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**Archive Warning:** Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings  
**Category:** M/M, F/M  
**Fandom:** X-Men: First Class (2011) - Fandom  
**Relationship:** Erik Lehnsherr/Charles Xavier, Armando Muñoz/Alex Summers  
**Character:** Erik Lehnsherr, Charles Xavier, Raven Darkholme, Alex Summers, Armando Muñoz, Tony Stark, Steve Rogers, Jarvis (Iron Man movies), Kurt Wagner, Warren Worthington III, Jean Grey, Kitty Pryde, Bruce Banner, Betty Ross, Hank McCoy  
**Additional Tags:** Male Homosexuality, Domestic Fluff, Mutant Powers, Alternate Universe - Modern: Still Have Powers, Adorable, Erik is a Sweetheart, probably forgotten some stuff, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Don't Have to Know Canon, Oral Sex, Hand Jobs, Past Child Abuse, Off-Screen Child Abuse, Bigotry & Prejudice, Anal Sex, Anal Fingering, Barebacking, Loss of Virginity, First Date, My First Work in This Fandom, First Time, virgin, Family Drama, Canon Jewish Character, Jewish Identity, Female Jewish Character, Family Fluff, Meet the Family, Paranoia, Baby Mutants, Tooth-Rotting Fluff, Angst and Fluff and Smut, Animals, Marriage Proposal, Weddings, Wedding Night, Wedding Fluff, Wedding Planning, Father Figures, Families of Choice, Extended Families, Mother-Son Relationship, Adoption, Adopted Children, Phone Sex, Grief/Mourning, Body Image, Mpreg, Unplanned Pregnancy, Teenage Drama, Discussion of Abortion, Festivals, Mentions of Cancer, Childbirth, Cesarean Section, Epidural, Surgery, Medical Procedures, Medical Examination, Catheters, Newborn Children, Circumcision, Bris - Freeform, Brit Milah, Mitzvah, Jewish Ceremony, Bombing, Terrorists, Mutant Rights, Mutant Pride, Young Love  
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**Bashert**

by [AvengingAngel](http://archiveofourown.org/)

Summary

Erik and Charles meet and fall in love. I wanted to write a story where Erik had a huge family. Pretty fluffy (for me anyways). I suck at summaries.

Notes

The title is Yiddish, is means One's Beloved, often in reference to being Predestined or Fated.
I'm not Jewish, nor do I speak Yiddish, but I wanted Erik and his family to. So if there are any mistakes or inaccuracies then please, don't hesitate to point them out to me and I'll try to rectify the problem.

All Yiddish comes from this website:
http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Glossary/Yiddish_Words/yiddish_words.html
Chapter One

He was practically a child, but damn if he wasn’t the sweetest little thing Erik Lehnsherr had ever seen.

Erik, as a custom jewellery maker, has had his fair share of dull days. Days where he turned up the radio and crafted jump ring after jump ring from a huge misshapen lump of silver just for something to do. That Friday was such a day, until this young man walked into the store. Before he knew it, his mutation had caused all fifteen thousand jump rings he’d crafted that morning to stand on their edge like domino’s waiting to cascade.

He was shorter than Erik’s six foot one, but not too short. Five eight? Little less maybe? Thick brown hair with a slight curl. Well dressed, expensive. Wearing a waistcoat. What kind of man wears a waistcoat aside from at a wedding? Wow, an actual Cartier watch, Erik doesn’t get many of those in. Most of his clients are bohemian types. Erik reached out with his ability. Titanium credit card, Sterling tie clip, real cufflinks, steel pieces in the lace holes of his shoes, belt buckle. No wedding ring, no jewellery at all other than that watch.

He turned slightly, tilting his head to get a better look at one of the more elaborate necklaces Erik had on display and, my oh my, he had very full, very red lips. Just finished kissing someone perhaps?

He took a deep breath and reigned in his arousal.

“Are you looking for something in particular?” he asked and the young man looked at him with the brightest, bluest eyes he’d ever seen.

“A birthday gift,” he replied, and Erik was transfixed by the very proper English accent.

“I’m sure there’s something here to meet your needs. Was there a certain type of piece you were looking for?”

He came over and leant against the counter. “Something durable, but it still needs to be delicate looking. Blue accents perhaps, or maybe yellow if it works better. Something unique, I don’t want her to be able to find something similar at some horrible chain store,” he said and Erik felt himself groan inwardly when he said ‘her’. Straight. Of course he was.

The glint of the tie clip caught Erik’s eye. It was the mutant pride symbol that had become so popular in the last few years, a circle with an x in the middle. He wondered if this man actually had a mutation or if he was just a supporter.

He had a brief moment of fantasy where he and this very nice boy end up going out for a beer and then back to his apartment for some incredible sex where no one gets upset when he makes all the metal things in his bedroom float when he climaxes. And then he pushes it all to the back of his mind and smiles.

“Let’s see what we can find.”

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“He was beautiful, I tell you. Absolutely beautiful,” Erik complained, motioning to the bartender for another beer.
“He was straight,” his roommate, Azazel, replied, his Russian accent slurred. Jesus, how many have they had?

“He could have been bi,” Erik pointed out.

“He was buying a birthday gift for a female, si?” Janos, Azazel’s much younger, wonderfully Spanish, boyfriend, pointed out in return.

“I still could have gotten horizontal with him,” he argued and they’d both stopped going against him, and instead tried to work out what the hell a man does for a living that he needs to be wearing an actual waistcoat.

They drank several more beers and then Azazel teleported them all back to the apartment they shared without leaving any body parts behind.

If Erik spent the night dreaming about blue eyes and full red lips, no one else needed to know.

Charles took a deep breath and pushed open the door to Lehnsherr Designs, the very same door that he’d been staring at and deliberating over for the last forty three minutes.

He was there again, the man who caught Charles’ eye. He was very tall, with dark hair pushed back, as if he kept running his fingers through it to get it out of his way. He can’t see them, but he noticed last time that the man has the most beautiful blue green eyes. He’s in a black t-shirt and beige slacks this time; last time it was a black turtleneck and black slacks. He’s leaning over the counter this time, focussing intently on a ring in his fingers, tools poised in his fingertips.

“Hello again,” he said, and then coughed to clear his throat.

“Oh! Hello. Welcome back,” he said, and there it was, that wonderful voice. Deep and kind of smoky, a little rough right on the edge of it. Perfect morning voice.

“Thank you.”

“Did she like it?”

“Like it?”

“The bracelet?”

Ah, of course, the bracelet. It had taken over an hour to find the right one. In the end Charles had gone with a simple yet beautiful design. Three smooth rings of white gold, all connected by a delicate lattice of star shaped links. The first ring had a design of a branch bent into the metal, the second held a single perfect sapphire, and the third held a tiny little owl in the winding twists of gold.

“She loved it, hasn’t taken it off since,” Charles said, moving forward to peer at the ring in Erik’s hand. “This is beautiful.”

“Thank you. It’s a custom order, an engagement ring.”

Charles leaned in closer, marvelling at the shine of the metal, the impossible twists and turns of the Celtic knot work woven into the band, the gleam of the perfect diamond.

“How extraordinary!” he exclaimed, reaching out to tilt Erik’s hand and then pausing just shy of
actual contact. He felt himself blush and straightened, looking Erik in the eye. “How long does it take to do something this intricate?”

Erik smirked. “Not as long as you might think,” he chuckled. “So, what was it I can help you with?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Well, you’ve come to my shop once again, I assume there’s something you want,” Erik pointed out as he placed the ring safely back in the padded box he keeps on his workbench for his works in progress.

“Ah, yes, of course.” Charles paused, trying to figure out what it was he wanted to say. Telepathy is easier, it’s just sending exactly what he thinks, no wondering about if the other person will understand his meaning or intent.

“Are you all right?”

He looked up and realised that he had been silent for longer than is politely acceptable.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. I just…ummm.”

“Are you this articulate with your girlfriend?”

“My who?! I don’t have a girlfriend! What on earth gave you the impression that I did?”

Erik felt himself blush, and cursed his quick mouth. “The bracelet,” he said eventually, after stammering for a few minutes. “You were buying it as a birthday gift, you said the birthday girl was very special.”

Charles couldn’t help it, he just couldn’t. He burst out laughing, clapping his hand over his mouth to try and stifle his giggles.

“She is, she is very special,” he said eventually. “But she’s not a girlfriend.”

“Oh. God, I’m so sorry, I assumed…and…oh God.” Erik buried his face in his hands.

“It was for my sister,” Charles revealed. “Her name is Raven, and she’s a hippy bohemian type. I wanted something special for her, she’s had a tough few months.”

“I’m so sorry,” he mumbled.

Charles reached out and brushed aside a lock of hair that had fallen across Erik’s forehead.

“How about we start this conversation over?” he murmured and Erik looked up, meeting his eye and smiling gratefully.

“So, I’m Charles Xavier,” he said.

“Erik Lehnsherr.”

“Very nice to meet you, Erik, and what is it you do?”

“I make bespoke jewellery. And yourself?”

“I’m a teacher at NYU.”

“Advanced Genetic Theory,” he replied. “And I’ve lost you already.”

Erik laughed. “A little. What is Genetic Theory?”

“Well, I’d love to explain it to you...over dinner.”

“You just keep on surprising me. Dinner?”

“Yes. Two people sitting down to have a meal together, perhaps some wine, hopefully conversation. Sound like a good idea?”

Erik had the feeling he should feel patronised but Charles had such a cute smile he couldn’t find it in himself.

Charles’ smile faltered and he looked suddenly serious. “In case I’m not finding the right words, or I’ve said it wrong...I’m trying to ask you to have dinner with me...as in...a date?”

Erik reached out and took his hand. “I’d love to.”

Charles picked him up from the store at six thirty on the dot, and they walked four blocks to a small Italian place where the owner himself came out to greet Charles and seat them at a table for two.

“Come here often?” Erik asked as they were waiting for their wine.

“Yes, fairly regularly, but Joe’s family and mine go back a long way. Anything striking your fancy?”

Erik hadn’t even looked at his menu yet. He had been too intrigued by Charles.

“Listen...before we really get into all this,” Erik said, watching as the waiter brought over the wine.

Charles accepted the bottle and shooed him away once he had pulled the cork for them.

“All this?” Charles asked as he poured them each a glass.

“The date. Before we go into it and get to know each other and all that good time stuff, there’s something you should know.”

Charles felt his stomach drop. Oh no, not again, not another one.

“I’m a mutant,” Erik blurted out and Charles sighed a breath of relief before smiling at him.

“Me too,” he admitted and then had the pleasure of watching Erik blink at him.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I’m a telepath. You?”

“Metal bender.”

“Ah, that explains how you chose your career then,” he said with a smile, taking a sip of his wine.
“I honestly thought you were going to tell me you hated mutants. I’ve been on a few first dates were they couldn’t wait to tell me how we’re all sent from hell.”

“And that soon enough we’ll have three eyes and tentacles,” Erik contributes.

“I do actually know a boy with tentacles as it happens.”

“I know a bloke who looks like the devil, red skin and a tail to boot. No horns though.”

They end up chuckling at the absurdity of mutant haters before they finally order their starters. They chatted about inconsequential things, movies, music, books and favourite haunts.

“I’d very much like to get to know you,” Charles said as their plates were cleared to make room for their mains.

“I’d imagine that getting to know someone is easy for someone with your…talents,” Erik said with a smile, reaching over to pour himself another glass of wine.

“Well…yes, usually. But I’m not doing that.”

“Are you not? Why?”

“Because I wasn’t sure if you would be comfortable with that. Some people aren’t.”

Erik leaned back in his chair and considered it. “It might be a little soon for me to give you free reign in my head,” he conceded and Charles nodded.

“Very fair. I do have a small request though.”

Erik inclined his head for Charles to continue.

“I would like to use my ability to get the surface of things. Sort of tasting the flavour of it, as it were. I can, by all means, not do it, but I’m afraid I’m rather blind without it.”

“So, to be without even a bit of your ability is like losing your sight?”

“A good way to put it. I’ve lived with it for so long that I have no clue how to function without it.”

“And this…tasting the flavour?”

“It’s getting an impression of your emotions, your attention, your understanding of the things I’m saying. It’s the telepathic equivalent of reading body language and facial expressions. I’m afraid I don’t do either very well. My ability has developed in place of that ability to read unconscious signals, and I’m sorry to say that my reading of them never developed because I had the telepathy.”

“Then, by all means, taste away,” Erik allowed and watched as Charles went very very still for a moment, followed by a sort of fluttering sensation around his temples. “Is that you?”

“Is what me?” Charles asked as their mains arrived.

“The fluttering feeling, sort of like a butterfly flapping by my temples.”

“Yes, that’s me. I’m not hurting you, am I?”

“No, it doesn’t hurt. It’s just not something I’ve ever felt before. What does it feel like when you’re fully in someone’s head?”
“Do you know, I’ve never asked anyone,” Charles admitted, considering it as Erik began to cut into his exceedingly rare steak. “I suppose the only person who could possibly tell you is Raven, my sister, but I’ve never asked her. To be quite honest, I think I’ve been in her head so long she probably couldn’t separate the feeling to describe it for you.”

“Doesn’t it get noisy?”

“At times.” Charles grinned. “Do I get to ask you some questions now?”

Erik felt himself blush once again. “Sorry. I’ve been told I ask too many questions when I’m given the chance. You should have stopped me.”

“No, no, it’s no bother,” he assured. “I like questions. I wouldn’t have become a teacher if I didn’t. I’m just terribly curious about your mutation. I’ve never met a metal bender before. Telekinetic, yes, but never yours.”

“What would you like to know?”

Charles considered it while he ate for a while (his carbonara was delicious) and then took a sip of wine to clear his throat, and all the while Erik watched him with amusement and a little wariness. His emotions were so full, so vivid, he felt them so strongly without any sort of reservation. It was refreshing. Most people tried to keep a lid on it all.

“How does it feel?” he asked eventually. “The metal around you. Does it all blend into a single sensation, or can you differentiate between different points of metal? Can you tell the difference between metals or is that beyond your skill? Do you employ your mutation in your work or do you work without it?”

Erik laughed, a full throaty laugh, and Charles closed his mouth with a snap.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ve been told many times that I can be a bit much.”

“No, no, don’t apologise,” Erik insisted. “Please, feel free to ask all the questions you want. It’s just that I don’t usually get a million questions at once.” He took a sip of his wine and proceeded to explain his mutation between bites of his steak.

“I can always feel the metal around me,” he began. “It’s always there, I think that without it I would feel as you do without yours, as if I had lost a sense or a limb even. Each piece of metal is separate and distinct, but they all come together as a whole in my senses. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, it’s almost like a mosaic. Each piece a separate tile on its own, yet they all come together to create the whole picture,” Charles surmised.

“Exactly, that’s exactly it. I can differentiate between them all but they all come together to make the whole. Yes, I can tell the differences between different metals, and I can detect any flaw in the piece. I do use my ability to work, it’s how I get it to be so intricate. I picture how I want it to look in my mind and then I sort of reach out with my power and force the metal to bend to my will.”

Charles was staring at him with complete attention.

“How much can you manipulate? I mean…well…”

“You’re talking of the MAT’s.”

Charles nodded. “Have you ever taken the Mutant Ability Test’s?”
“I have,” he revealed. “Not the most enjoyable day, I’ll admit.”

“No, they’re not, are they? I’ve been working for years to get them changed, to have them adapted to make them more tolerable but people keep telling me that they’re the best way to make the adaptations to the world that mutants need.”

“Do you agree with them?” Erik asked cautiously. He’d had this debate several times with several people, and he was worried that he and Charles would not be able to see eye to eye on this.

“I think that mutants don’t necessarily need or want special adaptations. Saying that we do simply reinforces the belief that we need to be segregated from the human population.”

“And segregation would be a bad thing?”

“Yes! Absolutely! Mutants are not something that should be hidden away from the world, there’s nothing wrong with us, and we shouldn’t be treated as such. How will people ever learn that if we’re secreted away?”

Erik felt himself smile. “I’d love to introduce you to my cousin, Richard.”

“Why?”

“He does believe in segregation, in separatism. My aunt is forever asking herself where she went wrong.” He chuckled. “I’d love to see what he does against your passion on the subject.”

“Your aunt doesn’t believe it?”

“My aunt affects the temperature of water. She never runs out of ice in the summer.”

“You come from a family of mutants?” Charles asked excitedly. He felt Erik take in his happiness and match it with his own.

“My, you’re positively giddy,” he chuckled as their plates were once again cleared and desert menus were placed before them.

“Another bottle, please,” Charles said distractedly to the waiter. “I am slightly giddy. I have a theory that mutation will become more frequent in familial lines in the generations to come. It was part of my thesis.”

“Well, you’d love my family. Four generations now.”

“Four? So it started with your…”

“My Bubbe.” Erik smiled at the confusion. “My grandmother. She and my grandfather, he was human by the way, had fourteen children. Then there’s my generation, me, my brother and sister, and 23 first cousins. Then there’s the next generation. At last count we had 22 of those, but it’s been a while since we did a head count.”


“With the greatest of difficulty and a lot of confused names,” he admitted. “Most of us are mutants, we’ve got a few humans but not many.”

“Any duplications of mutations?”

“No, surprisingly. So, desert?”
They ordered desert, a chocolate fudge for Charles and a crème caramel for Erik, and continued on with their conversation.

“So, you were going to explain Advanced Genetic Theory to me,” Erik said when Charles had finished laughing at his story of a customer who had come in for a custom made cock ring.

“I was, wasn’t I? Well, basically it’s evolution and the creation of modern mutations. I usually start off with the scientific theory of all life beginning with...well, the primordial ooze really. Then I follow on with the evolution of the human species, how we came about, why we are the way we are, standing upright and opposable thumbs and all that. And then it’s onto modern day mutations. What people think of when they think of mutants is a relatively new phenomenon, something that has only emerged within the last few generations or so. People very rarely realise that everything about us is a mutation. Without mutation, we’d still be the single celled organisms of the beginning of time rather than the dominant life on the planet.”

“And this is all based on your thesis?” Erik asked, completely enthralled by this sudden passion, this seemingly endless knowledge. Erik had never found intelligence a turn on before, but now…

“Partly,” Charles admitted. “I draw on the works of lots of other people. It goes all the way back to the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers Anaximander and Empedocles, through Aristotle and da Vinci, pulling in works by John Ray, Carolus Linnaeus, Maupertuis, William Paley, and Darwin, both Erasmus and Charles. Of course, Thomas Henry Huxley was the first to really apply Darwin’s theory of evolution to the human species. The branch of genetics really took off with the publication of the structure of DNA in 1953 by James Watson and Francis Cook, that was really the first demonstration of a physical basis for inheritance, the first real ‘proof’, so to speak, that genetic traits run in families.” Charles paused to take a sip of wine. “Have I lost you?”

“No at all,” Erik assured. “You’re obviously very passionate on the subject. Do you inspire the same enthusiasm in your students?”

“No, unfortunately. Most of them choose my module because they think it’s an easy way to get the science component of their degrees. I get at least half dropping my class in favour of another choice within the first week, and the rest barely manage to survive the semester. I get a handful coming back after the winter break, but they never really get into it.”

“If they don’t get into it, why do they stay?”

“For a lot of them, I think it’s curiosity. I think they have this idea that I’m going to reveal some great big secret that will explain everything anyone wants to know about modern mutations. Sad to say, many are angry that I can’t give it to them. The honest truth is that there’s still so much we don’t know about how these abilities work.”

They chatted while they had coffee’s to end the evening, and then Erik gathered his courage. He could feel the night drawing to a close and he had so many questions still unanswered, so he knew he had to find a reason to see Charles again.

“Have you taken the MAT’s?”

“Yes.”

“What did you test at?”

Charles willed himself not to blush, or cringe away in mortification. “I broke it,” he mumbles.

“Excuse me?”
“I broke the machines. They couldn’t give me a level because I had more force than the machines could handle. The best they could estimate was Omega-level, but they think I’m higher than that.”

“Oh.”

Erik didn’t really know what to say. He’d never heard of any mutant being off the scale, he didn’t know they could be. Just how powerful is this guy?

“If you’d like to end the evening here, I would understand,” Charles whispered and Erik suddenly had a blinding flash of realisation.

“How long have you spent playing down your mutation?”

“Most of my life.”

“And when people find out about you - that you potentially have no limit - they don’t like it?”

Charles shook his head. “It scares them,” he revealed. “They get scared enough that I can read their thoughts, but to find out how much I can do…well, it never bodes well.”

Erik considered it, remembered what it felt like to have humans be afraid of him, to have other mutants back away from him, to be alone in the community with no one to ground him. He’d felt so alone every time he had the tests done, even with his mother holding his hand. It was different for her, she was barely a Gamma-level, no threat to anyone. No one ever looked at Edie Lehnsherr with fear. But they’d been trying to put Erik on mutation dampening drugs since he had manifested at 12. Maybe if Charles saw, if he knew that he wasn’t the only one they were afraid of…

“I was Phi-level last time I was tested, but that was a decade ago. I’m actually due for another, they’ve been sending me reminders. Would…I mean, if you want to…would you like to come?”

“What?”

“The letters all say I can have someone with me, and all through my earlier tests my mother came with me, but I’d really like you to be there. If you’d like to, that is.”

Charles could taste a little happiness, a little cautious optimism, maybe a little wariness and some downright fear way way in the back, but Erik wasn’t really scared of him. Odd. Most people were. Why wasn’t he?

“I’d like that. I’d like that very much.”

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“Yes, Alex?”

“Yes, Alex?”

“Speciation is the process where a species diverges into two or more descendant species,” Alex said.

“Very good, Alex. Can you give an example?”

“Modern mutations,” he replied without hesitation. “The human species has started to split into two separate and distinct species, those with mutations and those without.”

“What bull,” said another student, one of the big burly jocks who needed this grade to still qualify for his scholarship place. “Modern mutations are a mistake on nature’s part. I mean, it’s not natural for anyone to read minds or grow wings or wag a tail.”

“That’s your opinion,” a girl in the fourth row countered. “Some of us, meaning the more cerebrally advanced, know that mutation is what keeps a species flourishing. With all the floods and other natural disasters, who’s to say if developing gills isn’t nature’s way of keeping us all from being wiped out?”

“And that, ladies and gentlemen, I’m afraid, is the point where I call this to a halt,” Charles interrupted. Their collective surprise hit him like a thousand little taps hitting his awareness. Usually he would let them hash it out, let the debate run. “I know it’s early, but I have an appointment to attend and I’m sure you’ve all got places you’d much rather be than stuck in here with no air conditioning.” They all chuckled at that. “Now, for next week, remember to read chapters five through eight of the text and please try to work a little on your papers, they are due in to me at the end of the month, no exceptions. All right, off you go.”

He straightened his papers and started to pack his briefcase while they filed out.

“Professor?”

He looked up to find Alex peering at him. Alex Summers was a bright young man of 19 with a rather volatile mutation; rings of laser beam from his chest. Charles knew that underneath his clothes lay a special shirt with a metal plate stitched into it to control most of the backlash. He’d known Alex for many years, and he was one of the few students who genuinely enjoyed his class.

“Alex, excellent work today, my friend,” he praised. “Your academic phrasing is really coming along.”

“Thanks,” Alex said, raising a hand to scratch at his blond hair. “I was wondering if you had a few minutes to talk?”

“Oh.” Charles looked at his watch. “If it can be done while we walk?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Charles smiled and they soon fell into step together, heading out of the room and into the mostly deserted hallways.

“So, what’s on your mind?”

“I wanted to do more reading on the speciation that we were talking about in class and I wondered if there was a specific book that dealt with it.”

“Are we talking speciation in homo sapiens or in another classification of species?”
“Human speciation really. How we came to be how we are, how the species split and that.”

“Then I recommend Speciation of Modern Homo Sapiens by T.J. Crow, published by Oxford University Press. It was really the first volume to address directly the question of the speciation of modern Homo sapiens. Sounds like what you’re after. Also, try to dig up a copy of Species, Species Concepts and Primate Evolution. I’m afraid I don’t know the author, but it’s worth trying to dig up.”

Alex was furiously scribbling down the recommended titles. He held out the piece of paper and Charles peered at it for a moment before smiling.

“Those are the ones,” he said with a grin. “I’m sorry I don’t have more time for you, Alex. Another day.”

“It’s fine,” Alex assured as they emerged into the sweltering heat. “Armando wanted me to ask you to call him. He wants you to have dinner sometime.”

Ah, Armando Muñoz, Alex’s long term boyfriend and even longer friend of Charles.

“I’ll give him a ring, probably this evening, maybe tomorrow morning,” Charles assured. “I’m terribly sorry, Alex, but I do have to go, or I’ll be late.”

“Charles?”

The telepath actually stopped in his tracks at the worry pouring off Alex. He reached out and grasped his shoulder.

“Why so worried, my friend?”

“This appointment…you’re not sick, are you?”

Charles smiled. “No, Alex, I’m not. Why do you ask?”

“You have a notation for the hospital on your hand, and you said appointment.”

“Ah, No, Alex, I’m not sick. A friend of mine is going for his MAT’s today, I promised him I’d go with him, that’s all.”

“Swear? Because me and Armando are here if you need us.”

“I swear to you, I’m fine, and I’ll be over to have dinner with you very soon. Now, this is your last class for today, isn’t it?” Alex nodded. “Good, lucky you. Go on, do something fun, and tell Scott I’m expecting his artwork on Saturday. He can’t get out of it just because of his sight issues. I expect full participation, Alex, would you remind him of that?”

“Absolutely. Good luck…for your friend.”

Charles smiled and nodded before realising that he had stood still for more than two seconds and took off again at a rush.

Erik sat on the hard plastic chair staring at what may possibly have been the ugliest piece of art he’d ever seen. He couldn’t even tell what it was supposed to be. Strokes of grey, brown and black, it looked like someone had knocked over an ashtray and then got a paper cut.
‘He’s not coming,’ he thought to himself. ‘I know it, I knew he wouldn’t come.’

“Mr Lehnsherr?”

He nodded and let the nurse lead him into a room. “I just need to check your basic details, take basic vitals and take a little blood,” she explained as she fastened a wristband around his wrist. “Is that okay with you?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

Oh, if his mother were there, she would have smacked him around the head for his rudeness, but he didn’t care. He was no longer in the mood to play nice. He answered her questions on his health and details, surrendered all his metal, and then amused himself by bending five needles as she tried to take blood before there was a knock at the door.

It opened and Charles peeked around the wood.

“I got held up,” he said breathlessly. “One of my students had a question, and I’m afraid I don’t run as fast as I imagine myself to run.” He paused, looking at Erik. “You do still want me here?”

Erik broke into a huge smile. “Yes, yes I do.”

Charles smiled in response and entered the room properly, dropping his briefcase atop Erik’s jacket and perching on the gurney next to Erik. “So, where are we up to then?”

“Taking blood. Poor girl, her needles keep bending,” Erik said in all innocence.

There was an odd sensation in his head, around about his right ear, sort of like a tap.

[Yes?]

[I don’t think she’s impressed by the bent needles.]

Erik felt himself grin. [Perhaps, but it amused me.]

He felt the equivalent of a mental chuckle.

[Erik?]

[Hmmm?]

[Is this okay? Talking like this?]

[Depends.] Erik winced as she finally managed to get a needle into his skin.

[On?]

[How deep are you?]

[No deeper than this conversation, I swear. It’s like tasting, with extra seasoning.]

Erik actually laughed out loud at the analogy. [Then yes, this is okay.]

Soon enough they were being led into a sort of anteroom, and being asked to remove their shoes and any metal that they may have forgotten. Charles removed his watch and surrendered his phone, wallet, belt, cufflinks and tie clip.
“You know, you can wait outside if this makes you nervous,” Erik assured and Charles shook his head.

“I said I’d be here. Lead on.”

The room is large, almost the size of a high school gymnasium, with a ceiling at least three times as high as it should be. The walls seem to be reinforced with double layer concrete.

“Seems a bit much,” Charles said.

“All testing for mutations with physical effects is done in rooms like this. What was yours like?”

“Smaller, compact machinery, sort of like a lab. They attached me to the machines and pointed out certain minds I was to make contact with, see how far I could stretch.”

“And?”

“Australia, before the machine went bang.”

“Good to know,” Erik said after a pause, and the two men looked across the room as a doctor approached them.

“Hello, Erik,” he said, holding out his hand and shaking Erik’s. “How have you been?”

“Fine,” Erik grits out. He hates Dr. Shaw, hates him with a passion. He makes Erik’s skin crawl.

“This is Charles, a friend.”

“Hello, Charles. I’m Doctor Sebastian Shaw, I’ve been looking after Erik since he was a boy.”

Charles reaches out and shakes the man’s hand, and a shudder passes down his spine.

[Charles?]

He sends out a wave of reassurance to Erik.

[I’m fine.]

“Nice to meet you. Charles Xavier.”

“The geneticist?”

“Yes. You’ve read my work?”

“I have, I also attended one of your seminars last summer in Boston. Your theories are very intriguing. I’d love to chat with you.”

“Of course, I’ll see what I have open.”

“Right. Well, we should get on with this. Erik, would you like Charles to wait outside like your mother does?”

“No,” Erik spat. “He stays.”

“It could be dangerous for him. Remember?”

“I was a boy then, I’m a man now, I won’t let him get hurt, and it’s my damn test,” Erik snarled and Shaw smiled at him.
“As you wish. I’m going to activate the readers, and then we’ll get this done.”

Charles wasn’t quite sure what was going on, but he knew there was something off with the doctor. Shaw was about Erik’s height, brown hair, weird little moustache.

“Erik, are you sure? I don’t mind waiting outside,” Charles offered. “I mean, if you want to do this without me.”

“I want you to stay,” Erik said firmly. “Please, Charles.” [Don’t leave me alone with him.]

“Okay, I’ll stay. What should I do? Should I take a seat or…?”

“However you feel comfortable. I promise not to let anything hit you.”

“That’s…good to know.”

Charles took a few steps back and sat down cross legged, watching and waiting for something to happen. Soon enough there was a mechanical kind of whirring, and then what looked like the filled end of a pipe descended from the ceiling, four others emerging from each of the walls and the floor faded to what looked like black ink.

“Erik, the equipment is all fired up. When you’re ready,” came Shaw’s voice, creepily floating out at them from some hidden speaker somewhere.

“I’m ready,” Erik called.

There was an ominous rumble and the walls seemed to melt away to reveal an array of metal objects. There were metals of all descriptions, all shapes, all sizes, all thicknesses. Charles remained completely still and waited.

Erik could feel them, all of them, hundreds of different pieces, dozens of different types of metal, all of it humming in his senses. He could feel a little blank spot just behind him which he knew was Charles. He oriented himself, creating a map within his ability, before he began to pull.

The metal began to shake slightly, before it moved away from the walls, moving into the room properly and beginning to spin and swirl around them. The dim lighting glinted off the shiny surfaces, creating beautiful patterns on the walls and floors and Erik’s skin. The man himself was standing perfectly still, his arms held slightly away from his body, palms out towards the room.

[Beautiful,] Charles thinks and he was surprised when he heard Erik’s mental chuckle.

[You really like it?]

[It’s like nothing else I’ve ever seen. It’s fantastic.]

[Why thank you. Keep watching. And, please, don’t move. I need you to sit right where you are, and keep your hands and arms inside the ride at all times.]

Charles sniggers. [I promise, I’ll be good.]

Erik smiled and let his awareness spread ever further, let it take complete hold of all the metal, not just the metal in the room but all the metal in the building. In the block. Maybe a little further than that. He took hold of specific pieces, using them to caress against Charles’ cheek, the backs of his hands, the tips of his fingers. There was a pleased shiver somewhere inside his mind, and he forced a dollar in pennies to float just before Charles’ face. He waited until he was sure Charles was
watching and then he melded them all together, curving them and forming them together to make a
copper branch of cherry blossoms.

“Take it, it’s for you,” he said, and Charles reached out slowly, Erik making sure nothing hit him
as he took hold of it.

“It’s lovely. Thank you, Erik.”

Charles admired the shine of his flowers, this perfect thing that would never wilt or fade, and felt
almost ridiculously happy. And then there was something else, a rage building somewhere close.

[Erik, is that you?]

[Is what me?]

[That anger. There’s…there’s so much of it…it’s so strong.]

[No, it’s not me. Are you okay?]

[I…I don’t know. Hang on, give me a minute.]

Charles reaches out, trying to find out where it’s coming from. It’s not Erik, of that he’s certain.
Erik is filled with a sort of focus, and Charles realises that it’s his concentration. There’s a little
worry in there too, and it’s with a jolt that it registers that it’s for him. Awww, he’s so sweet. He
reached out a little further, feeling along the nurses, and orderlies. No, it’s not them.

And then it hits him. There it is, like the burning bright blue at the middle of a flame, the centre of
a tornado, the rushing of a tsunami. All these thoughts of Erik, of Charles, of unimaginable pain to
be visited on Charles’ head. Oh, it’s so much, so strong.

[Erik? Erik, oh, Erik!]

[Charles? What! Tell me, Charles what?!]

[It’s so much, Erik, there’s so much and – Erik, I can’t breathe!]

Erik shoved all of the metal to the edge of the room, making sure nothing was in his way, before
he spun on his heel, dropping to his knees to pull the smaller man close.

“Charles, I’m here, I’m right here,” he murmured next to his ear. The man was shaking, gasping,
his lips turning blue. “Charles, please! Take a breath!”

[I can’t!]}

Erik raised his head and looked around wildly, trying to figure out what the hell he could do.

“Charles, take me,” he whispered urgently. “Take my mind, go on, take it all.”

[What? I – I don’t - what?]

“Use my mind, focus on me. Go on, take all of it, go as deep as you have to. Please.”

[No, no I can’t!] Charles tried to pull away from him, but there was such rage sucking him in he
could barely feel his body anymore. [I’ll hurt you!]

Erik pushed back at the connection, starting to get the hang of it, the feel of how it worked. [You
won’t,] he said firmly, taking hold of Charles’ head and forcing him up to look him in the eye. [Oh, so blue…Charles, you trusted me not to hurt you…it should be red, those full lips should be so very red not blue oh it’s wrong it’s so wrong please don’t don’t mir lamden khaver make it stop have to help don’t know please Charles haymishe mensche I just found you such a connection bubbee so amazing…please Charles do this, take my mind, let me help you.]

Charles couldn’t fight on both sides, he couldn’t keep fighting the rage that was pulling him in and Erik too. So he gave in to the pull before him, snaking into him, taking in all the points of such a wonderful mind, so complex, so full, so vibrant.

Erik gasped as he felt the full weight of such power, such a match for his own. He’d felt so alone, so lost, even in the mutant community. He’d never felt that there was any match for him, that there would ever be someone who could connect this way. Charles was fully in his mind now, no boundaries, no end, no beginning, just Charles taking in all there was of Erik and delighting in it.

[Oh…there you are…]

Erik chuckled. [Yes, here I am. Charles, please, take a breath.]

Erik felt Charles’ arms slide up to wrap around his neck and he pulled him closer. Charles buried his face in his neck and took a small shuddering breath. Erik ran his hands up and down the slender back beneath his fingers and relaxed a slight fraction as the breaths got a little more steady.

[You’re warm,] he thinks in surprise and there’s a twitch of the fingers absently playing in the hair at the nape of his neck. [You’re warm in my head.]

[Am I? No one’s ever told me that before.] Charles sounds slightly dreamy, almost drugged.

[How are you doing?]

[It’s easier. I can breathe now. Thank you, Erik.]

[No problem. Charles, what was it? What did that to you?]

[Rage. Someone is terribly angry at me.]

Erik can’t understand the sentence. How could someone here possibly be angry at Charles? Unless…

[Shaw?]

[Yes,] Charles admits. [His rage clouds so much, it hurts to touch, but I can get some things from him. He sees you as his, he’s angry that I’m here. My flowers, he doesn’t like them. He keeps thinking how you never made him anything like that. He wants to crush them…oh, Erik, he wants to crush me.]

[I won’t let him. He can’t have you. I’ve decided, you know. You’re in my head, you should be mine.]

Charles chuckled at him, a wheezy sound barely above a whisper against the skin of his neck.

[That simple, hmmm? One date, me sinking into your head and that’s all it takes?]

[Yes,] Erik replied simply. [I can’t imagine anything more intimate than this. The rest will all come later.]
[Well, then I was a little cautious, wasn’t I? I’d planned all these romantic dates, all these things to show you how much I fancy you, and here you go and put the proverbial kibosh on all of that.] A mental sigh. [I suppose it’s for the best. Gets all those sticky things out of the way, all the wondering if this will go anywhere. Erik?]

[Yes?]

[I’m going to push against him, make his rage stop hitting me. I can do it now.]

“Are you sure?” he whispered into one finely shaped ear, the soft curl of Charles’ hair tickling his lips and the tip of his nose, filling his senses with the scent of honeysuckle.

[My shampoo, it has honeysuckle in it,] Charles projected in answer to the unasked question. [And yes, I’m sure. He caught me off guard, I wasn’t expecting it and I couldn’t push back in time to stop it overwhelming me. I can do it now, now I have you to ground me. Just…stay with me?]

“Of course.”

Erik can feel it, the slow receding of Charles’ mind, but it’s still there somehow, way in the back, way deep down, something that makes him feel all warm and safe and whole. He gets the sensation of riding on Charles’ coattails, so to speak. He can feel the mutation stretching, but it isn’t his, it’s just something he happens to be witnessing, along for the ride.

It’s there, right there, the white hot edge of pain, fire slicing through his skin, burning his awareness until all he can feel is the pure disgusting loathing of Charles. He tries to pull away from it, tries to make it stop, and then he realised that he was physically trying to pull away from Charles and he stopped dead, his grip on the younger man tightening.

He felt it, the slick whiplash of Charles’ power snaking through the air, startling Shaw with just how much power is in it. The connection was broken and Erik could practically see the shields coming up around their mind – minds? - to protect against such hurt.

[Done.]

[Are you okay?]

[I’m sleepy,] Charles admitted, leaning a little more heavily on Erik. [It’s been a long time since I’ve done anything even remotely like that.]

[Oh?]

[My stepfather,] Charles said offhandedly and Erik could feel him strain again, pushing something else at Shaw.

[What did you just do?]

[Planted his next move. Told him that the equipment shorted out. The test needs to be repeated, all the data from this one is incomplete. That he needs to hand your case on to another doctor, a Doctor Armando Muñoz. You’ll get an appointment in the mail.]

Erik laughed, a full on belly laugh. “That simple, huh?”

[That simple. Erik?]

“Charles?”
I’m very tired, Erik.

“All right, come on, let’s get you out of here.”

Charles slowly came back to himself. He vaguely remembered the hospital, and Erik, and the warm connection to Erik’s mind. There was the rage, the unimaginable rage from Shaw, and what Charles did.

Oh. He’s really going to have to call Armando now.

Erik. He slowly started to try and blink his eyes open but it was too much, just too much like hard work. He felt like he’d been flattened by a truck and then bulldozed. Damn it, how did he get so much feedback from Shaw? It never happened with Kurt.

He slowly began to realise that his physical body didn’t want to do as it was told, so he let his awareness stretch out, only to hit upon a mind almost right next to him. A little higher… a chair maybe? Charles was pretty sure he was lying on his back on a bed. Well, something soft, it might have been a sofa, he wasn’t sure. The mind is almost still, so very calm, with little flutterings of thought that he doesn’t want to make out properly, they’re too pretty with all their colours. Sleep. The person was sleeping. He knew the mind, knew that person. There was a thread between them, Charles is already connected to this mind.

[Erik?]

A sudden start of awareness. [Charles?]

[Am I dead?]

“No, your friend Armando tells me you’re fine. Drained, but physically fine,” Erik assured him and Charles felt the dip of Erik sitting on the surface he was lying on.

“Where…” God, it feels like someone has ripped out his entire oesophagus. [Ow.]

“What hurts?” Erik asked and Charles felt a cool palm pressed to his forehead.

[Everything.] He paused, taking stock. [My head. And my throat, they’re the worst. Wait, you said Armando. Where are we?]

“Don’t you remember?”

[I remember Shaw, I remember his rage. I made him think other things, things I put there. And then it was all sleepy.]

“After that, I managed to get our things, get you out of the hospital and into a cab, and I used your wallet to find where to take you. I didn’t think the hospital would really know what to do with a telepath. They never really know what to do with me. We’re in your apartment, Charles. You’re safe, it’s okay,” he soothed, running his fingers through Charles’ hair. “You said some weird things in my head, before you really went under.”

[Weird things?]

“Something about your father and a man named Kurt, and another called Cain. There was a lot of… pain… in what you sent me.”
[Oh, God,] Charles projected and he could almost feel part of his insides die a little. [Erik, I’m so very sorry. I’ve moved this too fast, accelerated the relationship. I’m so, so sorry, my friend. Please, Erik, you have to understand, you’re under no obligation to stay, to continue in this relationship if you don’t want to. I would understand.]

There were suddenly lips against his forehead.

“Relax,” Erik whispered. “It’s okay, I understand. I hope you realise that I’m rather taken with you. I don’t plan on going anywhere. I’ve been told that I can be unreasonably stubborn when I want something. Nothing can persuade me that I don’t want it. And when I want something, I don’t usually stop until I have it.”

[And…you want…?]

“You, Charles. I want you. I know it’s fast, but I don’t consider that anything to do with anyone but us,” Erik said and Charles got the impression that he’d done a lot of thinking while Charles had been off with the fairies.

[Right then. I suppose that makes it abundantly clear on how you feel.]

“It does.”

[And you know that I rather like you. More than like. Fancy the pants off of is closer to the mark but there you go. Oops, I didn’t mean to share that last bit.]

“Fancy my pants off?”

[One step at a time,] he countered at the amused tone. [First, I’d quite like some water, please.]

Some movement and then he was being tilted up slightly, a cool glass pressed to his lips and…

[Oh, sweet blessed water!]

“Good?”

[Very. This is rather a convenient way to talk to you, you know. I’m rather enjoying this.]

“I was wondering. Raven said you don’t get this deep in people’s heads usually. I can understand, it’s very intimate.”

Charles was sure he may have projected his surprise to the entire Northern hemisphere. [Raven? You met my sister?]

“Yes, I did. She is a very nice blue. Interesting scales too,” Eric conceded. “And then I met your little friend Alex, and his very nice doctor boyfriend, Armando.”

[Huh?]

“Oh, that was eloquent,” Erik chuckled as he returned the now empty water glass to the nightstand and laid Charles back down, adding another pillow behind his head so he was comfortable.

[I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware that this was a vocabulary test,] Charles sent him. Hopefully he was actually scowling.

“Touchy. Bodes well. Right, so I got you into a cab and went through your wallet and found your ID, which has your sister listed as emergency contact. I called her, she gave an address and that’s
how we ended up here and how I met her. She’s very nice, by the way, a little scary protective over you, but I don’t mind scary protective. Wait until you see my mother in protective mode, now that’s scary.”

[I rather imagine she threatened to disembowel you if you didn’t explain to her what I was doing unconscious.]

“Something along those lines, a little more graphic. I explained to her best as I could what you did, at which point we’d got you into bed, and she goes pouncing on your phone, scrolling through and calling Alex. Fifteen minutes later, there’s Alex and Armando staring me down as if I’d done this to you with Raven trying to get them to calm down.”

[You still have all your appendages?]

“Yes, I still have all my bits.”

[Alex was calmed then.]

“Yes. Eventually. I’m going to have to get you to tell me how those two got together, I’m sure it’s a brilliant story. Now, at this point you were projecting a lot of very weird stuff and a lot of pain, which scared the shit out of me.”

[I’m so sorry, Erik.]

“I know, it’s okay, you didn’t mean to.” Charles felt Erik take hold of his hand and bring it to his lips.

[Sweet.]

“I am not sweet,” Erik protested vehemently. “I am a miserable, off-putting person, with practically no people skills.”

[You’re wrong.] he sing songed. [You forget, I’ve seen every little thing in your mind, I know everything there is to know. I even know about you catching your brother trying to swap your sister with the boy next door for his new budgie when she was a week old. Now that really was sweet.]

“Don’t ever tell my sister that, she’ll never forgive him.” Erik paused. “Everything?”

[Everything. Well, all the big stuff. I don’t know what your childhood was like, or where you went to high school or who your eighth grade geometry teacher was, but I got a general sense of you. It was all I had the concentration for at the time. Though…I can’t translate whatever language you keep slipping into. I thought maybe it was German at first, then perhaps Russian but I can’t place it.]

“It’s Yiddish.”

[Ah. You’re Jewish then?]

“A lapsed Jew. I had my bris as a baby and Bar Mitzvah at 13 and I sometimes go to Temple, but not that often. Usually it’s only when my Bubbe wants someone to go with her. My family isn’t religious, but we try to keep some traditions.”

[Like the Yiddish?]

“Yes, like the Yiddish. You’ll pick it up, it’s not that hard. We don’t speak it in full sentences, it’s
just words here and there.”

[So, what were you saying to me when I was having trouble taking a breath?]

“What did I say? Can you play it back to me?”

[You were thinking ‘mir lamden khaver make it stop have to help don’t know please Charles haymishe mensche I just found you such a connection bubbee so amazing…please Charles do this, take my mind, let me help you’. Translation, please?]

“Hmmm. Mir lamden khaver is my learned friend,” Erik began, and Charles managed to locate the neural pathways to open his eyes. He started to blink slowly as Erik continued. “Haymishe mensche is a term for someone you feel at home with. Bubbee, not to be confused with Bubbe-”

[Which means grandmother.]

“Well remembered. Bubbee is a friendly term for anyone you like. Sort of like calling you my friend.”

[Thank you.]

“You’re welcome. I should let the others know you’re awake.”

[By all means, I’m not going anywhere.]

Erik pressed a kiss to his forehead before he moved to the door and poked his head out, looking at something before disappearing from Charles’ sight. Moments later he returned, followed by Raven, then Alex, and then a very calm looking Armando. Raven all but launched herself at him and he managed to find the strength to put an arm around her.

“You said you were fine,” Alex complained with a face full of thunder.

“And I was,” Charles croaked. “I just didn’t stay that way. And stop giving Erik the evil eye, it wasn’t his fault. That means you too, Raven, don’t think I missed that.”

Armando chuckled as he eased his way past Alex, kissing his temple, before he gently pulled Raven off him.

“I needn’t have bothered getting him to ask you to call me,” he says as he perched on the bed, reached out to feel Charles’ pulse.

“Probably not.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Awful.”

“What happened to him?” Raven asked, her yellow eyes fixed on Armando as he listened to Charles’ heart.

“Erik tells me you had a run in with Sebastian Shaw,” he said, ignoring Raven and focussing on Charles.

“Yes.”

“Did you know he was a mutant?”
“What?” Erik asked from where he was leaning against the wall near the door.

“Yup. He’s got a mutation that allows him to absorb power, physically that is. He doesn’t really have a defence against psionics but Charles has never come up against anyone like him,” Armando explained. “Your head hurts?” Charles nodded. “Feel queasy?” A shake. “Any shortness of breath? Pain in the limbs?”

“No, none of that. Just my head and my throat’s a little sore,” Charles said. “And I’m tired.”

“Think of it like a hangover. You didn’t get enough warning to really warm up before going against Shaw. No lasting damage, Charles, not for a telepath of your level. A few hours and you’ll feel fine again. You might get a nosebleed or two, but it’s nothing to worry about. Any sharp pain or passing out and I want to hear about it immediately, okay?”

“I promise,” Charles whispered.

“Good. Now, I’m going to write you a scrip for some painkillers, and suggest you get a few more hours sleep.”

“I’ll cash it,” Erik said.

“Right,” Armando said, handing him the prescription and smoothing Charles’ hair back from his forehead. “Unless you need anything else, I need to get to work.”

“I’m fine. Thank you, Armando. Dinner on Tuesday? Your place?”

“Tuesday sounds good, I’ll see you then, not before hopefully,” he said as he stood. “Alex, say goodbye and then I’ll drop you at home before I go in. Raven, you need a lift?”

“I should stay with Charles,” she said.

“Go to work, they need you. I’ll be fine, it’s just a hangover.”

She looked doubtful.

“I’ll stay,” Erik said, placing a hand on her back. “I’ll stay with him.”

“You don’t have to,” Charles argued.

“I want to. Charles, you came to the hospital for me, and it landed you unconscious. I’ll stay and keep an eye on you.”

[I’m not blaming you,] Charles insisted.

[I know. I want to stay. Please?]

“If you’re sure…” Raven said.

“I’m sure, go to work.”

She swooped in and pecked him on the cheek, whispering that she was a phone call away if he needed her and that Erik was hot and if he didn’t want him she’d happily take him off his hands.

“You’re terrible. I love you, have a good day.”

Alex is the last one to leave the room. He stood there, shifting from one foot to the other, gnawing
at his thumbnail before Charles beckoned him over and pulled him into a hug.

“There now, I’m all right, Alex. Just did something silly and ended up with a headache,” Charles soothed.

“When Raven called and said…oh shit, Charles…I thought…” Alex mumbled. Charles stroked his hair.

“I know, I know. But I’m fine. I’ll sleep and eat something and I’ll be right as rain. You can see me when you drop Scott off tomorrow. Okay?”

Alex sat up, scrubbing at his face. “Yeah,” he said. “I should go. I need to do some reading for my Lit class, and I might have a lead on those books you told me about.”

“Fabulous.”

Alex waved goodbye on his way out and Charles tracked the three of them as they left the apartment, the building. It wasn’t until Armando’s car rounded the corner that he breathed a sigh of relief.

“They’re gone, you can relax now. No more evil eye,” Charles said and Erik smiled. “I scared you, didn’t I?”

“A little,” he admitted, sitting on the bed at Charles’ urging. “I’ve never really met a telepath at your level. Shit, I’ve never met anyone at your level.”

“I think you might be at my level, to be perfectly honest.”

“We won’t know until I get my test done again.”

“Erik? Can I ask you…about Shaw.”

“You want to know why I hate him, why he felt that way about you,” Erik said bluntly. “I…Charles, I…he…”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to tell me.”

“No, I want to, I want you to understand. But…the words…”

“Oh.” Charles reached out and laced his fingers with Erik’s. “I see,” he whispered. “You know, if you wanted, I could…” He wiggled his fingers near his temple.

Erik nodded and gave the hand in his a little squeeze. The warmth in the back of his head grew a few degrees hotter, like adding more hot water to a bath that had gone tepid, and then he felt all the muscles in the back of his neck relax.

[Ohhhhhh.]

[Am I hurting?] Charles asked.

[No, no pain. Nice.]

[Ah. You’re sure you want me to look?] A small start of surprise. [You collect cocktail umbrellas?]

[And now my whole face is red as a fire truck.]
[Told you that you were sweet.]

[Farmakh dos moyl!]

[Pardon me?]

[Sorry, Yiddish,] he said with a smile, moving to lean against the headboard of Charles’ bed. Charles shifted to curl into his side. [It means shut your mouth. Most often used on my brother. Or on me by my brother.]

[Ah. But you are sweet, I swear it. You just don’t know it.]

[You wanted to know about Shaw?]

[Yes, I did.]

There’s a feeling of a sort of rummage through his mind and then Charles is pulling memories up, one by one. He closes his eyes and watches them flash through.

Erik is six and he’s had an abnormal blood test during a check-up. His mother takes him to the hospital and to Dr Shaw. The doctor is tall and makes Erik’s tummy hurt. He looks at Erik like the way his father looks at a piece of chocolate cake. He sits in the corner with some colouring books while Dr Shaw explains that he’s tested positive for the Mutant X gene. His mother’s smile is so wide, Erik can’t help but smile with her. When Dr Shaw smiles at him, he wants to crawl under his bed.

Erik is nine and he’s been having headaches and pains in his arms and hands. His mother takes him back to Dr Shaw, who looks at Erik the way he’s seen his father look at his mother sometimes when he thinks Erik’s not looking, an expression he almost has a name for. He checks Erik’s eyes and sends him for x-rays on his arms, a machine that makes Erik feel like he’s had too much sugar. He says this to his mother as Shaw brings him back to her and Shaw grins, just like that shark in that movie Uncle Elijah let him watch. Shaw says his mutation will probably have something to do with some facet of the radiation spectrum.

Erik is twelve and his mother takes him to Shaw, gets him to make a nickel float a foot above the desk. Shaw claps and pulls out a metal wind-up toy shaped like a clown. Erik hates clowns. He makes it walk across the desk and take a nose dive into the wastepaper bin. That afternoon Erik is taken to that room, the one with all the sensors and Shaw has him move as much metal as he can. The names for the levels are reeled off: Beta, Gamma, Lambda, Sigma, Phi, Omega. Shaw tells them Erik is at Lambda, just a touch under Sigma and his mother is so happy. She’s a Gamma. Erik wants to push pennies through Shaw’s head.

Erik isn’t supposed to know about the letter but his Bubbe keeps asking his mother about the Rivolex and he wants to know. So he creeps into her bedroom when she’s making dinner and riffles through her nightstand. There’s a letter from Shaw saying it would be best, that he’s testing too high for his age. He takes the letter and confronts his mother, demanding that she doesn’t let them give him medication. She promises she won’t, and Shaw is angry next time they see him, though he doesn’t show it to his mother.

Erik is fifteen, and being tested again. He’s tired, so very tired, but Shaw won’t let him stop. He’s supposed to be pulling on a metal ball that’s attached to a tough nylon rope. Shaw keeps pulling the rope tighter, making it harder, and Erik can feel the tears streaming down his cheek. Shaw tells him just a little longer and before Erik knows what he’s done, he’s hit his mother with a piece of metal. It’s sticking out of her side and there’s blood and she looks so very surprised. He keeps
apologising and she keeps telling him it’s okay and then they’re taking her to surgery. Shaw hugs him close; he’s almost as tall as Shaw. Shaw’s hand drifts down his back and along his slacks and cups his buttock. It makes him feel sick and Shaw whispers in his ear how handsome he is. Erik doesn’t know what to do, how to stop it, and then he doesn’t have to because there’s his Bubbe and she pulls him into her arms and it’s all okay again.

The next time he’s tested he’s almost nineteen and everything is fine until he’s getting changed into his jeans once more. Phi-level, his mother will be so proud. He debates between telling her when he they go for food and waiting until he gets home. He grabs his phone to see how much battery it has and then he feels it. The weight of iron in someone’s blood standing somewhere behind him in the hospital changing room. There’s a row of lockers between him and this person, but he still knows that they’re there. The blood starts to go faster and faster, pooling in one spot in particular and Erik’s touched himself enough times to know what this person is doing. By the movement it’s a man, and Erik puts his phone down so he can grab his jeans. He wishes he’s remembered that this test was today, that it was not a good day to go commando or to wear clothes with metal in them. Before too long he’s dressed and he’s gathered his courage and he’s rounding the lockers, ready to batter this mystery person and then he’s face to face with a climaxing Shaw. Erik runs from the locker room and goes for a burger to celebrate his level with his mother and he never tells a soul what happened. He refuses to be tested again.

[God, Erik…]

Erik became aware of how tightly Charles is clinging to him, how tightly he was clinging back.

“It wasn’t anything really, he didn’t actually do anything,” Erik said into Charles’ hair. “But still-”

[It doesn’t matter what he actually did, it’s what he wanted to do. Shit, Erik, he whacked off to you being naked, it’s sick. You were his patient, it’s just plain wrong…so gorgeous…nice arse… wonder if he still looks like that…over a decade…]

Erik laughed. “Gorgeous, huh? Nice ass?”

“Shit, you weren’t meant to hear that,” Charles said. “If Raven hears things she’s not supposed to, she’s never said anything.”

“I don’t mind. I’ll have you know I’ve got a fondness for your ass too.”

There was a faint blush of pleasure through his mind and he realised it was Charles mentally preening at the praise. He tilted his head to look Charles in the eye and then stopped.

“You’re bleeding,” Erik said, sitting them both up.

“What?” Charles raised his hand to his upper lip and it came away bloody. “Oh, yes, you’re right, I am bleeding. Pass me a tissue, please.”

Erik reached back and grabbed the box of tissues from the nightstand. Charles pressed a handful of them to his nose and looks up at Erik.

[Maybe I should do as Armando said and get some sleep,] Charles wondered. [Maybe it was too soon for me to play.]

“Maybe. Get some sleep, I’ll go get this prescription for you and come right back. Promise me you won’t leave this bed?”

[Promise.]
Chapter Two

When Erik returned Charles was sound asleep, tissues layered carefully on his pillow under his cheek. Erik left the painkillers and a fresh glass of water on the nightstand and then made himself some coffee.

He called Azazel while he drank and got him to teleport over a change of clothes and his toothbrush, pushing off the questions Azazel couldn’t help but ask before he popped back out again.

Erik wandered around the lounge while he sipped at his second cup, noticing all the little details that would tell him more about Charles.

There are an awful lot of books. They lined every wall, more than half the shelves going all the way from floor to ceiling. There was a hell of a lot of books on genetics which, given Charles’ chosen field, doesn’t surprise him. There’s books on crime, law, history, economics, a whole shelf full of books on Henry the Eighth and his wives and children, and another whole shelf on meditation techniques. There’s four shelves of fiction, mostly thriller and crime, the kind that Erik never has the patience to get through because he can’t keep track of all the clues to point to who the killer is. Then a shelf of romance novels, well thumbed. He hoped that they were Raven’s.

Aside from the books, there are other things that catch his eye. Ornaments, models, one of a double helix. There’s some art, and some photographs. One of a small Raven and Charles playing chess in a rose garden. One of a very young Charles holding up a little trophy, standing just in front of a man that looks so much like the man he knows now that they have to be related.

It’s on the shelf just below this photo that Erik notices something different about the books. These are all written by Charles. There are at least a dozen, all of then relating to genetics in relation to mutation. A quick scan of one of the blurbs proves the books to be a favourable account of how modern mutations are the next stage of human evolution.

As he put the book back, Erik accidentally knocked out a photo album. As he crouched to get it, he noticed the page it had landed open on. It wasn’t a photo album. It was a scrapbook.

Newspaper clippings. Pictures of a young Charles, all of them with the child holding some trophy or medal or award. Articles proclaiming him to be a child prodigy, a possessor of a genius level intellect. His telepathy is mentioned a few times, and in the later articles some of the journalists try to discredit him as a charlatan, that Charles has no intellect, just a direct link to all the minds around him. More articles, this time detailing the testing conditions Charles has to have every time he sits an exam. Erik can’t believe Charles has to be dosed up with Rivolex every single time.

And yet, there are so many certificates hanging on the walls, Charles must get through it.

Before Erik realised what he was doing, he’d read almost the whole scrapbook. There are a few articles pasted into the very back, as if Charles had wanted to keep them but not look at them too often. And Erik soon figured out why.

Brian Xavier was a brilliant nuclear scientist from a wealthy family. He married Sharon Graymalkin, and they had one living son, Charles Francis Xavier, and a stillborn daughter,
Cassandra Nova Xavier. Brian was a highly attentive father and adopted Raven Darkholm when Charles was eight and Raven six. Brian went on to work on several high profile research projects, most notably Black Womb, a foray into mutant genetics in stillborn infants. The project was worked on by Dr. Brian Xavier and Dr. Kurt Marko.

Dr. Brian Xavier was killed in an explosion at a nuclear facility, leaving behind a 10-year-old Charles as the joint inheritor to his fortune with Sharon, Charles’ inheritance to be held in trust until his 21st birthday. There was a brief notation about Trust funds and maintenance stipulations for Raven, something that makes her pretty damn wealthy in her own right.

Another article on the wedding of Sharon Xavier to Dr. Kurt Marko a mere six months after the death of Brian Xavier. There’s a picture of the whole family, Marko and Sharon looking happy, Raven in a beautiful dress but morphed to be blonde with a peachy complexion. Charles is in a suit and looks positively miserable for all that he is smiling. There’s another boy standing next to them, and Erik found out via the caption that it is Cain Marko, Kurt’s son from his first marriage; Cain’s mother died when he was three he learns from the article.

So this is the Kurt and Cain that Charles was thinking about last night.

He put the scrapbook back and stood up, hefting his bag and making his way to Charles’ room once more. He gently sat on the bed at Charles’ side and smoothed his hair back from his forehead.

A little flutter in the back of his mind and Charles is blinking up at him sleepily.

“Hey,” he said. “How are you doing?”


“Painkillers?”

“Please.”

Erik peered at the label and then followed the dosage instructions and poured out three, handing them to Charles as he sat up. Charles chucked the pills back and looked curiously at the bag on his bedroom floor.

“I got my roommate to bring me some fresh clothes,” Erik explained, following his gaze. “Is it okay if I use your shower?”

“Yes, it’s fine. There should be fresh towels in the cupboard under the sink. Do you need a toothbrush or anything?”

“No, he brought that too. I’m all set.”

“Then, by all means, have at it.”

Erik leaned in, laying another kiss to Charles’ forehead, and then another one to his temple. There’s a feeling of something like relief and he knows it isn’t his. Erik couldn’t remember the last time he felt this nervous. He goes slowly, adding another kiss to Charles’ closed eyelid and then to his cheekbone, down his cheek with two kisses, one under the other until he’s right at the corner of his mouth.

[Is this okay?] he pushed, trying to be as gentle as he could.

[Yes.]
It was so gentle, it could have been a butterfly landing on his lips. But it wasn’t, it was Erik, and he was being so very gentle with Charles that it brought tears to his eyes. It had been so very long since anyone was gentle with him. Charles wasn’t really sure how to go about kissing him back but he wants it, God, he wants it so badly.

Erik pressed a little more firmly the second time his lips met Charles’ and then Charles was kissing him back and Erik felt relief flood him. It took a few passes of his lips for them to really figure out how to fit together, and then it was like they had been doing this all their lives. As Charles gained confidence, Erik retaliated with his own, swiping just the tip of his tongue over that full bottom lip.

Charles was sure he’d been electrocuted as that tongue touched his lip and he pushed himself closer to Erik in response. Opening his mouth wasn’t a conscious decision but as Erik’s tongue pressed forward he didn’t care if he’d meant to or not.

Sweet merciful heavens above, he tastes sweeter than anyone alive has a right to taste, and Erik knew he was pushing too hard, moving too fast, but the taste of Charles’ mouth was all he could focus on, that and the heat pooling in him so fast.

It was so good, until it wasn’t. Charles wanted it, wanted Erik, until he realised that Erik was pushing him back, sliding on top of him.

[Stop. Erik, please, stop.]

It was like a bucket of ice water had been poured over him, there was such fear flooding into his head from Charles. Erik shot up, backing off so fast he hit his head on the post at the foot of the bed.

“Sorry!” he cried, rubbing his head. “I’m so sorry, Charles. I shouldn’t have…and I…”

“It’s okay, Erik, really,” Charles promised, reaching out to grab his ankle. “It was just…a little faster than I was thinking.”

“I’m still really sorry.”

“I know.”

“I- I’m just going to shower now.”

Erik was up and in the bathroom before Charles could say anything else, so he slowly got to his feet and picked up the bag Erik had forgotten. He knocked at Erik’s mind.

[Your bag is just outside the door,] he said when he was sure Erik was listening. [I’m going to go have some tea. Take as long as you need.]

[Thank you. I’ll be out in a few.]

Charles sighed and dropped the bag, looking regretfully at the bed for a few moments before he padded to the door.

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When Erik emerged from the bathroom he found Charles had showered in Raven’s room and dressed in a t-shirt with the word ‘Stirlingite’ on it and sweatpants, his bare toes peeking out from under the too long hem.
“What’s a Stirlingite?” he asked as Charles pottered back to the kitchen with his empty coffee mug. “Sorry, I meant to put that in the sink.”

“It’s okay. A Sterlingite is someone who is a fan of the music of Lindsey Stirling,” Charles explained as he opened the fridge and stared at the contents.

“And Lindsey Stirling is?”

“A violinist. The CD should be in the stereo, unless Raven moved it. Speaking of Raven, it looks like she forgot the weekly shop again. Take out sound okay?”

They ended up listening to the violinist, which was pretty good as Erik discovered, and ordering a pizza, some vegetarian deal that Charles picked.

“Look, Erik, about before…”

“It’s fine, really,” Erik insisted. “I moved too fast, it was my fault.”

“No, it wasn’t. Erik…” Charles took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “I haven’t.”

“Haven’t? Haven’t what?”

Charles blushed the brightest red Erik had ever seen. There was a small tap at his temple. He nodded and the images rushed in.

Charles with a girl, on a bed, kissing, her hand down his trousers. Charles couldn’t have been more than fourteen. And then she’s going wild beneath him, his own desire flooding her mind until Charles has to pull away. Another one, this time a boy, a few years have passed, and exactly the same thing happens. Charles started to project and his partner’s all slipped under, lost in it. It’s a flip book of the same thing, happening over and over, Charles getting lost in the moment and losing control, just different partners.

“Oh. You - you’re a - a virgin.” Smooth, Erik, real smooth. “That’s why you pushed me off?”

“Yes. It wasn’t anything you did, it’s me, what I do. I’m sorry.”

Erik crossed the room in quick strides, reaching out and taking Charles’ hands in his own. “No, Charles, no, you didn’t do anything,” he swore. “I promise you, it was my desire that I was acting on, not yours. I just got caught up in it and my body took over before my brain could catch up.”

Charles looked so adorably confused.

“You…you wanted me?”


[Oh.]

“Yes, oh.”

Erik moved slowly, giving Charles the chance to move away, to push him back, anything he wanted. But he didn’t. Charles stayed perfectly still, leaning in a little as Erik got closer, before their lips connected and they were right back where they were before. Charles let out a breathy little sigh and Erik shivered.

[You have no idea how much I like that,] he sent.
Like what?

The little sigh, Erik replied, winding his arms around Charles’ waist as he let his tongue venture forth. Charles tangled his fingers in his hair and let out a moan, such a tiny little moan. The moan too. It’s sexy.

Sexy? Me?

Charles was actually genuinely surprised, he really didn’t know how beautiful he was and it shocked Erik to the core. Erik wanted so badly to back him up against a wall, or lay him out on the sofa, or the floor, or a table.

Interesting ideas. Those definitely aren’t mine.

No, they’re all mine, Erik assured. But, there’s no rush. I can wait.

Thank you.

Welcome.

The pizza was pretty good, even if Erik isn’t all that fond of pizza to begin with, but food is food, and it was the place that would deliver the fastest. Charles had looked like he was about to pass out, so Erik didn’t think it was the time to be picky.

“So, tell me some stuff,” Erik said as they each reached for a second slice. “No, you had all the mushrooms on the last slice, you’re not having them this slice.”

Charles grinned sheepishly and selected a different piece, leaving Erik the one with all the mushrooms.

“What do you want to know?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Erik said. “Things about you. Like…okay, what religion are you?”

“I was Christened as a Protestant, but it’s been years since I was last anywhere near a church. You said you go to Temple?”

“Only when Bubbe wants someone to go with her and no one else volunteers. Why genetics? You could’ve chosen any science to study. Any aspect of mutation. Why genetics? Why teaching too, for that matter. And if you’re that close to Alex how are you allowed to mark his papers?”

“I don’t mark the papers, they get sent out,” he admitted. “The administration was worried that I’d pick out what the students were trying to say from their heads instead of what was actually written. So all exam papers and essays get sent out to a friend of mine. As for the genetics…I suppose it was the endless possibility of it all. Genetics are mutating all the time, creating new and exciting combinations. I always liked the idea of being in the middle of all that, being there when it happened. And, as for the teaching, that’s a whole separate thing, so you answer one of mine now and I’ll tell you next round.”

Erik chuckled. “Okay. What do you want to know?”

“Tell me about the store. I assume you own it, as it has your name on it.”

“Actually, it was my grandfather’s store,” Erik said. “He and Bubbe, they came here in 1946, after
the war. My grandfather came from a family of jewellers, it was all he knew, so he took out a loan and started the store. He used to tell me that he wanted to build a good life for Bubbe because she’d kept him alive.”

“So they were…”

“Yes, they were in the concentration camps. I don’t know which one, or what happened to them there, or how they ended up there or anything like that. I tried asking once, when I was about nine, but they wouldn’t tell me. My mother told me that it was too painful for them to talk about and I never asked again.” Erik paused to take a sip of his soda. “So, they came to America and Poppa opened the store, which flourished. He was very skilled, made very fine work. He and Bubbe had 14 children, and they had kids and so on. When I was a little boy, I used to spend the summer with my grandparents here in New York. We were always moving around, my father needed to for work. I used to help Poppa in the store long before I could see over the counter. He taught me to wield metal, to design something, to make it come to life. When I came into my mutation, he taught me to use it to make beautiful things. He gave the store to me for my 20th birthday. When he gave it to me, he told me that he wanted to be sure it was going to someone who would love it as much as he had.”

“That’s beautiful,” Charles sighed. “Your family sounds so different from mine.”

“How so?”

“Just…different.”

“Does it have anything to do with your mother’s husband?”

Charles looked at him in shock and Erik tapped his forehead, inviting him in. When he felt Charles in his mind, he showed him what he’d done while Charles had been sleeping.

“Oh. Well. Do you want the simple version?”

“I want whatever you’re comfortable giving me.” [In every sense.]

[I know that.]

“Kurt married my mother for the money,” Charles said simply. “I don’t think that they even pretend to love each other anymore. It was a tough thing, being a telepath as a child. I didn’t know how to block anything back then. The manor – that’s where I grew up – it’s way out in Westchester, very isolated. It was easier for me there. But then Kurt came, and he and Cain were so very loud.”

“Kurt…did he dislike you?”

“He hates me. I have the money he wants, I have the control of my father’s foundation, and I have the one thing that really tips him over the edge.”

“Which is?”

“I’m a mutant,” Charles said sadly. “Kurt is a Human Supremacist. Cain isn’t much better. You read the articles, you saw what I had to do to go through the tests?”

“The Rivolex.”

“That was Kurt’s suggestion. He pushed the idea to all my teachers, until it was common practice
to dose me up for exams. It wasn’t until Oxford that anyone actually considered that I could do it without them, that I wouldn’t cheat. But it was too late by then, there was too much prejudice against me and my abilities for anyone to listen to my thesis mentor’s objections.”

“That’s horrific.”

Charles shrugged. “It’s done, can’t go back and change it now.”

“So, where is Kurt now?”

“In Westchester with my mother. They still live in the manor, on the estate. I own half of it, but it’s too big for just me and Raven. Plus, I need to be here in the city to teach and socialise and meet handsome jewellers.”

Erik chuckled. They ate in silence for a while before another question occurred.

“So, who is Scott?” Erik asked. “You mentioned a Scott to Alex.”

“Scott is Alex’s brother. He’s 17 and attends a youth group I work at on a Saturday.”

“Teaching teens about genetics?” he teased.

“No,” Charles chuckled, flicking a pizza crust at him. “It’s a mutant youth group. Mostly it’s about giving the kids a chance to be somewhere that they’re not the odd ones out. We do all sorts of things. Arts and crafts, writing workshops, homework help, exam prep, days out. It’s how I met Alex, as it happens. He came to us when he was 15. He was withdrawn and scared unto death of himself. Over time, we taught him that there was nothing wrong with him, that he just needed to strike a balance. He slowly learnt that he could have fun just like anyone else without it getting out of hand.”

“And his mutation?”

“Rings of laser that come from his chest. We had quite a few fires from it until he got the knack. Scott’s mutation is a little more centralised, his lasers are optical, they come from his eyes. He wears ruby quartz glasses to absorb the output, but it leaves him a little blinded. He can see, just not as you or I do. He’s been saying that it’s giving him problems in completing homework and other such things.”

“Does he really have trouble with the work?”

“Not as such. He’s trying to find his boundaries. A lot of our kids do it. They keep being singled out for being different and in turn they try to remove themselves from the situations where it could happen. We try to teach them that running from it doesn’t help anything.”

“A good lesson to learn.”

“What does your mother do?”

“She’s a carer for Bubbe now,” Erik said as they both reached for the last slice of pizza. “No way, you’ve already had more than half the pie.”

“But I was the one who had to have the doctor make a house call.”

“For a psychic hangover. The slice is mine, Xavier.”

It’s fun and light and makes Charles feel like he and Erik have been having play squabbles like this
for years instead of knowing each other for less than a week.

“Fine, have the slice.”

“Thank you,” Erik said as he snatched it up, shoving the end in his mouth before Charles changed his mind.

“Next time I’m ordering double.”

“Good plan.”

“What did your mother do before she became a carer for your grandmother?”

“She was a whole lot of things. My father never really held down a job long enough for us to really settle anywhere, and then Poppa died and Bubbe needed looking after and mom’s career never really took off. She went to college, got a degree in fine art, but never did anything with it.”

“And what does your father do now?”

“Don’t know, don’t care. He walked out when I was 15. Haven’t heard from him since.”

“I’m sorry. That must have been hard.”

“I guess. I was 15, David, that’s my brother, he was 5 and my sister Anya wasn’t born yet. Poppa showed up two days after he left and packed us all up, took us home with him. We lived with my grandparents permanently after that. It was easier for my mom, having them there to help her.”

Erik took a sip of soda. “Before you ask, no, I’ve never thought about tracking him down. He’s always known where we are, and he’s never bothered to come looking. I’m almost 30, I don’t need him to sweep in now that I’m grown.”

“Duly noted,” Charles said, stunned.

“I’m sorry,” Erik mumbled, realising how harshly that last part had come out. “Touchy subject.”

“You’re forgiven.”

They lapsed into inconsequential conversation, mostly about the plot of the latest Vampire Diaries, which they are both slightly embarrassed to admit watching. They eventually dug out the chess set and Charles finds himself to be inexcusably rusty and Erik to be very good at the game.

“Of course she’ll choose Damon in the end,” Erik argued. “All that passion. It overwhelms everything else.”

“But Stefan loves her so much, and Caroline is right: Stefan and Elena are epic,” Charles countered.

“Get over it already, you Stelena fans have had three seasons of it. Season four is all about the Delena.”

“See, now that right there, that you know the fan terms for it, shows that you are far more obsessed than me.”

Erik chuckled guiltily. “I have a fourteen year old sister, she loves the show. She’s also a Stelena fan, by the way.”

“See? I’m not in the minority. Elena is Stefan’s true love, she just can’t see it.”
“We’ll see. Only a few more episodes, and all the message boards are promising that Elena will finally make a choice before the season ends.”

“We shall see indeed,” Charles said, tilting his head as a consciousness hit his.

“Charles?”

[It’s Raven. Have we really been talking that long?]

[Well, you did sleep a lot of the day…but yeah, we’ve been talking for hours. Should I go?]

[Why would you do that?]

[I’ve had you to myself all day, won’t Raven want your attention?]

[I doubt it.] Charles sniggered. [It’s Friday night. She’ll come in, have a shower, put on something slutty and go out with her girlfriends for the night. I’ll see her tomorrow morning at the youth group and shield against her so I don’t know what she got up to.]

“You make it sound like a routine.”

[It is. Care to wager?]

“If you’re wrong, you have to meet my roommates.”

Charles smiled. [And if I’m right, you have to come to the centre with me tomorrow and help out with the kids.]

“Deal.”

Charles felt annoyingly chipper as he made his way to the centre.

They had had space problems for years, so when they finally found an old clothes store that had seen better days but had huge square footage was up for sale, Charles had felt no issue with buying it outright. Kurt had gone ballistic, calling it a massive drain on the family trust. That alone had been enough for Charles.

The Brian Xavier Centre for Mutant Youth. He was unbelievably proud of it.

There were already a few regulars waiting outside for someone to show up and open the doors.

“Hey, Charles, I remembered my pens this time,” said Kitty, a young lady who could walk through walls, who always wanted to take part in the art activities but never remembered her pens. They had ones she could use, but she always complained that she should have remembered her own.

“Wonderful, Kitty. Let’s see you put them to good use, hmm?”

He opened the door and motioned them to go ahead of him. Jean, one of the older girls, gave him a smile as she passed.

[Jean, be a love and get the lights, would you?] he sent out. Jean was telepathic and never had a problem talking to him this way. He was always careful to keep it light in her head, though. No need to push her beyond what she was capable.
[No problem.] she sent back and he heard the hum of the electrics coming to life. [Might be time to get the electrician in again, Charles. That buzzing doesn’t sound right.]

[Might be. Start setting up for me, please, I have a call I need to make.]

[Sure.]

Charles balanced his travel mug of tea and blueberry muffin in one hand while pulling out his phone with the other.

=Coming in today?= he typed and then sent it to Raven.

“Of course I’m coming in,” she called, heading towards him with a coffee in hand, wonderfully blue in the morning light.

“Good night?”

“Very good. How was yours?”

He deliberated for a moment while she stole his muffin, as he knew she would. “It was fun,” he said eventually.

“Fun? You haven’t been on a second date in like a gazillion years and it was fun?”

“It wasn’t a date, and it hasn’t been that long,” he argued as they entered the building. “We watched a movie, ordered Thai.”

“And?”

“And nothing. Raven, as my sister, you should know me better by now. You’re my oldest friend.”

“I’m your only friend,” she countered.

“Thank you for that,” he said with a chuckle, sipping some tea. “I like him, Rae. I really like him. And he likes me. Can we just…not pressure this one?”

“Hey, I’m all about keeping it light, you know me, but when was the last time anyone gave you free reign in their head?” she pointed out as she made her way over to the homework area, picking up the list to see which kid had what due.

He declined answering her. Instead he made his way through to what used to be a store room and was now an office. They all used it, the staff and volunteers alike. He opened his locker and stowed his stuff, hung up his jacket and picked up a registration sheet to note down who they actually had in that day.

“Sign in, please,” he called, holding up the paper for them all to see, and they all made their way over. He left them to it and went to stand outside to greet the rest of the arriving kids while he finished his tea.

Bobby and John arrived together, and he hoped that this will be one of those Saturdays that they actually manage to get along. Then there’s Marie, who catches the eye of both boys. Then Angel, who he remembers has an algebra assignment due. Sean, who needs help with trigonometry. A few of his regular volunteers smiled as they passed, and Moira, a young woman who was the human child of two mutants and one of the few paid staff. He grinned at the little blonde heading for the door.
“Alison.”

The ten-year-old stopped and looked up at him. “Yeah, Charles?”

“Are you going to be good today? No blinding anyone?”

“I’ll be good.”

She runs on inside as her mother informs him that Alison has started to encounter some bullying at school. Another one for the list.

Ororo is the next to arrive, and she bounces up in all her seven year old glory. Then comes Kurt, his tail covered in what looks like bondage tape.

“I hope, for your sake, that your mother didn’t see you leave with that on,” he murmurs to the sixteen year old.

“No worries, I put it on after I left.” His fangs glinted in the morning sun as he smiled.

“Good to hear. How’s the French assignment going?”

“I’m having a little trouble with the conjugations.”

“Need adult help or brainstorming with some of the others?”

“Brainstorming should be enough.”

“Come and find one of us if it’s not, all right?”

“‘Kay.”

A dozen more kids arrive. Their youngest is Yuriko, a tiny little thing with a Japanese mother who has the ability to heal. It’s made her the target of the more sadistic bullies. A four year old shouldn’t know what a switchblade is.

[Should I be bracing myself?]

Charles chuckled and Yuriko looked at him from where she was perched on his hip. She always spent the first hour or so clinging to one of the mutant adults.

[No, they all seem pretty calm today. And I’m betting your mutation will thrill them enough that they’ll take to you immediately.]

Charles smiled as Erik rounded the corner, and pointed him out to Yuriko. “Do you want to say hello?”

She shook her head and buried her face in his neck. “Oh, sweetheart, it’s okay,” he murmured, rubbing her back. “It’s okay, this is Erik, he’s a very nice man.”

“No,” she whispered as Erik finally reached him.

“All right, Yuriko, that’s all right. You can say hello later.” He looked up at Erik. “Good morning.”

“Good morning. And who’s this?”
“This is Yuriko.” [She’s not quite ready to say hello yet.]

[Fair enough.]

“You’ve come on a good day, Bobby and John seem to be getting along.” Erik took a sip of his coffee and Charles couldn’t help but notice the way his Adams apple bobbed as he swallowed. “You ready for this?”

“As ready as I’m likely to get.”

“He better be ready. You warned him about Marie yet?”

Charles looked around Erik to see Scott and Alex walking towards them. Scott did not look a happy young man.

“Not yet, I was getting to that part.” Scott didn’t even say hello, he just disappeared inside. “That bodes well.”

“He’s pissed he can’t go to baseball camp this summer,” Alex said. He reached out and wiggled one of Yuriko’s braids. “Hey, Squirt. Don’t I get a hello?”

She waved at him and he smiled.

“Why can’t he go?” Charles asked. “I thought it was a done deal. All the paperwork we sent off, there shouldn’t have been any problems.”

“We got a call yesterday, their insurance apparently doesn’t cover mutant damage.”

“Not another one,” Charles moaned. “Has Armando tried talking to them?”

“Man, he was on the phone for like four hours after dinner. No go.”

“No wonder he’s angry,” Erik said.

“Yeah. Fire extinguishers at the ready, buddy. I better go, I got a dentist appointment. Armando’s picking him up, he can’t go on his own no matter what he says.”

“Don’t worry, Raven learnt her lesson.”

Alex moved off with a small wave and Charles motioned for Erik to enter the building, when a familiar mind stopped him from following.

“You must have had a terrible night,” Charles called.

“I’ll have you know that I had a great night.”

“Tony Stark, you are the worst liar I have ever met.”

Tony clapped him on his free shoulder, tickling Yuriko’s ribs with his other hand. She giggled and held out her arms to him.

“So, are you here to help?” Charles asked as he handed the girl over, her little fingers going immediately to trace the glowing circle of Tony’s arc reactor.

“Absolutely.” They made their way in and Tony took in the room. “What, no soldering iron?”
“Sorry, my friend, you’ll have to content yourself with magic markers. And we’ve got a few that need math help, if you would be so kind.”

“Sure thing.” He looked at Yuriko. “Coming with me, sweetheart, or staying with Charlie-boy?”

She reached out to Charles and Tony nodded at them both before heading off to immerse himself in the homework help area.

Erik wandered around, trying to figure out what to do. He eventually found himself drawn to the largest of the tables, which was covered in paper and pens and other art stuff. There was a girl sitting there already halfway through a drawing, and two boys that were sword fighting with two paintbrushes.

Erik reached out and plucked the brushes out of their hands by the metal around the base of the bristles.

“I don’t think that’s what they’re for, boys,” he said and they grinned at him. “So, what’s going on here.”

“Charles likes us to express ourselves in ways other than breaking stuff,” one of the boys said, picking up a marker.

“Sounds like a good plan. My mother has a similar one. I’m Erik.”

“I’m Bobby, and this is John,” the boy said, motioning to the boy he’d been sword fighting with. He nodded to the girl. “That’s Kitty, but we call her Shadowcat.”

“Unusual nickname.”

“I walk through walls,” she said. “Bobby makes ice and John’s a pyrotechnic.”

“Those are cool.”

“What about you?” she asked as Scott threw himself into a chair and began drawing. They all cast a look at him and then ignored that he was there, which seemed to be the way to go.

“My mutation?” She nodded. “Metal manipulation.” He used his ability to make a load of paperclips do the cancan across the table.

“Cool,” Bobby breathed. “Jean’s got something like that. She’s telekinetic. Well, she’s telepathic too, like Charles, but not as much.”

“Which one’s Jean?”

“The redhead,” Kitty said, pointing across the room to where Jean was making a teddy bear do a tap-dance for the amusement of a tiny little thing with a shock of white hair. “The other one is Ororo, she can make weather.”

Charles looked over the heads of the children between him and Erik and smiled. Trust Kitty to show him the ropes. He held up another paperclip to Yuriko and she dutifully stuck it to the coffee mug with sticky tape.

“How about a few on the bottom?” he suggested and she flipped it over, sticking them down in a star shape. “Very good. Now, we’ll fill this with coffee and you can see what Erik can do.”

He settled her on his hip once again and filled the mug before reaching out.
[Erik?]
[Yup?]
[Coffee?]

[You’re an angel.] Erik sent back gratefully.

[Feel the mug?] Charles said, holding it up and Erik grinned at him.

[Very nice. Your handiwork? I had no idea you had such artistic talent, Charles,] he teased.

[Yuriko’s. We have no metal mugs. You want it or not?]

[Of course I want it, I’m sitting in a room full of underage people, of course I want coffee! Okay, I’ve got a grip on it. Let go.]

Charles let go of the mug and Yuriko grinned as it slowly started to float across the room, over the heads of the children and dipping suddenly to avoid a flying Frisbee.

“Take the Frisbee outside, please, you know the rules,” he called and there was a call of assent.

Yuriko was suddenly squirming to get down, so he placed her on her feet and watched as she scurried off towards the arts table. Charles chuckled to himself and moved off to the homework help.

“Hello, little miss,” Erik said as Yuriko came up to him. “Do I get a hello now?”

“Yup. Hi.”

“Hello to you. I’m Erik.”

“Yuriko,” she said, pointing to herself, before holding up her hands. He smiled and set her on his lap, pulling closer some paper and pens for her. “You made it fly.” She was pointing to his coffee mug.

“I did. I can make metal do things.”

“I don’t get ouches.”

He looked confusedly at her.

“She’s a re-gen,” Kitty said, swapping her green marker for a red one. “She heals fast.”

“Ah. That’s a nice gift,” he said.

“The boys don’t like it,” Yuriko said as she started to draw a big ‘Y’ on her piece of paper. “They were mean.”

“What boys?”

“The big boys at school.”

“And they were mean to you?”

“They hurt my arm. And their friends had knives.”
“Human Supremacists and their big brothers,” Scott spat. “Human scum. They think they’re big men because they can pick on a four year old that can’t get hurt.”

“That doesn’t make them human scum, it just makes them scum,” Bobby argued. “It would be just as bad if they were mutants.”

“But mutants wouldn’t do that to each other,” Scott retaliated. He looked at Erik. “I’m done. Can I go?”

“Go?”

“Go home, as in leave.”

“No, you have to wait for Armando to come pick you up, you know that.”

“Man, this is bullshit!” Scott yelled as he shoved away from the table, stomping off to the door to the backyard.

“That was a bad word,” Yuriko said.

“Don’t repeat it, Charles won’t be happy if you do,” John said and Yuriko nodded.

“Indeed he won’t,” said Raven as she approached. “Charles has me on the lunch run. Is there anything you don’t eat?”

“Pork,” he said. “Ham, bacon, anything from a pig.”

“Kosher?”

“No, just never developed a taste for it.”

“Fair enough. How are you doing?” she asked as she shifted into an exact replica of Yuriko. The real Yuriko giggled and clapped and then squealed in delight as Raven morphed back.

“I think I’m doing okay,” Erik said. “I’ve managed not to swear, or say anything inappropriate. It’s sort of like when all my family gets together and I’m left to entertain all my cousins.”

She laughed and rubbed his shoulder.

The day went pretty well, until Yuriko and Ororo came running up to Erik in a haze of childhood fear. They took a side each, tugging at his t-shirt and pointing across the room, where Bobby and Scott were wrestling about on the floor. He herded the girls off to Kitty and started across the room when Charles grabbed him by the arm.

“I’ll grab him, you help me,” the Englishman said and Erik was very confused, until Scott took off his glasses and blasted Bobby across the room. Bobby put up a shield of ice, Scott’s lasers melting it as fast as he could make it.

Charles grabbed one of the towels at the art table and ran up to Scott, shoving his towel covered hand over the boys eyes, forcing them closed. Erik reached out and snagged his hands, pinning them to Scott’s chest. The two of them struggled with the writhing boy, until they all ended up on the floor.

“Stop it, Scott,” Charles hissed in his ear. “Hurting us isn’t going to change anything.”

“I hate it!” Scott screamed. “I fucking hate all if it!”
“I know. I know you do. It’s not fair and you didn’t do anything and all those other things I’m sure Alex and Armando have already said several times over. But hurting Bobby, swearing at me and Erik, terrifying the younger children, is not going to make anything better!”

Scott struggled for a few more moments before falling still. “It’s not fair,” he said, and they could hear the tears in his voice. “I didn’t even do anything and they’re saying I’m too dangerous.”

“You’re right, it’s not fair. But this isn’t the way.” He nodded at Erik and the man slowly let go of Scott’s hands.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt Bobby, I swear I didn’t. I was just so mad…and…”

“Hey, man,” Bobby said, crouching down and rubbing Scott’s shoulder. “I get it.”

“I’m sorry, Bobby. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m Iceman, remember. It takes a little more than a laser blast to finish me off. Here, man. Put these back on.” He held out the ruby quarts glasses and helped Scott to get a grip on them. “Me and John are gonna make some sculptures outside. Want to join?”

“Sure. I’ll be right out.”

Charles moved the towel away from Scott’s eyes and the boy put his glasses back on. “I should go and see what damage there was to the floor,” Charles said. “Everything under control now?” Scott nodded and Charles moved off to the other side of the room, soothing the younger children as he went.

“I have to say, that was pretty impressive,” Erik admitted, leaning against the wall next to Scott. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like that.”

“Really? You must not have seen Alex do his thing,” Scott said.

“No, not yet, I only met him yesterday.”

“So, what? Charles did his thing in your head to make you come today?”

“Nope, I lost a bet. Can’t say I’m sorry I lost it, I’m enjoying myself.”

“Why, you got nothing better to do with your Saturday?”

“Not that, I have plenty of things I should be doing. I should be at work, and paying bills, and chasing up customers that owe me money, and I should probably deal with the mess that is my apartment. But I come from a big family, but we don’t get together that often. It’s nice to hang out with kids now and then, reminds me not to take myself too seriously.”

“Must be nice. A big family I mean. It’s just me and Alex. Our parents never gave a shit, and foster families don’t care.”

“But you’ve got Armando, he seems decent. And Charles.” He ignored the swear.

“I guess. Armando’s pretty cool…don’t tell him I said that?”

“No a word.”

“I mean, when Alex met him, it was like…weird, you know? He’s so much older than Alex, and a doctor and all that, and it’s like, how the hell is this gonna work. But then it did, and it does. And
when Alex came and said he could take me home with him, it was wicked. I even got my own room, how cool is that?"

“Very cool. Sometimes having somewhere to be, somewhere that’s just yours, it can be enough. When I was your age, having my own room was pretty much all it took to make my day better.”

“How do you know Charles? Are you one of his students? ‘Cause you don’t look like the usual geek his stuff draws in.”

Erik laughed. “Well, that’s flattering…I think. I own a jewellery store, Charles came to me for Raven’s bracelet.”

“See, that’s what I mean! You get to use your mutation all the time, and you don’t have people telling you how dangerous you are.”

“Believe me, I get my fair share of mutant phobia. But that’s their problem. The way I see it, if I didn’t have my mutation, I wouldn’t have met all of you. Those people out there, they’re so blinded by their own ignorance that they’ll never see the beauty of mutation. They’ll never see an ice rose made by Bobby, or Raven change into someone else completely. Their lives will always be boring, always be just the same thing as everyone else.”

“You sound like Moira. She keeps going on about how special we all are,” he said, motioning to the young woman Erik had noticed before. “Her parents are mutants, but she’s not.”

“There you go, a human that doesn’t hate us all.”

“Yeah, Moira’s okay. And Tony, he’s known Charles forever. Their dads were friends or something like that. Are you his boyfriend?”

Erik felt himself squirm. “Who’s boyfriend?”

“Charles,” Scott said, picking at the hem of his t-shirt. “The last one was a dick. He came here and was all fine and happy until he found out what we all are, what Charles is. We could hear him yelling at Charles all the way outside in the yard, all this shit about us being unnatural and that.”

“Language,” Erik said automatically, the same way he’d done with his cousins hundreds of times before. “And he obviously wasn’t the right guy for Charles then, was he? A telepath is what Charles is, it’s a part of him, it can’t just be turned off. If Charles, if any of us for that matter, is going to date, then it has to be someone who accepts us, just the way we are.”

“You sound like a guy who’s met some scum in his time.”

“Once or twice.”

“And now?”

“My goodness, you’re better at that than my Aunt Rebekah. Get you to spill your secrets without you even realising what she’s doing. Before you know it, she knows everything there is to know.”

Scott groaned. “And you’re more evasive than Raven.”

“See, there is more to your vocabulary than swears. Knew it was in there.”

“Stop changing the subject!” Scott laughed, pushing at Erik’s arm. “Are you dating Charles? Are you his boyfriend?”
“Does it matter?”

“Not really, I guess. It’s just…you don’t seem like an asshole. It’d be good for him to have someone who’s not an asshole.”

“Would that be okay with you, if I was dating Charles?”

“I guess. As long as you were good to him.”

[Charles?]

[Oh, hello. How’s it going? Scott not incinerated you then, that’s good.]

[No, not incineration. But he’s asking if I’m your boyfriend.]

[Oh my. That’s direct.]

“Ask him?” Scott asked and Erik nodded. “That’s really cool. I don’t know anyone that lets Charles do that. Not even Jean talks to him that much, not that deep.”

“What about Raven?”

“Nah. She says that her brother shouldn’t know that much about what she does.”

[So, am I your boyfriend?] Erik asked.

[I don’t know, to be honest. How does he define boyfriend?]

“Charles wants to know how you would define boyfriend.”

“Have you screwed?” Scott said and Erik snorted at his bluntness.

“No, not as such.”

“Well, have you kissed him?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like him, I mean really like him? And you have to like him just as he is, you can’t want to make changes.”

“No, I like him, just the way he is.”

“Have you had dinner together? Because Armando’s always saying that dinners with Alex are the best part of his day, so dinner must be really important.”

Erik chuckled. “We’ve had dinner twice, and a lunch. Well, it was pizza, but it was sort of lunchtime.”

“Then yes, I’d say you were his boyfriend.”

[Did you get all that?]

[So I suppose you are my boyfriend then. Does this mean I get to kiss you in front of the kids?]

[You can kiss me anytime.]
Goodie. Pucker up then.

Erik looked up to see Charles approaching. He slid down the wall and sat next to Erik, looking around him at Scott.

“All okay?”

“Yeah, it’s all okay,” Scott said, and then he fixed Erik with a hard stare. “If you hurt him, I will blast you, and it will hurt.”

“Noted. Scott, I won’t hurt him, not on purpose.”

“Swear it.”

“I swear on my life that I will never intentionally hurt Charles, or let him come to harm if I can prevent it.”

“Good enough. I’m off.”

And, with that, he got to his feet and walked off, disappearing into the yard.

“Well, that was forthright,” Charles said. “So where’s my kiss?”

Erik smirked and leaned in, capturing Charles’ bottom lip between his own and sucking at it. He felt Charles grin and reach for him, so he licked at the lip he had hold of and entwined his fingers with Charles’.

[I’d go a little further if we were alone, or somewhere a little less public, but we do have little people watching,] Erik said and Charles moaned in disappointment.

[Later?]

[Later.]

The weeks passed and Erik and Charles grew closer and closer. Erik found himself humming along to the radio as he worked, and Charles actually looked forward to his forced leave from the university. He anticipated sitting in the jewellers watching Erik work and being very distracting.

But, before that, he got a phone call one afternoon. And when he was done dealing with the fallout from that phone call, all he wanted to do was crawl into a hole somewhere and die. So he did the only thing he could think of at that moment.

“Azazel! Get the fucking door!” Erik hollered. A few moments passed and then the doorbell buzzed again obnoxiously. He growled and shut off the water.

He climbed from the shower and grabbed a towel, wrapping it around his waist as he yanked open the bathroom door, to find a note taped to it.

Erik, me and Janos have gone to Madrid to visit his sister, we’ll be back in a week. Or maybe longer. Need me, call me, Janos’ cell is on. Azazel.

“Typical,” he muttered as he padded over to the intercom. “You couldn’t have fucking told me
“first?” He seized the handset. “Hello?”

“Erik?”

“Charles? I thought you were having dinner with Raven?”

“Change of plans. Can I come up?”

“Sure.” Erik pushed the button to open the outside door and replaced the receiver, opening the door and waiting. He was well aware that he was dripping wet and in nothing but a towel, but over the past few weeks Erik had learnt that Charles never turned up unannounced, he would always call first.

It was less than a minute before Charles appeared at the top of the stairs, and he pushed Erik back, slamming the door behind him, before attaching himself to Erik’s lips.

Erik moaned, gasping as Charles’ tongue pushed into his mouth, those wonderful hands gripping his hair. He had no choice but to wrap his arms around Charles. He lost himself in it, surrendering to this unexpected (but incredibly welcomed) ravishment. It wasn’t until those wonderful hands slipped downwards, slipping over his nipples and fumbling for the twist holding his towel up that his senses returned.

“Charles! Charles, stop, stop,” he said, pulling his mouth away and lacing his fingers with Charles’.

“Why? You want me, I know you do.”

“Yes, I do want you, but this isn’t you. Charles…what happened?”

Charles froze and backed up a few steps, yanking his hands back. “I’m sorry. I’ll just go.”

“Charles, don’t. Please, don’t go. Just…explain, okay?”

Charles locked his big blue eyes on Erik’s and there was such sadness there. “I got a phone call. My mother had a fight with Kurt. She was drinking and got behind the wheel. She wrapped it around a tree,” he said.

“Shit. Is she okay?”

“Broken collarbone, and a gash above her eye. They’re going to keep her in overnight, make sure there’s no head trauma. They called me because they couldn’t get hold of Kurt, he’s probably ten sheets to the wind in my father’s study.”

“I’m not quite following you,” Erik admitted. “Your mother is fine, so why are you trying to strip me?”

Charles began to pace, gnawing at his thumbnail. “Do you know what it’s like to have everyone around you want you to be something else?” he asked. “Mother doesn’t want me, doesn’t love me, she can’t, she even says so herself. If only I wasn’t a telepath, she says, if only I wasn’t a mutant. And Raven, she wants me around as long as I don’t go too deep in her head. The uni wants me to teach but, oh no, I can’t possibly mark papers, might plant things in their heads. I just…fuck, Erik, I can’t do this anymore. It’s too hard, Erik, it’s too much.”

It broke Erik’s heart to see the man he had fallen for like that. This time, when Charles reached out for him, he went willingly, letting Charles cling to him.
“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Charles whispered.

“No, no, baby, no sorrys. There’s nothing for you to say sorry for,” he crooned, sweeping the dark waves of his hair back.

“I just…I want…I…”

“Tell me. Come on. Whatever it is that you want or need, if I can get it for you, I will. Anything, no matter how outrageous you think it is. Just tell me.”

“I just want you,” he murmured. “Someone who wants me, just me, no other bits.”

Erik leaned in, joining their lips.

[I want you. Just you, just the way you are,] Erik pushed, pulling their hips flush against each other. [No changes, no substitutions. You’re perfect, Charles. Don’t let anyone convince you otherwise.]

[I’m not perfect. My own mother doesn’t want me.]

Erik could feel the tears falling from Charles’ cheeks to land on his chest.

[But I do. To me, you are perfection. Come on, you’re way in my head, in every little piece of it. See how I see you, see how much I want you just the way you are.]

Erik could feel the sweep of Charles through his mind, through every neuron and synapse. After a few minutes of rummaging, Charles pulled back, leaning his forehead against Erik’s.

“You want me,” he murmured. There was pure relief in his voice.

“In every way. I want you, Charles. No matter what.”

“Then have me. Please, Erik.”

Erik pulled him in to a kiss, sliding his hands down the slim back and pulling Charles’ shirt out of his trousers. Charles moaned and Erik responded by backing him up, groping wildly for the frame of his bedroom door. His breath caught in his throat as Charles detached from his mouth and began to nip at his throat.

“Oh fuck me,” he breathed, finally managing to locate the bed. “Charles, how far are we going?”

“Not a clue, making it up as I go,” he purred and Erik chuckled.

“Then lie down and we’ll go a few steps further.”

Charles left one more maddening kiss right on his Adams apple before he did as he was told. Sweet fuck, Charles was stretched out on his bed and he suddenly had a biting fetish. All that pale, pale skin.

“Now, you’re not going to be needing these,” he said, pulling off Charles’ shoes, dropping them to the floor.

“Am I not?” Charles said.

“No. And you’ll not need these, either.” He pulled of his socks and then crooked a finger so Charles sat up. “This jacket, not necessary.” He unbuttoned it and pushed it off his shoulders. The
waistcoat was next. “Has anyone ever told you that you wear too many clothes?”

“No, it’s never come up. People usually think I dress from another time.”

“I do have to wonder,” he said with a smile, climbing onto the bed to straddle him.

“My father, when I was very young, told me that a true gentleman is always properly attired. And he wore things like this. I imagined that all gentlemen wore waistcoats.”

“And thus your wardrobe was born, I get it.” He swooped in and nibbled at Charles’ throat, his long fingers slipping the buttons open so fast that Charles didn’t realise until Erik took a nipple between his teeth.

[Oh!]

[Good?]

[It’s not polite to talk with your mouth full.]

[Hmmm, apparently not good enough if you can still chastise me.] He reached out with his ability and removed the cufflinks, sliding off to the side so he could get a better angle. The shirt soon joined everything else scattered on the floor and Charles squirmed as Erik trailed kisses down his torso.

[More, Erik. Please.]

“Mmmm, better,” he purred. He rested his fingertips on his belt. “Can I?”

Charles hesitated for a moment before he nodded. Erik held his hands up and wiggled his fingers as Charles’ belt unbuckled under his power. Next came his button, and the slow downward slide of the zipper.

“Impressive,” Charles said. Erik wasted no time in pulling the trousers down and chucking them over his shoulder.

“Thank you.”

Erik lowered himself, kissing Charles with as much passion as he could, proving to him how much he was wanted. Charles, for his part, wrapped his arms around him, feeling the warm skin beneath his fingertips. His hips thrust up of their own accord, hitting air, and Charles whined in frustration.

[Mmmm, we are needy. I’m sure I’ve told you before, I like the noises. Very sexy.]

[Then do something and I’ll make more of them.]

[I think I like you frustrated.]

Erik laughed as Charles flipped them, the smaller man climbing astride him and swooping in to kiss him. Erik surrendered to it, letting the sensations lead him. He thrust up and Charles gasped.

[Oh.]

[Oh? Good oh or bad?]

Charles nibbled at his throat. “Not sure. New oh.” His hands had slid down and he was toying with the edge of the towel.
“Hey,” Erik crooned, caressing a cheekbone with his thumb. “You don’t have to touch me. Or you can if you want to. It’s entirely up to you where we go.”

“I want it off,” he replied. “Can I…I want…”

“Anything. Tell me what you want and you can have it.”

“I want to see you,” he whispered. Erik nodded and reclined back, his hands behind his head. Charles licked his lips and pulled, unveiling Erik in all his glory.

Erik was fascinated by the way Charles nibbled on his lower lip as he gazed down on his half hard member. A little crease formed between his eyebrows.

[Something amiss?] Erik asked and blue eyes locked onto his. They trailed down and landed just below his throat. [Star of David. Anya made it for me last time she was in the store.]

[Ah, that’s what it is,] Charles said, a small half smile forming. [You had a bris.]

[Oh! That’s what caught your attention, that I’m circumcised. I forgot that you’ve never done this…seen another man up close and personal.]

[Never. It’s…not what I expected.]

[Really. And just how often have you thought of my cock?]

Charles blushed, his face a mask of shocked horror. “That’s not what I meant! I meant-”

Erik silenced him by sitting up and kissing him. Charles kissed him back, their tongues duelling, Charles’ hips thrusting against him, a needy little sigh escaping his throat every now and then. He gripped his hips, caressing his arse, adding a few groans of his own to the symphony of their pleasure.

[Charles…]

There was no reply, just a thrum of desire through his mind. It was odd. He knew what he was feeling, how much heat there was thrumming through his body, his own needs, his own wants. And then there was that, a whole other set of sensations that were entirely not his. Desire, heat, need, an undercurrent of nervousness and some honest fear right underneath it all.

Erik flipped them back over, Charles letting out an adorable little squeak as he hit the pillows. He nibbled his way along his jaw, down over his throat and fingers tangled in his hair. Erik slid his hand down, toying with the waistband of Charles’ boxer shorts and he shifted his hips.

“Can I take them off, or do you want them on?”

“Off,” Charles breathed, tugging on his hair. “Take them off.”

Erik licked another kiss on his stomach, just above his bellybutton, before he sat back on his heels. The nervousness that wasn’t his intensified and he smiled at the younger man.

“We don’t have to.”

“But I want to. I’m just…it’s new,” Charles said.

Erik grinned before he hooked his fingers into the elastic and pulled, Charles lifting his hips to make it easier, and then they were both bare. Charles was a little smaller than him, but still a
decent size, and he was uncircumcised. Erik chucked the boxers to the floor with the rest of the clothes, added his discarded towel to the pile, and caressed Charles’ thigh, manipulating their limbs until her was comfortably stretched out atop the telepath, his hips snug in the cradle of Charles’ thighs.

“All okay?” Erik asked.

Charles wriggled a little beneath him, hiking his left leg a little higher on Erik’s hip, resting one hand against Erik’s heart.

“All okay. It’s not so bad, this whole naked thing.”

“No?”

“In fact, I think I quite like it.”

“Good.”

And then the flames between them consumed them, their kisses becoming wild, hands gripping, nails digging in, drawing blood. Before they really knew where they were, Erik had slid down and taken Charles in his mouth. Charles arched in sudden pleasured shock, hips thrusting of their own accord.

[Sweet heavens!]

Erik chuckled and Charles half screamed. [Fuck me, that’s hot. Want to scream for me again?]

[If this were in public, I’d be calling you a pervert.]

[But we’re not in public,] he replied, rolling his balls in his fingers, swirling his tongue around the head. [And your cock is in my mouth, so I don’t consider it pervy.]

[That’s – oh shit! – almost sweet, all things – fucking hell! – all things considered. Oh my God!]

[If those were verbal, I’d say you had a dirty mouth.]

[If you keep on like that – ah! Ah! Ah!] Charles trailed off, his thoughts becoming a meaningless babble.

Erik sucked harder, taking him deeper, until his mouth was flooded with hot salty liquid. He swallowed it all down, enjoying the flashing going on in his head, his own telepathic show of Charles’ orgasm.

He crawled up the bed, propping his head on one elbow and trailed a finger over Charles’ chest, admiring the way it rose and fell with each gasping, shuddering breath. He could feel his own aching arousal and wasn’t quite sure what to do. Did he take care of it himself? What if Charles wanted to? What if he didn’t, and it intimidated him?

“You think too much.”

Erik shivered as Charles rolled over onto his side, pulling Erik into a kiss and snaking his hand down to wrap around the hard length.

“Mmmm, is this all for me?”

“If you want it.” He groaned as Charles slid his fingers along his length, getting comfortable with
it, learning how to hold a penis that wasn’t his own.

“Am I doing this right?” Charles whispered between kisses. “I don’t know how, it’s all rather strange.”

“St – oh! – strange?”

Charles kissed him, loosening his grip a little and Erik moaned, reaching down and wrapping Charles’ hand tighter, rolling more onto his back and letting Charles press him into the mattress.

[More, please, fuck Charles more!]

[How? What do I do?]

[Squeeze tighter – oh! Just like that. And move a little faster. Ah! Fuck me, that’s it!] He found himself biting at Charles’ lips as he kissed him, his own hands gripping at the thick wavy locks. He couldn’t hold on, it was too much. [Charles, please, just add a little sort of twist at the end, right at the head.]

And that was it, he was lost and he was screaming into his mouth, gripping at his shoulders and he was just gone.

When he came back to himself, Charles was sitting up and looking at his sticky hand, trying to figure out what to do about it.

He kissed a pale, freckled shoulder. “Stay here.” He bounded off the bed and sped to the bathroom, returning with a damp washcloth. He cleaned them up and chuckled it on top of his towel, before tugging Charles under the duvet, holding him close. “Just stay for a bit, just a little while. I know you have work tomorrow—”

“No, I don’t,” Charles interrupted. “I’m on leave from now until September.”

“What about the exams? Shouldn’t you be there?”

“I’m not allowed to be there,” he whispered. “They bring in the bloke who does my marking. The admin are worried I’ll implant the answers, so I’m not even allowed to go near the campus right now.”

“That’s fucking bullshit! You’d never do that.”

“I know, but it is the way it is. On the plus, I get to spend my days sitting in the store distracting you.”

Erik chuckled and let it go, let Charles distract himself from the injustice of it. “Sounds like a plan, Mr Xavier.”

They fell silent, each just basking in the warmth of each other.

“You know, Azazel and Janos have gone to Spain for a week. You can stay tonight…if you wanted.”

“I’d like that,” Charles mumbled. “Erik?”

“Yes?”

“My mother wants me and Raven to go for dinner with her this weekend. Will…would you like to
“Come?”

“As long as she knows I’m coming before we get there, I’d love to come.”

Charles was silent but Erik could feel the happy thrum pushing through the connection.

“I could feel you,” Erik said conversationally. “When I was blowing you, I could feel you in my head.”

“Oh. You felt my desire? And…did it…”

“No, it didn’t override my own. I was very aware of what was mine and what was yours. It was very intense, sort of like a feedback. Very…What’s the word? I think groovy covers it.”

Charles smiled and snuggled in a little closer. They were silent again, the two of them almost asleep when Charles spoke once more.

“I’ve known Tony a very long time, did you know that?”

“Scott said your fathers were friends.”

“They were. Both came from very rich families. Tony got into MIT when he was 14, boy genius. For my eighth birthday, just before he went away to school, he brought me a robot he made for me. It was a little person, about the size of a two year old. It danced and talked, all the things a regular old human did. It was a wonderful gift. Played a wonderful game of chess. I didn’t have Raven yet, my little Albert - that was his name, Albert – he was my friend. And then Kurt and Cain came for lunch. Cain wanted to take Albert with him, but I said no. So Cain threw him into the wood chipper the gardeners were using.”

Erik pulled him closer, kissing his neck. “No one’s going to put me in a wood chipper. I won’t let anyone take me from you, I’m right here. I’m yours, Charles, for keeps.”

A pleased little hum of contentment.

[I love you too, Erik.]

Chapter End Notes

This is the YouTube channel of Lindsey Stirling, who is one of my favourite violinists.

http://www.youtube.com/feed/UCyC_4jvPzLiSkJkLlkA7B8g/u
Chapter Three

Erik was raised in a house where his mother, or aunts, or grandmother, or one of his cousins was always in the kitchen. It seemed to be a genetic trait, the women of his family loved to cook and feed people. He and the other male Lehnsherr’s had tried, thousands of times, to help, but it always ended up with someone getting burnt and being shooed out of his mother’s kingdom.

Charles, on the other hand, was raised in a house where the maid and the cook were the only women who did anything domestic. When Raven and Charles had bought their apartment and set up home, both of them had gone down the route of take out. They may not have been able to whip up dinner, or make a breakfast that wasn’t burnt, but they had a very impressive binder of menus for every take out place that would deliver.

So it’s not surprising that Erik can’t get the hang of chopsticks. He can wield instruments to put a tiny diamond in a space less than a millimetre, but he just can’t get this to work.

“No, this finger goes here,” Charles said, repositioning Erik’s fingers around the thin piece of bamboo once again.

“I’m telling you, my finger doesn’t bend like that,” Erik complained and Raven giggled.

“How is it that you’re almost thirty and you can’t use chopsticks?” she asked, displaying her own skill at it by scooping up some fried rice.

He didn’t respond, save for a glare that made her giggle again, and reached out with his powers, summoning a fork from the kitchen. Charles blinked at it as it flew past him, and then chuckled as Erik stabbed his chopsticks into Charles’ spring roll.

“Good Jewish boys don’t learn how to use chopsticks,” he said as he finally got a decent mouthful of food. Actually, he knows his cousins are very good with chopsticks and they’re a lot more orthodox than he is, but Charles and Raven don’t need to know that.

[I heard that.]

Damn it.

“We also don’t learn all this stuff you babbled at me when I first walked in the door,” he said. “So, what’s all this about cutlery and napkins and such?”

“You’re coming for dinner this weekend,” Raven said. “Sharon’s traditional, like real traditional. She goes in for all that high dining and etiquette shit.”

“Fuck,” Erik muttered. “So jeans and a shirt won’t work?”

“Absolutely not, she’d assume you were the cab driver.”

“Are we talking a full on tux?”

“No, not quite that far. Smart casual is more what you should go for.”

“Think a nice pair of trousers and a button down,” Charles chimed in.

“As for the dinner table etiquette - ”
“Raven, honestly, I’m going to have him in my head all night,” he said, nodding at Charles who was showing off with his chopsticks by getting a healthy mouthful of orange chicken. “I don’t think I’m going to have a problem with which fork to use.”

“Good point. Just…Kurt likes to get a rise out of people,” she said, dipping a wonton in chilli oil. “Don’t let him goad you.”

“A rise?”

“He likes to say things to get people all worked up so he can argue with them and make it look like he’s the innocent party,” Charles explained. “The man should have been a politician. Cain’s better, only in the way that he barely says anything of any importance.”

“Are there any safe topics of conversation?”

The siblings looked at each other for a long moment. “Probably best to see what kind of mood they’re in before defining that one,” Charles said eventually.

“Am I going to like the food at least?”

“Oh, yeah,” Raven promised. “Rosalie is a wicked cook, you’ll love the food.”

“So there is a bright side.”

Erik looked between them and decided to grab the ginger beef instead of saying anything.

Well aware of the fact that he was going to be meeting his boyfriend’s mother for the first time, Erik did everything he possibly could to make the evening go smoothly, and that included getting the mechanic to have a quick last minute look at his car so it didn’t break down and make them late.

He bought a whole new outfit just to go to dinner, and he’s not actually sure how he’d managed to never buy a shirt that needs actual cufflinks before.

His shoes he dropped in to the cobbler to have them buffed and re-soled.

He even went to a tailor to have a proper pair of trousers made specially.

And then, just to be sure, he went online and looked up what to take with him to make a good impression with Charles’ mother.

So, when he picked Charles and Raven up from outside their apartment at 6 on the dot that Saturday evening, he could feel the surprise from Charles at all the prep he’d done.

“Really, darling, you didn’t have to go to so much trouble,” Charles said as he slid into the front passenger seat, leaning in for a kiss before buckling up.

“I wanted to,” he replied. “I wanted to make a good impression.”

“Shit, you even shaved!” Raven cried from the backseat, reaching forwards and rubbing at his cheek.

“My mother always complains when I don’t, I’m taking no chances.” He started the engine.

“Directions?”
Charles pushed a little map into his head and he smiled.

The drive was about a half hour, and they passed it quite pleasantly, talking about the kids at the centre and debating about the radio station to be listened to. Erik finally found out what Raven did for a living.

“Let me get this straight,” he said, glancing in his rear-view mirror before fixing his eyes on the road once more. “You go around to schools and help mutant kids get a grip on their abilities, providing a necessary and invaluable service that these parents don’t even have to pay for, and they’ve got you stretched over ten schools?”

“Yup, two schools a day, one in the morning, one after lunch. I see somewhere in the region of two to three hundred kids a week.”

“Why don’t they get someone to help you? Surely they can see the importance of what you do?”

“The problem is in the education system itself,” Charles said. “They’re still under the illusion that a mutant ability is something like an extra sense, not really understanding that our abilities are like breathing to us.”

“They still believe that shit?”

“Yes, they still believe it.”

“They were saying that when I was a kid. It was bullshit then, too.”

“The National Mutant League has tried to implement change but they’re not getting very far,” Raven said. “Oh, take a left.”

After a further ten minutes, Erik got a glimpse of a huge house.

“That’s the one,” Raven said, pointing to it.

Erik bit his tongue and pulled up where Charles directed him to.

[Say it,] Charles sent and Erik grinned guiltily.

[This is…how on earth did you and Raven find each other as children? Seriously, does this place have its own zip code?]

[And now you see why me and Raven have such a small apartment.]

Erik looked up at the imposing brick building, feeling suddenly very small and insignificant. His childhood home is by no means a hovel, but it’s nothing like this. This is huge, more than enough room to house half the population of New York.

“Is it not big enough for half the population of New York,” Charles said, rolling his eyes.

“It’s close,” Raven agreed and Erik got the shock of his life when he turned to look at her.

“What the hell? What is this?” he asked and her peachy cheeks went pink, her now blue eyes focussed on the ground, a lock of blonde being twisted around her fingers.


“But…”
[Mother doesn’t like the blue. Raven does this every time we come here, no matter what I say. Just leave it.]

Erik took a deep breath and clasped Raven’s shoulder. “You turn back as soon as we get back in the car,” he said, leaving no room for argument. “You need to do this right now, that’s fine. But as the guy who’s dating your brother, let me say, I like the blue, I think it’s beautiful.”

“Okay,” she whispered and there were tears in her eyes.

“Okay.” He rubbed the shoulder and made his way to the trunk of his car. Inside, he opened the cooler and pulled out the flowers, chocolates and bottle of wine he had bought specially.

“Wow, you really do want to make an impression,” Raven gaped.

“Yup,” he said simply, closing the trunk and locking the car with his powers. “And I know exactly jack shit about wine. The guy at the store said that this would go well with duck. You did say we were having duck for dinner…right?”

“Yes, duck,” Charles said, leaning in and stealing a quick kiss.

“Good. Let’s do this thing.”

They made their way up to the front door where they were met by the butler, Geoffrey. He met Charles and Raven warmly and with obvious happiness at seeing them, and then politely welcomed Erik. He led them to the parlour, where Sharon was waiting.

She was a little shorter than Charles, blonde, and they possessed the same blue eyes, but hers had none of Charles’ warmth. She was impeccably dressed in a red dress and actual pearls, the wound over her eye artfully disguised by her hair and make-up. Suddenly Erik’s mouth was very dry.

“Steady,” Raven murmured to him as Charles stepped ahead to greet Sharon. “Her bark is worse than her bite.”

“I’m fucking her son, she probably wants to rip my heart out,” he whispered as Charles enquired after his mother’s health.

“You haven’t actually had penetrative sex, she’d consider everything you’ve actually done to be fooling around, and even if you had fucked him, I doubt she’d care.”

And, with that, Raven stepped forwards to greet Sharon herself, kissing her cheek and saying how wonderful she looked.

“Mother, this is Erik Lehnsherr, my boyfriend,” Charles said, leading him forwards with a hand on his elbow.

“Mrs Marko, it’s so lovely to finally meet you,” he said, glad that his voice was steady. He held out his offerings. “These are for you. Thank you so much for inviting me into your lovely home.”

“Oh, thank you, dear,” she said, nodding at a young girl in a uniform who came forwards to accept Erik’s gifts with a small curtsy. “Wonderful you could come. Kurt and Cain are waiting in the atrium. The lilies are in bloom.”

“Of course. Shall we?” Charles said. His mother reached out and grasped his arm, giving Charles no choice but to escort her. Erik held out his arm for Raven.
“I need a drink,” Erik hissed through his teeth.

“Soon,” she promised. “Nice greeting, very smooth.”

“Who was the one in the uniform?”

“Abigail, one of the maids. Nice girl. Daughter of our cook, Rosalie.”

“Right.”

The atrium was a beautiful glass room with a curved ceiling that had an amazing view of the stars. It was filled with flowers in every colour Erik could imagine. There were two men standing at the far end of the room, each with a brandy in hand, and a young woman holding a glass of wine.

Charles greeted them, and then Raven did the same, and then Erik was introduced to Kurt and Cain Marko, and Tiffany Cramer, Cain’s new squeeze.

Erik was very relieved when he was finally handed a scotch, and had to force himself not to down the whole thing in one go. Raven got handed her requested orange juice, but Charles was given a stern look by his mother when he asked for a scotch.

“Charles, really,” she admonished. “You’ll have water.”

[Charles?] 
[She believes my telepathy goes haywire when I drink.]

[Does it?] It occurred to Erik that he’d never asked what affected his lovers abilities.

[Not in the slightest.] Charles said as he accepted a glass of water from another young girl in uniform. [A bout of flu, on the other hand…]

[Why doesn’t she know this?]

[I’ve tried telling her, but Kurt got in there first.]

[Ah.]

“Mrs Marko, this is some house,” Erik said with a smile. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it.”

“It is rather too large for my liking,” Kurt said. “But, inheritance and all that.”

“I inherited the house from my late husband Brian, Charles’ father,” Sharon said. “It was in his family for ten generations, you know. And please, call me Sharon.”

“Father told me once it was built in the late 1700’s,” Charles added.

Erik nodded, and then let his brow furrow in confusion. “Forgive me if I’m wrong, but I understood inheritance law to work in the favour of the first-born legitimate child,” he said, putting on a mask of innocence.

“Oh, yes, Charles is a co-inheritor,” she said dismissively.

“Ah. So, Kurt, I read that you were a physicist?”
“Yes,” the man said, swirling his drink. “I’m too busy these days for the lab, all these society functions, you know.”

“Of course. You must be in the society pages quite often, I would imagine. Of course, I wouldn’t know about such things myself. Different circles, I believe that’s the term?”

“Yes, I didn’t think I recognised the name. Lehnsherr, was it?” Erik nodded. “Yes, quite unusual. Scandinavian?”

“German.”

The conversation stopped as they heeded the call to head into the dining room. The table was huge, absolutely massive. It could have seated 25 people easily, with room to spare. Erik pulled out Raven’s chair for her, and then sat where Raven directed him to, which was in-between her and Charles. Kurt took the head of the table, with Sharon to his right, followed by Cain and then Tiffany.

[Holy fuck, that’s a lot of cutlery.] Erik thought. [Fuck, these can’t all be for me.]

[They are. Just follow my lead.] Charles replied with a soft wave of affection and reassurance. He picked up his napkin, unfolded it so it still had its centre fold, and laid it across his knee. Erik copied him exactly.

Sharon began to talk to Raven about the latest society function, and Cain and Kurt busied themselves with talk of the stock market. Tiffany looked a little lost, but she’d obviously already had too much to drink, so they left her to it.

[So, what are we actually meant to talk about?]

[Well, your surname has sparked something in Kurt…]

“So, Erik,” Kurt said as their first course arrived, a light bruschetta with tomato and basil. “What is it you do exactly?”

“I’m a jeweller,” he answered, copying Charles on which cutlery to use. “I own a store in the city.”

“Ah, that’s where I know the name. Lehnsherr Designs. Very fine work, Sharon’s engagement ring is one of yours.”

“I think it’s probably Erik’s grandfather that made that particular ring,” Charles said.

“He opened the store, and then gave it to me when he felt I was ready for it,” Erik added.

“Wonderful thing, a family business,” Cain said, shooting a snide look at his stepbrother. “Shame Charlie here never grasped that.”

“I think Brian would have thought very highly of what Charles is doing,” Raven said.

“I think he would’ve wanted the Xavier Foundation to do something more than give a few city kids a playroom,” Kurt replied.

“It’s not a playroom,” Charles said, outwardly calm but Erik could feel the tension in him. “These kids need somewhere to go, someone to look out for them. Father would have been more than happy with the work the Foundation is doing.”

“Brian wanted to change the world of mutants, and you’re enabling them. Not what I call
“Is everyone enjoying the food?” Raven asked brightly, interrupting before the argument could really start.

“It’s delicious,” Erik said, making a show of reaching for his napkin on his knee to dab at his mouth so he could reach under the table and squeeze Charles’ thigh.

[I’m fine,] Charles sent, smiling at him as their plates were cleared away and the soup brought out. [Really. Cain just knows the right buttons to push, that’s all.]

Erik flashed him a brief smile as he took up his soup spoon, waiting for Charles to take a mouthful before he emulated him.

[Spoon in the right hand, tilt the bowl away from the body, scoop away from yourself,] Charles guided. [Now, don’t put the spoon in your mouth, but delicately sip from the side of the spoon. And don’t slurp, it’s very bad manners.] Erik nervously took his first mouthful of the lentil soup. [Very nice. We’ll make a socialite out of you yet.]

The conversation had turned to Tiffany, who was a waitress from Queens. They were talking about the shocking state of the police force in New York City.

[I’m tempted to dip my roll in the soup. Can I do that?] Erik sent and Charles’ shoulders shook slightly in a silent chuckle.

[No, don’t do that. You tear off a bite-sized piece at a time and butter each one individually. Oh, and you help yourself to some butter before you start. Scoop up some and put it on the side of the plate that’s got your roll with your butter knife, this one.] He briefly touched one of the knives as he reached to get his glass of sparkling apple juice. […can’t even have one fucking glass of wine fucking ridiculous I’m not a fucking child bloody woman why did I subject him to this…]

[Your stream of consciousness is showing.] Erik sent. [And I promise you a beer after this.]

[I might need several.]

The meal continued, the conversation somehow, miraculously, managing to stay light, until the main course was brought out.

“Oh my God,” Raven said to Charles, glancing at him behind Erik’s back. “I thought you said we were having duck!”

“I did!” Charles hissed through his tightly clenched teeth. “Mother?”

“Yes, darling?”

“I thought we were to be dining on Rosalie’s roast duck,” he said, keeping the tone light.

“We were, but you know how much Cain loves a ham.”

Erik bit his lip, trying very hard not to laugh, but he could feel it bubbling within him.

“Erik, I am so sorry,” Charles said, looking at his boyfriend. Oh, shit. Erik was biting his lip, a hand brought up to cover his lips, his eyes glued to the baked ham in the middle of the table.

[How angry are you?]
[If I say anything right now, I will die laughing,] Erik said firmly and Charles’ eyes widened. [Where’s the bathroom?]

Charles pushed a map of the house into his head, highlighting the route to the closest bathroom.

Erik cleared his throat. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment,” he said hurriedly, standing and leaving the room.

Charles could hear the echo of Erik’s laughter in his head.

“Mother, why did you change the menu?” he hissed as Kurt began to carve.

“I don’t see the problem, Charles,” Kurt said. “You’ve never complained before.”

“Erik is Jewish,” Raven said.

Sharon looked shocked, Kurt had some kind of rage going on, Cain snorted and Tiffany’s jaw dropped.

“Way to go, asshole,” Cain said with a malicious smile.

“Really, Charles, you could have warned your mother,” Kurt said, serving slices out to them.

“Well I was told that we’d be having duck so I saw no need to bring up religion,” the telepath snarled. “If someone hadn’t declared how much they love a ham.” He shot an accusing look at Cain.

[…don’t look at me like that…sick fucking freak…hope he leaves you…the things this girl can do with her mouth…stop looking at me Charles stop it stop stop stop stop I’ll break you again…]

Charles put up his shields and prepared to stand so he could go and find Erik, when the man himself reappeared in the doorway. He shot Charles a quick smile and sat down once again.

“Erik, I am so sorry,” Charles said.

“It’s fine, Charles, really. There are plenty of other things here, I won’t miss out,” Erik assured. He stretched out his mind and was surprised to find that there was nothing, just a blank wall where he usually found Charles.

Kurt looked smug and Sharon relieved. Cain looked mildly disappointed. Erik used the commotion of dishes being passed around, so reminiscent of his own family gatherings, to lean in to Charles.

“Are you okay?” he murmured as he accepted the dish of apple and herb stuffing.

“I’ll tell you later. I’m not blocking you on purpose. Just let me calm a bit and I can let you back in,” Charles whispered.

Erik nodded and set to his dinner, peering over at Raven to see which cutlery to use.

“So, Erik, how is your business faring in this economy?” Kurt said.

“I haven’t really seen a shift, to be honest,” he replied.

“You’re either bad with math or a fool, because everyone’s suffering,” Cain said. Erik stiffened and reminded himself not to rise too high to the bait.
“And what is it that you do, Cain? I didn’t catch it.”

“I’m a consultant. I fix problems within major companies all over the world.”

“And that’s a good living? Answering to everyone else, doing everyone else’s bidding?”

“I make enough to live the way I should be living, despite not having a pretty little inheritance like Charlie here.”

“You were nothing to do with Brian,” Raven said. “It’s an Xavier inheritance, not a Marko one.”

“You’re not an Xavier, and you still got a trust fund.”

“I was adopted by Brian and listed in his will,” Raven said, her tone cold. “Just because the lawyers cock blocked you.”

“Enough,” Kurt snapped. “This is not a discussion to be having at dinner, nor is it one for our guests to hear.” He took a sip of wine. “I must admit, Erik, I am curious about your business. Are you truly not affected by the recession?”

“At first I was,” Erik said, passing the mashed potatoes to Raven. “When it first hit it was a wait and see philosophy, we all adopted brace positions I think. Then everyone adapted to the current climate. If anything, I do more business now than when the economy was good.”

“Really?” Sharon asked. “I would have thought it to be the opposite.”

“Well, people are more careful about what they spend their money on now, so when they go looking for a gift for someone, or something special for themselves, they’re more likely to go for something unique, something made by a craftsman instead of something mass produced. Every piece I make is one of a kind, I never reproduce anything. With the exception of a specific request, of course. I’ve had two or three clients looking for something for twins, or a set of replicas of a beloved family heirloom.”

“What sort of jewellery do you make?” Tiffany questioned, tugging at her own mass produced pendant.

“I run a pretty broad spectrum,” he said. “A little of everything. Rings, necklaces, earrings, bracelets. I don’t make watches, or anything else that has a complex mechanism, I never trained for that. It’s how Charles and I met, in fact. He was shopping for a gift for Raven.”

He reached out and took Raven’s hand, holding it up so they could see her bracelet.

“It’s beautiful,” Tiffany breathed. “Are you expensive?”

“It depends on the piece. This one was one of the more pricy items, because of the level of detail and the time it takes to make something of this intricacy, but I do a whole range of prices.”

“Did it take you long to train?” Kurt asked. “I would imagine a lot of your knowledge was passed down.”

“It was,” he admitted, pausing to take a mouthful of green beans. He cleared his mouth before he continued. Even he knew enough to not talk with his mouth full. “I spent the summers helping my grandfather when I was small, and then I learned to make my own pieces when I got old enough to handle the tools and materials. I didn’t actually have any formal training, for me it’s more instinctual, and handed down know how.”
“No college education?” Kurt pressed.

“I left education after high school. I had a career to go into, and school was never my thing anyway. I admire Charles for his perseverance, I never had the patience for science myself.”

“But still, you did fine away from the walls of academia. Perhaps you’ll be able to convince Charles to do the same.”

“His students would be lost without him,” Erik replied smoothly, glancing at Charles. “When you have a mind as strong as Charles’, you should put it to good use. His theories on genetics are fascinating, don’t you agree?”

“Charles has always had a flair for the fantastic,” Sharon said.

“Sometimes the fantastic makes the mundane bearable,” Erik retorted.

The conversation drifted off to cover a few socialites that Raven knew, and the possibility of Cain becoming a member of the ‘club’.

Erik felt a little tap at his temple.

[Calm now?]

[Very,] Charles said, and Erik could feel a sort of blush in his thoughts. If they had a colour, the words would be neon pink. [You didn’t have to do that.]

[Do what?]

[Defend me to them. It won’t change their minds.]

[I wasn’t defending you, I was being truthful. I love listening to you talk on genetics, and your students are lucky to have you. I’m lucky to have you.]

The blush from his thoughts suddenly surged over Charles’ cheeks, and Erik smiled as their plates were cleared.

[How much more food?]

[Desert course, cheese and fruit and then coffees in the atrium.]

[Good. Much more and you’re going to have to roll me out of here.] Erik quipped.

Desert turned out to be an unreasonably rich chocolate torte, which Erik could feel coat his insides as he swallowed. He only managed two bites before he had to put down his fork and spoon, making his apologies to Sharon, claiming he had never had much of a sweet tooth. It took his whole glass of water to clear his mouth.

Then came the cheese board. There were at least fifteen different cheeses, assorted breads, apricots, plums, pears, figs, dates and apples, assorted nuts, and two bowls, one with balsamic vinegar, the other with honey. Erik managed three crackers with a nice safe cheddar, and a couple of slices of apple before his stomach told him he’d reached his limit.

They retired to the atrium once more to take coffee and brandy for those that wanted it. Charles once again tried to ask for some alcohol, and was once again told by his mother that he would be having a coffee with the rest of them.
Erik asked for a brandy and then mentioned that he would love to see the grounds. Charles led him out to the gardens through the French doors and around to admire the roses, where they couldn’t be seen.

“Give me that,” Erik said, plucking the coffee out of Charles’ hand and shoving the brandy at him.

“Ah, so this is why you told me to put two sugars and no cream in the coffee,” the geneticist said. He took a sip of brandy and sighed.

“Better?”

“Much. So…on a scale of one to ten…how awful has tonight been?”

Erik looked at him with something between shock and amusement on his face, before he leaned in and captured Charles’ lips.

The smaller man moaned, gripping at the buttons of Erik’s shirt with his free hand, kissing back, opening his mouth obediently when Erik licked at his lips, delighting in the coffee flavour of his boyfriend.

Erik delighted in the way Charles gripped at him, at the tiny little moan, the whimper as he swooped in and began to nibble at his throat.

“Tonight,” Erik whispered, nipping at the ear he was nuzzling, “was a good chance for me to see where you came from. The food was great, and come on, I came here to eat above all things.”

Charles sniggered and rested his head against the strong chest.

“Were you worried?”

“A little,” Charles admitted. “Kurt and Cain can be…”

“Pains in the ass, I noticed. Charles, no matter what you show me, what this house and its inhabitants have meant to you over the years, it won’t scare me away.”

“What would scare you away?” he whispered, as if afraid to ask.

Erik took the time to consider it and he knew Charles was listening in on his thoughts.

[…]murder? No, he’d have a good reason, some form of self-defence or defending one of the kids or Raven…drugs…no, he wouldn’t, the man barely takes aspirin…crime lord?…nah, too sweet…]

“You keep telling me off for calling you sweet,” Charles pointed out. “Why are you allowed to call me sweet?”

“Because you are,” he replied simply. “I’m only nice to those important to me. You’re sweet all the time. That woman at the coffee shop the other day actually pinched your cheek, you’re that sweet.”

Charles huffed and lifted his head to drink some more brandy.

“And there is only one thing that could come between us.”

“Which is?”

“If you cheated on me. But you wouldn’t. Your noble streak is too wide, you’d never stray.”
“You talk as if you know me so well.”

“I do.”

“What about your family?” Charles pointed out. “What if they don’t like me?”

Erik actually choked on his laughter. “My family will absolutely love you. Trust me, they’ll take you under their wing and try to feed you. Bubbe will eat you up.”

“But what if they don’t?”

“They will. At some point, I’m taking you home to meet them. You’ll love them, they’ll love you, simple as.”

“You sound so sure.”

“I am sure. They’ll love you because I do.”

There was a pleased hum through the back of his mind and Erik swooped in for another kiss.

[I love you too.]

“I noticed a picture in the hall on my way to the bathroom. A painting. The guy looked a lot like you.”

“You mean the life-sized portrait near the stairs?”

“Yes, that one.”

“My father. It was painted when he was nineteen.”

“You look so much like him.”

“I think that’s part of the problem between Mother and I.” He sipped his brandy and Erik shot him a questioning glance. “She loved him very much. She never really stopped. He died when I was ten, and all she could see in me was him. To her, I’m this living constant reminder of him.”

“What was he like?”

Charles smiled fondly. “Enthusiastic. He used to get very excited about things. I remember when I brought Raven to him. He was positively bouncing at the sight of her.”

“Brought Raven to him?”

“I found her in the kitchen one night, looking for food. Her birth family tried to drown her, several times, so she ran away when she was three. They never went looking for her. She lived rough for a few years, and found her way here when she was six.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Quite. Probably why I wanted to start the centre. Anyway…you wanted to know about my father. He loved mutations, delighted in them. He used to tell me that I was limitless, that there was nothing to hold me back.”

“Sounds like you believed him.”
“I did. He was, he is, very important to me.”

“And Kurt was supposedly his friend?”

“Supposedly. I don’t know the ins and outs of it, how they met and such. I don’t want to know.”

“And Cain?”

“What was all that shit about inheritance?”

Charles smiled. “When mother decided to marry Kurt, the family lawyers went to work securing everything. They didn’t trust Kurt, didn’t believe that he was marrying her for love, so they took steps to protect all the assets. To that end, Kurt, and, by extension, Cain, cannot access the Xavier family money. Kurt gets a small allowance, but it’s a pittance in comparison to what he thinks he’s owed. It’s always grated on them that they have no standing with regards to father’s legacy. Cain feels he should have had a trust fund and an inheritance held in trust like Raven and I.”

“What would he have done with it?”

“I’ve never asked, nor have I peeked in his head to find out. I don’t wish to know any more of Cain than I already do.”

“Hey,” Erik said softly, winding his arm around Charles’ waist. “Is this why you shut me out earlier? Something about Cain?”

“He and I have never had the best relationship. I’d rather not, Erik. Not just now. Later, when I don’t have to endure the rest of the evening.”

“Well, I’m thinking that later I’ll be in your bed making you mindless with pleasure. I know it’s Monday tomorrow, but I am my own boss, you know. I was thinking on going in late. I have an overnight bag in the car.”

Charles grinned and kissed him wildly before they detached, finished off their drinks and made their way back inside, where the conversation had grown heated.

“It’s not enablement!” Raven snapped at Cain. “It’s helping kids that the system is ignoring!”

“What did we miss?” Charles asked.

“Just Cain talking shit about my job. He thinks that my chosen field, something I went to college for and worked my ass off for, is a mindless waste of public resources and I’m wasting my life.”

“Cain, really,” Charles reprimanded. “We don’t have a go at your choices, you have no business making judgements on ours. Raven does a wonderful job, the kids she helps are lucky to have her.”

“They’re mutants, they already ride above the norm,” Kurt said. “Why should it be that they get extra help when the rest of the human children get neglected?”

“I don’t think it works like that,” Erik said. “Some of these kids have mutations that they have to learn to control. It’s not that the baseline children are being neglected, it’s that they don’t need the support that mutant kids do.”

“Charles had no special help, and he managed to get himself through all those exams just fine,” Cain said, and Erik wanted to knock his head off for the snide look he was giving Charles. Cain
had to know about the doses of medication they had forced on Charles in years past.

[Don’t do it, it’s what they want.] Charles sent.

[Right now, it’s what I want too.]

[Please, Erik? For me?]

Erik took a deep breath and nodded, sitting down next to Charles on the loveseat.

“Erik, I recall you mentioning that you liked Charles talking about his work,” Sharon said.

“I did say that,” he said, ignoring the other two men. He reached out with his ability and rubbed Raven’s wrist with the metal of her bracelet. She shot him a smile. “I’ve never seen such passion in someone.”

“He does get rather excitable at times.”

“I find it fascinating, the concept of all life being a mutation, that without the changes in DNA we’d still be primordial ooze. And Charles explains it all so eloquently, makes it so accessible… personally, I can’t see why anyone would drop his class. They’re suffering a great loss, if you want my opinion on it.”

“It’s all well and good having theories,” Kurt said. “But they’re not worth anything if you do nothing with them.”

Erik felt Charles stiffen.

“He is doing something with his theories,” Erik said. “Teaching, the books he’s written, the changes he’s making in the scientific community. Charles is very important to the genetics movement and the mutant community at large.”

“But that’s not worth a damn! If you would just take the position at the lab, Charles…”

“I’ve told you, no,” Charles growled. “How many times must we hash this out? I won’t let you use my work to further that.”

“Is it truly your work?” Kurt asked. “If you would dose we could know for sure. But you don’t, you’ve always been difficult, right from the start. The theorems may not even be yours, so there is no issue with using them to help the project.”

“Understand this, I will not let you use my work, which is MY work and MY theorems, to further Black Womb!”

“What’s Black Womb?” Erik queried. The articles in Charles’ scrapbook had said that that particular research project was closed down after Brian Xavier’s death.

“It’s a genetic research project, building on the research done by Brian and Kurt over 20 years ago,” Raven explained. “Black Womb is looking to find a ‘cure’ for the so-called mutant problem.”

Suddenly, all the metal in the room began to hum, all of it suddenly very sharp in Erik’s senses. His connection to Charles was the only thing that stopped him from making it all land on top of Kurt.

“Mutation is not a disease, it is not an illness, it is not a disability,” he said, managing (though he didn’t know how) to keep his tone calm. “It needs no cure.”
“There are many that would disagree,” Kurt retorted, not realising how precarious his position was.

“Erik, calm down,” Charles said. Erik had gotten to his feet, though he couldn’t remember when. Charles was leaning into his side, a hand on his back, the other on his chest just over his heart. “Darling, please. I very much like the pipes where they are.”

Erik realised that the pipes in the walls and ceiling were groaning under the pressure he was putting on them. He relaxed, letting them go, only because this huge house meant so very much to his lover.

Erik took a deep breath and looked down at Charles. Those bright blue eyes were a port in a storm, they held so much love and understanding that he felt himself calm, everything becoming very clear in his mind.

“Listen to me, and listen good,” Erik said. “I’m a mutant, who comes from a very very large family of mutants. I delight in Charles’ mutation, in Raven’s. When we arrived here tonight I was shocked that she would feel the need to hide her beautiful blue form, morph herself into something more acceptable in so-called civilised society. This is supposed to be her home, the place she feels most safe, the most at ease, and yet you make her feel like she has something to be ashamed of. And Charles…you’re so convinced that there’s something wrong with him, with what he can do. Have you ever even let him into your head? Do you have the slightest comprehension of how amazing it is to have him in your mind? No, of course you don’t, because you’re so wrapped up in your own prejudice that you never thought to look beyond your own preconceptions. You heard the word telepath and immediately jumped into the idea of him needing to be medicated because, heaven forbid, he actually be brilliant on his own.”

He pulled Charles in closer, reaching out and taking Raven’s hand.

“Charles is incredible. His intelligence is staggering, and it is HIS, no one else’s! He is intelligent and articulate, kind, compassionate, fiery and so fucking brave. He gets up every day and goes to a job where no one trusts him because of the seeds of doubt YOU sowed when he was a child.” He looked accusingly at Kurt. “He gets up and goes to the university and keeps going even though he can hear all the nasty bigoted things they’re thinking about him. I have him in my head, and I’m glad to have him there, I feel privileged that he is there, that I get to be anywhere near someone that amazing. You should all feel ashamed of yourselves.”

He took a deep breath.

“Charles, are you ready to leave? I think the evening is over.”

“Yes, I’m ready.”

“Raven? Are you ready?”

“More than.”

“Good. Turn blue and we’ll get going.”

She blushed slightly before the peachy complexion melted away and she became the beautiful blue he adored.

“Much better,” he said. “Let’s go.”

As he reached the door, Charles felt a hand on his elbow. He turned and looked at his mother.
“Thank you for dinner, Mother,” he said, leaning in and kissing her cheek. “I’ll call you in the week.”

“Charles…if you ever bring that man back to this house, you won’t be welcome in it,” she said firmly.

Charles stood there in shock.

“Are…are you really asking me to choose between Erik and you?” he asked faintly, hardly able to believe what he was asking.

“That man is not welcome here, and while you are associated with him, neither are you.”

“You can’t do that,” he growled. “This house is half mine, you cannot shut me out of it.”

“I can and I will. If you leave with him now, you will no longer be welcomed.”

Charles felt his knees shaking. [Erik.]

[Charles? What’s wrong?]

[My legs are going to go from under me.]

He said it almost conversationally, but he could feel Erik’s shock, hear him speeding up the gravel with a barked command at Raven to stay in the car. His hands landed gently on Charles’ back and he felt those strong arms go around him.

“Mother, please, don’t do this, don’t ask this of me!”

“Charles, I have made myself clear,” she said coldly, and Charles could see Kurt hovering behind her.

“Then I’m leaving,” he said, leaning a little more heavily on Erik. “Goodbye, Mother.”

[Erik, get me out of here, and get me a stiff drink.]

Charles sat on his bed and stared into nothing.

He had just walked away from everything that possibly held memories of his father. He had just walked away from his ancestral home.

“Here.”

He looked up into the concerned eyes of Erik. He was holding out a large tumbler of water.

Charles took a sip and winced as it burned his mouth. Ah. Not water then. Vodka.

“Raven’s called your lawyers,” Erik said as he sat down beside him. “She said to tell you that they’re expecting you tomorrow to discuss your inheritance and fighting your mother for the house. She said they sounded pissed.”

“Hmmm?”

“Hey,” he whispered, taking the glass and placing it on the nightstand. He cupped his jaw and
gently turned his head, making Charles look at him. “What can I do? Tell me. How can I make this even a little bit better?”

Charles took a deep, shuddering breath. “Did…did I really…did I…”

“Yes, you did.”

“And…Mother is…she’s going…”

“Yes, she is.”

Charles closed his eyes and swallowed. His knees felt like jelly once again. He reached out blindly and grabbed Erik’s shirt, pulling him closer as Erik wrapped him in his arms.

[Don’t you dare leave,] he threatened.

“I’m not going anywhere, I’m right here.”

[Bag.]

“Raven grabbed it on the way in, it’s on the sofa.”

[Fuck, the fucking ham!]

“I, for one, found it hilarious.”

[Erik…]

Erik needed no instruction as to what Charles wanted. He tipped him backwards, leaning over him to join their mouths, kissing Charles with all the tenderness he had in him. A little wriggling and Charles was beneath him, his hips snug in the cradle of those wonderful thighs. Fingers tangled in his hair.

“Erik,” he breathed. “I want…I…”

“Hush…Let me take care of you.”

Erik wasted no time in ridding them of their clothes, the feel of skin on skin like a drug through his system. Charles was so warm beneath him, felt so good pressed against him. All that soft skin, pale, so very pale, and all those freckles to be kissed and explored. He let himself move down, taking a nipple between his lips, and was intensely satisfied with the whimper Charles gave him, pushing his chest up in an attempt to get more.

It took far too long and still not long enough for Erik to finish teasing his nipples, and Charles was sure that by the time Erik was through with him, he wouldn’t be able to ever think again. Those wonderful hands dipped between his legs, one wrapping around his dick and the other tugging at his balls.

[Erik…]

[Hmmm?] he replied as he licked and kissed at his hipbones.

[Kiss.]

Erik grinned and crawled back up, kissing Charles and running his hand up and down his side. Charles reached out and took Erik’s hand, laying it on his collarbone.
Cain broke it when we were ten.] He moved the hand to his ribs. [When I was eleven.] He swept the hand down, resting it over where his kidney was. [Bruised by Kurt when I was fifteen.] He moved it to his sternum. [Cain snapped it when I was seventeen.] He raised Erik’s hand and wrapped it around his jaw. [Cain when I was fourteen.] He twisted his wrist so Erik was holding just below the heel of his hand. [Twice now, both times by Cain.]

Erik could feel tears in his eyes as Charles continued, pointing out that his nose had been broken four times in two years by Cain, and twice by Kurt. He pressed Erik’s fingers down to show him the unevenness of the ribs on his right side, the stiffness in his left shoulder where Cain had pulled it out of its socket and damaged the tendons. His cheekbone, his shin, his fingers. All the split lips, all the bruises. All the times he explained it away to his mother and his teachers as a play fight with Cain that got out of hand, or a fall down the stairs, or a tumble off a horse. No one ever noticed that the little telepath was being abused, not even his own mother.

“You wanted to know,” he said simply. “You wanted to know what it was about Cain that made me up my shields so you couldn’t get in. This is it, this is what I couldn’t tell you at that moment.”

“Why didn’t you just let me bring the ceiling down on them?”

“Because I need you, here, with me, not in a prison somewhere. And I like the ceiling where it is.”

Erik couldn’t argue with that. And he couldn’t understand why they had done what they had to the beautiful man in the bed with him.

“Erik?”

“Yeah?”

“I wanted to…well…if you wanted to, obviously…”

Erik kissed him to stop the babbling. Charles opened his mouth, the tip of his tongue tickling Erik’s lips and he couldn’t stop himself from stretching out his own tongue, invading Charles’ mouth, tasting him, savouring it.

“I have this need to be with you,” Charles said. “Completely.”

“I’m here, right here.”

“No,” he said with a smile, a blush creeping across his cheeks and slowly spreading down his chest. Erik was fascinated by it, and had the urge to follow it, see how far down it actually went. “I didn’t mean that. I mean…well…”

Erik moaned as Charles sent the images into his head directly. Charles on his back, Erik buried inside him; Charles on all fours with Erik pounding him from behind; Charles riding him.

“Oh. You want me to fuck you.”

“Don’t look so smug,” Charles murmured as he blushed a bright shade of red.

“I’m not smug!” He chuckled. “Okay, maybe a little. Come on. You want to give this to me.”

Charles looked at him confusedly. “Give what?”

“Your first time. It’s important, Charles, no matter what anyone may say. Your first time is
important, and it should be special. Something you won’t look back on and regret.”

“You think I’ll regret it? Doing it with you?”

“No, not at all. I just want you to be sure. You don’t get a do-over on this,” Erik cautioned. “I’d love to do this, if it’s really what you want.”

“And if it were?” Charles asked. “What comes next?”

“If it were, then my next step would be to ask if you had any lube.”

“Nightstand drawer.”

“And if you wanted me to wear a condom.”

“There comes a choice with that?”

Erik chuckled and leaned in, sipping a kiss from those beautifully plump lips.

“Yes, there comes a choice. See, I know I’m clean, I was tested a few weeks ago, just after I met you. I wanted to be sure, so if we did get to this point then you could have the choice. And I know you’re clean, because you’ve never done this.”

Charles was still for a moment, and Erik let him be, let him make his choice. He was content to let Charles lead, knowing that the night would end with something in the shape of an orgasm, no matter what he chose.

Charles surged upwards, claiming Erik’s mouth, hiking his leg up high on his hip. Erik could feel him harden beneath him and his own arousal began to show an interest. He buried a hand in those thick locks, tilting his head to get a better angle, while he reached down to caress that wonderful thigh pressing against his skin.

[Erik…God, Erik…]

[Are we still being hypothetical?] he asked as he thrust slightly against Charles, feeling an answering thrust. [Do you want it? Or something else? I don’t mind either way. It’ll still be good.]

[I want it…oh that’s nice little to the left…oh! Please, Jesus, oh Jesus…I want…mmmm…harder, please…ah!]

Erik added a little roll to his hips as he thrust lazily against him, ducking his head down to suckle at the pale skin of his throat.

“Please…Erik…”

“Yes? Was there something you wanted?” he enquired, biting gently at the pattern of freckles on his shoulder. “Only I’m a little busy right now.”

“I want you…to…oh, Erik, please, I’m trying to talk.”

He laughed, raising his head to look him in the eye. “So talk.”

“I want you inside me,” he said, all embarrassment gone.

“Sure?”
“Absolutely sure. I want it to be you, and I want it to be now, tonight.”

“Okay. Top drawer for the lube, right?”

Charles nodded and Erik levered himself up to reach out, opening the drawer and pulling out the bottle. He dropped it on the bed before returning to his place atop the genetics professor.

“Yes, or no to the condom?” he murmured. “I can if you want. I’ve got one in my wallet.”

“I don’t want,” he said firmly. “If we don’t need to, then I’d rather not.”

Erik smiled and kissed him, before ducking down to devote himself to those peaked nipples once more. He nibbled this time, worrying the nub between his teeth before sucking to soothe the sting. Charles was fully hard now, grinding up into his stomach, and Erik stroked one impossibly high cheekbone before sliding his hand down, so slowly.

Charles was lost in sensation, floating on a cloud of all the things Erik was making him feel. He was spiralling in a tornado of his own wants and the intense need growing low down in his belly, and he couldn’t bring himself to worry about anything. He moaned when Erik’s hand reached between them, kneading the inside of his thigh, so close to where Charles wanted it, but far too far at the same time.

“Erik, please,” he breathed, shifting his hips.

Erik slid up once more, leaning off to one side with Charles’ thigh trapped under him, making sure the other one was still hooked up high on his hip. He reached for the lube and popped off the cap, squeezing some out and warming it in his hand. He knew what a shock it could be on overheated skin and he wanted to spare Charles that. He rubbed Charles’ nose with his own, and laid a gentle kiss on the two freckles on the bridge as his hand slipped between his legs. Charles jumped a little as he touched him.

“Easy,” he murmured. “Only me.”

Charles smiled and tried to relax as Erik touched him in a place that no one had ever touched. He was so soft, so careful with him. He kissed him as a finger slowly worked its way into him, gently moving within him, until Charles wriggled and it was removed, only to return with a friend. It didn’t hurt, it was just new. A little odd, if he was honest.

“Odd?” Erik asked in amusement as he slowly moved his two fingers a little deeper.

“That was a private thought,” he replied, shifting as he felt himself stretch. “Erik…I…I don’t…” The fingers went completely still.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, no, it’s not that. It’s just…I don’t really know what I’m doing,” he admitted in a whisper, and Erik smiled at him, giving him a sweet kiss.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Just relax,” he said. “I’ll teach you. Don’t worry, no one knows what they’re doing the first time.” He moved his fingers once more, stroking the tight heat, letting Charles tug him down to lock lips as he brushed his prostate with his fingertips. He kept him distracted with the kiss and the way he rolled his hips against him as he finished preparing him.

“Charles?” Big blue eyes clouded with lust that Charles didn’t know how to deal with locked on his. “How do you want this?”
The confusion flowed into his mind from the telepath. He sent back all the positions he had been shown by Charles.

“Oh. Can I…like this?”

Erik nodded and covered his body with his own, kissing him before sitting back on his heels and reaching for the lube once more, coating himself without bothering to warm it. The cold shock was needed to make sure he didn’t blow too soon. He wanted it to be good for Charles. Scratch that, he wanted it to be amazing.

Charles watched as Erik coated himself before grabbing a tissue and wiping his hand. His skin glinted in the dim lighting of his bedroom. Charles marvelled at the clean lines of Erik’s body, his slim waist, his narrow hips. Those wide shoulders and defined chest.

“Charles?”

He met Erik’s concerned eyes and smiled a little. “I still want it.”

Erik kissed the top of his knee as he crawled closer, moving Charles’ legs a little, before he positioned himself and looked up, catching the small nod before pushing inside.

It hurt, no way for it not to really. Erik was well endowed, and Charles wasn’t quite convinced that it would actually work. It felt like he was being split open, and the pain echoed out to the base of his spine, but it was Erik doing it, so there must be more. Surely. Wasn’t there? It would get better, yes?

Erik thrust a few times, each time getting deeper, until he was fully seated. He lowered himself, gathering a trembling Charles close.

“Hey, hey, just breathe,” he soothed. “Relax, Charles, just relax and it’ll get better.” Erik hissed as Charles clenched around him. “No, Charles, don’t do that. You need to relax or it won’t get better. Just trust me. You need to relax, let your muscles go lax.”

Slowly, his muscles relaxed and the pain faded into a dull ache. He became aware of things in slow increments. The smell of Erik, the metal and sweat of his skin. The way he was gripping at Erik, the way his face was buried in the crook of his neck. Erik was toying with the hair at the nape of his neck, pressing gentle kisses to his temple. And the thick hot length of him, still and hard within him.

[It hurts.]

“It’ll get better, I promise. Just relax and let me take care of you.”

[I want it to get better.]

Erik pulled back a little and kissed him, a hand sliding down once more to hook behind his knee. Charles gasped as Erik pulled his leg higher, and he felt himself open further, Erik moving slightly as they shifted.

[Oh my…that’s new…it’s…interesting…]

Erik smiled and began to rock his hips, slowly moving within Charles, letting him adjust to the feel of being joined in a physical way with him. Charles’ erection, which had softened between them, began to show an interest and Erik let go of the knee he held, reaching instead to toy with a nipple.
Charles felt the pain begin to recede, a feeling of overwhelming intimacy taking its place. They were joined, in every way that they could possibly be. There was a slight burning as Erik moved back and forth, the strain of his muscles stretching in new and curious ways. The fingertips toying with his nipple, the tongue duelling with his, the feel of so much hot skin pressed to his own…

Charles began to whimper beneath him, shifting restlessly, and Erik let himself thrust instead of just rocking, feeling the skin drag as he pulled back a little further before surging forwards. Charles was so hot and tight and so incredibly right around him. No matter how much he wanted it, he knew his patience and self-control was not infinite, sooner or later he was going to give in to his body’s demands for more.

“Erik, this is…it’s not…oh, God, Erik, it’s not enough!” he moaned, gripping at him, unknowing of how to articulate what he needed.

“Easy. I’ll get you there. Raise your legs a little more, that’s it,” he crooned, smiling when he felt Charles follow his instructions. He used his strength to pull Charles a little further down the bed, shoving the pillows out of the way so the younger man was flat, somehow managing to shove one of the pillows under his hips. The movement changed the angle and Charles gasped as if he’d been electrocuted. A sudden thrum of intense pleasure not his own spiked through his mind.

Charles felt Erik thrusting into him a little more firmly, harder and deeper, a little faster, each time brushing something inside him that made his eyes roll back and his breath catch in his throat.

[…Erik…oh sweet fuck…oh! oh! oh!...more, please, more more more…ah! There, right there… PLEASE!!...]

Erik was lost in the feedback loop of their pleasure, his and Charles’ mingling together, passing from one to the other and back again, climbing higher and higher, burning hotter and brighter until it was almost painful, but so so good. It was an intense thing, this unique sharing of feelings. He knew what was him, and he knew what wasn’t, but he got to enjoy all the wonder of the things Charles was feeling. It was a heady feeling, almost indescribable.

Charles had never been one to give in to instinct, his abilities usually meant keeping a tight lid on just what he wanted to do. But with Erik it was so different. Erik seemed to want the unrestrained version of Charles more than anything. So Charles didn’t give it too much thought when he gave in and let his body do what was needed to get them there.

His hands moved of their own volition, nails scratching the skin of Erik’s back as he reached to squeeze his rhythmically pumping ass. Oh, it was all too much, the pleasure loop pulling him in, and he frantically grasped at Erik, pushing his hips back against the pounding thrusts, delighting in the animalistic growls coming from his lover.

Erik could take no more, could hold back no longer. He wormed his hand between them, grasping Charles firmly and stroked him, gasping as his orgasm shocked back onto his already pleasure-blissed mind. Charles went rigid beneath him, his teeth driving into the skin of his shoulder. Erik used the euphoria to pound unrestrainedly into the pliant body. It took him only a few more thrusts before his orgasm ripped through him, and he collapsed onto Charles as he spilled within him.

Erik was the first to regain his senses, followed mere moments later by Charles.

“How are you doing?” the jeweller asked.

“Mmmm,” he hummed, wriggling at the feel of Erik’s softening member still within him. “Actually…it’s a little…uncomfortable.”
“Stay still,” he ordered, and then slowly pulled himself back, trying to be gentle but Charles still winced. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Hmmm. I’m all sticky,” he said needlessly, looking down at the mess on his stomach.

Erik chuckled and bounded off into the private bathroom, grabbing a couple of washcloths and wetting them before returning to the bedroom. He cleaned off the little professor first, gently wiping away the mess and even pushing his leg up.

“Erik, I can’t…”

“I’m just cleaning you up,” he reassured as he delicately pressed the washcloth against the stretched opening to his body. “And I promise you won’t feel so very sore every single time. Just…your body isn’t used to this. But trust me on this, excess lube doesn’t feel very nice after you’ve come down from the high.”

“Thus speaks the voice of experience,” Charles said as he tried to stay still.

“Not an expert or anything.”

Charles smiled at the blush. “I was teasing, sweetheart. Just a joke. I am curious though. How old were you when you first did it?”

Erik wiped off his own stomach and shaft before chucking the washcloths at the bathroom. “I was seventeen,” he said, crawling up the bed and tugging at the blankets. “His name was Rupert, he was twenty six. My mother didn’t approve.”

“What happened?” Charles asked as Erik got comfortable, pushing pillows behind his head and wriggling into place.

“My mother found out, and told Poppa. Needless to say that Rupert never again taught math.”

“Wait,” Charles said as he snuggled in, resting his head on Erik’s shoulder. “He was your teacher?”

“Student teacher.” Erik tangled his fingers in Charles’ hair, playing with the glossy strands. “I was young, and I was naïve. I didn’t really know what the hell was happening, I didn’t even realise that it was wrong. I was a gay Jewish mutant, high school was tough. So this older guy showing an interest in me was…I don’t know…a rush I guess.”

“Please tell me you moved on to boys closer to your own age after that.”

He grinned as he reached out with his powers and turned off the light. “Yes, though none of them lasted very long. None of them really meant anything. Until now.”

Charles hummed in contentment and snuggled in closer.

“Charles?”

“Hmmm?”

“Was your first time good?”

“My first time was amazing. Thank you, Erik.”

“You are very welcome.”
Chapter Four

Erik woke before Charles, and for a moment he wasn’t sure where he was. And then he felt the slow breaths across the skin of his chest where Charles was half lying on him, and it all came flooding back.

A glance at the clock showed it was just gone six, and Erik was in desperate need of the bathroom.

It took some careful manoeuvring, but he eventually managed to slip out from under Charles and out of the bed. He picked up the washcloths from the floor and made his way to the bathroom, dumping the washcloths in the laundry hamper, relieving himself and washing his hands, before splashing water on his face.

He stood in the doorway and watched Charles sleep, curled into the warm space Erik left behind. He noticed a few love bites he’d left on the pale skin of his throat, and a couple of bruises on Charles’ hips. He himself sported more than a few remnants of the night before: scratches down his back, bruises on his hips, a bright red imprint of Charles’ teeth on his shoulder.

He made his way out to the kitchen to get a coffee, praying that Raven didn’t appear before he managed to get his sweatpants out of his bag. He managed it, but only by the skin of his teeth.

Raven’s door opened just as he was pulling them up over his hips.

“Good morning,” she said with a saucy little grin and he felt himself blush.

“Morning.”

“Coffee?”

“I’d love some.”

They ended up on the sofa in companionable silence until Erik cleared his throat.

“Raven, Charles told me something last night, and I don’t feel right about knowing it without you being aware of me knowing,” he said and she looked at him expectantly. “He told me about your birth family, how you came to be his sister.”

“You mean the drowning’s,” she said, and it shocked him how cavalier she was about it.

“You say it like it doesn’t mean anything.”

“It doesn’t. They’re just some DNA donors. Despite what Charles says, blood isn’t everything.”

“I guess. It just seems so wrong…the way you started out in life.”

“It was wrong,” she said. “Erik, they tried to drown me in a bathtub, of course it’s wrong. But I love my life now.” She took a deep breath and looked him straight in the eye. “So, you and Charles.”

He felt himself blush. “Sorry if we woke you last night.”

“It’s no big deal. Just…see, this is the bit where I’m meant to do the sister thing and tell you to be good to him or I’ll hurt you and all that stuff. But I’m not going to. What I am going to do is tell you that I approve. You make him happy, like, really happy. I’ve never seen him like this. He’s so easy right now, you know? He’s more relaxed, more content, happier. I’ve never seen this side of
him before. And it’s a good thing. You make him happy. Fuck, he trusts you enough to let you get physical. If that’s not proof enough that you two should be together, I don’t know what is.”

Erik grinned and ducked his head, hiding his smile behind his coffee mug. She rubbed his shoulder before standing up abruptly.

“I have a breakfast with a friend to get to, and I’m guessing you have work, and Charles is expected at the lawyers sometime today, preferably this morning, don’t let him forget,” she said.

He followed her to the kitchen, intending to refill his coffee.

“He likes tea,” she said as she checked her handbag. “First thing in the morning, he uses a teabag from the caddy by the kettle, in a mug, not a teacup. Three sugars, very little milk. Strong and sweet to get him going.”

“I think I can handle that.”

“Oh, and Erik?” she said as she opened the door.

“Yeah?”

“Next time you stay over, put on pants before you leave the bedroom,” she said with a little glance down at his crotch. “See ya.”

Erik gaped at the closed door she disappeared behind before scrubbing at his face. It was after his blush had faded a little that Erik realised that there was a lot of metal in the kitchen, lots of things in shapes he didn’t recognise. So he explored.

The martini shaker he found felt good, smooth against his senses. The cutlery, something which felt good no matter where he encountered it, felt sparkly in his mental map, a side effect of it being sterling silver. He loved silver, it made him think of diamonds and waterfalls and sparklers on the Fourth of July. A whole load of cooking utensils, all stainless steel, all rather boring to him. A set of chargers to put under dinner plates, copper, plated with a swirling gold design. He found them rather ugly.

And then there were the little doodads in the drawer. There were two types. The first were little cages on chains with funny little things on the other end. There was one shaped like a sharks fin. Some of the cages were funny shapes; there was one shaped like a yellow submarine. The second set of things were chains with little clamps on the end. The other end held a little charm. There was a moustache, a teddy bear, a heart.

He’d have to ask Charles what they were when he woke up. For now, he made a cup of tea, and a refill of coffee, before slipping back into the bedroom. He placed the mugs on the nightstand and shed his sweatpants, sliding back into bed to curl around the sleeping professor.

The sleep warmed skin beneath his hands was delicious, and he couldn’t stop himself from sliding his palm all the way down. Sharp shoulder blades, the notches of his spine, the curve of his backside. His hand finally found a furred thigh and he let himself curl fully around the smaller man.

Charles moaned and pushed back slightly against Erik, tilting his head deeper into the pillow as Erik began to press his lips to the skin of his neck.

“Good morning,” Erik whispered in his ear.
“Good morning.”

“Ah. Vocal cords not ready to work yet, then?”

“Not in the slightest,” Charles replied as he reached down to stroke the hand on his thigh. “You smell of coffee. Have you been up already?”

“Yes. Raven has a breakfast.”

“Jubilee. Nice girl, they’ve been friends as long as I can remember.”

“Jubilee? Interesting name.”

“It’s actually Jubilation Lee. She projects little fireworks from her hands. It’s very pretty.”

“Sounds it,” he murmured, sliding a few millimetres closer, shifting so he could push his other arm under his head, curling it up so he could play with Charles’ hair. “I made you tea.”

“Mmmmm,” he hummed, wriggling his way onto his back and reaching up to pull Erik into a kiss that made the metal bender’s toes curl. Before they really thought about what they were doing, Erik had Charles pressed into the mattress, his hand sliding down to hike up Charles’ thigh.

“Mmmm, Erik…stop…I can’t…” Charles protested between kisses. Erik pulled back, staring down into the bright blue eyes. “I’m sorry but I can’t, darling. I’m too sore.”

“It’s okay. We don’t have to do that,” he replied, stealing a quick kiss. “We can just kiss, it’s okay.”

Charles pulled him down into a hug, and Erik relaxed, setting down to lay atop his lover.

“So…we’ve established that you’re sore,” Erik said, perfectly content in Charles’ arms. “A good sore?”

Charles chuckled and pressed a kiss to his forehead at the hesitant tone. “Yes, a good sore. I’m sure I said it last night…but thank you. Last night was…thank you, Erik.”

Erik didn’t say anything, just snuggled in closer, pressing a kiss to the centre of his chest.

“You know, we should probably get up,” Erik said after a while. “Raven told me to remind you that you’re expected at the lawyers office sometime today, preferably this morning.”

Charles groaned and pulled the pillow over his head, shoving Erik off so he could roll over onto his front and hide.

“You can hide, but you can’t run,” Erik sent, running a hand down his back and kissing where his hand led.

“I’m not running, I’m avoiding. There’s a difference.”

[Funny, they look very similar from here.]

Charles suddenly jerked beneath him, squealing and batting his hands away from his ribs. Erik grinned and proceeded to tickle him mercilessly until he emerged from under the pillow.

“Fine! Fine. I’ll go see the lawyers.” He huffed. “I suppose I must. She is trying to shut me out of my ancestral home. I can’t really ignore it.” He looked at Erik hopefully. “Can I ignore it?”
“No, you can’t ignore this.” He leaned in and took his sweet time kissing Charles, snaking his tongue inside to taste him. “You know,” he said as he pulled back. “If I can help, you only need to tell me how. You know I’m here…right?”

“I know, and thank you,” he said, pushing himself up to take another kiss. “Actually, if you could…I mean, I know it’s Monday and you have to work…but…could you come with me?”

“No problem. I’ll call David, get him to open up, hold down the fort until I can get there.”

“David? Your brother, of course. You’re sure he won’t mind?”

“No, he’ll be cool. Probably expect me to spring for lunch, but cool.”

They arranged themselves against the headboard, Charles wincing as he moved, and Erik passed him his tea. He reached out with his powers and pulled his cell phone across the room from the pocket of his trousers, reaching out to snag it as Charles snuggled against him.

“I could get used to this,” Charles said, sipping at his tea.

“We’ll work something out, something that means we get to spend nights together.” He scrolled through his contacts and glanced at the clock, rationalising that eight in the morning wasn’t that early and David would forgive him for the wake up call.

“Hello?” a female voice asked sleepily.

“Errr, hi. I was looking for David.”

“Hold on.” It got very muffled. “Dave, wake up, phone.” Some inarticulate moaning. “David, wake up, for fucks sake!”

“Hello?”

“It’s Erik.”

“Fuck, man, do you know what time it is?”

“Yes, do you?” Erik replied, smiling as he began to play with Charles’ hair once more.

“Too early to be talking to anyone…why am I talking to you?”

“Because fate likes you and it wasn’t Mom or Bubbe that called and got a female.”

“Good point.” The sound of David sitting up and a hiss as he looked out the window. “Man, it is way too bright out there. So why am I talking to you this early on a Monday morning?”

“I need a favour.”

“Will I benefit from this favour?”

“Open the store and hold the fort for me and I’ll buy you lunch.”

“Hold it until when? Hang on.” The sound went muffled again and Erik could hear his brother talking to the mystery woman, telling her that it was fun and he’d call her sometime. The sound of a door closing. “Okay, I’m here, I’m listening. I’m searching for coffee, but I’m listening.”

“You’re too young for coffee,” Erik said. “Though, after the good night you no doubt had, I’m sure
coffee won’t kill you.”

“Do you live only to utz me?”

“Big brother’s prerogative.”

“Yes, tateleh, whatever you say.”

“Grober yung! Are you gonna open up for me or not?”

“Fine,” he said through a mouthful of food. “Why do you need the morning off?”

“I need to go somewhere, and it has to be done this morning,” Erik said, smiling at Charles as he quit the bed and headed to the bathroom, limping slightly. [Take a bath, it’ll help.]

[Really?]

[Yes, it’ll get rid of some of the soreness.] Erik replied as he grabbed his coffee.

“Does this have something to do with your new boyfriend?”

“What new boyfriend?”

“The one Kaitlyn saw you with, and told Uncle David, who told Mom, who’s been speculating about the “edel mensch with the likhticheh face” that has you all happy and smiling.”

Erik grimaced. “She said that?”

“Yup. You’re sunk. Call her before she really powers up.”

“I will, I will. And, yes, it does have something to do with him.”

“Name?”

“Charles Xavier, twenty four years old, professor of genetics, the man who’s bed I’m currently lounging in.”


“Adorable, very adorable. No kleptomaniac tendencies so far. I’ll bring him when I bring lunch.”

“Fine, I’ll open up, hold down the fort. See you later.”

Erik hung up and made his way to the bathroom, where he found the wonderful sight of Charles lounging in a hot bath, his hair wet and curling.

“Adorable, am I?” he asked without opening his eyes.

“Complete. Be right back.” He sped to the living room and snagged his duffel before hurrying back to the bathroom. He rummaged in the bag before pulling out his shaving bag. He was completely at ease as he began brushing his teeth.

“I like you in my bathroom…And my bed,” Charles said. [Did I project anything while I slept?]

[Not that I could tell,] Erik replied, his mouth full of foam. [I did have a very strange dream, all about a dancing grasshopper who wanted a grilled cheese but couldn’t find a ladybird so the snow was turning pink.]
[All your own, I assure you,] Charles said with a laugh. [You could join me if you like.]

Erik wasted no time in rinsing his mouth and climbing into the oversized tub, sliding in behind Charles. He amused himself by grabbing the washcloth and began to trickle water over his chest, reaching for the soap and lathering up so he could bathe his lover.


“So glad you approve.” He ran the cloth under his chin. “You’re all stubbly.”

“I’m not the only one,” he replied, reaching up to rub at the slightly ginger whiskers that had grown in overnight.

Erik grinned and tilted so he could look him in the eye. “How much do you trust me?”

“Implicitly. Why?”

“How much do you like my ability?”

“I love your ability, almost as much as I love you. What are you getting at?”

Erik reached out with his ability and floated Charles’ razor over to them, making it hover just before his nose.

“Oh. Can you do that? Shave with only your powers?”

“With a razor like this, with a metal handle as well as a metal blade, it’s almost too easy. So much metal to control…it’s fun.”

“Then have at it. Should I lay back against you, or something different?”

“Sit facing me, that’s it,” Erik said as Charles complied. Erik reached for the soap and the brush, working up a good lather, before working it onto Charles’ skin in circular motions. “Now, no sudden movements. Stay relatively still.”

Charles wiggled a little where he sat before nodding at Erik. The blade slowly dragged across his cheek, just enough pressure to make a very close shave. Not that Charles ever really needed to try to get a close shave, he grows so little facial hair it sometimes seemed pointless shaving in the morning. But it seemed to be important to Erik, that Charles let him shave him.

[Do I get to shave you afterwards?] Charles sent, and Erik smiled. [I can’t do it hands-free, but I can still…]

“I’d like that.”

They were happily silent as Erik finished up the shave with long strokes over Charles’ jugular and under his chin.

“All done,” he murmured as he wiped off the newly shorn skin, nuzzling the curve of his jaw. “Very smooth.”

Charles leaned in for a kiss, nibbling at Erik’s lower lip, before grabbing the shaving bag and finding Erik’s razor. Erik obediently sat very still as Charles dragged the blade over his skin, the blue eyes fixed on his jaw in concentration. Erik had to quell his urge to reach out and wrap his hand around Charles’ cock.
“Don’t,” Charles said. “I’ll jump and cut you.”

“I’m being good! Look, hands where you can see them.”

Charles finished up the shave and wiped off the excess soap before climbing onto Erik’s lap to straddle him, kissing him and winding his arms around his neck.

[This won’t distract me from taking you to the lawyers office…] Erik sent, smiling at the sudden feeling of disappointment Charles sent.

[Why not? It’s a good distraction.]

Erik whimpered as Charles slid a hand down to tease a nipple. [A very good distraction, but your mother is trying to keep you out of the family home, you need to do this.]

[But this is so much more fun.]

[It is, it is fun, and any other morning I would continue on with this, and make you scream for me. But I, for one, am starving. We used up a lot of energy last night.]

Charles laughed as he pulled back.

“Now that you mention it, I could be persuaded to have breakfast.”

“I know a good place, great pancakes.”

“Sold.”

They finished up bathing and managed to get in more than a few kisses and caresses as they got dressed, before they were making their way to a diner that Erik swore made the best omelettes in the world.

They started with a coffee and a tea, and big glasses of orange juice, before Erik ordered a big omelette filled with cheese and vegetables with a side of hash browns. Charles ordered the full English and happily smothered it in ketchup.

“You were right, this place’s food is very good. The bacon is especially yummy,” Charles said between mouthfuls.

“See, even after I moved out of home, I never got the whole bacon thing,” Erik revealed as he sipped at his orange juice. “I never developed a taste for anything pork related, just never tasted right to me.”

“Did you grow up Kosher?”

“Sort of. We were never really rigid with it, but it was all pretty Kosher.”

“So, what are your favourite foods?”

Erik sniggers. “This might sound really ridiculous, but I still keep getting surprised when you ask me stuff like that.”

“Why?”

“Because I expect to have you pluck it out of my head. You can do that, I don’t mind, you have my full permission.”
“But I like to talk,” Charles said. “I like verbal communication just as much as I like to read a mind.”

“Okay then, I’ll remember that in future. My favourite food…Are we talking snack foods, candy, give me some context.”

“Favourite take out?”

“Indian. I like a good chicken biryani. For a breakfast, my favourite is Bubbe’s blintzes, especially when she fills them with her homemade strawberry jam. I like Mom’s brisket, lemon ice cream, and cream cheese on my bagels, the cheap kind that really has nothing to do with cheese in any way, and never salmon. I hate salmon, and chocolate, can’t stand olives, or oranges, and I hate herbal teas. Not a fan of soda, but I do like ice cream floats. I detest yogurt, and shellfish.”

“What about TV shows? I know you like Vampire Diaries…”

“Big fan of Buffy, and True Blood. Aside from that, not a lot. I don’t really watch that much TV.”

“Me neither. I’m more a fan of books myself.”

“I noticed,” Erik said with a smile. “The romance novels…”

“Belong to Raven. She’s a hopeless romantic. The crime fiction ones are mine.”

“I’ve never been able to get into crime fiction. Too many variables that I can’t keep track of. Give me a good Shakespeare or a copy of Jane Eyre and I’m good to go.”

“Which Shakespeare is your favourite?”

“Titus Andronicus. I know, possibly the darkest play ever written.”

“I like Twelfth Night myself, or Othello. I’m also quite fond of The Taming of the Shrew.”

Erik smiled and motioned to the waitress for the cheque, and Charles’ face fell.

“You can’t put this off forever, Charles. You need to do this. It’s like ripping off a band aid, just do it fast, get it over and done with.”

Charles sighed and nodded, and let Erik pay after a small argument, where Erik pointed out that Charles had given him his virginity, the least he could do was pay for breakfast. Charles couldn’t find a good reason to argue with that, it was too sweet.

They tumbled into a cab and Charles gave the address and soon enough they were making their way inside a huge glass and chrome building. Charles gave his name at the front desk and the receptionist directed him to the lift, where they rode to the 37th floor.

Erik felt the uncertainty flowing into him from Charles and reached out to grab his hand.

[I’m right here,—he sent, and Charles flashed him a shaky smile as they approached yet another receptionist. As Charles gave his name, she ushered him directly to a large solid oak door.

“Charles! How wonderful to see you!”

Charles smiled and moved forwards to embrace Peter Rasputin, one of his family’s lawyers. He was a huge man, almost seven foot tall and heavily muscled. He was a mutant with skin that turned to metal when he was threatened. In his late seventies now, with a shock of pure white hair.
Charles had known him since he was small, the man had come to his Oxford graduation.

“Good to see you too, Peter. This is Erik Lehnsherr, my boyfriend.”

Peter shook Erik’s hand and then motioned them to the table, where they took a seat and coffee was poured out.

“The other partners and I felt it would be best if you had just me at this meeting, no need to overwhelm you on your first visit,” Peter said, stirring sugar into his coffee.

“First visit?” Erik wondered aloud.

“I’ve never really had anything that’s needed the firms help before,” Charles replied. “I usually leave it to Mother.”

“Charles, can I ask what’s brought you to us today? Raven mentioned something about Sharon trying to shut you out of the estate in Westchester,” Peter pressed.

“We went to dinner last night, and Mother took a dislike to Erik. She told me that as long as I associate with him, I’m not welcome at the estate.”

Peter’s brow furrowed. “But she can’t do that, legally she can’t. She can’t shut you out of your own property, even if she is trustee.”

“Well, she is co-inheritor, she does have the right to protect what’s hers.”

“Charles…what the hell are you talking about?”

“Mother and I both inherited half of my father’s estate, half each.”

“Charles, Sharon didn’t inherit anything. It all went to you, to be received upon the event of your twenty fifth birthday, which was back in March. You sent me papers stating that you wished to defer your inheritance until you married.”

“What?! I didn’t send any papers,” Charles said.

Peter motioned to them to wait and left the room, returning a few moments later with a file as thick as a bible. He opened it and flicked through the papers, pulling one of the stapled groups out and pushing it across the table to Charles.

“This is the original notarised copy of your fathers will, I supervised it myself.”

Charles read through the piece of paper in front of him.

I, Brian Xavier, being of sound mind and body, declare that this is my Last Will and Testament.

I revoke all prior wills and codicils.

I am married to Sharon Xavier nee Graymalkin, and all references in this Will to my spouse refer to Sharon Xavier.

I have two children, a natural living son, Charles Francis Xavier, and an adopted living daughter, Raven Darkholme. All references in this Will to my “child” will be in reference to Charles. Any stipulations for Raven will be made in a separate reference.

I hereby declare that my entire estate, including any money, property and physical attributes, is
hereby bequeathed to my only living son, Charles Francis Xavier, to be received in full, including any family trust and interest gathered, on the occasion of his twenty fifth birthday.

I hereby declare that the Xavier family estate of 1407 Graymalkin Lane, Salem Centre, Westchester County, New York shall be left in entirety to my only son Charles Francis Xavier, to be received on the event of his twenty fifth birthday. This shall include all property, grounds, furnishings and valuables on aforementioned estate.

I hereby declare that all furniture in my possession at the time of my demise shall be given to Charles upon the event of his twenty fifth birthday.

I hereby declare that all personal effects belonging to me at the time of my death shall be given to my son upon the event of his twenty fifth birthday.

I hereby declare that the amount of one million dollars is to be held in trust for Charles until the occasion of his eighteenth birthday. Upon the occasion of his eighteenth birthday, Charles is to be in full receipt of said trust, to do with as he wishes.

I hereby declare that the full responsibility of the Xavier Family Trust is to be ensured to Anthony Stark until the occasion of Charles’ eighteenth birthday, upon which occasion the responsibility shall be transferred to Charles, to do with as he wishes. If Anthony Stark is unable to fulfil this task, responsibility shall fall to Peter Rasputin until such time as the original specifications can be fulfilled.

I hereby declare that Raven Darkholme shall be given monetary trust to the sum of one million dollars, to be received upon the event of her twenty fifth birthday. It is also my wish that Raven be cared for in a befitting manner, using the Maintenance Trust detailed in the accounting details page of this document. It is my deepest wish that she should always know how much she was wanted by me, how important I find her to be. It is my greatest wish that she and Charles shall care for one another in such a way that they shall never be alone.

I hereby declare that my wife shall act as Trustee for these aforementioned articles, to be carried out in a full and legal manner.

I hereby declare that Kale, Robins and Rasputin Attorneys at Law shall act as executors to my wishes, ensuring all declarations are carried out fully and within the confines of the law. If needed, I wish for Peter Rasputin to assume responsibility of Trustee.

I hereby declare that my work on the genetics of the mutant species shall not be used, in any form, to destructive ends, including, but not exhaustively, a cure for the mutant X gene.

I hereby declare that my great works shall not be used in any way by Kurt Marko, or any persons so delegated by or connected to Kurt Marko.

I hereby declare that Sharon Xavier shall not be in receipt of any inheritance other than a small monetary trust to the sum of twenty thousand dollars.

There were signatures at the bottom of the page, and a second page of account details.

“It’s all mine?” Charles whispered.

“Every last penny,” Peter confirmed. “This document was received just after your birthday.”

Charles took the piece of paper and began to shake his head. “I didn’t sign this.”
“Are you sure? Sometimes these things can slip your mind.”

“I’m sure. I didn’t sign this. I’ve never seen this before.”

“Then I’m going to have to get the police involved,” Peter said as his intercom buzzed. “Yes?”

“Sir, a Sharon Marko to see you. She says it’s important,” said his secretary, her voice distorted by the electronics.

Peter looked at Charles, who nodded. “Show her in.”

Sharon entered looking as haughty as the night before, and then froze as she spotted Charles and Erik.

“Charles,” she said. “Such a surprise to see you here.”

“I’ll bet,” Erik muttered.

“Mother…why…who…I don’t understand,” Charles spluttered. “Why did you lie to me? Why did you let me believe that you and I both inherited? Why?”

“Charles, what on earth are you talking about? What has that man been filling your head with?” she said, sneering at Erik.

Charles realised he was never going to get a straight answer from his mother, so he did something he had never done: he dipped into his mother’s mind.

And there were all the answers. Sharon had known about the will, she had known that she would get nothing, so she bided her time until Charles had claimed his trust fund and then begun to weave her spell, making everyone believe that she had the right to the house. It was Kurt who had come up with the paperwork Charles held in his hands. The document stated that Charles didn’t want his inheritance, so it would pass to Cain in the event of Charles remaining unmarried by the time he turned 30. He also picked up on the little matter of Kurt and his Mother having an affair before his father died.

“You forged my signature. You lied to me!”

She looked at him, horrified, her mouth moving silently as she tried to find something to say.

“Not only that, you wanted to give it all to Cain, of all people!”

“There is nothing wrong with my son!” came a booming voice as Kurt burst through the doors, closely followed by the receptionist.

“Mary, call security, and then the police,” Peter ordered. “Sharon, what you’ve done is a federal offence.”

“He’s a mutant! He doesn’t deserve that inheritance!” Kurt roared.

“And you’re an accessory to the fraud,” Peter hollered over the man. He ushered Charles and Erik over to a door and motioned for them to wait in there for him. “I’ll deal with this, just sit tight. I’ll need your signatures on a few things before you leave, and then I can handle the rest.”

“You’re sure you can handle it all?” Erik asked. “Because I can so take care of them, if you want.”

“Erik,” Charles admonished.
“I can handle it. Just give me a half hour or so. I’d lock the door, if I were you. Oh, and Mary is on the intercom if you need anything.”

With that he disappeared, leaving Charles and Erik in his private office, Charles made his way over to the squishy leather sofa he remembered sitting on as a small boy, being given colouring books and apple juice boxes and chocolate chip cookies by the old secretary while his father had discussed something or other with Peter.

Erik melted the lock with his powers and turned to see Charles sitting morosely on the couch. There was something akin to utter devastation on his face. The tears started as Erik took his first step over.

Charles curled into Erik’s arms, trying to stop his tears.

[I’m sorry.]

“What the fuck for?”

[Crying. You must think me such a child.]

Erik held him closer, pressing kisses to the top of his head. “Don’t be an idiot,” he said. “I don’t think you’re a child. I think you just found out your mother is an out and out bitch. You go right ahead and cry. Better than what I’d do.”

[What would you do?]

“We wouldn’t need the police, just an ambulance.”

[Oh. Erik?]

“Yeah?”

[I’m glad you’re here.]

“Me too.”

Erik let Charles worm his way closer, surrendering to the intense kiss he was pulled into. He didn’t object when Charles shoved up his t-shirt and took a nipple between his lips, and he voiced no complaints when Charles began to toy with the zipper of his jeans.

“Don’t you think your lawyer might have an issue with his couch being used like this?” Erik asked as Charles began to nip at his throat.

“He might,” he conceded as he popped open the button on the denims.

“I’m guessing that you really don’t care right now.”

“Not even a little bit. And, if we keep relatively quiet and keep things clean and tidy, he’ll never even know.”

Erik chuckled, and then moaned as Charles’ cool palm wrapped around his hot erection. He kissed Charles as he began to stroke him, before those lips were gone and Charles was tugging at his jeans to get them down a little.

“Charles!” he hissed as a kiss was pressed to the head of his cock.
[Do you mind if I use your memories for a moment?]

[For?]

[Instructions.]

Erik grinned and stroked the silky hair away from Charles’ eyes. [Use away. Take anything you need. But you know I’m not expecting you to do anything you’re not ready for, you know that, yes?]

[I know. I want to try it.]

There was the feeling of a rummage in his head; Erik knew Charles could slip in and out of a mind without a trace but he made ‘noise’ to reassure Erik.

There was a tentative touch of his tongue to the head of his cock and Erik shivered when Charles let out a little pleased sound, moving forwards to apparently try and get more of the taste. Soon enough Charles was wrapping his lips around the head, suckling away, taking in more and more until he hit a limit as to how far he could go, his hand wrapping around the remaining length. Erik was trying to keep himself contained, to give Charles the time he needed to get used to this new act, but he wanted to thrust so so badly.

[I didn’t think I’d like it,] Charles projected.

“Do you?”

[I do, as it happens. Am I doing it right?]

“Suck a little harder, and less teeth. Not no teeth, just less.”

Charles followed the instruction and Erik’s head fell back in pleasure. He gave in to it, letting his hips thrust slightly, then harder as Charles’ hands urged him to follow through with it. There was the hot press of his tongue, the wet heat of his mouth all around him, and the slight scratch of his teeth, reminding Erik that Charles could, if he wanted, do him some damage while doing this. And yet he didn’t.

Charles had this power over him, this choice on whether or not to hurt him, and that feeling of vulnerability made his blood burn through his veins. He looked down in time to see Charles look up at him, those blue eyes showing just how much he was enjoying himself. Those pleasure filled eyes, those incredibly red lips stretched around his cock, those delicate hands wrapped around his hips.

It was all too much, all far too much and he came with a rush of white noise in his ears and a wordless grunt.

Charles, for his part, swallowed down what Erik gave him. It was hot and salty and a little bitter, and thicker than he thought it would be. He tucked Erik back into his jeans and crawled up his long satiated form, straddling those muscled thighs.

Erik leaned up and kissed him, smiling at the little squeak of surprise as their lips connected. He reached out with his ability, making the expensive metal tissue holder float across to him. He snagged it and tucked it between his body and the sofa, all the while keeping a tight lip lock with Charles.

[Now, I can’t guarantee that this will be as mind-blowing as what you’ve just done for me,] he sent
as he opened Charles’ trousers, pulling his shirttails out of the way. He reached inside and grasped the hot hard flesh within, setting a leisurely pace as he stroked him. He reached out and grabbed a handful of tissues, holding them just at the end of Charles’ cock.

It didn’t take long; he could practically feel Charles tapping into the remnants of his orgasm. He managed to catch all of the ejaculate in the tissues.

Charles slumped against him, his erratic breath hot on his neck. He balled up the tissues and tucked Charles back into his trousers before wrapping his arms around him, holding him close.

“Feel better?” he murmured and Charles nodded. “Good. Glad to oblige.”

After Charles had signed everything Peter needed him to, they were free to leave. Peter assured them that he could handle everything, and he would contact Charles in a few days with more information.

Charles hadn’t yet made a decision on whether or not to press charges. Erik was keeping his mouth shut, something he was finding increasingly difficult as more of Charles’ pain seeped through the bond between them.

They stumbled from the taxi, Charles insisting on paying, and then the shorter man began to make his way to the store, only to have Erik grasp his elbow and tug him down an alleyway.

Erik pinned him to the wall and kissed him, showing no mercy. Charles surrendered to it, let Erik take him over, flooding his senses with nothing but right there right then that man that kissed him with a thigh moving between his own.

[Erik…]

[Yes?]

[Please, not here…no orgasms here…not when I have to go in and look your younger brother in the eye.]

Erik chuckled and moved his leg, hearing the slight sigh of relief.

[Later?] Erik asked.

[Yes, later. But for now, you promised David lunch.]

Erik detached from Charles and rested their foreheads together.

“I’d never do that to you,” he whispered. “I’d never betray you like that.”

“I know that,” Charles said. “Erik…I have no doubts of you. You’re not a saint, but no one walking the earth is. You have your faults, your failings, and I’m well aware of them. But I don’t doubt you. I trust you, Erik, wholly and without reservations.”

Erik smiled and blushed, stealing another light kiss before he took Charles’ hand and led him to the store.

David turned out to be shorter then Erik, and stockier, but still strikingly handsome, with his pale blond hair and steely grey eyes.
“Charles, this is David. David, this is Charles.”

“Oh, Kaitlyn was right, he is edel mensch with the likhtickeh face,” David declared and Charles looked at Erik expectantly.

“A gentleman with the lit up face,” he supplied and Charles blushed.

“Ummm…thank you?”

“Bubbe will absolutely love him, she’ll eat him up,” David said. “Hey, Charles, I’m David. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you,” he replied, shaking hands with him as Erik moved behind the counter.

Erik checked over the books, making sure everything that should have been done had been done and he didn’t have to chase up any clients for payments. He and David discussed how the morning had been before they locked up and the three of them made their way to a deli two blocks away.

“So, you teach which science course at NYU?” David asked between bites of his roast beef wrap.


“And you take students from any major?”

“Yes. Many use my course as their science requirement.”

“I’m about to go into my final year of American Sign Language, but they’re saying I can’t graduate without doing a science module.”

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever had an ASL major in my class before,” Charles mused. “Can I ask…I mean, I don’t want to offend…”

“He wants to know if you’re a mutant,” Erik supplied, reaching over to stroke Charles’ bright red cheek. “You’re not going to offend anyone in my family with that question. Well, Richard maybe, but we count him as another form of life altogether.”

“I have had people take offence at it before.”

“I know, but David won’t.”

Charles smiled and kissed the palm against his cheek.

“To answer the question, I am a mutant. I manipulate glass. Not as showy as my big-headed brother, but I like it,” David said.

“Glass? Do you simply manipulate the shape of the glass object, or can you do more?”

“I can change the shape and sometimes the colour, but I can’t actually create my own glass out of nothing. I can manage some pretty funky shapes from a pile of sand, but that’s about my limit. I test about a Gamma, a Lambda on a really spectacular day.”

“Used to come in handy when we were kids and accidentally broke windows,” Erik added.

“Yeah, the baseball thing.”

“Your arm never did improve much.”
“Farmakh dos moyl!”

“Oh yes, you’re a complete shaifeleh.”

“Pisk.”

“A shaynem dank.”

Charles was amazed at their ease of switching between English and Yiddish. He had tried to learn French when he was a boy, but it didn’t take.

[Sorry,] Erik said with his mouth full of turkey sandwich.

[For what?] Charles asked as he took a bite of his grilled cheese.

[It’s impolite to do that, talk in Yiddish in front of you. It’s unfair. You can’t understand what we’re saying.]

[I assume it was something along the lines of the bickering Raven and I do from time to time. Completely harmless sibling speak.]

Erik grinned and they looked up to notice David watching them.

“Now that is a wicked mutation,” he announced. “You guys can have so many conversations without anyone knowing. Just think about it. You can complain about mom without her ever knowing.”

“I like to think my mutation is worth more than just allowing Erik to verbally abuse your mother,” Charles said with a smile.

“You haven’t met her.”

“She can’t be worse than mine,” Charles said, and then he felt his heart sink. He’d forgotten for a few minutes, what his mother had done, but now he felt the crushing pain of it bearing down on him.

Before it really took hold, Erik was sliding into the booth next to him, draping a long arm around his shoulders.

“Hey, it’s okay,“ he murmured as Charles leaned into him.

“What do I do?” Charles asked. “She’s lied to me and stolen from me and turned a blind eye while Kurt…while he…”

“I know, Charles, I know what he did,” Erik said and he had to pull himself back under control when he realised he had sharpened all the utensils on their table. “Charles…you don’t have to forgive her for this. She’s a liar and a thief and an adulteress and she turned a blind eye to some son of a bitch abusing her son.”

“And she’s still my mum,” he said quietly.

Erik had no response to that, so he pulled Charles in for a kiss, slipping his tongue past those red red lips to tangle with Charles’ own. The smaller man let out a tiny whimper, clutching at Erik’s t-shirt.

[David.]
[That’s not what a man wants to hear when he’s kissing.]

[I mean, what about David. This is a very public display.]

[He’s in the men’s room. He figured you needed me to yourself for a few minutes,] he replied as he began to ease up on the kiss.

“I did.”

“What did Peter say? Does he have an opinion on what you should do?”

“Not yet. He said he’d look into everything and get back to me.”

“Then you need to just relax and wait for him to call. He’ll take care of you.”

David returned to the table and they lapsed into conversation on the current state of mutant rights.

“It’s not about the politicians,” Erik argued. “Politicians come and go, it’s about the parents allowing their children to be influenced this way.”

“I don’t think it’s all the parents fault, though they are hardly blameless,” Charles put in. “If there was better education in schools, more tolerance, and zero tolerance towards bullying.”

“But it’s happening because the politicians are ignoring the issues,” David said. “If they would just pay attention, they could force real change.”

“I don’t think we’re going to agree on this one,” Erik said. “Hey, did Aunt Hannah call you?”

“I missed her call, she left a message on my answer machine,” David said, nibbling at the fries lingering on his plate. “Something about Uncle Richard and Tabitha and school and it got a little jumbled.”

“Well, I got that Richard is going nuts because Tabs is having some issues with school, getting in trouble.”

“Well, with that asshole for a father, I’m shocked she’s not done this sooner.”

“Which one’s Richard?” Charles asked.

“The mutant hating one who believes in separatism,” Erik replied and Charles nodded in understanding.

“I have no idea how he managed to find four wives in five years,” David said. “What the hell do they see in him?”

“Beats me.”

“He must have something going for him,” Charles said. “No one is all bad.”

“Wait until you meet him, and then get back to me on that one,” David said with a chuckle. “I have to get going, I’m meeting some friends for a study thing. Erik, thanks for lunch. Charles, it was great to meet you.”

“It was wonderful to meet you too.”

“See you guys later.”
Erik and Charles ordered some drinks to go and paid before they made their way back to the store. Charles perched himself on a stool and watched with fascination as Erik began to create.

Erik pulled out his huge lump of silver and began to pull at it with his ability, creating long strips of silver. He began to separate them into smaller and smaller pieces until he had a pile of short shining lengths. He then began to form them into rings, linking them together to make lengths of chain.

“Am I not boring you?” Erik asked.

“Not in the slightest. It’s fascinating, watching your ability in action. I’m trying to work out if it would be considered a physical mutation or a psionic one. Because the control of it is purely mental, but you can actually see the effects.”

“Well, Armando finally managed to find a slot for me, so I’m doing my MAT’s next week. We can see what he says then.”

“Can I come?”

“Of course you can,” he said, floating a length of chain and attaching a lily shaped charm to it.

“Armando said he tested in a completely different way to Shaw.”

“Armando was at my last MAT,” Charles said. “Of course, that was a while ago, and he wasn’t actually leading the tests. But he was very level headed. And he’s been my primary care physician for years, and Tony’s, and Raven’s. He’s a marvellous doctor. You’ll be absolutely fine.”

By the time Wednesday rolled around and the two men found themselves once again sitting in the hospital, they had progressed to each having a key to the other’s apartment and each having a drawer of spare clothes and a spare set of toiletries in the others bathrooms.

Charles spent his days sitting in Erik’s store, learning how to make jewellery and marvelling in Erik’s skill with his ability. This forced absence from the rigours of teaching was far more enjoyable than any before.

At Peter Rasputin’s urging, Charles had pressed charges against his mother and Kurt. Peter had reasoned that Charles could always drop the charges later, but what the pair had done was a serious offence. Erik had been an invaluable shoulder to cry on for Charles.

Charles had taken to sex like a duck to water. He delighted in the way Erik took control of his body, wringing incredible sensations from him, the feedback loop of their pleasure. The delicious sounds that Erik made when he sank into Charles’ body, the way he bit at his lower lip, the wonderful grip of those long fingers. There was no better feeling than having Erik inside him.

“You’re projecting,” Charles said, pulled out of his contemplation of the next sex position he wanted to try by the way Erik’s nerves were practically screaming at him.

“Sorry,” Erik mumbled. “Can’t help it.”

Charles wormed his way into his arms and pressed his lips to Erik’s throat.

“It’s okay to be nervous,” Charles reassured. “After Shaw and what he did…well, I’d be shocked if you weren’t apprehensive.” He pressed his hand to Erik’s chest, right over his heart. “But Armando is a good doctor. And in a happily committed relationship with Alex. And I don’t actually think
you’re his type, he likes his partners to be shorter than him.”

Erik laughed.

“Plus, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I can be a bit of a brat.”

“Now you mention it…”

“I’m used to getting my own way, and having people listen when I talk, and not sharing my toys. So, even if Armando did want you…he can’t have you. You’re mine and I’m not sharing.”

Erik pulled him in for a kiss, Charles smiling into it. They were interrupted by the nurse calling Erik’s name. Charles took him by the hand and led him into Armando’s office.

Erik was surprised that it was so light and open. The walls were a pale yellow and the chairs and exam table were covered in deep blue fabrics. There were bold black and white prints on the walls and everything was meticulously organised, which Erik liked a lot. It made him think of a well organised mind, something akin to how he pictured Charles’ mind.

Armando rounded his desk and shook hands with Erik and then Charles, motioning them to the chairs facing his desk.

“Thanks for coming in, Erik,” he said as he retook his seat. “I managed to get your records faxed over, so I have a pretty clear view of your medical history, though I’d still like to do a routine exam today, just to get a feel of your physical health. Then we can move on to the MAT’s.”

“Oh, Erik mumbled.

[I’m right here.] Charles sent.

“Can Charles stay with me?”

“Of course, if that’s how you feel most comfortable,” Armando assured. “I just need to check your details are correct and all the information I have is current and then we can get on with it.”

He proceeded to read aloud some parts of Erik’s file, checking his date of birth, address, phone number and email address. He confirmed that Erik had received all his vaccinations and had had all childhood illnesses, and then he ran through the usual sexual health questions.

“Oh, if you’ll just hop up on the scale,” Armando said once Erik had removed his shoes. “165 pounds, dead on where you should be. Stand over here for me, back against the wall.” Armando lowered the measure to rest against the top of Erik’s head. “182.45 cm, dead on six foot one. I like it when a patient has nice even numbers, it makes it so much easier.

Armando went on to listen to Erik’s heart, check his blood pressure, take a baseline temperature and draw a few vials of blood before he asked them to follow him to the testing room.

It was completely different than the room Shaw had used. It was smaller, for one. The walls were bare white, the floor a boring grey linoleum. In the middle of the room was a chair with a helmet resting on it.

“What the fuck is that?” Erik said, backing towards the door.

“It’s how I test my psionic patients. The helmet has receptors that pick up on psionic activity, showing us the levels. I promise, it’s completely painless and non-invasive. It’s also a lot less
taxing than the way Shaw tests. Can I ask, have you ever had an MRI scan done before?”

“I had an x-ray done once.”

“It’ll probably make you feel the same way that did,” he admitted. “It makes mutants with
 telekinesis feel a little high for a few hours after using it.”

“Erik,” Charles murmured. “It’s safe, darling, I swear. If you’d like, I’ll put it on first, and you can see.”

“No, I trust you,” Erik said after a few minutes deliberation. “If you say it’s safe, then it’s safe.”

Erik let Armando settle him in the chair as Charles slid down the wall infront of him, and then let
the helmet settle on his head. It was the strangest metal he’d ever come across.

Charles sat straight up as the helmet was put in place.

“He’s gone.”

“What?” Armando asked.

“Erik, he’s gone,” Charles said. “I can’t hear him anymore.”

“When did this happen? When did he vanish from your consciousness?”

“When the helmet went on.”

“Ah. The helmet is made from a metal called adamantium with a layer of anti-psionic alloy coating
the outer shell, which is why it’s purple. With the telepaths and other psionics I test, I like to be
sure they’re not being boosted by anyone else.” He pulled off the helmet and Erik came flooding
back into Charles’ mind.

“I see,” the telepath said. “Will I get him back once the test is over? There won’t be any lingering
lack of connection between us?”

“As with most things about psionic abilities, there is no absolute answer,” Armando said. “But, as
far as I know, what I’ve experienced doing these tests tells me that, no, there shouldn’t be any
problems for you after the test, Charles.”

Charles nodded and smiled at Erik, and the older man nodded at the doctor. Armando lowered the
helmet back onto his head and adjusted it a little so it sat more comfortably. He moved to a
portable table at the side of the room and wheeled it to stand just to Erik’s left, before he walked to
a panel on the wall and pushed a few buttons. The lights dimmed to halfway, and the helmet began
to give out a slight hum.

Erik moaned.

“Erik? How are you doing?” Armando asked.

“Feels good,” he murmured.

“Any pain? Numbness, tingling?”

“No. Tickles.”

Armando smiled and checked the readouts before he nodded to himself. “Okay, Erik. I want you to
reach out with your ability. I want you to move the marbles on the table to your left.”

Erik glanced over and noted the metal marbles sitting in the top right-hand corner. There were metal rulers, a few hairpins, a metal mug, some cheap jewellery, paperclips.

“What do I do with them?” Erik asked.

“Anything you want. Show me what you got.”

Erik reached out and took hold of the marbles, floating them up into the air and making them spin around each other. He made them melt and then formed a rose out of them before floating it over to Charles.

“Thank you, darling, it’s as lovely as the others,” the geneticist said, reaching out and taking it.

“Erik, how much metal do you think you could move all at once?” Armando questioned.

“All of it.”

“Go for it. You don’t have to push any further than you’re comfortable with, only what you know to be within your limits. But you can play with all the metal in any way you want. The machine will do the rest.”

Erik let his ability go, let it snatch up all of the metal, including the table, and made it fly around the room. He made the table stand up on two legs and do a tap-dance, he made the paperclips zoom like aeroplanes, he turned the hairpins from steel to bronze and made them into a tiny little bonsai tree, no bigger than a soda cap. The rulers became love hearts, changing them into rose gold and adding Armando and Alex’s names to them, floating them over to the doctor, which made him laugh.

“Okay, I’m impressed. Ready for another assignment?”

“Yup,” Erik said, his words slightly slurred.

Armando crossed the room and knelt down to look Erik in the eye. “Erik, how many fingers?”

“Three.”

“What’s your full name?”

“Erik Magnus Lehnsherr.”

“What is my name?”

“Doctor Armando Muñoz.”

“You feeling okay, Erik?”

“Wired. Kind of drunk.”

“Okay, all normal. It’s the harmonics of the helmet, the frequencies it gives out, it makes psionics go a little funky for a while. It’ll wear off. Are you okay to continue, or do you need a break, or do you want to stop completely?”

“I’m okay, I’m a keep going.”
“Okay. Erik, I want you to reach out and grab an awareness of all the metal in your range. Don’t move it or alter it or anything like that. Just sense as much of the metal around you as you can.”

“Just this room?”

“As far as you can reach.”

Erik let all of his control drop, reaching out as far as he could. He could feel the structure of the room, the building, the block, the city and beyond. The gleam of an operating room, the rush of pipes in the walls and floors and below the earth, the steady flow of a pen as someone wrote. The full thrum of blood rushing through bodies, the pool and heat and pulse of it as a couple had sex in an apartment, the gush of it as a teenage boy cut his arm with a craft knife, the sudden spurt of it as a toddler caught her head on the edge of a table as she fell. The huge mass of metal as a plane crossed overhead, and a helicopter, and further out the immense density of the metals in an orbiting satellite. A subway rushed below, and the metals in the earth’s crust, and lower near the core, oh, such heat, such pure kinetic energy, such untapped potential in that metal, but it had a use, had a purpose, and Erik knew the earth needed it more than he needed to play with it. He could feel the bobbing hollow of boats on the water, the drifting pattern of trash dumped into the sea and then even further.

He could feel the metal of a London bus full of iron rich human blood. The full bodied weight of a rare steak in Paris; the jewellery worn by a flamenco dancer in Barcelona; the metal cables holding the tower up in Pisa. The piercings in the tribes of Africa, the tourists in their thousands in Egypt, the boats on the Nile, the treasures of the Pyramids. Oh, the beautiful craftsmanship of the Faberge Egg’s in Russia, and the dense almost suffocating press of too much technology in Tokyo and Hong Kong and Singapore. The gentle motion on the fishermen in Thailand, the rough jarring course of a jeep in the Australian outback.

He could even feel the magnetic pull of the moon.

He could hear the distant sound of someone saying something but it wasn’t getting through. There was so much for him to feel. All his senses were full of all that metal.

Charles strode forwards and eased the helmet off his head, before he settled himself in Erik’s lap. There was smoke steadily pouring from the diagnostic equipment, a fire that Armando was dealing with.

[Erik?]

There was a feeling of euphoria, a floating intensely pleasurable sensation. Charles pushed through it, pushed beyond it until he found that little flame of consciousness he would be able to pick out of any crowd.

[Erik? Darling? Can you hear me?]  
[Charles?]

Erik sounded as high as a kite and Charles made the decision to never take Erik to the Statue of Liberty. He dreaded to think what that much metal in a single place would do to his lover.

[Having fun?]

[Mmmmm. It’s delicious. Can you see?]  
[Perhaps not the way you do, but I see how much metal you’ve found. And I see how much you’re
enjoying this. But you need to come back now.]

A whine of protest Charles more commonly got from the kids at the centre when he told them it was time to pack away.

[Don’t want to,] Erik moaned.

[Oh, I know, my darling, you’re having far too much fun,] Charles replied, his voice filled with amusement. [But you’ve made poor Armando’s nice machine explode. He’s rather upset that he can’t get the black smoke to stop. He needs to shut everything down and he can’t do that if you’re still playing.]

[Oh. All right.]

Charles bore witness to the slow pull back of Erik’s ability, the gentle loss of piece after piece of the metal, until he was back in New York, and then the block, then the building and then the room. Erik slowly blinked at Charles.

“Oh, Oops,” he mumbled. “I broke it.”

“Yes, you did,” Charles agreed. “But I broke it when I was tested.”

“Oh. Not so bad.”

“No, not so much.” Charles took a quick sweep of Erik’s mind. “Yes, you’re all there.” He looked over his shoulder at Armando, who had managed to get the smoke under control. “How did he do?”

“Omega, possibly higher. The machine said Omega before it went bang. I’m impressed. Not seen anything like this done since you were tested, Charles. I can honestly say that no equipment is going to be able to handle another test, so Erik, you’re not going to be tested again. Ever. We’re going to leave you alone from now on.”

[Dinner.]

Charles chuckled. “No, darling, he means no more tests. He still wants us to have dinner with him and Alex this weekend,” he reassured.

[Oh.] Erik reached up and started playing with Charles’ hair. [Nice hair.]

“Yes, I know you like my hair.”


“I’d give it a while. Ideally, I’d like to keep him here overnight,” Armando said.

“I don’t think that would really work,” Charles said, motioning to where Erik was pulling at his waistcoat, trying to figure out how to undress him while he was so high.

Armando smirked. “Okay. Take him home, but don’t leave him alone. Let him work it out of his system, and he needs to drink lots of water and get a lot of sleep. If he’s still like this in the morning, call me, I’ll come out to you.”

Charles thanked him and then took Erik by the hand, leading him out of the room with promises of fun games back at his place. Erik didn’t argue.
Tony Stark never really gave a thought to how much he used his money for, he was that used to it.

When zoning permits, parking tickets, locked doors all disappeared, he didn’t give it a second thought. He never had to wait to get through customs, and somehow he rarely had any run-ins with the police.

So it didn’t surprise him when his money got him into jail. The surprise was that he’d never landed there before.

“Can’t say that’s a good look for you,” he said as Sharon Marko sat down opposite him in a prison jumpsuit.

“Not to nit pick, but it isn’t exactly my choice,” she replied. “Why are you here, Anthony? Have you made Charles see sense?”

“I’m here to try and understand why you thought fucking over your son was a good idea. I know you’ve never been the maternal type but this… I didn’t think you could stoop so low.”

She stared at him, her mouth moving silently. “It wasn’t like that,” she said eventually. “I was doing what was best for Charles. He’s too young for such responsibility. And it was never fair! Cain should have an inheritance too. Raven got an inheritance, and she was never even a Xavier.”

“But she was adopted by Brian, and it was his money. Brian had the right to leave his money to whomever he wished, and he wanted it to go to Charles and Raven, NOT Cain.” He leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. “The money issue aside…my question now is, did you know?”

“Know?”

“Did you know about the abuse Charles went through? All the broken bones, all the dislocated joints, the bruises, the ribs that haven’t healed right. Because even I didn’t know until I had lunch with Erik yesterday and he told me all the places Charles has uneven bones, and damaged ligaments. Even you can admit there’s not a lot I don’t know about Charlie.”

“That’s ridiculous! Charles was a clumsy child, he never looked where he was going. I lost count of the times he fell off a horse or down the stairs. He wasn’t abused!”

“Yes, he was. By the man you were fucking while still married to Brian. By the little shit you think deserves an inheritance from a man he met twice.”

“That’s a lie,” she hissed. “They never touched Charles.”

“Funny how Charles barely had a scraped knee before he was 10, when you married Kurt.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but no words came out. Tony could see the doubt in her eyes.

“When Charles was a child, before Brian died, how many times did Brian tell you how strong his mind was? Not the telepathy, his mind. Charles is a genius and you let some asshole convince you that your son was cheating, so much so that you let everyone dope him up so high that he could hardly see straight.”

“We had to be sure…it was the only way…”

Chapter Five
“You could have asked him, and believed him.” Tony could see how much his words were affecting her, but he just couldn’t stop. Charles was his family, the only family he had left. “You believed Kurt over your own son, your own child, your baby.”

And, with that, he stood up and walked away, leaving Sharon to ponder the mistakes she hadn’t even realised she had made.

Ordinarily, Charles wouldn’t be walking around New York at two in the morning. It was far quieter than he was used to the normally busy streets being, which was peaceful.

Before long, he had let himself into Erik’s apartment building and made his way up. He’d just managed to open the door when he encountered someone.

“Azazel!” he gasped. “I thought you’d be asleep.”

The red mutant grinned, managing to look terrifying in nothing but a pair of boxers patterned with luminous pink love hearts. “I was, Comrade. I wanted water.”

Charles followed the red mutant to the kitchen and accepted the glass he was offered.

“He has been making noise for over an hour,” Azazel said, nodding at Erik’s bedroom door. “Did not realise he had called you.”

“He didn’t…at least, not with a phone,” Charles admitted, tapping at his temple with a finger. “Side effect of being so deeply linked with him.”

Azazel nodded. He bid Charles a goodnight and good luck before making his way back to bed.

Charles knocked back his glass of water before he slipped into Erik’s bedroom.

Erik was writhing on the bed, the sheets tangled around his waist, his forehead beaded with sweat. Whimpers escaped his lips and Charles disrobed down to his boxers, crossing the room and climbing in.

“Erik…Erik, darling…” he called gently, reaching out to touch him.

[Erik, darling…wake up for me…]

There was a small start of surprise and then Erik was reaching for him, sleep warmed arms winding around his neck.

[You’re here.] Erik thought, his mind fuzzy.

“I’m here. Come on, darling, wake up for me.”

Erik nuzzled into his neck, curling into Charles to take comfort from his lover.

“Why are you here?” Erik mumbled.

“I felt you. It’s a side effect, I feel it when Raven has bad dreams too, though usually she’s closer that you were.”

“And you came all the way across town to give me a hug?”

“You were afraid…and alone…”
Erik raised his head, blinking at Charles in the dim room. “You might be the sweetest man I’ve ever met,” he said, before he pulled Charles into a kiss. Charles kissed back with just as much passion.

They didn’t say anything more, not even in their minds. It was almost as if they were afraid to break the silence.

Erik pushed him onto his back, pulling off his boxers, never breaking the kiss as he reached out with his powers to float over the lube from the bedside table. He slowly prepared Charles, delighting in the gasps of pleasure, the way Charles bit at his lip, gripped at his shoulders, his ribs, his hips. Before too long, Erik had eased his way into the tight welcoming heat, laying his forehead against Charles’ and gasping at how good it was.

They moved slow at first, taking the time to find a rhythm, before they began to move a little more firmly. Erik let himself get lost in it for a while, before he realised how restless Charles was beneath him, how his own need was somehow lacking without the complete immersion into the feedback loop of Charles’ pleasure and his own.

He thrust deep into Charles and held himself still, sipping a kiss from the bright red lips. Charles was still beneath him, watching him with those oh so blue eyes, such love and trust shining in them. Erik laid a gentle kiss against Charles’ temple, reaching out with his own mind until Charles pulled him in, linking them completely, the loop sweeping through him, making every nerve stand on end. He panted against Charles’ throat, willing himself not to finish, before he pulled back, brushing his lips against Charles’.

Erik balanced himself on one arm, reaching down to loop his fingers around Charles’ wrist, sliding the delicate hand away from his ribs and placing it firmly against his chest, over his heart. They were completely still, eyes locked, barely breathing, before Erik’s hips thrust of their own accord, making Charles throw back his head, his eyes fluttering closed.

They moved like that, slow and steady, Charles feeling the firm beat of Erik’s heart, the two of them caught in the loop of pleasure created by Charles’ power, Erik tapping in to the fierce pulse of blood through Charles’ body.

The pleasure pulled them in, sudden and blinding, almost painful in intensity, and they surrendered to it, the only solid thing in the universe the solid strength of the other one’s body.

Erik flopped onto his back, pulling Charles with him, unwilling to let go, and it never occurred to Charles to mind.

It took an age for either to speak.

“Would you like to talk about your dream?” Charles asked gently, content to lie there and have Erik pet his hair.

“It was about Shaw,” he replied, barely a whisper.

“I see.”

“He was taking you from me, crushing you, and I couldn’t stop him.”

Charles curled more firmly into Erik’s arms, pressing kisses to his chest, his shoulders, his throat.

“I’m here, I’m right here, darling.”
“Will you stop that!” Erik shrieked, wriggling.

“I have no idea what you’re referring to,” Charles said, a scarily innocent smile on his face.

“The thing where you’re finding the part of my brain that makes my ribs tickle and giving it a poke,” he replied. “I can’t work on something this intricate if you’re tickling me.”

“You could take a break.”

“I could, but then Mrs. Leheeman would skin me because her daughter’s engagement ring isn’t ready.”

Charles settled back into his chair and huffed. “Fine, I’ll behave myself.”

“Good.”

They were silent for about ten minutes, Erik dancing random jewellery components in the air for Charles’ amusement.

“Erik.”

“Mmmmm.”

“I was thinking…”

“You’re always thinking, ziskeit. Orgasm is the only time your mind is still.”

“Well…yes, that’s true. But I had a specific train of thought in mind when I said that I had been thinking.”

“Right, I’m with you now.”

“I was thinking about NYU. About my classes, my students.”

“What of them?”

“I think I want to quit.”

Erik froze, dropping one of the pairs of pliers he was holding. “Quit? But…why?”

Charles looked slightly ashamed of himself. “Would you think badly of me if I did?”

“No! No, Charles, that’s not it. I would be happy no matter what you did. But I thought you loved teaching.”

“I do love teaching. But it’s not the way I wish it to be. I would like to mark my own papers, and be allowed on campus during exam season. I was thinking I could perhaps find another form of employment that I may find more satisfying.”

Erik sniggered. “Was that your Charles-speak for ‘I want to do something that doesn’t leave me feeling like a pariah’?”

“Yes, it was.”

“What kind of job were you thinking of?”
“Not quite sure,” he admitted. “I do love working at the Centre on Saturdays, and now during the week, now the schools are on summer vacation. Perhaps I could work with mutant youth, something like Raven does. Or I could go into genetics properly. I haven’t gotten to that train of thought fully yet.”

“If that’s what you want, then I’m with you. I think I’ve made it crystal clear how I feel about the way they treat you, and you’re teaching a bunch of morons who don’t appreciate the subject. I’m shocked you find any enjoyment from it at all.”

“Erik Magnus Lehnsherr, I know you were raised to talk better about someone’s profession.”

They looked around to find a woman standing in the doorway, hands on hips, glaring at Erik. To Charles’ surprise, Erik was actually cringing under her gaze. She was about five feet, slim, with the same striking grey eyes as Erik and greying dark blonde hair.

“Mamen, I wasn’t mocking his profession. We were having a discussion about a possible career change.”

“I should hope so.”

“Mamen, this is Charles, the one I told you about. Charles, this is my mother, Edith Lehnsherr.”

“How wonderful to meet you!” Charles exclaimed, hopping down from his stool and coming forwards to shake her hand.

Edie had another idea. She put her hands on his shoulders and pulled him in for a hug, making him start in surprise and then put his arms around her.

“Oh I see, Charles is a cute little thing, so he gets a hug,” Erik said mockingly.

“Hush,” she replied, letting the telepath go and chuckling as Erik actually got on his knees to be able to get a proper hug from his mother.

“What are you doing here? Is Bubbe with you?” Erik asked as he got to his feet.

“I had an appointment to have my car checked over, and I thought I would come and see my eldest while I wait. Your Bubbe is at home with your Uncle Thomas, I left them organising the latest round of family photos.”

“How many envelopes?”

“Thirty two. Sooner or later I will run out of room for albums.” She looked at Charles. “My, you are adorable. Look at you.”

Charles blushed and crossed his arms, feeling self-conscious.

“Maman, look, you’ve turned him pink,” Erik admonished. “Just give me another ten minutes to finish this piece and we’ll go get some coffee or something.”

Charles and Edie amused themselves by chatting about what Charles did for a living and Raven and the kids at the Centre until Erik finished up, just as Mrs. Leheeman walked in. Charles could honestly say that he had never seen anyone so happy over a ring. It left him feeling a little high.

“I’m serious! If I had fillings, they’d be humming,” Charles insisted as they waited for their sodas. They were in the same diner Erik had taken him to the morning after their first time.
“I don’t think I’ve ever met a telepath who takes such delight in it,” Edie said. “Nor one that can pick up so much.”

“No one like Charles,” Erik said with a grin at his boyfriend. [Go on, ask her. You won’t offend.]

Charles blinked at him. “Ummm. Erik said it’s okay for me to ask…about your mutation?”

“No one like Charles,” Erik said with a grin at his boyfriend. [Go on, ask her. You won’t offend.]

Charles blinked at him. “Ummm. Erik said it’s okay for me to ask…about your mutation?”

Of course,” she said, smiling at the waitress as their sodas were put on the table. “My mutation has to do with locks. I can manipulate the tumblers inside them. I can’t do anything big, nothing like a bank vault or a safe or anything like that, but I never have to worry about losing my keys.”

“How fascinating. It’s incredible. It could be used to hypothesise a link between the mutations of you and your sons. You manipulate the tumblers in the locks, which means that they, theoretically, were always predisposed to manipulate something. For Erik it’s metal, for David it’s glass. And, Erik mentioned he has a sister. Anya?” Erik nodded. “Has Anya demonstrated a mutation?”

“She has, she does ink. She can make words literally dance on the page,” Edie said.

“See, now that’s further evidence on the hereditary nature of modern mutations, adding further proof to the hypothesis of genetic predisposition towards it, and a link in the genetics of family mutation patterns. The metal in the lock tumblers meant that all three of your children would be genetically predisposed to manipulate something. They all manipulate metal, to a degree. For Erik it’s pure metal, and then David manipulates glass which more often than not contains trace metal elements, and then ink usually contains some form of metallic compound. I couldn’t give a definitive theorem about all of this, of course, not without further tests and observations as to the nature of all four mutations in one place. And then, of course, there is the wider spectrum of the whole family genome, looking at all the members of the family as individuals and as a whole.”

“You’re turning colours,” Erik said. “You have to take a break in there, remember to breathe occasionally.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry, I don’t mean to-”

“It’s fine,” Edie promised. “I’ve read some of your work, and watched a few of your talks on genetics on YouTube.”

[YouTube? Me?]

[Yes, you.]

[Why on earth would anyone put me on YouTube? I thought YouTube was for kittens and babies doing funny things.]

Erik burst out laughing, clapping his hand over his mouth. “Oh, ziskeit, never ever change.”

“And now I’ve done it again, I’ve said something to make you laugh and I’ve no idea what it is.”

“You have no idea how well known you are, how important you are to the mutant community,” Erik explained. “You don’t realise how others see you. It’s incredibly endearing.”

“Oh. Well. Thank you, darling. I think.”

Erik leaned in and pressed a kiss to his temple as his mother smiled indulgently at them from across the booth.
“At least this one is housebroken,” she said with a grin and Erik blushed.

“He’s not a pet, Mamen.”

“I should hope not, we have enough with the dog and the cats. I was referring to the last one you introduced me to.”

“Oh, him. Yeah, Charles is absolutely housebroken.”

[Do I want to know?]

“An ex who thought it was appropriate to pee in the backyard. From the bedroom window.”

“Goodness. No, I am definitely housebroken, I assure you.”

They had some sandwiches and fries and more drinks and spent the afternoon talking about Charles’ research, possible career options for the Englishman, and funny stories about Erik when he was younger.

Edie sipped at her cola, before she cleared her throat.

“Erik, I want you to talk to your cousin.”

“Which one?”

“Richard.”

“Not a chance,” he said without pause. “No way. Last time I tried to talk to him about anything it ended with him calling me a misconstruction of nature.”

“It’s not about Richard, it’s about Tabitha.”

“Is Tabs okay?”

“Richard sent out engagement announcements last week. Another stepmother, the poor thing must feel like a lost little lamb.”

“And you think she’ll talk to me?”

“More likely you than any of the rest of us.” She reached out and took his hand. “Boychick, please?”

He groaned. “Fine. Fine, I’ll try. But if she won’t talk, I’m not pushing it.”

“Fair deal. My little hilf. Just try to let the fehgeleh know there are people she can turn to. She is a part of the mish pokha.”

Erik sullenly stuffed a fry in his mouth before he froze and turned to Charles. “Don’t ever let anyone call you a fehgeleh and get away with it,” he demanded.

“All right. Why? What does it mean?” he agreed confusedly.

“It means fairy child in Yiddish. It’s fine to call a child a fairy child, but used on a gay man it’s very very very bad.”

[The Yiddish equivalent of faggot then?] Charles asked.
“Exactly.”

“I see. I’ll remember that for future reference then.”

Tony, will you please relax. There’s nothing you can do until they open that door, and they’re nowhere near opening it.”

Tony threw himself into the chair next to Charles and hung his head.

“This is wrong, this is all wrong,” Tony moaned. “This shouldn’t be happening.”

“Well, no, it shouldn’t, you’re right about that,” Charles agreed, moving to the coffee machine. “But it has and now you must deal with it.”

“But this was dads thing, not mine. He’s supposed to be a fucking dead man.”

“Technically…”

“Don’t, okay. Just don’t. His plane went down, dad never found him, it’s been 70 fucking years. This call was never supposed to come.”

Charles put his tea and Tony’s coffee on the table and gathered his friend into a hug.

He could remember the day of Howard Stark’s funeral, how Tony had stood there staring into the grave his father was lowered into, and, a few moments later, the one beside it his mother, Maria, was laid in. He remembered how Tony had said not a single word, but had refused to let go of Charles’ hand all day, even dragging him along to the bathroom with him. Which wasn’t the worst thing Tony had ever asked of him but now wasn’t the time for that.

He also remembered all the times Tony had been one of his only allies. All the times Tony had made him laugh, the nights he’d let Charles crash at his to escape Kurt and Cain, the times Tony had sat with him while he cried, the way Tony had been the one to cheer the loudest when he had received his qualifications. The man had never missed a single awards ceremony, no matter how hung-over he’d been. It was Tony he’d clung to when his father died. Tony had turned up on the morning of the funeral and refused, point blank, to let Charles move more than two steps from him all day long. It had been wonderful.

“Tony. Captain Rogers was a very dear friend of Howard’s. I’m sure it wouldn’t kill you to at least meet the man.”

“But they want more than that.”

They being S.H.I.E.L.D., the government department famous for its secrecy and founded by, amongst other people, Howard Stark. S.H.I.E.L.D. were, technically, in charge of Captain America because of the serum, but it was Howard who had led the search for him, so Director Fury was holding Tony responsible for the missing man. When they found him in the ice, and subsequently realised that he was still alive, Tony was the one they called.

“Mr. Stark?”

Tony and Charles looked up at a man in a suit, about forty, dark hair, calm demeanour.

“I’m Agent Phil Coulson, I’m with-”
“S.H.I.E.L.D. I guessed that,” Tony said. “Why did you call me? There has to be someone better.”

“There isn’t,” Coulson said, nodding at Charles. “Professor Xavier, an honour to meet you, sir.”

“Thank you,” Charles said as they shook hands.

“I met your father once. I was in training for S.H.I.E.L.D. and Director Stark had him there for lunch.”

“Can we get back to this?” Tony snapped. “There must be someone else.”

“Mr. Stark—”

“Tony—”

“Tony. With all due respect, you don’t understand the situation. There is no one else. None of the men Captain Rogers served with had children, and none of them are still living. The only living member of the original team, aside from the Captain, is Agent Carter, and she’s ninety seven and in a retirement home with dementia. You are the only link there is to his life, however tenuous a link it is.”

Tony sank back down into his chair with a groan.

“What is it you wish Tony to do?” Charles asked, his hand on Tony’s shoulder.

“At the moment, nothing. We’re still thawing the Captain.”

“And after?”

“Just talk to him. Nothing more.”

“Yet,” Tony said darkly.

While Charles was trying to keep a lid on Tony and the Captain America situation, Erik was loitering outside the high school, waiting.

He hadn’t really believed his mother when she had told him that Tabitha had changed. It became all too apparent when she almost walked right past him without him recognising her.

“Tabs?”

She looked up at him and tugged at her long hair, which used to be a beautiful strawberry blonde but was now dyed black. Gone were the colourful tights and t-shirts with cartoons on them.

“Going goth?”

“No,” she mumbled. “What are you doing here?”

“My mom told me about the engagement. I figured we could go get a milkshake.”

“I have homework.”

He reached out and tugged her hair out of her fingers. “Hey. What’s this? You’re turning me down?”
“Maybe.”

“We don’t have to tell him where you’ve been.”

She glanced up. “He wouldn’t care anyways.”

“Then come for a milkshake. We don’t even have to talk about the engagement.”

She sighed and nodded and the two of them walked four blocks to their favourite diner, where Erik ordered a chocolate cherry shake for himself and a chocolate orange one for Tabitha.

Erik and Tabitha had always been close, ever since the moment she could open her eyes. She had learnt to crawl, and then walk, by trying to follow him, and his name had been her first word. Bubbe had joked that they were twins out of time with each other, but it had long been accepted that their connection was stronger than anyone would have anticipated.

“So…what’s she like?” he asked, stirring his shake.

She shrugged. “Like the last one. And the one before that. And the one before that.”

“So she’s a vapid whore after his money who hates mutants.”

“About sums it up.”

“Where did he find this one?”

“School open evening.”

“She has kids?”

“She’s a student bio teacher.” She sighed. “Why did you come? It’s not like I can change this, so why are we talking about it?”

He reached across the table, intending to push her hair off her face, and got the shock of his life when she shrank back from him.

“Don’t. I’m not a little kid anymore, I don’t need you to fix my hair or buy me milkshakes or talk about the latest in my long string of stepmothers. I didn’t ask you to come, so I can’t imagine why you bothered.”

“Hey!” he barked and she glared him in the eye. “I’m here because your dad is a fucking asshole who is marrying someone he didn’t see fit to introduce to his own mother, let alone the rest of the family. I’m here because me and you have always been able to talk and I thought you might want to. If you want me to go, say it and I will, but don’t turn into a brat and expect me to sit and take it.”

She stared down at the table and he let her be for a moment.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

“Forgiven.”

And, just like that, she grinned at him and he couldn’t help but grin back.

“She’s a Supremacist.”
“Ah,” Erik said. “So, where am I going? Hell or a science lab?”

“Both.” Tabitha paused to take a sip and Erik once again felt a stab of sadness that the poor thing hadn’t taken the mutant gene. It would have been easier on her state of mind. Having the offended indignation of a mutant but none of the powers couldn’t have been easy.

“What’s he like?” she asked.

“Who?”

“The new boyfriend.”

“Does everyone know? Was there a memo sent around to the whole family that I missed?”

“No,” she said, poking her tongue out at him. “Grandma told me, who heard it from your Mom. What’s he like?”

“Have you heard of Professor Charles Xavier?”

“Of course, dad regards him as the antichrist.”

“That’s my guy.”

She laughed. “No way! That is brilliant!”

“Thought you’d like it.”

Erik had never been that deep in the mutant community, which is how he managed to know nothing of Charles’ reputation until after they had started dating. But most people with even a toe in the community had heard of him at least, and most followed him the way humans followed their favourite sports team: religiously.

“Is he as smart in real life?” she asked, scraping the bottom of her glass to mix in the flavour that had sunk.

“Smarter.”

“Cute? In all his talks and stuff he looks cute.”

“He’s adorable. My mom loves him.”

“David met him?”

“David has, not Anya yet, and I’ve met his mother, sister and best friends.”

“Is the accent real?”

“Very. I actually heard him say poppycock the other day. I admit it, I snorted.”

They chattered on for a little while, before she looked him straight in the eye.

“I wish mom was here,” she said in a small, painful voice.

The statement hit Erik right in the feels. He moved around the table, sliding in beside her and pulling her into a hug.

Miriam had been everything Sarah could have possibly wanted for Richard. A beautiful bright
young woman, who was also a human in a family of mutants. When they had married, everyone had breathed a sigh of relief, and then Tabitha had come along and they were all sure everything would go perfectly. Until Tabitha was five, and Miriam found a lump. She managed to battle breast cancer for five years before the spread of the disease had proved too much.

Erik could still remember the way Tabitha had clung to him as they sat Shiva, her hair in the black ribbon from the Rabbi, Richard too blinded by his own pain to offer any sort of comfort for Tabitha. It had been a long seven days.

“I know,” he murmured. “But I think she’d be very proud of you. Just like we all are.”

Steve awoke to bright sunshine pouring in from the window, the warm rays falling across his stomach as the buzz of noise from the world outside filtered in through the net curtains.

He looked around, noting that it seemed to be a hospital room, though smaller than any other he’d ever been in. He’d never had a room to himself in the hospital before. His mother had always had to scrimp and save to get him anywhere near a doctor. Private rooms were an unnecessary luxury.

He sat up as the door opened, revealing a rather short young man with startlingly blue eyes.

“Good afternoon, Captain,” he said, revealing a crisp English accent. “My name is Charles Xavier. I was asked to talk to you, help explain what’s happened.”

“Xavier? Are you a relation of Brian’s?”

“Yes, I am. But, at this moment, my story isn’t really the important one. Let us talk about you.”

“Where am I?”

“You’re in New York, at a medical facility,” he said as he took the seat next to the bed, sitting calm and relaxed, as if he had all the time in the world.

“Did anyone get hurt? The plane. Was anyone hurt?”

“No, no one was hurt. Captain, I wonder, could you tell me what you remember? Perhaps the very last things?”

“I was in the plane,” Steve said, trying to remember. “I was talking to Peggy. I… I couldn’t… I couldn’t land. She wanted to get Howard, but there wasn’t time. I had to put it in the water. I didn’t want anyone else to get hurt because of Hydra.”

“That’s very good. Is there anything else you can recall?”

“I was cold. And then it’s all kind of… blank. And then voices. And now I’m here.” He looked at the baby-faced man. “The cube. Where is it?”

“Cube? Oh! The glowing blue… thing. That was found years ago. It’s locked away safe, I assure you.”

“Years?” he murmured. “But then… I…”

“My dear Captain, I’m afraid things are a little more complex than you would imagine them to be. We’re not quite sure how it happened, we have a theory that it has something to do with the serum you were dosed with.”
“You don’t need to sugar coat it,” he said. “Please? Just tell me.”

Charles took a deep breath and looked him straight in the eye. “Captain, you’ve been in the ice for seventy years, give or take.”

Steve worked through it in his head, trying to get it to make sense. Seventy years?

“I understand that this is quite a shock.”

“Yeah.”

“Is there anything I can get you? Food? Drink? Anything?”

“Water…please.”

Charles crossed the room and filled a glass from the waiting jug of water. Steve took it without really noticing what was going on.

“So…Peggy, Howard…all of my team. They’re…”

“Yes, they’ve all gone now. All but Peggy, but the poor dear is really quite old now, and she’s suffering from dementia. She’s in quite a sorry state indeed.”

“And you were asked to help me? Why?”

Those impossibly blue eyes widened. “Well…I was asked by a friend. He thought I might help. I can go and get someone else if you’d rather.”

“No! No, that’s not what I meant. I was wondering if you were a doctor or something.”

Charles chuckled. “No, I’m not. I am a professor, but I’m nothing medical.”

“You look too young.”

“Thank you.” He perched on the bed, taking one of Steve’s hands in his two. “Steve…may I call you that?” He nodded. “Steve, I understand this is terribly strange for you. The world is terribly changed for you. I promise that there are many people who would like to help you, if you will let us.”

“Howard…his company…”

“Is now owned and run by his son, Tony. Tony’s the one who asked me to talk to you. I’m afraid he’s quite at a loss over what the correct thing to say would be.”

“Tony. Huh. Never figured Howard for the father type.”

“He wasn’t, as it happens,” Charles admitted. “But, it is what it is.”

“And Brian? You said you were related?”

“My father.”

“Wow. A father. When I knew him he was the skinny little kid, thirteen and working with Howard.”

Charles smiled fondly. “Yes, he once told me how much trouble Howard got into over taking him
into a military installation. I’ve always found it amazing just how much the Stark men can get
themselves out of when they throw enough money at it.”

“So Tony’s the same?”

“Oh yes. He’s very good at making trouble disappear. You, however, cannot be made to vanish
with the liberal application of money.”

“Which is why you were asked to talk to me?”

“Yes. Tony does better with machines than people.”

[I heard that.]

Charles grinned as Tony’s projection hit him. [People who listen at doors never hear anything
good about themselves. Come join us. I promise he doesn’t bite.]

A moment later the door slowly opened and Tony entered. “Charlie, I love you and all, but—”

“I know, I am well aware of your opinions, Tony,” Charles sighed, a sudden longing for Erik
filling him. “Decided to find your courage then?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” the billionaire said, taking the empty chair and looking at Steve.
Charles wondered how many others knew Tony had hero worshiped the Captain as a child. “Hi.
I’m Tony.”

“Howard’s son. You kind of look like him,” Steve said, staring at him, before realising what he
was doing and looking away. He looked to the door and Charles followed his gaze to find Agent
Coulson watching them.

“I just thought I’d check on things in here,” he said. “See if you guys wanted something to eat.”

“Food!” Tony crowed. “Food is a great idea. Yes, food is the way to go.”

“Tony, not all things are made better by cheeseburgers,” Charles chided.

“Not true, how dare you, you British infidel!”

“Dual nationality, and it is true. Though, I will agree this time, I do think food may indeed help this
conversation along. Do you mind terribly, Agent Coulson?”

“Not at all. Cheeseburgers.”

Charles made it home at gone midnight, and all he wanted was some food, a hot shower, and his
bed, in that order. He’d already messaged Raven to get her to open up the Centre in the morning,
and now he was ready to collapse.

As he stepped through the door, he had to look and check that he was in the right apartment.

“Raven called, told me you were on your way,” Erik said from the kitchen, where he was stirring
something that smelled divine.

“What…how…what…”
“Did you know you were projecting to me all day?” the metal bender said with a grin as he reached for a bowl.

“No.”

“Yup. Long day. My mom used to make this for me when I’d had a long day. Come sit down,” he said, ladling it into the bowl and adding a spoon, carrying it and a basket of bread with him to the table.

Charles sank into a chair and silently tucked in to the bowl Erik put before him. It was rich and filling, chunks of meat so tender they melted, root vegetables sweet and warming, sauce rich and hearty with tomatoes and basil and pearl barley. Before he even realised it, he’d eaten two and a half bowls, Erik sitting with him, breaking off bits of bread for him, plying him with tea, just waiting for Charles to be ready to talk.

“The poor man,” Charles said, content to sit and dip bread into the remainder of his third bowl. “He’s so lost. I was quite at a loss over what to say. And Tony has no idea what he’s doing.”

“You did what you could,” Erik soothed.

Charles was given more tea, and then Erik herded him into the shower, stripping him slowly, massaging as he scrubbed his back.

“Stay,” Charles said. “Stay tonight.”

“Absolutely,” he replied, ghosting a kiss on his shoulder.

“Mmmm. Erik…”

Erik grinned as Charles pulled his arms around, pushing Erik’s hand down, reaching up to tangle his fingers in his hair so he could direct his mouth to his neck.

[Needy.]

[Very.] Charles replied, moaning aloud as Erik grasped him, his teeth finding the corded muscles of Charles’ neck. [It has been a very long day.]

[Then I suppose I should be a very good boyfriend and help you relax so you can get some sleep.]

It was quick, it took only a few minutes for Charles to tumble over the edge, linking Erik in so he could come along for the ride.

Then he was dried and tucked against Erik’s chest, the strong steady beat beneath his cheek incredibly soothing.

[Charles.]

[Mmmm.]

[There’s something I wanted to ask you. But you’re too tired to give a verbal answer right now.] Erik said as he carded his fingers through the thick locks under his chin.

[I’m still listening, even if my mouth doesn’t want to obey me.]

Erik considered the mental voice to be relatively alert for all the tiredness Charles was projecting. [Well, Azazel has decided to move in with Janos, get a place of their own. And the lease is up on
Charles’ mind was suddenly perky. The Englishman struggled in his hold, propping himself up so he could look him in the eye.

“Could you afford it on your own?” he asked.

“Yes, if I wanted to,” Erik said. “I was just thinking…we spend an awful lot of time together. And I spend most nights here with you anyway. It seems a little silly to have two apartments.”

“Well, yes, it would be more logical to occupy a single living space,” Charles agreed. “After all, there are so many people all looking for housing. This city is terribly overcrowded.”

“Ah, economic sense as well as logic.”

“And just think, we’d save on the water bill, we shower together anyway. And the food bill. And you could teach me to cook, or at least you could try. Everything would be much simpler if we were living together.” His face suddenly dropped. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t make assumptions. We haven’t even talked about cohabitation and here I am making all sorts of assumptions and plans…”

Erik leaned in and cut off the rest of his babble with a scorching kiss.

“Relax,” he said as he pulled back. “We are talking about it, right now. And I wouldn’t have brought it up if I didn’t want it. I was actually worried you would think I was pressuring you to ask me to move in.”

Charles grinned at him, before climbing up to capture his mouth in a bruising kiss.

“Erik, will you move in with me?”

“Charles, I would love nothing more.”

Considering that Erik was only one man, it shocked Charles that they had to rent a U-Haul to get all his things across the city to his apartment.

Raven, Tony and the newly thawed Steve all pitched in to cart boxes up and down stairs, and when all the boxes were making a very impressive cardboard city in the apartment, the five of them went out for dinner and drinks, before Charles and Erik christened their new shared living space.

But, in the morning, there were an awful lot of boxes to be unpacked and Raven managed to make a rather hasty exit.

“How on earth do you have so much stuff?” Charles asked as he rearranged his wardrobe to house two men’s clothes.

“It sort of…accumulated, over the years,” he replied, dumping more folded shirts and boxers onto the bed. “I’m betting most of it is useless. You probably already have an ironing board and a kettle and all that other good stuff. But the landlord already found new tenants for my old place.”

“What do we do with the stuff we don’t need?”

“Goodwill. Call them up and they’ll come and take it, give it to someone who needs it more than we do.”
They continued on, arranging and rearranging things, the two men going so far as to move the bed to a position that worked for both of them and not just one. Erik liked natural morning light to wake him as his teenage bedroom had been (and still was) on the east side of his family home.

They managed to work in companionable cooperation for the morning, and then Charles had to go into the university for a few hours, to prepare for his class the next day, leaving Erik alone.

When he returned, he barely recognised the apartment. Every window had been cleaned, every floor mopped and buffed, every surface dusted. The furniture in the living room had been rearranged, the entertainment unit replaced with Erik’s sleek metal one. The electric appliances were all Erik’s too, far superior to the ones Raven and Charles had picked up on a whim at Walmart. There were high end expensive pieces that Charles was a little intimidated by. The bookcases were all dusted and arranged meticulously, alphabetically by author’s last name, including all of Erik’s. Even the CD’s were flawlessly arranged.

The bedroom was arranged the way Charles had helped that morning, but there were fresh sheets and new curtains and a very nice new rug he remembered from Erik’s old room. It made him feel all gooey inside to see Erik’s things arranged on the previously unused nightstand, his toiletries right beside his own in the bathroom.

“Is there any room you didn’t add something to?” Charles called out as he headed to the kitchen.

On his way, he glanced into the third bedroom; he and Raven had turned it into an office years ago. It had been rearranged slightly so a third desk could be added, the top containing neatly organised tools and materials, the filing cabinet and desk drawers meticulously labelled.

“Raven’s room,” Erik replied as Charles wrapped his arms around his waist. “Though I did dust it and cleaned the floors and windows.”

“What are you making?”


“Seems a little extravagant, seeing as you cleaned and unpacked.”

“It’s tradition,” he said as Charles set the table for three. “When I was a kid, whenever we’d move to a new place, my mom would make this on the first night. She said that it was so we’d know we were home.”

“It smells delicious.”

And it was. Erik was an amazing cook, something Charles deeply appreciated. It had been an age since anyone had cooked him a home cooked meal. It had last happened when he was in high school. The msoki was tender and satisfying, with a slightly spiced aftertaste, and the tzimmes were sweet and filling.

“Did you talk to your cousin, like your mother wanted?” Charles asked as Erik dished up seconds, putting Raven’s aside for her to eat when she came home.

“I tried. She wasn’t very forthcoming. Something’s going on with her, and I can’t figure out what it is. I’m almost tempted to have you in her head.”

“I don’t think that would be very fair to her. How old is she?”
“Fourteen.”

“Tough age. Is she a mutant?”

“No. Which is a shame really. She’s very into mutant rights and equality and all that, yet she has nothing of her own. Makes her a bit of a misfit. See, I thought the problem was this new marriage, but it doesn’t seem to bother her. It’s not school, she’s not dating anyone. I just can’t figure it out.”

“You will. Or she’ll talk, that could happen.”

“I was thinking, I might bring her to the centre one Saturday. Making some new friends might be the thing to help.”

“Mutant friends. If she’s feeling that out of place not having powers, maybe making a whole room full of mutant friends isn’t the right thing for her.”

Erik groaned. “You’re right. I just want to do something, anything. I want to help and I don’t know how.”

“You will.”

They spent the evening curled up on the sofa watching a trashy movie, and then Erik herded him to bed where he kissed every inch of skin he uncovered.

Erik thought the t-shirts and sweaters Charles had had printed were adorable. Until he was required to wear one.

“Do I really have to wear this? The kids know who I am,” he grumbled.

“It’s not for the kids, it’s for the public, so if one of the kids wanders off, us responsible adults can be located with ease,” Charles said once again as he checked his list again, glancing up to check he had noted down all the kids that would be with them.

“And remind me again how I ended up agreeing to help you with this?”

“I asked very nicely, saying please, and you said yes.”

“I need to stop saying yes to you.”

“Come on, sweetheart,” he said, curling into his arms. “You’ll have fun, I know you will. It’s the last time the group is going to meet before the holidays, we always take the kids on a trip.”

“But Build-A-Bear? Aren’t the teens a bit old for it?”

“Surprisingly the teens were the most enthusiastic voters. We gave them choices and this was what the majority of the kids wanted.”

“What about the poor suffering parents? How do they feel about the cost of this?”

“This is covered by the attendance fees they pay for their children to be a member of the centre. Anything else will be covered by me and Raven.”

Erik sighed and shut his mouth. He wasn’t going to win this, so he might as well brace himself for a day of wrangling kids.
They had all assembled in the centre at nine on the second Saturday in December to take the kids on the annual outing that Charles arranged. According to Raven, last year had been ice skating, and the year before had been a toy building workshop at a carpenters.

Once Charles was sure they had everyone, parents/volunteers included, they headed out, making their way through the chilly streets, cutting a large swath through the bustling inhabitants of the city.

Alex and Armando were somewhere in the middle of the group, corralling some of the middle aged kids with Tony and Steve. Moira and Raven were near the back, keeping peace amongst the teens with Yuriko’s parents, a Japanese woman called Yukio and her partner, a gruff looking man called Logan. Yukio could foresee the future, but only the moment of death, and Logan had regenerative powers and an adamantium grafted skeleton, complete with wickedly sharp claws as long as his forearms. The teenage boys seemed to have taken to him with startling enthusiasm, which might have had something to do with his foul mouth and complete disregard for being cheerful.

Erik and Charles were up the front with the youngsters, listening to them chatter away about what kind of bear they might like and how yucky the opposite sex was and how chocolate cake was the most amazing food ever created.

Soon enough, the excitement level of the kids reached epic proportions as the sign came into view, and Charles struggled to keep a straight face as both he and Erik were grabbed by both hands and all but dragged to move faster. He chuckled and gathered all the kids into a group.

“All right, I know you’re all excited, but if you could listen just for a moment,” he called and waited until he was sure he had their attention before he spoke once more. “Right, good. The plan is one stuffed friend, one outfit for that friend, and one accessory. Once you’re done, I want you to gather near the cash registers and I will pay for everything once everyone is finished. Now, I want no shoving, orderly lines only, no nasty words, and for heaven’s sake, please try not to let your powers run too wild, John, that means you. No flaming bears please. Right, I think that’s everything. Yes? Good. In we go then!”

The kids all sped into the store, a few members of the public giving Kurt a fearful look at his blue skin and fangs. It made Erik’s hackles rise.

“Do I get a bear?” Erik asked as he glared at one particular woman who had looked at the kids as if they were contagious.

Charles giggled and kissed his cheek. “Of course, darling. You can have a bear.”

The adults moved around the store, keeping order and helping some of the kids make decisions about what they wanted. There were a selection of animals chosen, from the usual bears, to bunnies, to dogs and cats, to the more unusual penguins and even a rainbow zebra. Erik chuckled as he spotted Steve picking up a Captain America patterned bear, and picked out his own bear, one with pink and purple marbled fur and a heart on its tummy.

“Interesting choice,” Kitty said, her own hands full of a sassy-eyed pink cat.

“My cousin.”

“Ah. She a pink fan?”

“I think so. She was for years, but she’s going through a phase. I think she’ll like this one though.”

One by one the kids (and adults) went through the heart ceremony, stuffing their bears and then
moving over to Raven so they could take their turn getting a birth certificate for their new friend before they congregated by the clothes so they could pick something for their toys to wear. Most of the kids even decided on underwear for their plaything, which amused Erik no end.

He tried to ignore how the baseline kids and their parents were staring.

Unknown to Charles, Erik had melted a piece of metal into the tag of each of the printed t-shirts and sweaters so he could use his powers to keep track of all the kids. He did a quick count as he helped Ororo fluff her pure white bunny’s fur. Nope, all there, all still in the store.

[Is everything okay, darling? Your thoughts are a little tense.]

[Diplomatically put.]

[Well, yes, murderous would be closer to the truth. What’s got to you? Too much fluff?]

[No. Look at the human patrons of the store. They’re looking at us like zoo exhibits. Bigoted fuckers.]

[If they’re not exposed to mutants then how will they learn?]

[Is that a good enough argument to put the kids through their narrow minded bullshit?]

[I refuse to give in to separatism, Erik, and I won’t teach my kids that it is acceptable to hide. They have nothing to be ashamed of, and if those petty little people can’t accept that then it is their loss.]

[I wasn’t suggesting we leave. My point is, we should keep an eye out.]

Charles smiled as he aided Remy in dressing his caterpillar, manipulating a tiny arm through a sleeve. [I always do.]

It took about an hour and a half to complete the toys and by then the kids were claiming to be ‘starving’. So they put it to the vote of where to eat and ended up at Wendy’s.

“So, was it as hellish as you thought it would be?” Charles asked as Erik sat down next to him.

“No, it was actually very enjoyable.”

“And the bear?”

“For Tabitha. My family, we do like a secret Santa thing, even though we don’t believe in Santa,” he said, hushing his voice for the last part. “Funnily enough, I manage to get Tabs every year, imagine that.”

“Quite strange,” he agreed with a smile.

“Think she’ll like it?”

“I can’t see why she wouldn’t.”

“Good. Oh, my mom wants to know if you’re coming.”

“Coming?”

“To the holiday celebrations with my family. Wait. Did I ask that or just mean to ask it?”
“Just meant to ask it. Won’t your family mind?”

“Are you kidding? If I don’t bring you, I’m pretty much asking to be disowned. They all know now that I’m living with you, which practically makes us joined at the hip in my scary family’s mind.”

“In that case, I would love to spend the holidays with you and your family.”

“Good.” [Now I don’t have to worry about my mother ripping off my left nut. The day is suddenly shiny and bright.]
Charles climbed out of the car and looked up at the house his lover had spent his teenage years living in.

It was a mid-1800's Victorian house with a wraparound porch, the siding painted a beautiful off white, with a red tiled roof. The front door was mostly glass, with a rich green frame, with the windows painted the same colour. There were sweeping lawns and sprawling trees, all lit by the warm light spilling from the lace draped windows.

“Oh, Erik,” he breathed. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah,” the taller man agreed as he moved to the trunk, pulling out their bags. “Poppa bought it after the war, once he’d set up the business. Eight bedrooms, four bathrooms, and over five thousand square feet.”

“I love it.”

“It’s not as big as your estate…”

“No, it’s better. It’s perfect,” he said, tiptoeing up for a kiss. “It’s the perfect family home. Can’t you feel it? All that love, it’s like it seeped into the ground.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it, to me it’s just-oof!”

Charles looked down to see the little speeding creature that had tackled Erik to the ground and climbed on top of him, bouncing on his chest until Erik tickled him breathless.

“How many times do I have to say it?” Erik asked with a grin, tickling mercilessly. “I know you’re a half-pint, but there are easier ways to get me to come down.”

“St-oh-op!” the little boy shrieked, giggling madly.

Erik pressed a kiss to the top of his head and plonked him on his feet, where he staggered drunkenly for a moment while Erik hoisted himself up.

“I’m getting too old for you to knock to the ground, Pete,” he said, wiping off the seat of his jeans. “I’m old and full of old guy starch.”

“Nuh-uh! Not old as gamma!”

“Still getting old. Pete, this is Charles. You want to say hi?”

“Hi! Hi! Hi!”

“Well, hello to you too,” Charles chuckled, squatting down to his level, though admittedly it wasn’t much of a difference. “I’m Charles.”

“I’m Pietro, but ev’body called me Pete.”

“Very nice to meet you, Pete. And how old are you?”
“I’m four! I go to school now!” he said, holding up four fingers.

“Wow! That is very grown up!”

He blushed and giggled, hiding his mouth behind his hands and looking up at Erik. “I like Chawls.”

“I like Charles too. You want to go tell Aunt Edie I’m here?”

“Kay!”

And he was off, like a bullet out of a gun, faster that Charles had ever seen anyone move.

“Is he…”

“Yes, he’s a mutant, and not even our youngest. If you thought the Centre got wild, you’ve got another thing coming. You’ve never seen anything like this.”

They hefted their bags and Erik led him inside, the two of them dumping everything by the front door and hanging their coats on one of the seven racks, toeing off their shoes and placing them in one of the nine shoe racks. They hadn’t even taken a step when a tiny little girl, no more than a year, came crawling out of one of the rooms, determinedly making her way to them, followed by a watchful elderly St. Bernard.

“Ah, little escape artist!” Erik crowed as he picked her up, smacking a loud kiss on her cheek, making her giggle.

“Ik!” she proclaimed, patting his cheeks.


“Ik!”

“Ah, close enough. Charles, this is baby Minka, our youngest, for the moment, as far as I know. 13 months old. Her mutation is something like Anya’s, she makes the pictures in picture book move. Minka, this is Charles. You say hi?”

“Cars! Hi!” she cried, reaching for him.

Charles was unprepared for Erik thrusting the baby into his arms, but he recovered quickly, holding her to his chest.

“Well, hello there,” he chuckled.

He propped her on his hip as he followed Erik and the dog trotted off to another part of the house, the taller man leading him into the warmest, most welcoming kitchen he’d ever been in. It was full of windows, the cabinets were white, the countertops a clean marble and the floor a warm rich wood. It was bathed in the warm glow of candles in storm lanterns and absolutely filled with happiness. The consciousness of the dozen or so people in the room hit him like a sleep-warmed pillow, and he felt himself grinning goofily.

[You high yet?] Erik asked as he hugged his mother and his many relatives.

[It’s wonderful.] he said happily. [So much love in this house.]

“Everyone, this is Charles,” Erik announced, taking Minka from him, and he was suddenly
surrounded by welcoming arms, hugs and kisses being rained down upon him.

He’d been hijacked into the Lehnsherr clan, and he didn’t mind at all.

Erik’s teenage bedroom was sort of like what Charles had expected.

There was a lot of metal everywhere, everything from the tissue box on the dresser, to the trunk at the foot of the bed. The furniture was a dark solid oak, while the walls were a pale green, and the carpet a royal blue. The double bed had a hand knitted blanket of all the colours of the rainbow, and the pictures on the walls were of various machines, the usual modes of transportation and things like buzz saws and the machine that made springs.

The wall the head of the bed was against displayed a huge graffiti piece of Erik’s name with various metal items integrated into the letters, screwdrivers, nails, knives, springs.

“What do you think?” Erik asked as he slipped their clothes into the dresser drawers. “Not what you expected?”

“Sort of what I expected. Lots of metal, that’s no surprise, and the big bed, with how tall you are, that was always going to be. I was expecting more posters, and more mess. It is your teenage bedroom after all.”

“I was always pretty picky,” he replied, slipping into the attached bathroom to place their toiletries.

“Might have come from moving around so much. I never really had a space that was totally mine, that was only mine. It was always somewhere that someone else had lived first, always the way someone else wanted it to be. When we moved in, Poppa let me have it just the way I wanted.”

“It’s a shame I can’t meet him, he sounds wonderful.”

“He was. And he would have liked you, I know he would.”

“This bathroom is yours?”

“Mine and David’s, his room is through that door,” he said, motioning to one opposite the one Charles was standing in. “My mom and Anya share one, Bubbe has one to herself, and one is a general one. There’s also like a half bath downstairs, near the kitchen. Toilet and sink, no tub or shower. Want a tour?”

“I would love one, and then I would love to meet Bubbe.”

Erik grinned and swooped in to give him a bruising kiss. Then he took him by the hand and started the tour. Charles got a glimpse of David’s blue bedroom, the walls covered with posters of different languages and frequency sound charts. Anya’s room was pink, so much pink it make Charles a little breathless, and an abundance of Japanese cartoons, including an enormous floor cushion shaped like a smiling piece of sushi. Edie’s room was a calm yellow, with lots of lace, and Bubbe’s was a pale peach with lots of photos and knickknacks.

The other bedrooms were a basic guest room, all filled with room for more than one occupant as there wasn’t space for everyone to be on their own. Anya herself had three of her cousins rooming with her; the floor was an obstacle course of mattresses.

The kitchen was still filled with relatives, only now they seemed to have doubled in number now there was cooking going on, and the noise from the living room added to the general happy chaos.
of the house. Erik led him in and introduced him to the younger members of the family, all of which immediately began talking to him and climbing him at once, which Charles loved.

[Wrapped around their little fingers already.] Erik teased.

[Absolutely.]

Erik and Charles happily kept the little ones entertained for a while, and then Erik took him by the hand and led him to the second sitting room, where some of the teenage cousins were sitting with a very elderly woman.

“Erik!”

“Hey!” he grinned as he hugged the teenage girl. “Been looking for you. This is Charles.”

“The boyfriend,” she said, looking him up and down. She was blonde and slim, very much the iconic image of a cheerleader, and she was wearing a t-shirt with a smiling cupcake on it. “Very cute.”

“Charles, this is my sister Anya.”

“Oh! How very nice to meet you,” he said, shaking her hand, and she giggled.

“Oy gevalt! The accent is real!” she crowed, gifting him with a hug. “No wonder mom likes him.”

They exchanged a few more pleasantries before Erik led him over to the woman, crouching down to kiss her cheek, letting her cup his cheeks as she talked to him in Yiddish.

“Bubbe, this is Charles, my partner. Charles, this is Bubbe.”

“How lovely to meet you, Mrs. Lehnsherr. I’ve heard so much about you.”

She reached out and pulled him into the chair beside hers with a surprisingly strong grip, before stroking his hair back from his face.

“Oh, no, you call me Bubbe. Everyone in the family does, and you with my Erik, so you one of mine now,” she said, patting his cheek. “Erik, go help your mamen, boychick. I take care of Charles.”

“Yes, Bubbe,” he said, kissing her cheek and then Charles’ forehead before he disappeared.

Charles sat perfectly still as she stared at him with her blind eyes. Erik had told him that she was a mutant, but he didn’t know what her mutation was, so she could very well see him with another sense. She reached out and placed a palm flat on his chest over his heart.

“So heavy here, such troubles,” she said with her accented English. “Feels like the whole world is falling down, yes?”

“I…how did…I mean…”

“I see. My gift, like Erik has metal, like Anya has ink. I see heavy hearts, and light ones, like a shadow. I see your sadness, though I cannot see you at all. I say, troubles are part of life. No use trying to pretend they’re not. I see many have not seen how wonderful you are. I see in my Erik how light he is, how bright his happiness. You bring that. So I say you are wonderful, and you must be part of us now.”
“But you’ve only just met me,” he argued. “How could you possibly know I’m worthy of you all?”

She laughed, stroking his hair before taking his hands in hers. “I know who to let near my babies,” she said firmly. “I see the light and dark, I know who is worthy. This new one of Richard’s, she is not. Richard is not, but he is blood, so I keep shut for my Sarah. I see heaviness in Tabitha, but she will not talk. I see. I see you are good man, good for my Erik. You know, my Joseph, he wasn’t like us, no gift like ours. But he loved to watch it all, like you. My Edie tells me you love gifts. You are good for him, good for all of us. You stay.”

Charles felt tears spring to his eyes, and he took a deep shuddering breath to try and contain them, but she was having none of that. She pulled him into a hug, holding him exactly the way she would any of her others. He was so absorbed in the wonderful embrace (something so far out of his frame of reference it wasn’t even on the same planet), that he didn’t even notice when the room emptied out.

[Charles.]

The telepath looked around to find Erik kneeling by his chair.

“It’s dinner time, ziskeit,” he said, standing and holding out a hand. Charles took it and let Erik pull him into a hug. “Are you okay?” he whispered.

“I’m fine,” he assured, pushing the whole exchange into his head. [I never want to leave.]

[Good. You never have to.]

They joined everyone for dinner in the dining room, which had a table to rival the one at the estate in size, but built out of a single long piece of solid oak. It could easily seat 30 people, and yet they still had to have a separate kids table. [I think a bomb could hit this table and it would be absolutely fine.]

[You’re not wrong. It was the first piece of furniture Poppa and Bubbe bought for the house. Every member of our family has eaten at this table, and now you will too.]

Charles ended up sitting between Erik and David, with Erik piling things onto his plate for him from the plates of things he didn’t recognise.

“What’s this one? I like this one,” he said between bites of noodles.

“Kugel. Try this one.”

“Oh! That’s yummy.”

“That is a meat knish. Knish are supposed to be a snack or an appetiser, but we all love them too much. This is a potato one, and this one is cheese,” Erik said as he put two more on his plate.

“I think the potato are my favourites, but the meat is a close second. Unsure about the cheese, but I’ve never been a big cheese lover anyway.”

“I like the meat ones best. Here, try the gefilte fish.” Erik leaned in, whispering, “Bubbe and mamen think it’s a sin to by gefilte balls like normal people, they insist it’s not right unless you do it yourself. If they could, they hunt down the fish themselves too.”

Charles got to taste all manner of things, mostly because almost every member of the family had brought ‘their speciality’ with them. He got to have four kinds of chicken soup, three kinds of
brisket, a whole army of vegetables, five kinds of kugel, plus all the bread that had been prepared, including Kaiser rolls, which Erik said were supposed to be for breakfast but were the only thing Anya could make without burning it to a crisp.

Once everyone had had their fill, the table was cleared by those sitting closest to the kitchen door and then the deserts were brought out.

“Much more and I’ll go pop,” Charles said, only half joking.

“Nit gede iget,” Hannah, one of Erik’s aunts, called down that table to him.

“No to worry,” Erik translated. “Trust me. If you walk away from this table actually able to breathe, they haven’t stuffed you enough.”

“No much further to go then.”

Charles was given a little bit of a few things, and assured by Edie that no one would be offended if he cried surrender. In fact, they would all be very pleased if he was so full he could barely move.

Charles had a mouth full of halvah (which he was sure he would never ever have enough of) when one of the cousins caught everyone’s attention.

“Seeing as we’re all together, I thought I should let you all know…I’ve got a new job. Better pay, better hours, and it’s closer to Marsha’s family,” he said, putting an arm around his fiancé.

“So you’re going to move?” Anya asked.

“Yes, we are.”

“To where?” David questioned.

“Perth.”

There was dead silence as it processed, and then all hell broke loose. There was shouting and screaming, everyone offering their own opinions of the situation, and Charles doubted anyone but him noticed the fragile looking teenage girl slip out of the room.

[Erik…]

[I see her. One thing at a time.]

Slowly, Edie and one of her brothers managed to calm everything down, and then Erik took his moment.

“So, when do you go?”

“Two days.”

“And Tabitha?”

“Is coming with us.”

Erik nodded, taking a sip of his red wine. “Let me just be sure I’m following all of this. You’re marrying a woman you didn’t see fit to tell your own mother you were dating. You’re moving to Australia, the other side of the planet, taking a fourteen year old away from her home, her family, her friends. You’re going in two days and you couldn’t be bothered to tell any of us. Have I got all
of that right?"

“Don’t pretend you know what’s best for my daughter! Don’t you dare, you know nothing. She’s my daughter, and I’ll do what’s best for her.”

“And best is to have her whole life turned upside down?”

“It’s a better life out there, a fresh start.”

“By better life, you mean a human life, right? This place you’re moving to…how many mutants live there?”

“None.”

“So you’re going to move her away from everything just so you can pretend you aren’t related to us?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But that’s the theory behind it, right. We’re all a bunch of freaks, all natures mistakes, so you’re going to go to the other side of the freaking world where none of us will ever shame you again.”

Richard didn’t say anything, just sat there.

“I don’t care where you go, so I’m out of this conversation, this is between you and Aunt Sarah, because you’re taking her only granddaughter to the other side of the planet. I’ve eaten my fill. May I be excused?”

“Of course, boychick,” Edie said, and Erik bussed his own plates to the kitchen, where he took a moment to calm down. He could hear the conversation begin again in the dining room.

[Are you alright, darling?]

[I’ll be fine, I just need to calm down. Do you know where she went?]

[Attic, I think.]

Erik pushed his love and thanks through the connection between them, and got just as much back, before he loaded up a tray with Tabitha’s favourite things.

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Charles knew he should relinquish Minka to her mother, but she was so sweet and cuddly he couldn’t bring himself to put her down.

“You’ll get tired of reading to her before she does,” Joseph said. He was yet another of Erik’s cousins. Charles had pretty much given up trying to keep track of all the family connections and tried to just remember names.

“I don’t mind,” he insisted as Minka accepted a sippy cup of warm milk from her father.

“Fair enough,” he said as he sat down in the armchair opposite. He raised his hand and shot flames at the empty fireplace. “She’ll nod off soon enough.”

“It’s very kind of you to let me monopolise your daughter.”

“Think nothing of it,” he said. “I have to say, you’re good for him, Erik. I don’t think he’s ever been so happy.”

“Really? Not even as a child?”

“No, absolutely not. We all remember what it was like, watching him move them all around, not seeing them for six months, eight months at a time. It took its toll on all of us. When he walked out on them, it was kind of freeing, but still Erik was always so serious. And now you. He’s better now, now he has you.”

“I thought it was just me who had changed. My sister says I’m different, better now.”

“No, not just you. And, for the record, you don’t have to play every single game the kids beg for,” he said with a smile. “Just tell them no like the rest of us.”

“Oh, no! I enjoyed it. They’re lively little things. And so many different powers! It was wonderful.”

Joseph chuckled. “No wonder Bubbe loves you.”

Charles opened his mouth to reply when his phone began to ring. He looked down at the tiny girl cuddled into him. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, but I should really get that.”

He handed her to her father and excused himself to Erik’s bedroom to answer it.

[Eric?]  
[Yes? Charles? Are you okay?]  
[Raven just called. She’s moving out.]  
[What? Since when?]  
[She said she wanted to tell me before we left but she didn’t manage it. She’s moving in with a girl called Irene. Erik…]  
[Tell me.]  
[She said I was too invasive. That I was too in her head, that she couldn’t stand it anymore, living like that.]
Erik felt rage fill him. It wasn’t bad enough that Charles’ mother had said things like that, now Raven too?

[Am I too much? Do you feel like you have no privacy?]

[No! Absolutely not! You’re my partner, my lover, my friend. I want to share things with you, this is just another way to do it. I have nothing to hide from you, baby, nothing at all. And if Raven feels that way, maybe she should move out.]

[Do you promise?]

[I swear it. Charles, if you ever read something from me I don’t want read, I’ll let you know, okay?]

[Okay,] he said, and Erik could hear his tears.

[Charles, do something for me? Go to my mom, or to Bubbe, tell them what Raven said. Let them comfort you? I’m still with Tabitha, so will you go to one of them for me?]

[I don’t want to be a nuisance.]

[Don’t ever think that of yourself. You’re NOT a nuisance, or a burden, or a problem, or anything like that. Do you think Bubbe goes around claiming every family visitor as one of her own? No. She only does it when someone is meant to be one of us. She wasn’t kidding when she said you were one of the family. Now, go find mom or Bubbe.]

Erik concentrated and pushed the feeling of a hug through to him, and he felt the relief and love push back, before Charles pushed the feeling of a kiss at him and then disappeared, fading back into the spark of warmth Erik had gotten used to and come to appreciate.

As Erik reached for his metal mug of hot chocolate, now gone cold, the mug slid across the table out of his reach. He adjusted his hand and tried again to grab it, only for it to slide back to where it started.

He rubbed at his eyes, cursing the early start he and Charles had had, and reached for a chocolate rugelach, only for that to slide away from him too. He looked up to see Tabitha looking at him, her hand outstretched. He watched as she curled her fingers slightly, making the cookie move again.

“Oh, Tabitha,” he moaned. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He pulled her into his arms and held her as she cried. “He’s going to hate me,” she whimpered.

“It doesn’t matter,” he soothed. “It doesn’t matter what anyone thinks of you. This is who you are, for better or worse. It’s as much a part of you as your fingers and your toes and your big brown eyes.”

“They’re not.”

“How?”

“My eyes. They’re not brown anymore.” She pulled back, using her sleeve to wipe away some of her tears. “I don’t look like this anymore.”

He reached out and used his thumb to push back her top lip, revealing a pair of sharp looking fangs.

“Is this why you wouldn’t eat anything?” She nodded. “And why you haven’t said anything since
you arrived, you didn’t want anyone to see?”

“I thought, if no one saw…”

“Then they would go away?” She nodded and he pressed a kiss to her forehead. “They’re not going anywhere, shaifeleh. None of it is.”

“I can’t eat,” she whispered. “It hurts. I keep catching my tongue or my lip and there’s blood and it hurts.”

“I’ll get you something, something soft, get something down you until we can figure out how you work around them.” He took a deep breath and forced her to look him in the eye. “Tell me honestly…is there anything else I should know before I begin to help you deal with this?”

“I have…there’s a…”

“Tabs, whatever it is, you can tell me.”

“I have a tail,” she whispered, mortification written across her face. “And I tried to hide it. So I taped it to my leg, and now I can’t get the tape off and it hurts and it’s turning colours.”

“Tabitha!” he groaned. “Do you have any idea how stupid that was?”

“I do now.”

He pulled her into another hug, holding her as he tried to work it out in his head, and then forced her to look him in the eye.

“Okay, right now, we’re glossing over how stupid you’ve been. You should have come to me, or to anyone instead of hiding this. But I understand why you did. So we’re glossing. Right now, I’m going to make a deal with you. I will go and make you something you can eat, and get Charles to find out if his doctor friend will make a house call, and I will talk to Richard. And, most importantly, I will do absolutely everything I possibly can to ensure you don’t go to Australia.”

“If?”

“If you go and take a shower and get rid of anything you’re using to hide anything. Deal?”

“Deal.”

Erik braced himself and pushed open the door to the main sitting room.

“Manage to get away from the tantrum then?” Richard said as he poured himself another scotch.

“Richard, listen to me,” he said gently. “I’m about to say something you’re really not going to like. How many of those have you had?”

“This is my second,” he said slowly. “Oy gevalt, she’s pregnant!”

“No! No, she’s not pregnant,” he said with a half laugh. ‘I wish,’ he thought. “No, no little Lehnsherr on the way. Maybe you should sit down.”

The two men seated themselves in the wingback chairs that had been Poppa’s, and Erik wondered where to start.
“I don’t hate you,” Richard said. “I don’t like mutants, I make no secret of that. But I don’t hate you as a person.”

“Nice to know. You know you’re breaking everyone’s heart with this move, you know that, right?”

“It’s not about them, it’s about what’s best for me and my child.”

“She’s a mutant,” he said bluntly, and Richard froze. “She’s telekinetic, I think. Something along those lines. And there are some physical manifestations. She’s not a human, Rich. She’s a Lehnsherr in every sense of the word.”

“She can’t be,” he murmured. “She can’t. She would have told me.”

“Really? You freely admit you hate mutants as a species and you truly think she would have come to you and said ‘daddy, I’m a mutant’?”

Richard pushed himself to his feet, downing his scotch, and began to pace, muttering to himself.

[Erik?]

[Hello.]

[Hi. I got a hold of Armando. He and Alex and Scott are on the way. Apparently, his sister started on with the marriage talk and the boys have needed to blow off a little steam twice already.]

[Great. What’s mom making for Tabs?]

[She’s heating some chicken soup and hot chocolate. Anya is a little worried. She caught sight of the tail. She said it looks very painful.]

[A broch!] He actually felt Charles flinch.

[David explained that one to me. I’m not sure if there’s anyone who shouldn’t be running.]

[Sorry. I didn’t mean that. It’s just so fucked up.]

[I know.]

[Hold up, looks like the groisser putz is about to drop some wisdom.]

“I can’t,” Richard said, and Erik felt his heart harden, making Charles wince.

“Can’t what?”

“I can’t have a mutant daughter, I can’t. Don’t you understand? The job, the house, Marsha’s family, her hand in marriage! All of it! I can’t have a mutant daughter! I’ll lose it all!”

“You really think that’s all more important than she is?”

“This is my whole life!”

“This is bullshit!” he snarled. “We got a doctor making a house call because she was too fucking scared to tell you, and may very well have done herself some damage, and you’re worried about a fucking job! She can’t eat anything, and you’re worried about the latest tzatzkeh in your bed!”

“And what about that thing gracing yours! If he’s legal, I’m a goy!”
The door flew open and Edie stormed in. “That is GENUG! Both of you! Put aside all of your issues and focus on the teenage girl who is currently falling to pieces!”

They both looked a little shame-faced; then Richard took a deep breath and put down his glass.

“I’ll send the paperwork.”

“What paperwork?”

“I’m not taking her with me, I can’t. So I’ll call my lawyer and get him to put together whatever’s needed. You can have her.”

“Richard…this is your daughter, not a pet!” Erik snapped.

“No, not anymore.” He pushed past them and headed to the stairs, disappearing into his room and emerging a few minutes later with his bags and Marsha in tow. “I’ll call my lawyer, he’ll send the papers, and you can deal with it.”

“You can’t do this!” Edie cried. “Richard! Don’t you dare do this!” She grabbed his collar as he grasped the front door handle. “She has lost her mother. Do not walk away from your child. You cannot come back from this.”

“I’m not coming back,” he said. “And she is not my child.”

The house was quiet for the moment. All the kids were in bed, the little ones asleep and the older ones having some downtime with cell phones and mp3 players, the adults collapsed into beds after a long day.

Erik sat down on the sofa and pulled Charles to him, joining their lips, pushing him to lay down so he could slide atop him.

“Erik…we’re in the living room.”

“I know,” he replied, nibbling at his throat. “But I want to.”

Charles giggled and let Erik do what he wanted, stroking at his hair and baring his throat for Erik’s enjoyment. Eventually, Erik pulled back and settled in with his head on his chest, cuddling in.

“To start with, you are not invasive,” Erik said firmly. “Raven was wrong to say that, and if she does feel that way then she should be moving out. I don’t feel that way, I’ve never felt that way. Seven months together, I would have said something, or you would have heard it in my head. Charles, I wouldn’t even be with you if you were like that, let alone have moved in with you.”

“You promise?”

“I swear it on my life. Who did you go to?”

“Bubbe.”

“And what did she say?”

“The same as you’ve just said.”

“And did you ask my mom too?”
“Yes.”

“And what did she say?”

“The same.”

“See? Charles, you’re not what Raven said, you’re not. I don’t know why she said it, but she’s wrong.”

Charles hugged him closer, burying his face in Erik’s hair.

[Thank you, darling.]

“You’re welcome,” he replied, moving up to press another kiss to his lips. “Ich hob dir lieb.”

“That sounds very nice,” he said with a smile. “What does it mean?”

“I love you. It’s I love you in Yiddish.”

“Itch hob deer leeb,” Charles said and Erik chuckled, coaching him in his pronunciation until he could declare love in Yiddish with the best of them.

“Erik, I was wondering…where is Tabitha going to live now? I’m with you, one hundred percent, on your opinions of Richard and his actions. So, I have to wonder what’s going to happen to her.”

“I don’t know, I haven’t gotten that far ahead yet. I’m only as far as getting a doctor to look at her and getting some kind of food into her. Past that…I have no clue. I guess it would be up to Aunt Sarah. Tabitha is her granddaughter. I suppose it’s all up to her now.”

They lay silently for a while, basking in the temporary peace and quiet, before there was a timid knock at the door. It opened to reveal Tabitha.

Her hair was an unnatural fuchsia pink, her eyes an unsettling luminous yellow, and instead of pupils, she had a cluster of small dots. She was dressed in one of Erik’s t-shirts and a pair of red shorts with little white hearts on them, allowing them to see the scattering of marks along her skin in random patterns, looking like oversized freckles. And then there was the tail, which was taped to her leg and terribly bruised, the part below the tape an eye watering purple.

“Oh, shaifeleh,” Erik moaned, standing up and moving to her. He let her cuddle into him.

“Hello, Tabitha,” Charles said, sitting up. “We didn’t really get a chance to meet earlier. I’m Charles.”

“Xavier, the professor with all the books and articles on mutants,” she said. “Dad thinks you’re the antichrist.” She looked up at Erik. “I heard him,” she whispered.

“Forget about him, just for now. Right now we’re taking care of you. The doc is on his way, he’ll fix you up, and my mom is making you soup.”

He led her to the couch, where she curled up against his chest, her hips angled so she didn’t have to put any pressure on the tail.

“May I see?” Charles asked, motioning to the tail. She shrugged, nodding, and he wriggled a little closer. Wrapped around her thigh and her new appendage, just above her knee, was bright pink Duck Tape; he recognised it from the tape roses Kitty was teaching Ororo to make. “I could probably have a crack at trying to get it off. It might help to be able to look at it from an external
“Okay,” she murmured, and he smiled at her as he slid to the floor to get a better vantage point.

He placed one hand on her knee and ran the fingertips of the other hand to lightly run his fingers over the tape, trying to find a ridge that would indicate the end of it.

“You’d have been better off using bondage tape,” he muttered as he reached his starting point and, not finding the end, began the circuit again.

“Bondage tape?” Erik asked, toying with the long pink locks.

“It’s what Kurt wraps around his tail. I don’t think I’ve seen him without it, to be honest. I’m almost certain he puts it on after leaving the house, I can’t see his mother appreciating it.”

“Azazel never does anything with his,” he added. “Only thing I remember is him complaining about getting things to fit around it.”

“Can I have it removed?” Tabitha whispered.

“Oh, my darling,” Charles said. “I’m fairly certain that won’t be possible. If your tail is anything like Kurt’s, it’s a part of your spinal cord. To remove it would most likely leave you paralysed. But why you would want to remove it is beyond me. It’s a part of you, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with you.”

“I’m a freak.”

[Not the only freak,] he projected onto the surface of her mind, careful to go no deeper. Her eyes went wide and she smiled hesitantly at him.

Edie appeared with the promised soup and hot chocolate and then moved to answer the doorbell. Tabitha managed about half a mug before she squeaked in pain and clapped a hand to her mouth.

“Let me see,” Erik ordered. “Come on, Tabby Cat, let me see.”

She lowered her hand and revealed the flow of blood from the inside of her lower lip.

“Oh, baby, it’s okay,” he crooned, pressing a tissue from the coffee table box to the deep scratch. “You’ll learn to live with these, I promise. Kurt has fangs, he manages those…right?”

“Right,” Charles said, using a nail to begin picking at the end he had finally managed to find. He didn’t get to continue his thought as Edie called for him. He excused himself and made his way out to the front door, where Armando, Alex and Scott were standing.

“Thank you so much for this, my friend,” he said, giving Armando a quick hug.

“Believe me when I say I was glad you called,” he said with a laugh. “I love my sister, but if she were to give me another suggestion on what me and Alex should do about anything, I think I may kill her.”

“Oh dear. Well, then I’m glad I called.” He gave Alex a hug and then Scott, and then Edie stepped in.

“Would you boys like something to eat or drink? We have plenty,” she said and Scott gave her a huge grin. “Come on and I’ll fix you something. And you can have the room Richard was in, the two of you,” she said, motioning to Alex and Armando. “And you,” she slid an arm around Scott’s
waist (she was too short to reach his shoulders), “I’m sure we can find space in David’s room, with all the other teenage boys.”

“We don’t want to put you out or anything,” Alex said.

“Nonsense,” she said. “You’ll stay the night and I want to hear no arguments. Now, food and drink.”

Armando requested some sweet tea and Alex and Scott disappeared with her. Charles explained the situation more completely to Armando and then led him to the sitting room.

The bleeding had stopped and Tabitha had managed to get the rest of the soup down; she was once again curled against Erik, her fingers gripping at his t-shirt like her life depended on him not moving an inch.

“Hi,” Armando said, moving to crouch down before her. “I’m Doctor Armando Munoz, I’m a friend of Charles and Erik’s and I’m also Erik’s doctor. You can call me Doc or Armando, or some people even call me Darwin.”

“Why?” she whispered.

“Because of my mutation,” he said. He held up an arm and concentrated, forcing it to become a rock-like surface for a few moments. “I adapt to survive.”

“That’s cool.”

“Thank you. How about you? Charles tells me you’ve had some problems. Feel like telling me about them?”

“My dad doesn’t like mutants…so I didn’t want him to know. I…I thought…maybe if…I hid it, it would go away.”

“I see. You know, you’re not the first teen I’ve seen try to hide their mutation. I once treated a boy. When he manifested his wings, he took his father’s tool box to the bathroom with him. The patch up on that was gnarly. But now he has the most beautiful pure white feathers, and a sixteen foot wingspan.”

“It hurts,” she admitted, and Erik’s eyes closed briefly.

“I’ll bet,” Darwin said, looking at the tail. “How about this? I’ll take a look at you, make sure there’s nothing else serious happening, and we’ll work up to taking off the tape, huh?” She nodded at him. “Now, do you want Erik to stay or leave or a female member of the family to come in?”

She looked up at Erik and then at Charles. “Will you both stay?”

“Of course, baby,” the metal bender murmured, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“If you wish,” Charles said.

She remained curled up against Erik as the doctor examined her.

“How about this? I’ll take a look at you, make sure there’s nothing else serious happening, and we’ll work up to taking off the tape, huh?” She nodded at him. “Now, do you want Erik to stay or leave or a female member of the family to come in?”

“Have you been having problems here?” he asked as he checked her eyes with a penlight. She nodded and he smiled. “Compound retinas. I’ve seen it twice before, and both times it resulted in difficulty adapting. The problem is that mutants with this adaptation see so much more than the rest of us. Is that what’s happening?”
“Yeah. It’s like everything is brighter all of a sudden. Lights and colours are all so much now. And I see so much more, like details.”

“You’ll adapt, I guarantee it,” he said with a smile. “Any other physical problems? Hearing? Sensitivity in the skin? Anything like that?” She shook her head. “Can you tell me about your mutation? Charles said something about telekinesis.”

“How?”

“Moving things without touching them physically,” Charles clarified. “Erik said you moved his mug and a cookie.”

“Yeah, I do that. But sometimes it’s too much. Things get crushed or explode. Glass things most of all, but plastic too.”

Darwin made notes with one hand while checking her pulse with the other, his face a mask of concentration.

“I don’t think it’s traditional telekinesis,” he said. “I think it’s more likely to be some sort of pressure exerted on the object in question. When the pressure is too high, they give under it. As far as I know, it would still fall under the classification of telekinesis. Are you getting headaches?”

“Sometimes.”

“Like when? Can you tell me what you were moving when you got the last headache?”

“There was a book on my nightstand and I tried to push it back to the bookshelf. I got a nosebleed.”

“Definitely some kind of psionic ability, but I’d like to wait for a while before even suggesting MAT’s. Let her settle into it first,” he said to Erik who nodded.

He went on to look at her fangs, and proclaimed that she would adjust, he swore it, and in the meantime she should remember to keep her fluids up even if she couldn’t eat very much.

“Tabitha, I know you’re in pain, but I need to look at the tail.”

She groaned and buried her head in Erik’s chest, the man murmuring soothing nonsense into her ear as he stroked her hair. Eventually he convinced her to move so Armando could get to the tape.

“How long has this been on?”

“Nineteen days,” she admitted, and Erik groaned.

Armando didn’t say anything, he simply began to peel away the layers. When he got to the tape that was actually adhered to her skin, he trimmed off most of the tape already removed and then attempted to make enough space to get his scissors between her leg and tail. However, it was just too tight, there was no way to do it.

“Oh, sweetheart, I need you to stay really still for me,” he said, pulling out a scalpel and unwrapping a new blade, putting it together.

He took a firm hold of her knee to ensure she made no sudden movements, and then he began to slice away at the tape, going a millimetre at a time, cutting through to her skin and somehow managing not to actually cut her. Eventually, he managed to separate the two limbs, and she screamed as the full blood flow rushed back.
Erik cuddled her close, rocking her, trying to soothe her without knowing how.

Armando looked at Charles and discreetly tapped his temple. The two had a momentary silent conversation.

“Erik,” Charles said. “I think maybe I should take over for a bit, my love. You take a break for a few minutes.”

Erik opened his mouth to object, so Charles dipped into his head.

[Armando thinks she’s managed to dislocate the tail. Take a break.]

Erik swallowed down the bile that had suddenly risen and rubbed a hand along Tabitha’s back.

“I’ll be right back, okay?” he asked quietly.

“Why? Where are you going?”

“I need to talk to my mom for a moment. Charles will stay.”

He didn’t give her a chance to argue before he untangled himself from her and made his way determinedly to the door. Once he had disappeared, Charles took his place.

“I don’t understand. What did I do?” she asked.

“Nothing, darling, I promise. The problem is that Armando thinks you may have done some more serious damage your tail, and Erik was looking a bit murderous.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt him, I swear.”

He hugged her close. “Oh, I know that, and so does he. No one is blaming you or angry at you. You weren’t intending to hurt anyone, you just wanted it all to go away. But he’s rather upset at your father, so it’s all a bit of a trigger for him at the moment. Best to do this while he takes a breath.”

Armando got her to lift her shirt and lower her shorts so he could see the base of the tail, and Charles managed to get a glimpse of it before he looked away. The bruising was horrific enough, he didn’t need to see anymore.

“It’s dislocated,” Armando declared. “With prehensile tails in mutants, what we’ve found is that the tail is actually an extension of the spine, but with one big difference. The vertebrae in the tail, from the coccyx down, become similar to the joints of the fingers. It offers a certain amount of protection, because they have a sort of hollow channel running through the middle, which holds the delicate nerves. The only weak point is the join, where the back and the tail meet. Dislocations in this area are the most common injury to the tail, with a break lower down as the second, from where mutants catch them in doors and things.”

“So, what do we do about it?” Charles asked.

“We have two options. The first is a trip to the hospital and surgery to relocate the joint. Ordinarily I would opt for that,” he said.

“And the second option?”

“I would need your help. You could go into her mind and block her ability to feel pain, or even put her under, so I could do the relocation here. Be warned though, to do it here, I would suggest Erik
and Edie and anyone else not be anywhere near. To do it here, I would have to exert pressure on the tail, and when it goes back into place the crack of it is pretty loud."

“What do you want?” Charles asked, pushing her hair away from her face and getting her to look at him. “We can do either, it’s up to you.”

“I don’t want to go to hospital.”

“Alright. Would you like me to block your pain or put you to sleep?”

“You can make me sleep?”

“If you’d like.”

“Can you make nice dreams?” she whispered.

“I can, as it happens. I used to do it for my sister when we were young. What would you like to dream of?”

“Something pretty,” she mumbled, letting the two men lay her down, Charles moving to crouch by the arm of the sofa. “Unicorns, and candy, and my mom.”

Charles stroked her hair. “What did your mother look like? Can you picture her in your mind for me?”

Tabitha’s mother was a short chubby woman with strawberry blonde hair and an infectious smile. In Tabitha’s memory, she was laughing, cuddling the girl close.

Charles used the memory to build the dream, placing the two of them in the candy world from a Katy Perry music video, adding in a few unicorns for good measure. He slowly pushed it forwards, covering all other things with it, immersing her in it. He blocked out the pain of what had transpired that evening, all the worries in her mind, putting them behind a timed wall that would dissolve in eight hours. Then he gently navigated her mind, careful of what he touched and how deep he went, until he reached the part of her mind that registered and processed pain. He put up a barrier around it, airtight walls to keep her safe.

“Now,” he whispered.

Armando turned her onto her stomach and placed one hand on the base of her spine, just before the tail began. The other hand he wrapped around the top most part of the tail, took a deep breath and began to pull. With ever increasing force, he kept the movement steady, until there was the loudest crack Charles had ever heard.

Charles had to push against the wall around her pain receptors as the sensation of blood rushing back to her tail. Slowly, it eased, and Charles was able to lessen the wall, putting a time on it to coincide with the dissolution of the dream.

[You can come back in now.]

[All done?]

[All done. She’ll sleep for eight hours.] He pushed what he’d done into Erik’s mind as the man himself entered.

“Is she going to be okay?” Erik asked.
“She’ll be fine,” Armando assured. “She’s going to be sore and bruised for a few days, some painkillers will help. When she’s ready for her MAT’s, I think we’d all be happier if I was the one who did them.”

“Agreed,” Erik said, stroking her hair.

“This place is wicked,” Alex said from the doorway. “The food alone is worth the late night drive. And Erik’s mom has invited us to spend the rest of the holidays with them.”

“What does Scotty say?”

“He’s already crashed in David’s room, after stuffing himself with all this wicked food.” He looked at the girl Erik was scooping into his arms. “Man, and I thought my dad was an asshole. Ah, shit. Sorry, Erik.”

“No offense taken, believe me.”

Erik carried her up the stairs and silently slipped her into bed, stopping at Anya’s bed before he left.

“Hey,” she said sleepily as he shook her shoulder. She blinked over at Tabitha and then looked up at him.

“She’s going to be okay,” he said. “No lasting damage, just some bruises. Listen, An, I just want to check…that you wouldn’t ever do something like that. You wouldn’t hide something important from us, would you? You know you can come to any of us, and tell us anything, right?”

“I know, Erik,” she said, sitting up and hugging him. “I wouldn’t, I promise.”

“Because I don’t ever want any of our family to think they’re not good enough.”

“I wouldn’t want that either.” She sighed, squeezing him a little tighter. “I can’t even imagine how much her life must suck right now. I mean, dad walked out on us and I wasn’t even born yet, so I don’t have anyone to miss. But Tabs does. She’s got all those memories to hurt herself with.”

“We’ll take care of her. And you. And anyone else that needs it.”

“Everyone’s tateleh.”

“Damn straight,” he said with a smile, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Go back to sleep. And keep an eye on what you come down to breakfast in. The doc and his partner brought a 17 year old boy with them, partners brother. So try not to flash him everything.”

“Thanks for the heads up,” she said sleepily as she lay back down.

When he got back to his own room, Charles was in the bathroom, so he stripped off and climbed into bed, leaning back against the headboard, enjoying the quiet until a very damp Charles climbed atop him.

“Well, hello there,” he said with a grin, gripping the slim hips.

“Hello,” Charles purred, ducking in to kiss him.

“Long day.”

“Very.”
“And we haven’t been naked together for…oh, at least eight hours.”

“My, my, that is an unreasonably long time,” Charles said, pushing Erik’s hand towards his cock.

Erik freed himself from his boxers and kissed Charles, snaking his tongue inside. He lined them up and wrapped his long fingers around them both. Charles moaned, arching his back and thrusting into the touch.

“Do you know how much I love you?” Erik asked as he ducked his head to lick at this collarbone.

“Ye-eh!-es.”

They climbed higher, a thumb circling a slippery head, a hand tugging at a scrotum, teeth nipping at a peaked nipple, until Erik stuttered out a groan, his breath catching in his throat, Charles tapping in to his orgasm.

They cleaned themselves up and then curled into bed, Charles snuggling to him, his head on Erik’s chest.

“Ich hab dir lieb, Charles. To the moon and back.” [Forever and always.]

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked it, I managed to churn this out in just under a week, which is a new one for me. I really wanted to get this one out of the way because I had real problems with the emotions in this one, it was hard to write.

If you liked it, kudos, comment and subscribe. Let me know what you liked and didn't like, what your thoughts are, all that good time stuff.

I'm now on Facebook, search me out under AvengingAngel for random thoughts and updates on what I'm working on.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

Not entirely happy with all of this, but I feel bad about making you lovelies wait so long for a new update, so here you go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charles could only summarise that he was awake so early because there were so many minds close to him. He eased himself from Erik’s hold, did what he had to in the bathroom, and then made his way out of the room. He had no desire to wake Erik at five in the morning.

It was a shock to see a light beneath Bubbe’s door.

“Bubbe? Are you awake?” he called gently as he knocked, and he felt a start of surprise before he was called to enter.

“Charles? Why are you up, słodki jeden?”

“I’m not sure to be honest,” he admitted, crossing to the bed and sitting beside her so she could take hold of his hand. “Might be that there are so many people in one place.”

“Oh, no! I didn’t even know you were awake until I saw your light was on.”

“But I had bad dreams, so might have been me.”

“Oh. Very bad dreams? Would you like to talk about it? Or maybe there’s something I can get you?”

“Ach, you are so sweet, kochanie. I need nothing but a cuddle. Come cuddle with me.”

He crawled up the bed and let her arrange him as she wanted, his head on her tummy, his arm across her legs, her fingers stroking through his hair.

“My Joseph, he would have loved you,” she said. “You are good boy, you would have made him happy.”

“Erik’s told me about him. He was a jeweller, yes?”

“Yes. He made beautiful things.” She hummed sadly. “You know, he saved me.”

“He did? Erik didn’t say.”

“Erik does not know,” she said. “None of them do. They see my numbers…and they shy away.” She motioned to her arm where her concentration camp tattoo was. “They think it will hurt too much to say.”

“If it does, you don’t have to tell me.”
“Erik asked me once, when he was younger. Joseph, it was too hard for him to hear, too hard to say. Me? I couldn’t find the words. I lived through it, I know how bad it was. I never want for my babies to know that, never to feel that pain. But…some things are important to remember.” She hummed again, twirling a lock of his hair around her finger. “My Joseph, when we were on the train going to the camp, he held me close, and he told me that he was taking my heart, and that I should take his. He said that we would keep each other safe that way. After the war, when the Allies came, it had been such a long time since I had seen him, since I had been Minka. I had been a number for so very long. The Allies came, and they took me to a place. Not a hospital, but a medical place. There were too many of us that needed help, there wasn’t enough room in the hospitals for us all. I lay there, waiting, and they told me they could not find him, they could not find my Joseph. It was then that I gave up, I lost my hope.”

Charles could hear the smile. “One morning, I was very weak. I could not even lift my head, I could barely open my eyes. And there he was, my Joseph. Oh, he was so thin, and so weak, but he was mine. He said I had kept him alive, my heart had kept him warm.”

“Oh, that’s lovely,” he breathed.

“Yes. He used to call me Serce. It is heart in Polish.”

“How many languages do you speak?”

“I speak Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew, English, French, Spanish, German and Italian.”

“Goodness! I’m impressed.”

“Thank you.”

They were quiet for a while, each enjoying the silence and stillness of the house around them and the company of the other.

“Charles, you must not believe what this Raven has said,” she said firmly. “She does not understand, I can see. You say her gift is to look like others. She cannot know what it is to feel what another does, to hear their mind. You have a gift, ziskeit. Do not feel shame for it.”

“I just worry that I am too invasive. She’s not the only one to tell me that. My mother, my step father, step brother. Even my best friend. None of them are comfortable with it.”

“These people you say are not comfortable…they are humans, yes? Aside from Raven, they are human?”

“Yes…”

“Then it is like with Raven. They cannot know what it is, they cannot know what it costs you to know another’s mind. If they did, they would not feel this way. My Erik, he does not love lightly. You must be worthy to have his heart.”

“You Lehnsherr’s are all so sure of yourselves,” he said with a chuckle.

“Then stop arguing.”

“Yes, Bubbe.”

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Charles entered the pink room and picked his way around the mattresses to the one on the far side.

Tabitha was just beginning to stir.

“Good morning,” he murmured, sitting down and brushing her hair away from her face. “Did you sleep well?” She nodded, blinking those peculiar eyes slowly at him. “And how is the pain this morning?”

“It hurts,” she said, her voice rough from sleep, a slight lisp from the fangs.

“I know. We’ll get you some painkiller soon.”

She sighed, rolling slightly from her back to her side. “Everyone’s arguing about me, aren’t they?”

“No, they’re not arguing,” he assured. “They’re trying to decide what might be best for you, that’s all.”

“Who even knows what that is anymore? I can’t go to Australia, I can’t go home. I’ve got nowhere now.”

“I think that’s the problem. Pretty much every Lehnsherr wants you with them. Tabitha, they’re not debating because they don’t want you, they’re debating because they all do, and none of them want to back down. They all think they’ll be able to give you the most of what you need.”

“Then who am I going to live with?”

“I honestly don’t know. I left them going round in circles. Was the dream I gave you alright?”

“Yeah. It was nice, to see mom again. Dad never talks about her.”

“She seemed a very nice woman, from what I saw in your memories. So happy.”

“She was, mostly. Even when she was sick. Like, just before she died, she was still smiling. She’d say the world was grumpy enough.”

“Erik said she was human?”

“Like dad. She came from a family of mutants. They’re all in France, they came from there originally, and moved back when I was little. I guess I could go live with them, if there’s nowhere else. I don’t speak French, but I could learn, I guess.”

“Yes, you could. I’ve been to France a few times. Very good food, especially the pastries. Their Mutants Rights Program is more advanced, the rights are more equal to what baseline’s get. You’d get more legal and educational support there. If that’s what you wanted, of course.”

“I don’t know,” she whispered, her voice quiet and tiny and impossibly young.

“Oh, my darling,” he murmured, stroking her hair and rubbing her back. “It’s okay not to know. No one expects you to know anything at this point. It was a terribly stressful night.”

“He’s not coming back for me,” she said, her eyes watering.

“No, my love, he’s not. But you are not alone, I swear it on my life, you are not alone.” She slid over and curled into his hold. “Tabitha, can I ask you something?” She nodded. “If you could live with anyone at all in the entire world, who would it be?”
“Anyone?”

“Absolutely anyone.”

“My mom. I know it’s not possible. But it would be nice. She used to be a big Star Trek fan. She liked the Vulcans. They have this thing, this belief, called the IDIC. It’s Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations. Mom used to tell me that the whole world is a tapestry, and every person is a thread in it. She said that we all had to be different, or it wouldn’t be a tapestry, just cloth.”

“Oh, I like that,” he said, toying with her hair. “Such a beautiful way of looking at it. I shall have to remember that one. And you’re right, you can’t live with your mother. I wish it were possible, but it’s not. So, who would be your next choice?”

She was quiet in thought, before she peeked up at him.

“I’d want to live with Erik,” she admitted. “But I know I can’t.”

“Why can’t you?”

“Because he’s living with you and your sister and you’re all love nested and all that. I’d only get in the way.”

“What poppycock! You couldn’t get in the way even if you tried. And Raven…well, she’s decided to move out, live with one of her friends. And even if she hadn’t, it’s a three bedroom. We’ve been using the third bedroom as a study, so there would be room regardless of Raven being there.”

“Is that why you’re sad? Because of your sister?”

“It’s a little of it, yes.”

“Even if there is room, I’d still be intruding on the love nest.”

He laughed. “It’s not a love nest, it’s a home. And it can be yours, if you wanted it to be. I would love to have you with us.”

“Really? I could live with you and Erik?”

“I’m for it. I’m sure Erik will be. Hold on.”

[Erik? Erik, darling?]

[Hi. She up?]

[She is. Erik, Tabitha and I have been talking. She’d very much like to live with you. I’m all for it. What do you think?]

[You’d really be okay with it?]

[More than.]

[Then, yeah, I’d like her to live with us. I think it’d be good for her to live with us. She’d be close to the mutant community, she could go to the centre, have a good support network.]

[Good, good. We’ll be down in a minute.]

“Erik’s in agreement,” he said aloud and she giggled. “How about you get dressed and whatever it
is a teenage girl does in the morning, and I’ll meet you downstairs, hmm?”

He helped her up and then hovered as she slowly made her way to the bathroom, stiff and in pain, before making his exit so he didn’t overstep his bounds with her. He may have wanted to help her, but he reminded himself that she was a 14 year old girl and he was a grown man. Best to leave her to it.

He descended the stairs to find the teenage cousins sitting at the bottom, the little ones hovering around the hallway, and raised voices from inside the main living room.

“I don’t think any of your parents would appreciate the eavesdropping,” he said, sitting next to Anya.

“We’re not,” she defended. “Not our fault if they’re loud enough to be heard.”

“Fair point. What developments?”

“Nothing. They keep going round in circles.”

“Hmm. Perhaps now is the time for my two cents. Will you lot do me a favour and take the littles outside to run around, spend some energy?”

“Of course,” said Cain, the human son of Jane, the daughter of Edie’s brother Samuel. “Come on, guys. Shoes, coats, hats, gloves, scarves. Snowball fight and snowpeople building!”

There was a cheer from all of them and a mad scramble to get into proper attire, before Cain and Elijah, the 19 year old son of Jane’s brother Johnathan, opened the door and let them loose.

“What’s your plan?” asked Edward, the 15 year old son of Emily, who was the daughter of Edie’s human sister Lily.

“I’m rather making it up as I go,” he admitted.

“Then good luck.” called Anya as she picked up Minka and made her way out.

Charles took a deep breath and pulled out his phone, composing a message to Raven.

=When are you moving out then?=  
And then one to Tony.

=I wonder, if I asked you to redo a room in my apartment, how long would it actually take you?=  
He made his way to the kitchen and made a cup of tea while he waited for replies.

=Irene and me are packing up my stuff as we speak, I’ll be gone by tomorrow. Moving truck for my stuff is already here. Are you mad?=  
Charles kept in mind what Bubbe had said to him that morning.

=No, I’m not mad. Just hurt that you think so little of me.=  
=No, Charles, that’s not it. It just makes me uncomfortable. I love you, you know that.=  
=As I love you. I think, perhaps, this holiday season spent apart will be good for both of us.=  

He sighed to himself at her reasoning. It wasn’t okay, not by a long shot, but he wasn’t quite sure what to do about it. Maybe there was nothing to do. Maybe this just had to run its course. He had always known that he and Raven couldn’t live together forever, that sooner or later they would part ways. Always in one another’s lives of course, but not so intrinsically linked.

 Probably a good thing it was only his name on the deed to the apartment and not the two of them.

He was just debating what to make Tabitha for breakfast when his phone chirped again.

=Hey, sexy, I’m bored in here.=

[Erik, put your phone away and pay attention!] he scolded and felt the echo of his lovers chuckle as his phone went off again with the message from Tony.

=Well, Charlie-boy, I could probably get it done in a day, half a day if need be. Why?=  
=Curiosity for the moment. I’ll get back to you on it. How is Steve?=  
=Peachy keen, with a side of swell. He’s learnt how to use my TV.=  
=Wonderful!=

=Actually, he learnt how to use JARVIS.=

=Ah. Close enough. Give him my love. Love to you too, Tony.=

=Yeah, I know you love me, doesn’t everyone? You’re not half bad yourself, Charlie. Say hi to your stud muffin for me.=

[Charles! Get your ass in here before I kill someone!]

Charles leaned against the counter as he laughed before stowing his phone and making his way to the living room.

“You called?” he said as he poked his head round the door.

“Yes, I did,” Erik said, holding out a hand. “Please, explain to them that Tabitha would be welcome in our apartment.”

“Oh, is that the issue? I see,” he said, taking a seat. “Now, I’ve been thinking about this one. Tabitha is going to need many things in order to not become a complete wreck. Firstly, she’s going to need somewhere relatively quiet and peaceful. Somewhere she can learn to use her powers without fear of hurting anyone. That’s not going to happen if she lives with other children or teenagers. In our apartment is just me and Erik. She’d have her own room, a quiet space completely her own. Secondly, she’s going to need people with an awful lot of time on their hands. She’s going to need people who she can go to at any time of the day, without fear of getting in the way or taking up time from others. I say this as a psionic, she’s going to need uninterrupted time with the adults in her life.”

“But this is a lot of us to ask from you,” David said.

“You’re not asking,” Charles said with a smile. “I’m offering. Tabitha would like to live with Erik
if she can, and I would be happy for her to move in.”

“I second that sentiment,” Erik said. “If this is what Tabs wants then I’m on board.”

“She should be with Aunt Sarah,” said Audrey, who was the daughter of Edie’s brother Michael.

“And that would be perfect, if I didn’t have to travel for work,” said Sarah, Edie’s sister, Richard’s mother, and a pharmaceuticals rep. “I’m gone for weeks, sometimes months at a time, all over the world. If Erik and Charles can offer Tabitha somewhere stable, then I’m all for it.”

“I’ve already said, she can move in with us,” said Joanne, Richard’s sister.

“But you have Troy, who is eight and just come into his powers,” said Jane. “It’s not very calm for Tabitha with a little teleporter in the house, is it?”

“Enough.”

Every eye in the room looked to Bubbe.

“Tabitha will go with Charles and Erik. It is best,” she said, and Charles was reminded of that morning.

It’s best not to argue with a Lehnsherr who had made up their mind.

Charles had a sneaking suspicion that there was some kind of mutation at work in Disney films, but he couldn’t prove it.

The entire family, from Bubbe Minka to little baby Minka, were all curled up in the living room watching Tangled as the snow poured down outside.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you did this,” Erik murmured as they eased to the door.

“I did not!” Charles exclaimed in a whisper, Tabitha grinning at him.

“Does seem a little suspect, buddy,” Alex said as they joined him and Armando in the second living room, where they had patched Tabitha up the night before.

“I call slander.”

“I call order,” Armando said with a smile. “Hey, Tabitha. How’s the tail today?”

“It hurts,” she said. “But it’s better than it was.”

“Good to hear. Can I take a look?”

“Sure.”

She moved to the sofa and sat down, layering the blanket there over her front before wriggling her sweatpants down to her knees.

Her panties were hooked under the base of the tail, giving Armando a clear view of the enormous bruising at the base of her spine. What worried him was that it was raised, a clear lump of blood under the skin.
“I’m not a fan of that lump,” he said.

“Why? Why is it bad?” Erik asked.

“It’s a haematoma and it’s bad because of where it is. I’ve seen it before, and because it’s at the join between spine and tail, there’s the potential for the pressure of it to begin to crush the nerves.”

“What do we do?” Alex questioned.

“Drain the blood, relieve the pressure. It’s relatively minor, I can do it here.”

“Once again, the living room has become an operating theatre,” Erik sighed, moving to sit down so Tabitha could lean against him.

Armando reeled off a list of things he was going to need that he didn’t have, like paper towels and freshly boiled water, and Alex went off to get them while Charles took a seat, pulling out his phone.

=Update on the room thing, I need you to redo Raven’s room.=

A few moments later Tony answered him, and Charles was almost certain that he was dictating to his AI programme JARVIS.

=Whoa, Raven is moving out. Are you pregnant, Charlie? Am I doing a nursery?=  
=Excuse you, I am NOT pregnant! Ruin my hips it would.=

=Then why am I doing the room?=  
=Erik’s cousin Tabitha is moving in with us. Her father is a human supremacist and Tabitha just manifested.=

=Shit. You need my lawyers?=  
=Not sure yet, I’ll get back to you on that. I need you to do the room for her, so the move can be as smooth as possible.=

=Sure thing. I’ll get my designer on it.=  
=No, Tony. Just a simple everyday bedroom for a fourteen year old girl. Think you can handle it? Or should I call Moira?=  

And wasn’t that a low blow. Moira and Tony hated each other with a passion, always had, ever since the very first time they met. Charles didn’t know what it was between them, only that it was a valid threat to get either of them to do what he wanted.

=Back it up, Xavier. Normal teen room, I got it. Fave colour? Interests? Anything I can work with?=  

“Tabitha, what’s your favourite colour?”

“I don’t have one,” she said.

“Rainbows,” Erik supplied. “Bold colours, nothing pastel, but not neon either.”

“Cartoon colours then,” Charles suggested. “How about interests? It occurs to me that you’re
moving in and I know very little about you.”

“I like Disney movies,” she said as the sound of Rapunzel singing followed Alex back in. “All movies really. And I like to draw.”

“Good start,” he said as he noted it all down for Tony, along with a few other bits supplied by Erik, such as Tabitha’s habit of forgetting to eat, so she would need snacks everywhere, and her addiction to cherry coke. He also pointed out that Tabitha was afraid of the dark, and that she was flexible to the point of contortionism.

=Think I can handle that.= Tony sent. =I’ll go shopping this afternoon and do the rest tomorrow.=

=No rush, we’re here until the New Year.=

=I’ll forget.=

=You’ll get distracted you mean.=

=That too.=

It seemed to be far too much blood for a single bruise, and there were vague lumps in it that Armando said were clots. It soaked tissue after tissue, pouring out, until it slowed enough for a dressing.

“Feels better,” Tabitha murmured.

Erik smiled and pulled her closer. “Good, baby. You know, I think we’re going to need to get you some new clothes. That tail needs some room.”

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The truck with Tabitha’s belongings arrived four days later, just before dinner, and Charles was quick to arrange for it to go on to his apartment and be met by Tony, who had decided that decorating Tabitha’s room was the thing that would make his life complete.

Charles shuddered when he thought of all the things Tony had used to complete his life in the past.

Tabitha was quiet through dinner, but she at least ate something. She was slowly moving from liquids to barely chewed solids, like mashed potatoes.

Charles was treated to Edie’s salmon and corn chowder, then pumpkin risotto, and topped off with bublanina, a cherry sponge.

“Like it?” Erik asked as Charles bounced a little in his seat at his first taste of the cake.

“It is positively sinful.”

“Why, thank you. It was the first thing Bubbe taught me to make when I was just a child.”

“You made this?”

“Yes. Mamen let me in her kitchen, would you believe it.”

“It’s delicious, darling,” he said, leaning in for a kiss and stealing the last bite of Erik’s slice.

After dinner, it was decided that it was the right time to give gifts. Erik explained that it had been a
tradition in his family since his mother and her brothers and sisters had been small children. Bubbe and Poppa hadn’t wanted their Jewish children to feel left out from all of their Christmas-celebrating friends.

There were the expected things: make up and books, computer games, new cell phones and other technological things. Toys for the little ones, hand-knitted clothes for everyone, various things people had evidently asked for, like radio controlled cars and certain DVD titles.

Charles had gone to the mall closest to his apartment and picked out a variety of things, trying to be general rather than specific. His huge box contained candy and chocolate and small toys, little make up and nail kits, craft supplies and character cushions, blankets with cartoon characters on them and stationary sets. He had bought a few specific presents to go with the general ones.

For Bubbe he had brought a cardigan made out of the softest wool he could find. She snuggled into it and pulled him in for an enthusiastic hug.

Edie, he gave a dress of a deep red silk, cut modestly but elegantly.

David he gave an outrageously expensive set of headphones, to feed his interest in languages and the way sound worked.

Anya he had bought a pair of boots Erik had told him she had been lusting after for the past five months. The shrieks of joy and the way she hugged them confirmed Erik’s suggestion.

For Erik he had bought the first three seasons of Game Of Thrones, and an outrageously expensive watch.

“It’s too much,” Erik said, leaning in to kiss him.

“Nonsense. What’s the point of money if I can’t spoil those I love? Anyway, it’s got all the bells and whistles, don’t ask me, the man in the store said it was the best and he reeled off a huge list of features.”

Tabitha loved the bear Erik had bought her.

Charles found himself sat on the floor, baby Minka standing behind him and using his back to keep herself upright, and the kids teaching him how to make Dreidel’s.

“No, that one goes on the other side,” Cassandra said with all the imperiousness a three year old could deliver.

“Oh, dear,” he said, scraping off the design he had carved into one side of his clay spinning top.

“Which one goes on this side then?”

“This one,” said Wanda, the six year old pointing to the design on the finished one they were using as a base.

“I bet I can win,” Erik said with a smile, pulling a finished Dreidel out of his pocket.

“Nu-huh!” Pete insisted. “I win this time.”

“We’ll see shall we?”

Erik knelt at the coffee table, placed the Dreidel on its point, the handle between his thumb and middle finger, and then made it spin. Over the course of an hour, Erik won every spin, and Charles
felt no guilt as he dipped into his lover's mind to find out how he was so good.

[Erik Magnus Lehnsherr, that is cheating!]

[Give me away, and I swear, I'll leave you on the precipice of orgasm and leave you there, with your hands tied above your head.]

“Interesting dreidel,” Charles said. “When did you make it?”

“Poppa helped me make it when I was fifteen.”

“It’s lovely,” he said slyly, smiling at his lover.

“Thank you.”

“Poppa taught most of us to make them,” Tabitha said. She was curled up in an armchair playing snakes and ladders with Alex and Scott. “He used to say that we should all have a good basis in faith, that we’d need it as we grew up.”

“A wonderful lesson to learn,” he said. “My father used to tell me something similar. He was very big on morals.”

“Was he religious?” Edie asked.

“I don’t think so. I don’t remember him ever going to church, nor do I think I ever heard him say a prayer.”

They continued making their Dreidel and then started drifting off to bed. It was that night that held the first of Charles’ nightmares.

Erik managed to wake him before he projected to anyone other than Erik, and the smaller man curled into him, sobbing.


After a few minutes, Charles had calmed enough to sit up and take a sip of water before showing Erik his dream.

[Charles was a small boy, no more than three or four, standing in a lab. There were two men there, Charles’ father Brian and another man, a man that Charles knew was Nathaniel.

Brian picked Charles up and laid him on a cold table, smiling down at him, as Nathaniel brought over a tray.

“Be a good boy, Charles,” Brian said.

“I don’t like it, daddy,” little Charles complained. “It hurts.”

“I know,” Nathaniel said. “But we have to do it. You don’t want to hurt anyone, do you?”

Charles shook his head and they smiled at him, before Brian nodded and Nathaniel picked up a syringe, inserting it into Charles’ neck and drawing some blood. He then attached electrodes to his head and picked up a second syringe, pushing the blue liquid contained into Charles’ neck.

Charles began to convulse, his body wracked with pain, his head excruciating. His powers went bezerk, projecting pain out to the entire room. After a few moments, he calmed, the convulsions
stopping, and then, when he lay still, Nathaniel took another blood sample.

“That’s my good boy,” Brian said, stroking Charles’ hair.]

Erik gasped as the memory was pulled back out of his head and he gathered Charles close, kissing him desperately.

“What the fuck was that?” he asked against his lips.

“I don’t know,” Charles whispered. “But Nathaniel is real. He was one of the researchers that worked with my father and Kurt. And the lab…it exists, it’s on the estate, in the basement.”

“Charles…you’re not suggesting…”

“I don’t know what I’m suggesting. All I know is that I’ve never had a dream like that in my adult life.”

“But you have had them before?”

“I used to, when I was a child, around about the time my father died. Not exactly like this one, but the same sort of thing. Me being experimented on.”

Erik pulled him in close, kissing him until he went boneless, all thoughts of his dreams driven from his mind.

[Erik,] he moaned, his lips busy curling around Erik’s erection.

“Oy gevalt!” he cried, tangling his fingers in the mop of chocolate waves, his hips thrusting. [You know, I’m pretty sure I pictured this the other way around.]

[Oh?]

[Yeah. Like I would be making you gasp.]

[We can do that,] Charles thought, accompanied by the clear mental image of Charles riding Erik.

Erik moaned in disappointment and anticipation as Charles pulled his mouth away and crawled up him, straddling his body. He gripped Charles’ hips, sliding down to grasp his arse and grind them together as their mouths met.

He grabbed the lube and sat up, Charles’ fingers going to his hair as his mouth moved to his ear, his teeth tugging at the lobe.

“So not fair,” he breathed and Charles chuckled at him.

“What’s not fair?”

“You were a virgin when I met you. You should NOT be this amazing in bed.”

“Mmmm. Maybe you just inspire it in me.”

“Oh maybe I unleashed something that should have come with a warning sticker,” he said as he managed to squeeze out some lube, coating his fingers and reaching behind Charles to circle his hole. Charles half laughed half moaned, his thighs tightening around Erik.

Slowly, he increased the pressure, pressing a little more with each pass of his fingers, until the
muscle gave in beneath his touch and two fingertips slipped inside his lover, who jumped a little before pushing back against them.

“More?” he murmured as Charles kissed him and he received a nod.

It wasn’t the best angle to prepare Charles. He continued for a little while, until he was able to push two full fingers inside, and then he withdrew his fingers, getting a whine. He managed to shift Charles enough that he could reach between his legs from the front. He pushed his fingers back in, stroking the silky soft walls, pressing at the ring of muscle with a third finger. Slowly, he worked it inside, Charles clenching around him every now and then, spreading his fingers every few thrusts, until Charles was biting at his lips and pulling at his hair, his thighs trembling. He thrust his fingers a few more times, spreading them, swiping gently over his prostate just because he could before he removed them and slicked himself.

“When you’re ready,” he purred, driving his tongue into Charles’ mouth.

Charles took his cock in a gentle grasp and positioned it, letting himself sink down a little before letting go and sinking the rest of the way, pulling up a few times until Erik was buried to the root, and then he stilled, like he always did when they were together like this. It was as if Charles couldn’t quite believe it was happening and had to savour it.

Then Charles began to move, needing no help in finding a rhythm or speed that suited him. Erik wrapped his arms around his ribs, taking a perfectly pink nipple into his mouth and suckling, Charles stroking his hair.

Eventually, Erik laid back, watching Charles move, marvelling in the fluid arching, delighting in the tiny moans and exhalations, the delight Charles took in it, knowing that it was only him who had ever touched him this way, only him that had ever had the privilege of seeing Charles unravel.

Charles let his hands find Erik’s trimly muscled chest, sweeping them down, tickling over Erik’s abdomen, rubbing at his lower belly before entwining their fingers.

[Love you,] Charles projected.

“I know you do,” Erik assured, kissing his wrist. “I love you. So much, Charles, so so much.” He groaned, arching his head back at the coiling inside him, the spill of Charles’ orgasm in the back of his mind, the two sensations twisting and writhing within him, building and consuming everything until the two of them couldn’t know anything else but each other.

It exploded, the two of them coming almost simultaneously, Erik shooting deep into Charles’ slick passage, Charles spurting over Erik’s abdomen and chest. Charles froze, his breath catching in his throat, his mind a flame of white hot pleasure that was both razor sharp and beautifully soft, too much and just the right amount of toe curling exquisiteness to make it just perfect.

Erik curled his arms around him as he collapsed onto him, pressing a kiss to his sweaty forehead.

[We should clean up,] Erik mumbled, even his mind unable to speak properly.

[Nygh.]

[Good point.]

Tabitha was curled up in the back of Erik’s car, staring out the window and sipping at the
They had set out just after breakfast, and Charles could honestly say he was sad to leave the Lehnsherr house. But, life was calling, and they both had responsibilities they had to get back to.

[Is she okay?] Erik asked, his eyes on the road.

[Sort of. She’s happy to be coming with us, but sad and hurt by Richard, and a little apprehensive about the future. There’s some other things in there too. All the things you’d expect at this point.]

“Another twenty, Tabs,” Erik called and he saw her nod absently in his rear-view mirror.

The rest of the drive was relatively quiet, Charles and Erik trying to keep up light conversation while having the real one through their link, each expressing worry over how Tabitha was handling the changes.

They pulled up in front of the apartment building to find Tony and Steve waiting for them.

“Welcome home!” Tony crowed as Charles got out of the car.

“Thank you,” he replied, accepting Tony’s hug. “And yes, I do appreciate your efforts.”

“Good, because I’m sure the tabloids will have a field day with pictures of Tony Stark and Captain America buying bedding for a teenage girl.”

Charles laughed and then internally cringed when Tony’s eyes widened.

“Tony, Steve, this is Tabitha,” Erik introduced. “Tabs, this is Tony Stark, friends with Charles since baby-dom, and Steve, who was an ice cube until recently.”

“It’s very nice to meet you,” Steve said, taking her hand and kissing the back of it like a true gentleman and she giggled.

They exchanged a few more words before Tony and Steve took their leave, claiming they were meeting some friends, and Erik led Tabitha and Charles inside.

“Now, I’m not sure what Tony’s done,” Charles said as they entered. “So if you don’t like it, we can change it.”

Erik took his and Charles’ bags to their room while Charles led Tabitha to hers. He apprehensively opened the door, and then breathed a sigh of relief.

The walls were freshly painted, two walls yellow and two purple, the baseboards in crisp white. The carpet had been replaced with a soft cream deep pile, and there were a couple of rugs in the shape of paint splashes, bright pops of red and green and blue.

The furniture was a bright clean white, smooth lines complimenting the curves of the rugs. The bed was a queen-size, with more than enough storage in the huge headboard and the bed base. There was a vanity and stool, a dresser and armoire, and a pair of heavily padded armchairs. Tony had even set up an entertainment system, and there was a brand new laptop on the desk. Charles made a mental note to get the receipts from Tony and pay him back.

“Well, he was very sedate,” Charles declared taking in the room, the colourful bedding, the framed cartoon prints, the twinkle lights embedded into the voile curtains. “What do you think?”

“I like it,” she said, dumping her backpack on the bed. “It works. Thanks.”
“You’re very welcome,” he said.

“Charles, have you seen this box city we got going on?” Erik called and they peered into the living room.

The packing crates full of Tabitha’s things were piled around the room.

“Oh, the kids at the centre would love these,” he said, running his hand along one of the smooth wooden sides. “They could make a wonderful fort with them.”

“Maybe we should help Tabitha decant them before you steal them,” Erik suggested as his phone rang. “Hello? Azazel! How are you?” He motioned to them that he would be back and made his way to the bedroom once more.

“He has a point,” Charles said, grabbing the crowbar the movers had left and beginning to pry off the top of one of the boxes.

It took about an hour for them to empty the boxes, Charles opening the tops and handing things out while Tabitha put them away in her room. Then Charles left her to it while he saw to some emails that were waiting for him. The three of them worked away in their own spaces, Charles with his emails, Tabitha with arranging her room, and Erik catching up with Azazel, until there was an almighty crash and a scream from Tabitha.

Charles got there first, finding one of the armchairs in pieces and Tabitha holding her bloodied nose.

“Oh, sweetheart,” he said, crossing to her and pulling her close.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled through her tears. “I didn’t mean to…I just…I was…”

“Hush, it’s alright,” he soothed. “It’s just a chair, it can be replaced. It’s only a chair. Are you okay? Let me see.”

He tilted her head, pulling out a tissue to mop up the blood.

“My head hurts,” she said. “I think I pushed too hard. I don’t know. It felt like it.”

“What were you doing?” Erik asked as he swept the pieces of chair into a pile.

“Trying to push the books to the bookcase. I thought, if I could, then maybe…I don’t know what I thought.”

“It’s perfectly alright to try out your gifts,” Charles said, Erik nodding as he left the room to get a garbage sack. “And accidents will happen, it’s okay. You’ll learn to handle them, I promise.”

“And until then, we’ll keep the credit cards on hand,” Erik joked with a wink.

@@@ While Erik was off with his lawyer, sorting out the final custody papers for Tabitha, Charles cuddled Yuriko closer and pointed out a mistake John had made in his algebra homework. The teen groaned and set about trying to figure out where he went wrong. Charles chanced a glance across the room, where Tabitha was wandering, unsure of herself.

“Hi,” Kurt said, appearing beside Tabitha with a puff of smoke. She jumped and sent a ball bouncing across the room. “Damn, sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. You okay?”
“I’m fine,” she said. “It’s my fault.”

“No, I should have realised. I just get so used to teleporting, it’s sort of my first choice now. I’m Kurt,” he said, holding out a two fingered hand, his fangs glinting.

“Oh, you’re Kurt!” she said, shaking his hand. “Charles mentioned you. I’m Tabitha.”

“One of Erik’s cousins, right?”

“Yeah. I live with him and Charles now.”

“How come?” he asked as he led her over to the corner where they had amassed a load of beanbags and cushions. He flumped down onto a green beanbag and smiled as she picked a red one, sitting gingerly while she tried to figure out the tail.

“My dad doesn’t like mutants,” she said, curling to balance on one hip and almost falling off in the process.

“That sucks. His loss though. Hey…do you want some help?”

“That’d be great. It’s new, and I dislocated it a couple of weeks ago.”

He leaned her forwards and gently took hold of the tail, curling it around her hip, smoothing it to lay in a channel he made in the bag.

“I’ve done that a few times. Hurts like a mother,” he said, leaning her back. “I can’t really say, I was born with mine, but I’m sure you’ll get the hang of it.”

“Thank you. It takes some getting used to. Until a few weeks ago, I had nothing, and now I’m learning to do everything.”

“Wow. I’ve never met a mutant with mutations so extreme that just appeared. Only guys that were born with them, like me.”

“So you were born with all of yours?”

“Yeah. My mom said the doctor passed out,” he said and she laughed. “Apparently my dad is a teleporter, but I’ve never met him, so I wouldn’t know. My stepdad is cool though. Mike. He’s baseline, but he’s good.”

“Sounds nice…my mom died when I was ten, and my dad…”

“Hey, not everyone is going to accept it. First time I got punched on the playground, I was four. I remember it was Mike that came to pick me up. He took me for ice cream and told me that most people are assholes, you just have to find the ones who aren’t. He gave me this key ring, it says ‘People who matter won’t mind, and people who mind don’t matter’. It helps.”

“Does it?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah. And coming here. Moira’s baseline,” he said, pointing out the human woman who was helping Ororo tie her shoelace. “And Tony. Not everyone baseline is a jerk.”

“We’ve got a few Lehnsherr’s who are baseline that don’t suck,” she said.

“Exactly.”
“How did you learn to teleport?”

“How did you learn to teleport?” he laughed with a shrug. “I got no clue. It just sort of happened. Of course, I ended up in the middle of the street outside my house in my boxers a few times, but I got there.”

“I keep breaking things. I’m not sure how.”

“What’s your power?”

“Kind of telekinesis. I push at things. Charles says I exert pressure on them until they move.”

“Sounds like you don’t know your own strength. It happens.” He picked up a cushion shaped like a donut. “Can you push this?”

She took a deep breath and he shook his head.

“You’re thinking too much. This power is yours, it’s part of you. When I do mine, I just picture where I want to be, and then…it’s kind of like the feeling you get when you jump. When you’re a kid and you play that game where the floor is lava? That kind of feeling. And then poof! I’m there. I think with yours…Hey! Jean! You busy?!”

“No,” said the red-haired girl as she sank gracefully to the floor. “Hi. I’m Jean Grey.”

“Tabitha Lehnsherr.”

“Like Erik?”

“My cousin.”

“Jean, Tabitha is a telekinetic, like you…kind of. She pushes at things,” Kurt said.

“Ah, a mover. I’ve met a couple. They’re rarer than regular telekinetics, but they’re out there.”

“She’s new at it.”

“Oh, I see. Broken a lot?”

“A chair,” Tabitha admitted. “And a fish tank. And I get nosebleeds.”

“You’re doing too much too soon,” Jean said decisively. “Or possibly going about it the wrong way, straining the wrong part of the brain. Right, take a deep breath and hold it.”

Tabitha did as she was told, and then blew it out slowly when Jean told her to.

“Okay, now there’s a point in your mind, Charles calls it the point between rage and serenity. Now, working on rage is a pretty spectacular thing on its own, it gets a lot done, but it’s exhausting after a while. How I do it is I find something to focus on, some memory of something that makes me feel calm, and I use the feeling attached to the memory to fuel the power. And then I kind of imagine it’s like another pair of hands, the feel of using it is the same sort of thing.”

“I think I get it,” Tabitha said. “It’s not enough just to push, I have to want to and have a reason to.”

“Exactly. Give it a shot.”

Tabitha searched for a memory, finding one of her mother and Erik taking her to a department store when she was little. They hadn’t gone for anything special, it was just the three of them taking
some time out, spending time together. She let herself sink into the tranquillity of it, before she
looked at the cushion and pushed it up, feeling the echo of it in her physical fingers, making it land
on Kurt’s head.

Kurt and Jean cheered, and Tabitha felt herself relax for the first time in weeks.

Erik bolted out of the subway and kept running as he made his way to Tabitha’s school.

He had thought it would be quicker in the lunch hour rush to take the subway than to drive.
However, he hadn’t counted on an accident on the line which delayed him for over an hour.

He raced up the front steps and to the front desk where he had to lean on it while he caught his
breath.

“I was called…about…Tabitha Len…Lehnsherr…” he panted.

“Down the hall, first right, talk to the woman behind the desk,” said the bored receptionist,
handing him a badge that said visitor in big block letters.

He followed instructions, catching his breath a little more on the way, and came to a stop in front
of a bored looking woman who couldn’t be much older than the students.

“I was called about Tabitha Lehnsherr,” he said. “Some kind of incident.”

She looked up at him, popped her gum, and pointed behind him with her pen. “I’ll let the Principal
know you’re here.”

He turned around to find Tabitha sitting on a plastic chair beneath a poster about the importance of
tolerance.

She had a split lip and an icepack to her eye, another wrapped around the end of her tail.

“What happened?” he asked as he sat with her.

“I got in a fight,” she whispered and he groaned.

“Did you start it?”

“No.”

“Did you come off worse?”

“No.”

“Okay then. Just give me an overview of what I’m walking into here.”

“They shut my tail in a door and called me an abomination. So I pushed them. You know ‘pushed’
them. And then he punched me and it all got a little hazy from there.”

Erik took a deep breath and counted to ten in English, and then back down again in Yiddish.

“Mr Lehnsherr? The Principal will see you now,” the secretary called.

“Right,” he said. He looked at Tabitha. “Let me do the talking.” He slipped an arm around her as
they stood. “Milkshakes on the way home,” he whispered.

Erik had a suspicion that every Principal’s office in every school in every country in the world was decorated the same way, with the same lingering smell of old bad coffee and cigarettes. He and Tabitha took a seat, glancing at the boys and their parents taking up space in the other seats.

“Now, the boys tell me that this was a simple situation of name calling that got out of hand,” the Principal said. He was a balding overweight man of about fifty. “I’d like to hear Tabitha’s side.”

“It was an accident,” she mumbled when Erik nodded at her. “I didn’t mean to.”

“Are you saying that this is your fault?” one of the mothers asked.

“No, that’s not what she’s saying,” Erik argued. “They called her names and shut her tail in a door, so she retaliated. Granted, she probably shouldn’t have used her powers on them, but she’s not the only one in the wrong here.”

“Look at my son!” one of the fathers snarled, pointing to a boy who had a gash above his eye and an icepack on his hand. “That little hellcat is responsible for this!”

“I didn’t mean to!” Tabitha cried. “They started it!”

“Enough!” the Principal snapped. “Boys, two day in school suspension, and a ban for three football games. You can take your sons home.”

Erik watched in stunned silence as the boys and their parents left the room and then he stared in utter disbelief at the Principal.

“I’m sorry, I must be reading this wrong,” Erik said finally. “Those boys…they’re at least twice her size, and there were three of them. And all they get is a two day suspension?”

“There’s no actual harm done,” the Principal argued. “It’s a simple dispute that got out of hand.”

“They shut her tail in a door! They called her an abomination! Unless I’m wrong, in the Mutant Discrimination Act of 2002, it mentions derogatory language as a form of abuse and harassment, and the unwanted contact of an above baseline body part still counts as physical assault.”

“Mr Lehnsherr, I understand all that, but this was nothing more than a simple argument.” He paused, looking at Tabitha and then back at Erik. “I understand that there’s been some upheaval at home. It’s easy for little things to seem bigger than they are when things are unsettled, when there are a lot of changes.”

Erik felt his jaw drop. Was this asshat seriously trying to pin this on Tabitha?

“Tabs, wait outside for me,” he muttered and she did as she was told, leaving the room. Erik stood up and leaned on the desk. “Listen to me, you mutant phobic sorry excuse for an educator. Blaming her for an assault is a disgusting act of cowardice. Those boys are responsible, and we both know it. So here’s what’s going to happen. No trace of this is ever going to appear on her permanent record, and I’m going to pull her from this school, finding her one better suited to actual children and not miniature bigots in training. Understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” he said, nodding as his silver letter opener floated threateningly at him.

“Good.”
“You sure you don’t want to go to the emergence room?”

“It’s not broken,” she said, stirring her milkshake. She lifted the bruised tail and waggled it at him. “See?”

“Okay, okay, but you’re putting some ice on it when we get home,” he said with a smile. His phone buzzed and he pulled it out of his pocket and looked at it. “Charles is on his way. Grab the waitress next time she goes by, huh?”

“Sure thing. Did you really just pull me out of a twenty thousand dollar a semester private school?”

“Absolutely. I’m not having you go to a school where they think it acceptable to assault the only mutant student!” He smiled at the waitress.

“Tough day?” she asked.

“Understatement,” he said. “Can we get a chocolate fudge shake, please?”

“No problem,” she said, jotting it down on her pad. “Anything else?”

“Three of your biggest slices of chocolate fudge brownie, please,” Charles said as he slid into the booth next to Erik.

“Coming right up.”

As she moved away, Charles gave Erik a swift kiss and looked at Tabitha, wincing. “Good grief. Anything broken?” She shook her head, wiggling her tail at him and making him smile. “Very good. Did you win the fight?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful. I don’t condone fighting, but if you must, then I insist you win.” He looked at Erik’s grin. “What? Is that not a proper way of thinking of it?”

“Only you could praise her without actually offering praise. I love you, you ridiculous fruitcake,” he said with a kiss to Charles’ temple.

“Oh. Thank you, darling. I think. Now, do I need to call my lawyer?”

“No, already called mine. Emma Frost, telepath who lives for blood. I could practically hear her evil grin. What I do need from you is a decent school.”

“Oh! Well…let me get back to you on that one. I’ll go through my contacts, see which school is best for physical manifestations.”

“Perfect,” Erik said as their extra order arrived.

“So…no one’s mad at me?” Tabitha asked after they had finished their cake.

“Not in the slightest,” Charles assured. “I rendered my bullies unconscious the first, and last, time they tried to hit me. All you did was bruise the little bastards.”

“I think he might be the coolest Lehnsherr ever,” she said to Erik, who whole heartedly agreed.
“It’s the accent,” Erik said. “Everyone expects him to be all sweet and demure.”

“No, it’s the eyes. They lull people into a false sense of security.”

“I’m sitting right here!”

Erik swept him into a bruising kiss.

“And I’m not a Lehnsherr.”

“Yes, you are,” Erik argued. “Bubbe claimed you. You’re a Lehnsherr whether you like it or not.”

Chapter End Notes

So, there it is. Comment below and let me know what you thought and what you'd like to see next.
Chapter Eight

Charles surrendered everything he was asked to and followed the officer through, signing where he was asked to sign.

“First time?” the officer asked.

“Am I that obvious?”

“You have the look. Listen, we’re aware of all our prisoners failings. We’ll be right outside the door, and watching on the monitors. If it gets too much, or you just don’t want to be in there anymore, just let us know and we’ll get you out of there. Okay?”

Charles nodded and took a deep breath before he entered and took a seat, waiting patiently. Before long, the prisoner he’d come to see was led in.

“Charles,” Kurt said as he took a seat. “I didn’t expect to see you.”

“No, I don’t expect you would. Look, I know what you think of me and what I can do. I’m here because some things have come up and I think you might have the answers to some of the questions.”

“Charles…” he sighed. “I’m not sure what answers you think I can give you.”

“I’ve been having nightmares lately,” Charles said. “About my father and Uncle Nathaniel.”

Kurt paled and Charles felt his heart sink.

“Kurt, of all that we’ve been through, all the years you’ve been in my life, I have never, not once, asked you for anything. But I’m asking you for this: tell me the truth. Please, Kurt.”

Kurt stared at him for a long moment before he sighed, scrubbing at his face.

“Before I begin, let me preface this with the fact that I have never experimented on children. Well, not live ones. Donated foetuses is one thing. But living, breathing, understanding children… I never did that.”

“I understand.”

“Charles, you were born with your abilities, did you know that?” Charles shook his head. “Yes. Never before has a telepath been born with the ability. They develop them. Your father didn’t manifest until he was twelve, and his father-”

“Wait,” Charles cried. “My father was a telepath?”

“Charles, the Xavier men have been telepaths for at least three hundred years. Every man in your family has had that ability. Your father was going to tell you, when he felt you were old enough to understand, but I guess he didn’t get that far. But none of them were born with it.” He groaned, leaning on the table between them. “Brian wanted to understand mutation, to help, to make things better. He might not have wanted to cure it like me but he did want to understand. The two of us and Nathaniel worked on trying to find the X gene.”
“The X gene?”

“Yes. Brian theorised that there was a specific gene that created mutations in other parts of the DNA, which causes powers. He had the idea that you, being born with your power, could hold the key to finding it. He also had an idea that maybe Raven could be used as well, but he never got around to that phase of testing.”

“So…I was experimented on?” Charles whispered.

“You were. I can’t give you details of it. I never took part in that section of research. I don’t even know where Brian would have kept the files of it.”

Kurt paused, looking at Charles, and the younger man could see him weighing up the options, judging if he should say the rest.

“You were there,” Kurt said eventually.

“I was…where?”

Kurt closed his eyes, shaking his head before looking at the ceiling and muttering “Fuck you, Brian.”

He looked Charles in the eye.

“You were there the day he died. You were in the lab, they had you strapped to the table.”

Charles felt his mouth working silently, felt himself pushing away from the table.

“Don’t you understand, Charles? They pushed you too far! The psionic energy within you was building too fast, much faster than they anticipated. I told them to stop, I told them that you were too young, too far gone, that they couldn’t predict or control the outcomes of more testing. But Brian wouldn’t listen, he had to be right, he always had to be right! The energy in you exploded, manifested into a…a force. It pushed outwards, you pushed, trying to get them to stop.”

“No!” Charles wailed. “No, stop! Stop, I didn’t! I couldn’t!”

The guards burst through the door, pulling Kurt up and away, back towards the door he had entered through.

“You did it, Charles,” he yelled as they dragged him away. “You killed them.”

“Wait!” Charles cried and the guards stopped, waiting for Charles. “I couldn’t have. The whole building was destroyed. I would have been killed with father, Nathaniel would have been killed.”

“Nathaniel realised what was happening in enough time to take cover. He got you out. When he brought you home, you were a blubbering wreck. Sharon called me, and I called a friend to come and help you forget.”

“What friend? Who was it?” he begged, grabbing the front of his jumpsuit. “Tell me!”

“Sebastian. Sebastian Shaw. He brought a telepath with him, a girl, her name was Braddock.”

Charles’ fingers went slack and he felt his knees go from under him. The officer who had given him the advice entered and helped him to stand, slowly guiding him out to the waiting room. His things were waiting for him in a plastic baggie but he didn’t reach out to take them. He couldn’t. He couldn’t do anything.
“Hey,” the officer said, ducking to catch his eye. He placed a cup of water on the low table his things were resting on. ‘I’m just going to leave this here, for when you’re ready for it. And…I’m just going to go in here.” He pointed at the baggie. “And check through your wallet, see if there’s someone I can call for you.”

He opened the bag and rifled through it, checking through and finding the contact card. He put the wallet back and assured Charles he’d be right back before he went off to place the call, and then he sat with Charles until Erik came through the door. The officer crossed to him and explained in short order what had happened.

“Oh, baby,” Erik crooned as he sat down, pulling Charles into his arms. “Why the hell would you come here? And why didn’t you tell me you were going to do this?”

[Couldn’t. You’d stop me.]

Charles pushed what Kurt had told him into Erik’s head and then he collapsed into his hold fully. Erik managed to shrug off his coat and drape it around a shivering Charles. He helped Charles to stand and used the metal of Charles’ keys to levitate the bag of belongings behind him as he took him out to his car. He strapped him in and pressed a kiss to his forehead before rounding the car and sliding into the driver’s seat.

“I’m taking you to Tony’s,” Erik declared as he started the car. “If anyone will know anything about this, then he’ll be able to find them.”

Charles held out his glass and Steve obediently refilled it.


“The bar,” Tony said, motioning to it with his glass. “Unopened ones are in the cupboard beneath it. Yes, I’m still here,” he said into the phone pressed to his ear. “No, Braddock, the name is Braddock. B-R-A-double D-O-C-K. Yes, I’ll hold.”

They had arrived at Tony’s Tower, a huge monument to his ego. Oh, and clean energy. Erik had proceeded to fill Tony and Steve in, and then Steve had settled down with a bottle of alcohol. He dutifully refilled Charles’ glass every time he held it out.

Erik returned from wherever he had disappeared when his phone rang.

“That was Tabitha,” he said and Charles actually managed to drag himself out of his funk enough to pay attention. “We have a small mercy. Alex and Darwin are taking Scott to the Aquarium tomorrow, something about a school project, and Tabs wanted to know if she could sleep over so she can go with them. I said yes. She’s going to pick up an overnight bag and then she’ll be there until tomorrow afternoon. That is, barring disaster.”

“Small mercies,” Charles mumbled, taking another sip. “Did you tell her?”

“No. Charles, we don’t even know if there’s anything to tell yet. There’s the real possibility that he was lying.”

“He wasn’t lying,” he said firmly, draining his glass and holding it out for Steve to fill.

“But you’re blowing this all out of proportion, Charlie,” Tony said, phone still pressed to his ear. “If, and this is a big if, Kurt is right, and the explosion was caused by your powers, then it’s
Brian’s own fault.”

“I killed him, Tony.”

“No, no, no. You did not kill anyone. You reacted to stimulus. Brian was warned what would happen and he didn’t listen. Even the sweetest of puppy dogs will bite back if the poor thing is tormented for long enough. And how many times have you told me about one of your kids accidentally hurting someone who was going to hurt them? You were a child, for fucks sake!” He stopped in his tirade as the person on the other end of the line returned. “Yes, I’m here.” He let out a frustrated growl. “Are you kidding me? What am I paying you for? Braddock, female telepath in my age range, associated with Sebastian Shaw. Keep digging, call me when you find something…oh, you’ll find something. How do I know that? Well, it’s very simple. If you don’t find me the information I want, I’m going to stop paying you. Oh? Really? That’s great. Talk soon.”

“Tony’s right,” Steve said. “I don’t know much about mutations, it was all pretty taboo in my time, but from what I understand of them…this couldn’t have been your fault. It’s not murder, or anything like that. It was self-defence, it was a child trying to save themselves from abuse. And this was abuse. I saw plenty of parents who beat their children, it was the done thing in some circles, but what the Nazi’s did in the camps…no one was okay with it. Experimenting on children turned everybody’s stomachs. Not a court in the world would ever find you guilty of murder.”

“Listen to Spangles, his moral compass always points due north,” Tony said.

Suddenly Charles leapt up, scrabbling through the baggie for his phone and scrolling through his contacts.

“Charles? Ziskeit, what are you doing?”

Raven answered on the third ring.

“Charles? Hi.”

“Raven, I remember you saying something about Uncle Nathaniel, that he got married or attended a wedding…”

“His daughter got married, beginning of November.”

“Do you have his number? Or address?”

“Somewhere. I’ll hunt it up for you. Charles, what’s going on?”

“I just need to talk to him, as soon as I can, to do with the estate.”

“Oh. Okay. Hey, Charles, I was thinking…we should talk, clear the air.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I’ll let you know when I’m free.”

“Great. I’ll hunt up the information for you.”

“Thanks, see you soon,” he said, hanging up before she could draw him into further conversation. “She’s got his information. I can talk to Uncle Nathaniel, he’ll know. Of course he’ll know. Haven’t seen him since the funeral though…no matter…it’ll be fine.”

Tony crossed the room and snatched the phone from Charles, throwing it at the couch and then forcing Charles to look at him.
“Listen to me, Charles. Are you listening?”

“Yes,” he murmured.

“I have known you your entire life, been there for every moment that mattered. Fuck it, let’s just be honest, I’ve been more of a family to you than either of your parents. I know you, Charles, every bit of you. If this is true, IF, then you are not a murderer. You are not capable of murder, it is not there, not possible. IF this is true, then it was an accident, pure and simple. So you need to stop blaming yourself. You were a child, protecting yourself, no more.”

“But I killed him,” he whispered.

“If he were still around, I would be killing him. Charles, he experimented on his own son! There are consequences for every action. Like right now, you’re experiencing the consequences of going to see that asshole. Cause and effect. And the next effect is you getting mind numbingly drunk, passing out on my sofa, Erik hauling you to my spare room, and then a massive hangover, solved by food.”

Charles collapsed into Tony’s arms, sobbing for all he was worth, and Tony let him, sinking to the floor with him and letting him cuddle close.

JARVIS was already scouring all of Howard’s files for any mention of Charles or Brian. So far nothing, but Tony was determined to prove this wrong.

Tony remembered his father taking him to Uncle Brian’s house to meet the baby. Charles had been this tiny little thing, with huge blue eyes. He’d been a very calm baby, happy to lay there and look around. Later Howard would tell Tony that Charles was an early manifesting telepath. Tony didn’t really understand what that meant until Charles was walking and talking, the latter of which he did shockingly early, with skill far beyond his age.

Charles had been this happy little guy, toddling around after Tony on unsteady little legs, playing with the little robots Tony built while their fathers talked.

It was later, once Brian was gone, that Tony had taken it upon himself to protect the little telepath. Charles had always been so soft, so gentle.

He couldn’t have killed Brian, it just wasn’t possible. Kurt was lying, it was the only explanation.

Erik chopped up the dried cherries and tipped them into the batter, stirring it evenly.

When his mind was in turmoil, he made something edible, whether that was something sweet, like the bublanina he was working on, or something savoury, like a roast joint of meat. It soothed him, following the steps, knowing that if he followed the instructions, it would always turn out right. It was something he could control, something he could fix.

“How was it?” he asked as Tabitha sat down at the kitchen table.

“Fine. A lot of mutants. My math teacher is a mutant,” she said.

It was her first day at the new school, the same school that Kitty from the Centre attended. Aside from being mutant friendly, it also boasted a very good educational record, strong in math and science, with a good community outreach programme which allowed the students to volunteer within the community to add to their college applications when the time came.
“Make any friends?”

“Not yet. A few nice girls, but nothing noteworthy,” she said, pulling out a text book. “Erik?”

“Yeah?”

“What’s wrong with Charles?”

“Nothing, nothing is wrong with Charles.”

“So him crying last night…that’s nothing?”

Erik sighed and pushed the bowl away, turning to look at her.

“Charles is going through some stuff, stuff to do with his father and when he was a kid. He’ll be okay, I promise. Just…right now…he needs some time.”

“Should I go stay with Bubbe or something?”

“No, no, you don’t need to do that. This is your home. He’s just a little upset is all. He just needs time.”

“If you’re sure…”

He reached for the textbook. “I am sure. Just give him a little time. Now, show me what you’ve been learning.”

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It took almost three weeks, but Tony finally managed to track down the telepath.  

Her name was Elizabeth Braddock, and she was living in London, England. So Tabitha was packed up and sent to stay with Steve at the Tower, the Captain promising to take good care of her and that she would get to school on time every single day, and Erik and Charles boarded Tony’s private jet with the billionaire and set off across the pond.

London was just as Charles remembered it. Hustling crowds, busy roads, classic architecture mixing with the new buildings. People rushing past, determined on their own paths; public transport taking people here and there. There was more technology than he remembered; everyone seemed to have a smartphone or a tablet, most people walked around with headphones on, no one seemed to talk face to face anymore.

They checked into a hotel as Tony’s apartment was under renovation, and Erik and Charles made themselves comfortable while Tony went off to talk to his contact.

Erik slid up behind Charles, peeking over his shoulder at the world beyond the window. “How are you doing?”

“I don’t know,” Charles admitted. “Oh, Erik. What if she tells me it is true? What if I did do it?”

“Well we’ll deal with it,” he assured. “And, no matter what she says, no matter what happened, I promise you this: I will never stop loving you. You are my little fruitcake, and I refuse to give you up.”

“Oh, Erik,” Charles breathed, leaning a little more firmly against him, stroking the arms around him and entwining their fingers. “You are sweet, love.”
“Am not,” he argued, pressing kisses to his neck.

[Are to.]

Erik made to turn him, fitting their lips together, thrusting his tongue deep into the hot cavern. Charles gave in, letting Erik manipulate his limbs, back him up towards the bed. His knees had just hit the mattress when there was a knock at the door.

“Housekeeping,” Tony called, in a terrible Swedish accent.

Erik crossed and yanked open the door. “You have the worst timing,” he grumbled as he adjusted his erection.

“Well, excuse me for doing as I’m supposed to,” Tony said as he entered, smirking at the metal bender. “I just thought you’d want to get this out of the way.”

“You found her?” Charles asked, springing up from where he’d sat down on the bed.

“Yup. Just bow down to my greatness now.”

“Tony…”

“I mean it. I am awesome and you need to recognise that.”

“We recognise, Stark,” Erik growled. “You’re amazing. So tell us where she is.”

“Hold on, I’m basking in the glowing ball of happiness from your declaration.” He yelped as Erik jabbed him with a pin he’d pulled from the complementary flower arrangement. “Okay, okay, jeez. Is he this bossy in bed?”

“Tony!” Charles shrieked.

“I take it back. Too easy. So. Ms Braddock runs a school here in London for gifted children. Translation: she runs a school for mutants. My contact talked to her, she’s expecting you as soon as possible.”

Charles let Tony herd him out of the door and into the waiting car, Happy the driver offering an encouraging smile, before they were weaving through the traffic. In what seemed like no time at all, they pulled up outside a large Victorian building in North London, where a friendly looking young man was waiting for them.

“Mr Stark?” he prompted as they got out of the car.

“That’s me. You’re not Braddock.”

“No, I’m her secretary, George Banks.”

“Like the movie, Father of the Bride!”

“The very same. Ms Braddock asked me to meet you and your guests and escort you to her office. She’s currently in a meeting with some parents of a prospective student, but she’ll be with you as soon as she’s able.”

As they walked, George gave them a run-down of some of the details of the school. The Braddock Centre was opened in the late eighties when Elizabeth and her brother realised the need for mutant-friendly education in London. It was still the highest rated mutant school in the country. It catered
for children from ages 3 to 11, and had good links with several highly rated secondary schools.

As they settled in the office with coffees (tea for Charles), Erik paced around and looked at the awards the school had won, the newspaper articles that had featured it.

“Shame Tabs is too old for this place,” he commented.

“A shame,” Tony agreed. “But she’s doing okay in the new school, right?”

“Yeah, she’s settling in okay. She was talking about joining the school paper, or maybe the yearbook committee.”

Tony didn’t get to answer as the door opened and in walked a young woman. She was of Asian origin, purple eyes and hair, and a tattoo peeking out of the collar of her shirt.

“Mr Stark, how nice to finally meet you in person,” she said, shaking Tony’s hand. “Ms Braddock, but please, call me Betsy. I’m so sorry you had such a hard time tracking me down. If I’d have known, I would have contacted you myself.” She took a seat and smiled at Charles. “Look at you, all grown up.”

“You…you remember me?”

“Of course. I only met you the once, but I couldn’t forget those baby blues.”

Erik cleared his throat and pressed a hand to Charles’ knee as he sat down. “Erik Lehnsherr, I’m Charles—”


“Oh. Right.”

“Now, shall we just get down to it? My contact said that there were some questions you had over your father’s death.”

“Yes, yes, that’s right,” Charles said. “I was recently told something about his death that I need verified. I tried asking Nathaniel, but he’s disappeared, his assistant keeps saying that he and his wife are on vacation.”

“And you need someone who was there or knows what happened to fill in the gaps. I understand. I used to do a lot of helping children forget trauma. It wasn’t until my own father was killed that I realised I wasn’t helping anyone. By that point, your mother didn’t want any telepaths near you, something about encouraging you.”

“My stepfather isn’t a fan of mutants.”

“No, he wasn’t then either. Petty little man,” she said, crossing to a cabinet. Inside were hundreds of notebooks, all carefully organised. “Remind me, your father’s name…”

“Brian Xavier.”

“It was an accident, wasn’t it? Not a car…some sort of explosion,” she asked, flickering her fingers over the spines.

“Lab accident.”

“Right! I remember.” She plucked a notebook and flicked through it, scanning a page before
replacing it and returning to her seat. “I remember what I took from you now. I kept notes on all the memories I buried.”

“Wait,” Erik said. “Buried?”

“Yes. I very rarely erased the memories, they weren’t mine to take. All I did was bury them, sort of lock them away, until the child was ready for them.”

“So the dreams I’ve been having…” Charles trailed off.

“The experiments?” she asked gently and he nodded. “They’re real. Charles…are you sure you want me to tell you what I know?”

“Can’t you just unlock the memories?” he requested.

“No. The trauma of unlocking them would be too much. I’ve tried it before with events much less severe than yours and it landed the person in a coma. They will come back on their own, but I won’t let you have them all at once.”

Charles sighed and let Erik entwine their fingers. “Then you need to tell me,” Charles insisted. He took a deep breath and blurted, “I went to see Kurt, and he told me I killed my father, that I lashed out and caused the explosion.”


“I…I didn’t?”

“No! Charles, your father…how honest do you want here?”

“Completely,” Tony said. “Whole truth, shame the devil.”

Charles nodded at her and she took a deep breath, taking a sip of her coffee. “Okay then, if you’re sure.”

“I am,” Charles assured.

“All right. Charles, I was called late one night by Sebastian Shaw to use my powers to help a young mutant who had been in an explosion where several people died. He collected me from my house and drove me to the biggest mansion I had ever been in. I mean, it looked like a damn museum.”

Erik sniggered and Charles elbowed him.

“I was taken to a room, some sort of study. You were there, and a woman, and two men. Your mother, a man named Kurt and one called Nathaniel. One of the men, Kurt, talked with Sebastian, and then I went into your head. Charles, you were almost catatonic. I’d never been asked to help someone so far gone.”

“What did you see in my head? How did my father die?” he whispered.

“He put a pistol in his mouth and pulled the trigger,” she said. “The night your father died, they were experimenting on you. He’d been managing to shield against you, against your psionic calls for help, but that night you broke through them. I saw it, through Nathaniel’s eyes. Your father was about to dose you up again, he’d been told to stop, that you couldn’t take anymore, that it would kill you, but he wouldn’t listen. Nathaniel refused to go through with it anymore. You were on the
table, strapped down, a gibbering wreck because of what he’d pumped you full of.”

She sighed and ran her fingers through her hair.

“Part of what you were told is true, your powers did lash out. You were trying to protect yourself, trying to make it stop. But you didn’t cause the explosion, Charles. You made things go bang, but nothing big enough to make the building go up. You made beakers and test tubes explode, a couple fuses. But you got through your father’s shields. He heard you, finally. Years of experiments and finally he heard you. He finally saw what he’d done.”

“He killed himself,” Charles murmured.

“He saw what he’d done to his son and crumbled under the guilt. Charles, your father put the lab into meltdown, set everything to collide, and then put a gun in his mouth.”

Charles didn’t hear anything more. Tony and Erik engaged Betsy in light conversation, and then they made their way back to the hotel. Tony made some excuse about meeting some friends for dinner and then Charles and Erik were alone in their hotel room.

[What do you want for dinner?] Erik asked.

[Not hungry,] Charles said from where he was lying on the bed.

[Ah,] he said, curling around the smaller man. He pressed a gentle kiss to the soft skin behind his ear. He wasn’t truly surprised when Charles flipped over and kissed him fiercely.

“I didn’t kill him,” Charles breathed, collapsing against him.

“No, you didn’t. I told you, you’re not a killer.”

“Oh God, Erik, I thought…I was sure…and I…”

“I know, baby, I know what you thought. Come on, it’s okay, let it out,” he soothed, holding Charles close as he sobbed in relief.

Erik pushed everything Betsy had told him and Tony to the front of his mind, letting Charles take the pieces he had missed.

Nathaniel had told Kurt everything, but Kurt had only heard what he wanted to hear. Kurt had heard that Charles had caused the explosion and made his own conclusions. Betsy, seeing the danger the tiny telepath had been in, had adjusted the memories of every person present that night. Charles’ she had buried, Kurt she had adjusted to make him fear Charles, fear what would happen if he pushed him too far. Sharon she had made forget, completely erasing the truth and implanting a lie. She’d done the same with Nathaniel.

As for Sebastian, she had waited until he had dropped her home, and then she had scrubbed his mind of everything at all to do with Charles or Brian. She had seen how dangerous he could be and refused to let him damage Charles further.

Charles’ emotions were a tornado. Grief, sadness, relief, betrayal; just some of the things he was feeling.

Erik let him cry it all out, and then held him as he fell into the first solid sleep he’d had in weeks.
Steve had never really spent any time with kids. Sure, sometimes he’d babysit for one of his neighbours, way back when he was a weedy little guy, but the kids were usually asleep, or too young to talk.

Tabitha was 14, and scared the hell out of Steve.

He understood the basics, that she needed food three times a day, that she had to sleep at night, and do whatever it was she did in the bathroom, and she had to be dropped at school by 8am, and picked up at 3pm.

Aside from that, he had no clue. So when the weekend rolled around and Charles and Erik weren’t back, Steve was faced with two uninterrupted days with a teenage girl.

Saturday morning dawned bright and clear, a chill still in the air and snow still on the ground, but not bad, considering it was late January.

Steve made pancakes for breakfast, and they sat in silence as they ate.

“So,” Steve said as they picked at the last of the meal in uncomfortable silence.

“So?”

“I was thinking…we could go somewhere. Like a day out.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s Saturday. Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do on a weekend, go places, do things?”

“Fair point. I do have a project due next week. I was going to go to the library or maybe online, but if we can go somewhere, that’d be great.”

“Good, that’s good. What’s the project?”

“Art. We need to draw something in nature, an animal or a plant.”

“Oh! I’m sure we could find something. JARVIS, any suggestions?”

“I suggest the Bronx zoo, Captain, as it seems to house the largest selection of wildlife. It is open today from 10am until 4:30pm,” the AI supplied.

Tabitha went off to brush her teeth and get her things and Steve checked out the travel routes. Soon enough they were emerging into the bright sunshine and making their way to the subway.

As they rode the subway, Steve pointed out landmarks he knew, and the ones he didn’t, which Tabitha filled in the details of. As they came closer to their stop, Steve couldn’t help but notice how many people were staring at his companion.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, noticing his gaze on two boys about her age who were whispering about her tail. She flashed them a hint of fang and they swiftly moved down the compartment.

“Doesn’t that bother you?” he questioned.

“Kind of. But this is the way I look, I can’t change it. People are going to stare, and little kids are going to point. I have to just live with it.”

“But you shouldn’t have to. They shouldn’t stare, it’s rude.”
She smiled at him. “Well you’re just an old fashioned gentleman, aren’t you?” she teased with a smile and he blushed. “You haven’t been around many mutants, have you?”

“Not really. It was kind of taboo, back when I’m from. If there were any in my unit, I never knew about it.”

“It’s not like that now.”

“I’m getting that.”

They reached the zoo, Steve paid the entrance fee, and the two of them meandered their way through the exhibits, pausing here and there to sketch something. They stopped for lunch at one of the on-site restaurants, defining some of the drawings and chatting as they ate.

Tabitha learnt that Steve was a fan of parrots, the colourful ones, and Steve discovered that Tabitha liked penguins.

“What’s it like?” Steve asked timidly.

“What’s what like?”

“The way you see,” he clarified. “Your eyes…Tony said Charles mentioned a change in your vision when you manifested.”

“I see things in more detail now. The colours are clearer, more vibrant. It’s kind of hard, learning not to focus on the details too much. It’s easy to get distracted by them, and miss the big things. Like dust motes in the air. I can watch them for hours, see all the different shapes they make. And going to a gallery…I get lost in the texture of the brush strokes. It’s learning how to see all over again.”

“That must be incredibly hard.”

“I guess,” she shrugged. “You’ve done it. Learn to see a completely different world than the one you know.”

“It’s not the same though,” he countered. “You grew up in this world, you know how it works.”

“Theoretically.”

They moved on after lunch, making conversation as they walked, each of them adding to the several pages they had already filled in their sketchbooks. Steve kept getting distracted by her tail as it moved in and out of his line of sight. He was sure she wasn’t even aware that she was curling it slightly as she walked, like a cat.

Steve could swear on a stack of bibles that he only looked away for a moment, only long enough to tell the hotdog vendor that they both wanted the works.

Then there was all sorts of commotion, security guards running towards the scene, and their hotdogs hit the pavement as Steve waded in.

He was pretty damn sure Erik was going to eviscerate him.

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Tony’s private jet touched down in the small hours of Sunday morning and Happy, Tony’s bodyguard and driver and all round good guy, drove them back to the Tower.
The plan was to stay the night in one of Tony’s many spare rooms, and then head home in the morning, as they didn’t want to wake Tabitha at one in the morning. That plan changed as soon as they stepped into the penthouse and found Steve nervously wringing his hands.

“What’s wrong?” Tony asked. “You break something you think is expensive again?”

“No, I didn’t break anything,” he snapped before looking at Erik and Charles. “I am so sorry. So sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” Erik asked warily.

“I swear, I was right there, I only took my eyes off her for a second, just to give the hotdog guy our orders. I was right there!”


“Yes! Oh, gosh, yes, she’s alive!”

“Alright then, everything else we can handle. Now, tell me what happened. Start at the beginning.”

“She has a project due for art class, she has to draw something in nature, a plant or an animal. And seeing as it’s Saturday, I thought a day out was a good idea. So I took her to the Bronx Zoo.”

“Right…”

“It was all going so well. We walked around, sketched some animals, talked about TV and movies and stuff, had lunch, visited the gift shop. It was all normal, I swear. And then I saw a hotdog cart.”

“What, he had no kosher dogs?” Erik questioned.

“No, he did.” Steve sunk down onto the sofa and scrubbed his face. “She was watching the tigers and I walked like ten steps to the hotdog cart. I took my eyes off her for a second. And then there was all this yelling and commotion.”

“Did Tabs do something?”

“No. This couple decided she was evil and punched her. We spent the afternoon at the hospital, and the police need to talk to Tabitha’s legal guardians.”

“Oh, dear God,” Charles moaned. “Where is she? Is she alright?”

“She’s in bed, but not asleep, I don’t think. Black eye, cracked ribs, split lip, and a broken tail. The woman grabbed it a just…” Steve mimed snapping a twig with his hands. “I am so sorry, really, so very sorry.”

“Hey, no, don’t,” Erik said. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“We were in the Bronx! JARVIS said it was mutant friendly!”

After a few minutes, Steve was convinced that no one blamed him for Tabitha’s injuries, and the two mutants went off to check in with the teen, leaving Tony to soothe the soldier and fill him in on what had been discovered in London.

She was lying on her side, curled under the blankets, sniffling.
“Hey, Tabby Cat,” Erik crooned as he crossed the room, sliding onto the bed and letting her curl into him.

Charles rounded the bed and carefully cuddled close, stroking her hair. She cried into Erik’s chest.

“I didn’t do anything,” she whimpered. “I was just standing there. I didn’t do anything.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Erik agreed. “And even if you had, they still didn’t have the right to touch you.”

“They said I was evil, that I was made by the devil.”

“What piffle,” Charles argued. “You are beautiful and perfect and they are just idiots. Let me see your tail.”

She pushed down the blankets far enough to snake her tail out for him to see. There was a wide support bandage around it, about two thirds of the way down, and the livid imprints of the hands that had grabbed her.

“What did the doctor say?”

“She said I was lucky not to dislocate it again. The x-ray showed a clean break, said it would heal nice and clean. Don’t take off the bandage and don’t poke at it or scratch it. She said the ribs are cracked and bruised, and the black eye will be spectacular when it fully comes up.”

“Do you need a follow up?” Erik asked.

“With my regular doctor. That’s Darwin, right?”

“Yeah, Darwin.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly before he pulled her away from his chest slightly, looking down at her lip and eye. “Might be a good thing you were with Steve and not us. I don’t think Charles would have been able to calm me down in time.”

“Probably,” she agreed as Charles tucked her back in. “How was London? Did you do what you needed?”

“I did,” Charles said. “It’s all okay now. I’m so sorry for the past few weeks. It’s not been fair on you, me being so upset.”

“No, Charles, it’s okay. Erik said it was personal, and that’s okay too. But you’re…well, you’re kind of cool, and sweet, and dude, those eyes should be registered weapons. And I like being with you and Erik, it’s better than with my dad. After mom died, it was never the same. With you guys…it’s home, you know? And I want you to be okay. So you are, right? Okay?”

“I think that was teenager speak for ‘I love you, Charles, and I’ll kick the ass of anyone who doesn’t recognise your awesomeness,’” Erik added and they both laughed, though it made Tabitha wince and clutch her ribs.

“I love you too,” Charles said, carefully hugging her. “And yes, I’m okay. There are still some things to be dealt with, some issues to work through. But for the most part it’s all sorted now.”

“Good. Because I will, you know,” she said. “Kick ass if you need me to.”

“Oh, thank you, sweetheart…I think. I assure you, I am quite capable of kicking arses on my own. But I do appreciate the offer.”
Monday morning saw Charles keeping Tabitha home from school so he could take her to Armando for the follow up, and then to the local precinct to talk to the very nice mutant police officer. Erik didn’t have words for how adorable it was, Charles being all grown up and responsible.

Armando proclaimed that Tabitha would be just fine with a little time and TLC, and the police man said that the assailants had admitted the assault and had been charged with assaulting a minor and hate crimes.

They finished up with all the paperwork and legalities at about lunchtime, and then they were at a loss over what to do with themselves.

“I could go to school for the afternoon, if you have to work,” she suggested.

“No! I took the day off for you, to spend with you, we might as well enjoy what’s left of it, now we’ve got all that mundane stuff out of the way. Now, teenage girl…doesn’t that equal the mall?”

“I guess. I could use some more pants that fit the tail.”

“The mall it is then.”

They walked to the mall, chatting happily about things that came to mind, be it television (Tabitha was firmly on Team Damon), food (pizza was the ultimate food and never to be messed with, ever), what Tabitha wanted to do when she left school (artist or circus performer), and that Tabitha was afraid of clowns (which put a kink in the circus idea).

The mall was quieter than Charles was used to, but he had always found himself venturing there on a weekend. They started off by hitting up a burger place for some lunch, and then began wandering through the stores. Several times Charles had to remind her that money wasn’t a problem, that he had more than enough for several lifetimes, and that he really did want to spend it on her.

“What do you think?” she asked as she emerged from the changing room, spinning to show him the pair of jeans she was trying on.

“I like them. Much better than the pale pair. Are they the right size? Enough room for the tail, all that good stuff?”

“Yeah. They feel pretty good.”

“Wonderful. So we have three pairs of jeans, two sweatpants, some pyjamas and three skirts. Is there anything else you need?”

She blushed and Charles felt no shame in skimming her mind to find out the issue.

“Oh! Well…ummm.”

“Peeking is cheating,” she said as she headed back to the changing room. “But thank you.”

“You’re welcome. How about I go and browse the men’s section while you get the necessary items, hmm?”

“Perfect,” she called.

He grabbed the basket of items already decided upon, adding the jeans as she laid them over the top of the door, and moved off. He meandered his way around the men’s sections, picking up a few...
t-shirts he thought would look good on Erik, and a new cardigan to add to his collection, before he heard his name called and he made his way to the cash registers.

“Everything…in order?” he asked, handing the basket to the sales woman and very determinedly ignoring the bras and panties Tabitha had picked out.

The only underwear he wanted to know about that wasn’t his own was Erik’s.

“Yup. All sorted,” she said.

“Good. I think we’re done here then. Where would you like to go next? We could look at the craft supplies.”

“Sure. Do you craft?” she questioned as he handed over his credit card.

“Me? Goodness, no! No one wants to see the monstrosities I create.”

“You can’t be that bad.”

“I’m afraid I am. Even my stick people come out deformed. My doodles look like don’t all’s.”

She was still giggling about it when they reached the branch of Walmart within the mall, and Charles loved the sound. She’d been so down, so serious in all the time he’d known her. It was nice to see her lighter.

They grabbed a shopping cart and meandered their way around the store, picking up whatever took their fancy. They grabbed some first aid equipment to add to the medicine cabinet, and Charles pretended not to notice when Tabitha added some sanitary towels. They picked up some new bed sheets, pens, pencils, a sketchbook, some cushions for the living room, a fancy coffee machine for Erik. Tabitha was quick to point out that it could make hot chocolate too, and tea, so really, it was an investment.

Charles quickly discovered that, once given free reign, Tabitha was an excellent partner in crime for spending far too much money. Anyone without his bank balance would have wept at the total they managed to rack up.

Charles just delighted in it.

Tabitha was pulling in straight A’s and B’s, she was getting a handle on her powers, she was always eager to help around the apartment, vacuuming and dusting and making sure Charles didn’t poison them or burn the place down.

In light of all that, he saw no reason not to spoil her with things she wanted. There wasn’t much she wanted outside of the essentials. Clothes and shoes and toiletries, those didn’t count, those came with the package of having a teenager living under the same roof.

She didn’t ask for frivolities, she didn’t want make up or jewellery or nail varnish, she didn’t ask for the latest trend that she’d get bored of after ten minutes. Tabitha knew who she was and what she wanted and Charles saw no issue with indulging that.

For her artwork, Tabitha favoured pencils and pastels, so he put a new set of each on the cart, along with some fancy paper. He couldn’t tell the difference, paper was paper to him, but it seemed to be needed when it came to pastels, so he went with it.

“Oh, I know this one,” he said as they entered the kids craft sections. “Kitty and Jean do this one.”
“Rainbow Loom. Yeah, it’s pretty cool. I had a load, but…”

“But?”

“Marsha said they were a waste of time and money.”

“Ah. I see. Well, perhaps you could teach me? I would love to be able to show the girls I can do it. I fear they may begin to despair of me soon.”

“No one could despair of you,” she assured. “Okay. Well, we need the basic kit, and some more bands, so these here and then you pick some colours that you want.”

She guided him in picking a good selection, and then they headed off to other parts of the store, adding to their cart various electrical items like headphones and phone cases, some DVD’s, CD’s, and books, and then they added some food items to the haul.

They bought far too much candy, and soda, and chips, and cookies. Charles convinced himself that because they had some essentials like tea, coffee, apples, juice, milk, cereals and bread, that somehow it cancelled out all the rest.

“We’re going to need a cab to get all this home,” Charles commented as they were paying and bagging up. “Or, perhaps this mall has a delivery service.”

It turned out that the mall did offer such a service, which conveniently allowed them to continue wandering the stores.

Considering their last purchase before heading home, that might not have been the smartest idea.

Erik detoured to the kitchen as he arrived home, grabbing a beer from the fridge, before following the feel of Charles’ watch.

Charles and Tabitha were sat at the coffee table doing something complicated looking with elastic bands and a hook and a peg board.

“Should I even ask what you’re doing?” he joked as he crouched down to look closer. “Or is this some weird ritual bonding thing I should ignore?”

“Loom bands,” Charles said, brow furrowing as he worked on his creation. “You take the rubber bands and you weave them into things.”

“I see. What are you weaving?”

“A snowman,” he said, counting his bands. He jammed his hook into the work and finally looked at him. “Hello, darling.”

“Hi,” he replied, leaning in for a kiss. “So, today was a successful operation, I take it?”

“Very. Armando says she’ll be fine, the police have it all in hand, and we went shopping.”

“I noticed. Very nice shiny new coffee machine.”

“It makes tea and hot chocolate too,” Tabitha added. “It’s really an investment for the apartment.”

“Uh huh. What else did you – what the hell is that!”
They looked at each other before Tabitha became very interested in her loom and Charles smiled sheepishly at Erik.

“The poor thing looked so lonely, and all the money goes to a good cause,” he began.

“Charles,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You purchased a bulldog because it looked lonely?”

“No! Not just that. They were having a collection drive at the mall, for the local shelter, and they had all these dogs there that could be adopted, and the poor thing was being overlooked by everyone because she’s missing a leg, and she give such marvellous hugs…”

“Stop. Take a breath. Tabs, is it his dog or yours?”

“Charles said she could be mine.”

“She housebroken?”

“Yes. Her old owners didn’t want her after the amputation. She was hit by a car and had to have the leg removed and they didn’t want her after that,” she explained, reaching down to scratch behind the ear of the dog resting its head on her thigh.

It wasn’t the prettiest dog Erik had ever seen. A mottled brownish-red colour, with an under bite and a snout that looked like the poor thing had run face first into a wall. It was missing its front left leg, and had a decidedly sad look about it.

“She have a name?”

“Bailey.”

“Fabulous.”

“She can stay?”

“She can stay. But she is your dog, Tabitha. You walk her and feed her and clean up after her.”

“Thank you!” she squealed, near strangling him with her enthusiastic hug.

[Charles, you are a pushover parent.]

[Perhaps, but you are sweet, love.]

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it took me so long, but here it is.

Please comment below and let me know what you think.
Tabitha was enjoying the new school.

Sure, there were the usual groups. The jocks, the cheerleaders, the band, the mathletes. There was a group that hung around in the art room at lunchtimes and roasted marshmallows in the kiln; the group that wore nothing but black and wouldn’t talk to anyone not in the group; the chess club; the debate team.

Mutants were scattered throughout, in every group, accepted by most of the student population. Tabitha might have been the mutant with the most obvious physical manifestations, but she wasn’t the only one. There was a boy with scales in her English class, and a girl with a second set of arms in her Calculus class.

One thing hadn’t changed. Gym class was still hell on earth.

“I can’t do this,” Tabitha mumbled to herself as she tried to yank herself up the climbing rope.

“Come on, Tabitha, show me that upper body!” Coach Kimble called.

She took her hand off the rope to attempt to go a little higher and lost her grip completely, falling the ten feet she’d managed to land with a shriek.

“Hey. Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, looking up at the boy holding out a hand to her. “I’m okay.”

“Tough class, huh?” he said as he hoisted her up. “Seems more like torture than education.”

“Definitely. When are we ever going to use this?”

He chuckled. “I’m Troy.”

“Tabitha.”

“I know. You’re in my History class.”

“Oh. I didn’t…I mean…”

“I get it. New school, all overwhelming. I get it. Well…I should get back to it,” he said, moving off to the balance beam. “You know, a bunch of us were gonna go to the mall after school, get a burger. You’re welcome to join us if you wanted. Flag pole at three.”

“Okay! Great.”

Tabitha settled back into the lesson, and then showered before making her way to her locker and grabbing her phone and purse.

“Tabitha? Are you alright, darling?” Charles asked as he picked up.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. I just wanted to ask if it was okay if I went somewhere after school. I know you and Erik would be worried if I didn’t ask.”

“That’s very considerate of you, sweetheart. Where did you want to go?”
“This boy in my gym class asked if I wanted to go get a burger with him and his friends at the mall. Is that okay?”

“Of course. Erik and I shall dine without you then, if you’ll be eating with friends. Is he a nice boy?”

“I think so. He doesn’t look at me weird, which is nice. His name’s Troy, he’s in my History class too.”

“Well, he sounds very nice,” he said and she could hear the rustle of papers on his end. “Be a love and give Erik a call when the fun is over. I’ll feel better having him drive you, rather than you taking the bus or subway.”

“Okay. What are you up to?”

“Some research for a book idea. Have you eaten lunch yet?”

“On my way. Smells like the fish sandwich, be still my stomach.”

“Pizza once again then?”

“I don’t know. Walking the line. Ooo, chicken rice bowl!”

“Go eat,” he said with a chuckle. “I’ll see you this evening. And Tabitha?”

“Yeah?”

“Have a good time.”

Erik arrived home at half past five with Chinese take-out, as Charles had requested via text message.

“Charles?”

“In here.”

Erik followed the feel of Charles’ watch to the living room and chuckled as the dog limped up to meet him.

“Hey, Bailey. Hey my good girl,” he praised as he scratched behind her ear, the dog letting her tongue loll out in pleasure as her tail swung back and forth.

“I fear she’s only after the teriyaki beef she can smell.”

Erik chuckled and curled onto the sofa, dumping the bags on the coffee table and swooping in for a bruising kiss.

[Hello, darling.]

“Hi, yourself,” Erik said as he let Charles up to breathe. “I got that duck you like.”

“Oh, I love you.”

“Cupboard love.”
“Deep undying devotion to the man who feeds me so I don’t die.”

“Mamen was right, the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach,” Erik joked as he fished out containers.

The two of them had a very nice carpet picnic while Charles filled Erik in on his day, outlining some of the research he’d done. Most of it went straight over his head, but he got the general gist of it, and he adored watching Charles so animated and alive.

“Where is Tabitha?” Erik asked as Charles wrapped it up.

“Gone to the mall for a burger with some friends,” he said, reaching for the sweet and sour chicken. He paused. “Did I do it right? She called at lunch and asked if she could go. I didn’t see the harm.”

“It’s fine. It’s good that she’s making friends. Charles…do you think…think she’s happy here?”

“I do. She seems to be settling beautifully now we’ve sorted out the school problem.”

“So…if there was somewhere else for her to go, someone else to have custody of her…do you think she would?”

“Does this have anything to do with what’s been on your mind all afternoon?”

“Am I that obvious?”

“Well I am psychic, you know,” Charles said with a grin. “I could feel you worrying all the way across town. What’s bothering you?”

“I got a call this afternoon from my lawyer. She’s been contacted by Richard’s lawyer.”

Charles felt the colour drain from his face. “No! No, he can’t do that! He can’t treat her like something disgusting and worthless and then take her back!”

“No, Charles, no, it’s not Richard,” Erik promised, kissing him gently. “Richard terminated his parental rights, we have custody of Tabitha, it’s a done deal, baby, I promise. No one is trying to take her from us.”


“No, don’t apologise, I know what you mean. It’s not Richard. It’s Maurice LeStrange. Miriam’s father.”

“Miriam. As in…”

“Tabitha’s mother.”

“Oh. So Maurice is the family that lives in France?”

“Yeah. Miriam was born in France and they moved here when she was a teen. They moved back there when Miriam died, and haven’t had any contact with Tabs since.”

“Why did he contact Richard’s lawyer?”

“He didn’t, his son did, Samuel. Sam wants to see Tabitha, they all do. They’re here in the States for a couple weeks and they want to see her.”
“They?”

“They?”

“Maurice and his wife, Vianne, Sam and his wife Portia.”

“Why? They’ve had nothing to do with her for nearly five years.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know any of it. All I know is that they want contact.”

Charles fell silent, thinking it over. He wanted Tabitha with them, she was important to him, felt
like his, even in the short time she’d been with them. He’d grown to love her smiles and sense of
humour, the way she cuddled in to anyone who stayed still long enough, her things littering the
apartment. Their apartment. Their home. Even now he could see her sweater draped over the arm
of the sofa, one of her text books hidden under the take-out containers.

Miriam’s family couldn’t take Tabitha if she didn’t want to go. She was a US citizen and a
teenager, approaching her 15th birthday. The courts would most likely go with what Tabitha
wished.

But would that wish be to stay with him and Erik?

“Could we meet them, before we discuss this with Tabitha?” Charles asked.

“I can call Emma and ask if they’d be willing.”

Charles crawled across the carpet and curled into Erik’s arms. “Oh, Erik. I don’t want her to go. I
want her here, with us. She’s ours, our girl. But if she wants to go…”

“I know, Charles. If she wants to go, we won’t stop her. But I don’t want it any more than you do.”

It weighed heavily on them, this new challenge.

They could lose her.

Tabitha had had the most fun she’d had for a very long time.

Troy’s group of friends was a full mix, male and female, baseline and mutant, jocks and nerds and
everything in between. They were all so friendly and welcoming that Tabitha hadn’t had a chance
to feel self-conscious about her tail or hair or eyes or fangs. In fact, all of the girls had gone nuts for
her hair, either wanting the colour or the length or the straightness or all three.

The guys had wanted her fangs, even after she told them how many times she’d accidentally made
herself bleed with them.

And all of them had descended on her tail cast, decorating it with Sharpie drawings of cartoon
characters. She was so sad that in a few weeks Armando would cut it off.

The group had made their way to the mall and then spent a few hours wandering in and out of
stores. Charles had given her full permission to use the credit card he had given her when she
moved in, and she knew he meant it, but she didn’t see it as a reason to go nuts.

Make up was out as an option; making it work with the unusual eyes and hair was a mission she
was still on. Heels she hated, couldn’t walk in. She wasn’t a fashion slave, she knew what she liked
and what she didn’t and her closets were already well stocked. That and the tail made it hard to find
things that fit.
She did get herself a few pieces of jewellery; a couple pairs of earrings and a necklace. And she got herself a few books she wanted to read, and some that she needed for her classes. And some new art supplies she had fallen in love with.

They had spent most of the time laughing and giggling over some thing or another, the guys making fools of themselves to make her and the other girls laugh. And then they had headed to a burger joint that did pretty good milkshakes.

“Who are you waiting for?” Marissa asked. The two of them were the last ones left, the others having gotten the bus or subway home. The two girls were the only ones waiting for someone to pick them up.

“My cousin, Erik. You?”

“Brother. Danny. Seventeen and just got a beat up car, so he loves any excuse to drive it. Beats the bus though, right? Why didn’t you take the bus?”

“Charles didn’t want me taking the bus, I promised I’d call Erik when I was ready to go home.”

“Remind me who Charles is again? I know you told us but I forgot.”

“Erik’s partner.”

“Oh, right. I remember. What’s he like?”

“Charles?”

“Uh huh.”

“He’s…I don’t know! He’s Charles. Let’s see. He’s English, so the accent is adorable. Smart, cute in a sweet puppy kind of way. Very sweet, almost always happy.”

“He sounds awesome.”

“He is. They both are.” She grinned as Erik pulled up. “Speaking of, here’s my ride.”

“Okay, I’ll see you in school tomorrow. Hey, Tabitha?”

She moved close to the mutant girl, giving her a gentle smile. “I’m just wondering…you know Troy is crushing on you, right?”

“What? No he’s not! He’s just…being nice.”

“No, Jackson was just being nice. Troy thinks you’re a hottie. I’m not saying you have to do anything…but…you could do a whole lot worse, you know.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Tabitha said with a smile. She waved as she moved to the car, climbing into the front passenger seat and smiling at Erik.

“Hello,” he said, peering through the windscreen at Marissa. “You have a good time?”

“Yeah, it was good. Marissa,” she said, waving at the girl.

“Ah. You ready?” She nodded and fastened her seatbelt. “You eat?”

“Veggie burger, fries, chocolate shake.”
“Good?”

“The shake was. Not as good as our place, but still pretty good. The burger and fries…meh.”

“Passable?”

“I’ve had worse. What did you guys have?”

“Chinese carpet picnic.”

“Charles given up on teaching you the mystical art of chopsticks yet?”

Erik chuckled. “Nope. Our determined little fruitcake. We saved you some. The duck and spring rolls you like.”

“Wicked.”

“Homework?”

“Did it at lunch, knew I’d be out.”

“Good girl. Movie?”

“Sounds good.”

Erik turned on the radio and the two of them drove home, occasionally singing along. Once Tabitha had dumped her bag and gone through her nightly routine, she curled up between them on the sofa in her pyjamas.

Charles couldn’t help but cuddle her close. Erik reached out and toyed with her hair, admiring the drawings on her cast, before he looked at Charles over her head.

[Erik…]

[I know, baby. I know.]

Erik picked at the plate of fries before him. Charles was tearing his grilled cheese to pieces.

They were sitting in their favourite diner, Thursday lunchtime, waiting for the LeStrange’s to appear. Neither of them could speak, they both felt sick, and just wished that this wasn’t happening at all.

“Erik Lehnsherr. Damn, you haven’t changed.”

“Sam,” Erik replied, standing to greet the man approaching their booth.

Sam was about Erik’s age, a little taller than him, with almost white blond hair and the most peculiar eyes. They were completely white, no pupil or iris to be seen, and yet he didn’t seem to have any trouble seeing. He bypassed the handshake completely and pulled Erik in for a hug, clapping him on the back.

“You look well,” Erik said as they pulled back, looking each other over, before Erik guided him to a seat. “Sam, this is Charles Xavier, my partner. Charles, this is Samuel LeStrange.”
The two men exchanged a handshake across the table and the conversation paused while Sam ordered, and then there was an uneasy silence.

“I thought Maurice would be coming, or maybe Vianne,” Erik said after Sam’s coffee had arrived.

“Truth be told…they don’t know I’m here. They don’t know I’ve contacted you,” Sam admitted. “I didn’t want to get their hopes up. In case we couldn’t see her.”

“I don’t understand. I thought Maurice and Vianne wanted to see Tabs.”

“You…you don’t know what Richard did, do you?”

“Oh shit,” Charles muttered.

“No, I have no clue of what the hell you’re on about,” Erik said.

“Erik, my sister died, and all my parents could see when they looked at Tabitha was this little girl who was the only piece of Miriam left. Looking at Tabitha…the pain of it…I can’t describe it. It was too hard to be around her. It wasn’t her fault, and it wasn’t fair to her, and we have no excuses for it. It was us, we did that, and we can’t apologise for that. But after a couple of weeks, it became pretty clear that Tabitha really was all that was left of Miriam. So we tried to make contact. Richard shut us down, told us that he didn’t want us anywhere near, that Tabitha was confused and missing her mother and seeing any of us would just hurt her.”

“So you left,” Charles said.

“Yes. It was best for my parents to go back to France. It was easier for them there, not having so many reminders of Miriam all around them.”

“Richard didn’t want mutants near Tabs,” Erik said quietly. “He wanted to pretend that she and he were both baseline, completely.”

“I see. Doesn’t surprise me. But I don’t understand why he sent you.”

“He didn’t. Tabitha manifested. You can imagine how Richard took it.”

“Yeah, not much of a stretch of the imagination.”

“He walked out on her, terminated his parental rights. Me and Charles have full custody of Tabitha, she lives with us.”

“Oh.”

Silence fell once again, and Charles didn’t feel too much guilt as he got a read of Sam. The man was confused, and saddened, and he very clearly missed his sister. He could feel a longing in him, and a fiercely protective instinct.

“Sam, why are you here?” Erik asked bluntly. “Do you want to check in on Tabs, or something else?”

“Oh, fuck, you think we want to take her,” Sam breathed. “No, fuck, no, that’s not what this is. Papa, he’s sick, a heart problem. I just wanted him to be able to see her, maybe have a conversation with her. Look, we’ve only come here so Papa can work out some details of his will with his lawyer. We thought it would be a good vacation, see the sights, catch up with some old friends.”

Erik and Charles both breathed a sigh of relief, laughing at their own paranoia.
“I’m sorry,” Charles giggled. “We thought…”

“It’s okay. I get it. Some random relative showing up, of course you freaked. I should have seen it.”

“Sam’s precognitive, but he’s pretty low level.” Erik explained to Charles. “Let’s move on, yeah? How are you? How’s Portia?” Erik suggested.

“She’s good. She’s on maternity leave right now. We’ve got two girls, Miriam and Miranda. Two and a half and eight weeks, respectively.”

“Congrats. Mutants?”

“Miranda, too early to tell, but Miriam is a chameleon. She can blend in with her surroundings. Hilarious when she tries something with a pattern.”

“Sounds fascinating,” Charles said.

“Thought you’d like it. You’re THE Charles Xavier, aren’t you? The geneticist?”

“Yes, that is me. I would absolutely love to know more about your family and their manifestation of mutations. Erik mentioned that Miriam was baseline, but the rest of your family were manifested. Which is wonderful, and it goes a very long way in giving a clue in why Tabitha is manifested the way she is. Considering a manifestation background in both parents but said parents being baseline, it could go some way to explaining why she was late, and why she’s on the extreme end of the spectrum.”

“Take a breath, ziskeit,” Erik said with a smile.

“Is he always so…”

“Yes,” Erik grinned, trying to ignore Charles’ blush and how he wanted to follow it down to those pretty pink nipples of his.

“I’m so sorry. I don’t mean to go on, I just get excited.”

“It’s fine, really, absolutely fine. I’m not sure how much time I’ve got to spare so you can grill me on my family history, but I’ll swap you email addresses. That help?” Sam offered.

“That would be wonderful. Thank you,” Charles said and grinned into the swift kiss Erik gave him.

“You’ve just made his year,” Erik quipped.

“So…Tabitha is manifested?” Sam asked cautiously.

“She is,” Erik confirmed. “Telekinetic. A mover, to be more specific. And some physical manifestations.”

“Here,” Charles said, holding out his phone.

Sam took it and looked at the picture he was being offered. It was Tabitha, playing with Bailey the dog in the park the weekend just passed. Her hair was bright against the lingering snow, and her fangs were visible as she smiled.

“She’s beautiful,” Sam breathed. “She is so beautiful. Is she okay? Healthy? The tail, it looks…”

“There have been a few problems,” Erik admitted, and he and Charles proceeded to fill Sam in on
Richard’s reaction to having a mutant daughter, Tabitha trying to hide her manifestations and the damage from that, and the attacks at school and the zoo.

“Is she okay now?” Sam asked as Charles showed him more pictures.

“Yeah, she’s doing really good now,” Erik said. “She’s pulling good marks at school, and she’s made friends, she’s sleeping through the night, got her appetite back. She’s doing really well.”

Sam opened his mouth to say something when his phone chirped at him. He looked at the screen and grimaced.

“And that is my cue to get my ass back to the hotel before Portia decides to sell one of the girls.” He shoved the phone back in his pocket and gave Erik a card. “We’re having dinner here on Saturday. It’d be so great if Tabitha was there. You guys too, of course. Around seven?”

“We’ll talk to Tabitha, see how she feels about it,” Charles assured.

Sam and Charles exchanged contact information while Erik settled the bill and then they parted ways.

Erik walked Charles to the library so he could work on some more research for his new book, something he was loving working on, and then he headed to the store, back to work while he tried to figure out how to talk to Tabitha about her other family.

Tabitha was home by the time Erik got there, her homework spread out across the coffee table, the TV on low.

“Hey,” he called. “Charles home?”

“Not yet. He left a message on the machine, something about meeting a friend for a drink to discuss some theories.”

“Have you eaten?”

“Not yet.”

“Pizza?”

“Veggie?”

“Absolutely. I’ll order, you start packing up.”

He waited until they were well into stuffing themselves with more calories than they could possibly handle before he brought up Sam.

“Tabs, can I talk to you about something?” he asked, setting down his slice.

“Sure. Am I in trouble?”

“No, you’re not in trouble. I wanted to talk to you about your mom.”

She froze, looking at him with worry. “Why? I don’t want to talk about mom. Why do you want to?”
“I got a call from my lawyer. She was contacted by your uncle, Sam. Me and Charles met with him today.”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” she snapped, throwing down her pizza and moving to her room.

“He wants to see you, him and his parents,” Erik called after her. “Tabitha, come on. Don’t do the teenage huff thing. I hate the teenage huff thing.”

“Then change the subject,” she said, spinning to stare him down.

She was stunning in her fury. Her long pink hair whipped around, her tail swishing in anger, her peculiar eyes boring into him as her fangs glinted in the light.

“I can’t,” he said sadly. “Please, just let me say what I need to and then, if you want, we never have to talk about it again.”

“You have 30 seconds to convince me to talk about this,” she said.

“Okay. We met with Sam and he told us that Richard blocked any of them from having any contact with you. I called my lawyer and she confirmed that there is still a restraining order in place to keep any and all LeStrange’s away from you, permanently. Richard told the LeStrange’s that seeing them would hurt you, as they were a reminder of your mother.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because they’re mutants. He wanted to pretend you were baseline, just like him.”

She deflated, folding her arms around herself as if she were cold.

“So they had to stay away because he’s an asshole,” she mumbled. “Why now? Why have they come back now? Did they know about me, about me manifesting?”

“No. Maurice has a heart condition. He and Vianne had to come to see his lawyer about his will, Sam and his wife decided to use it as a vacation. Sam contacted Richard’s lawyer on the off chance that they’d be allowed to see you. His lawyer contacted mine.”

Slowly she crossed back to the sofa, curling up and staring off into space as she processed what she’d been told. Erik let her be, occupying himself by getting a fresh beer from the fridge.

“How is he?” she asked eventually. “Sam. Is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’s good. Him and Portia have two girls now.”

“And Grand-pére? Grand-mére? Are they okay?”

“I think so. They’d like to see you. They’re having dinner at a restaurant on Saturday. Sam wants you to go. Me and Charles can go too, if you want.”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s okay, you don’t have to know. It’s not until Saturday evening, you can take your time and think about it.”

Erik didn’t push any further, he let her change the subject to what she was studying in school. He kept wondering what she would decide, and what that would mean for him and Charles.
“Well?”

Kurt grinned at Tabitha, dropping two cards and picking up two.

“Well what?” he said. “What do I think of it all? I think your dad is a raging asshole, but you knew that already.”

“Don’t be a jerk,” she said, picking up a card. “What would you do, if you were me?”

“But I’m not you.”

“Kurt,” she whined, flicking a piece of bagel at him.

“Okay, okay! Your mom’s family…they were nice, right? Before things went to hell?”

“Yeah.”

“And they only stayed away because they were doing what they were told was best for you. So they got it wrong, big whoop. People make mistakes. They didn’t want to hurt you. If it were me…I’d go to dinner. It’s just a meal, it’s not a binding contract, and if it sucks, you can leave.”

She fell silent as they continued the game, and then, once Kurt had won, they moved on to practicing her mutation. At this point she could pick up a pen and move it to the paper, but lost it when she put it to the paper to draw something. Kurt was trying to push her range, and fine tune her skills.

Charles watched from across the room as she managed to pick up a crayon.

“Charles?”

“Sam! What a surprise. Did we arrange for you to come by and I’ve forgotten?”

“No, no, just me,” Sam said, bouncing the toddler on his hip. “I wanted to bring this by, it’s more of my contact details for you, some of my relatives too, if that helps. I wanted you to have it even if you didn’t come tonight.”

“Oh, thank you so much,” Charles gushed, taking the offered sheet of paper and shoving it into his pocket so he could hold out his hands for the toddler. “May I?”

“Sure,” Sam said, handing her over. “This is Miriam.”

She giggled and morphed into the pattern of his sweater, which was red with love hearts.

“Oh, how clever!” he praised, tickling her tummy until she squealed.

Which caught the attention of Tabitha, who looked like a deer trapped in headlights.

“Oh, dear. Ummm. Excuse me for a moment. May I borrow this?” Charles babbled, shrugging up the toddler and smiling before he got an answer. “Much obliged.” Charles rushed to the other side of the room, where Tabitha was making all the markers on the art table stand on end.

“Is that…?” she said quietly, staring at Sam.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know he was coming. He came to give me some contact
details for some of your other relatives, so I can use their mutations as examples in my research. I can make him go if you’d like?”

“No. No, he doesn’t have to go,” she said eventually, tearing her eyes from the man hovering by the door and looking at the toddler now mimicking her hair. Except she was all pink. “Charles…do you think…maybe…”

“What is it, darling? Come on, whatever it is, you can tell me,” he urged, curling his free arm around her shoulders.

“Maybe me and Sam should talk, maybe?” Poor thing, she sounded so unsure of herself. “It couldn’t hurt, right? To talk.”

“No, it wouldn’t hurt. If you would like to talk to him, I’m sure we can clear you a space so you won’t be disturbed by the others. Or, there is a very nice coffee shop down the street. You and he could go there to talk if you wished for a little more privacy than we can offer here. I could even keep tabs on you, you know, psychically, if you’d like.”

“Maybe.” She glanced over at Sam again, who gave her an encouraging smile. “Who’s this?” she asked, motioning to the baby.

“This is your cousin, Miriam. She’s Sam’s daughter, one of them. He has two, this one and a newborn, Miranda.”

Tabitha tentatively reached out, accepting the tiny girl reaching for her. Miriam was highly impressed by the new arrangement and set to stroking Tabitha’s hair, delighting in the way it slid smoothly under her palm.

“Ink,” she said finally.

“That’s right,” Charles praised. “It is pink. It’s pretty, isn’t it?”

“Pity.”

Tabitha took a deep breath and crossed the room. Charles trailed after her, wary of what was coming.

“Hi, Uncle Sammy,” she said and his face broke in to a huge grin.

“Hi, Pipsqueak.” He grinned at her. “You grew up.”

“Pretty much. This yours?”

He took Miriam from her and settled her on his hip, producing a pacifier, which she took gleefully and stuck in her mouth.

“Miriam, huh?”

“She was my sister, I wanted…”

“Not a judgement,” she interrupted. “Just a comment. Look, maybe we should talk, you know, just us. There’s a coffee shop down the street, we could go there maybe.”

“Sure, sure! That’d be…yeah.” He looked at Charles, who gladly took Miriam and her diaper bag and handed his wallet to Tabitha, just in case.
Sam and Tabitha made their way to the coffee shop in silence, both sneaking glances at the other. They ordered and took a seat, the silence between them growing awkward.

“You know, when I said we should talk, I kind of assumed actual talk would happen,” she said, rolling her cup between her hands.

“Yeah, I know. Sorry. I’m just not quite sure what to say.”

“Anything. How’s Aunt Portia? What’s your other daughter called? How are Grand-mere and Grand-pere?”

“Portia thinks I’m mad to be doing this, that I’m setting us all up for more heartache. My other daughter is called Miranda. My parents are doing well. Papa has a heart condition. It’s not too serious, but he thought he should set his affairs in order, just in case.”

“Do they know about you coming to see me?”

“No. We tried a few weeks after the funeral, and when we were turned away…my parents didn’t take it well.” He gave her a tentative smile. “Mutation suits you.”

“You think?”

“Oh, yeah! The hair, the eyes, it’s all good.”

“Miriam seems to like the hair.”

“I noticed. Hell of a pink. Must be easy for your friends to spot you in a crowded hallway.”

“They never lose me.” She took a deep breath and looked at him. “I want to know what he did to make you stay away, what he said. I was ten years old, I don’t remember that much about those few months, before and after mom…went away. I don’t remember him telling you to stay away.”

“You weren’t there,” Sam said, motioning to the waitress for a refill. “It was about three weeks after the funeral. You were with Erik, I think. Or maybe your grandma Sarah, I’m not sure. Richard came by the house. We’d called, asked to see you, maybe have you for the weekend. He turned up with a restraining order stating that contact with any member of your mother’s family would be detrimental to your wellbeing and ability to successfully cope with her passing. We had no choice.”

“So you left.”

“Yes. And that was probably the wrong thing to do. But we can’t go back and change it. All I can do is say how sorry we all are.”

“Don’t do that, don’t start in with the apologies, I don’t want apologies. I don’t know what I want but I know I don’t want any of you to say how sorry you are. You’re right, we can’t go back and saying how sorry you are won’t help anything.”

“Okay, sure, I can do that. Uhhh…how are you doing in school? Are your classes good?”

“Pretty good. Still not a fan of math and gym sucks, but I like art and English and biology.”

“What are you covering in biology?”

“The stages of mitosis.” She smiled at him. “Do you still take photos?”

“I do. It’s my job now, I’ve left investment banking behind. I work for a magazine in Paris.”
They continued on with the conversation, catching up on all the things they’d missed, before Sam brought up the suggestion of dinner.

“You don’t have to come, and I’d completely understand if you said no. But I’d really like it if you came to dinner tonight,” he said cautiously.

“I…I don’t know. Maybe,” she hedged.

And Sam could ask nothing more of her. He now had the issue of whether or not to tell his parents. He was relatively sure that she’d allow the contact, but he wasn’t sure if his parents could handle simple contact. They’d want more than that, they’d want to be involved in her life.

And he wasn’t sure if anyone was ready for that.

“Ah, mon petit ange!”

Miriam giggled and toddled across the room to her grandfather’s waiting arms, babbling at him in a mix of French and English.

“Papa, English please,” Sam said. “We’re trying to teach her.”

“Oui, but she cannot forget that she is French,” Maurice argued. “Why is she pink?”

Sam froze. He’d forgotten about that little detail. Miriam had been that way all day, ever since she’d met Tabitha.

“About that,” he said, plucking Miriam from Maurice and setting her in the playpen where she was all about the blocks. “Papa, there’s something we should talk about.”

They sat on the sofa in their suite and Sam wondered where to begin. Oh well, best just to get it over with.

“Papa, I saw Tabitha today. Me and Miriam. That’s why she’s pink, she’s copying Tabitha.”

Maurice was frozen, his eyes wide as he looked from his son to his little granddaughter.

“Oui. Il ya beaucoup que nous devrions parler de.”

Charles could hear a strange sort of thump come from Tabitha’s room every now and then.

“Erik?”

“Hmm?” he hummed from his desk where he was working on a pendant.

“What’s Tabby doing?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“There, that, that strange thump. What is that?”

Erik shrugged. “Not a clue. Go ask her.”

Charles smiled at his distraction and made his way across the apartment, knocking and waiting for
an answer before he entered.

Tabitha’s room was a whole mess of clothes. It looked like every piece of clothing she owned was strewn across the floor and furniture. The strange thump he had been hearing seemed to have come from her collection of shoes as pair after pair had been discarded by the girl.

“Is everything quite alright in here?” he questioned, picking up a dress she had thrown aside.

“No,” she said, emerging from her closet in her bra and panties. Charles felt himself burn as he looked away. “Sorry. You can look now, it’s safe.”

He glanced up to find she had pulled on her robe. “Quite alright. Just wasn’t expecting it.”

“I should have realised. It’s just you and Erik are like my parents, you know. You were there when I had to have my tail reset and all that. It’s no big deal. You’d see more at the beach.”

“Oh, what a marvellous idea!” he exclaimed, feeling all sappy at her declaration. “We should all go away this summer, somewhere with a beach.”

“Sounds great.”

“You were saying that you’re not alright.”

“I don’t know what to wear.”

“A clothing crisis, I see.” He stood and scooped up an armful of clothes, dropping them on the bed. “What’s the occasion?”

“I think I should go to this dinner.”

“Oh. If you want to.”

“Let me rephrase. I think WE should go to this dinner. All three of us.”

“Right, okay. Erik! Darling!” he called, leaning towards the door.

“Yeah!”

“Get changed, we’re going to dinner!”

“Sure?”

“Very.”

“I’m taking a quick shower then,” Erik said, poking his head around the door frame. “Everything okay in here?”

“We’re debating clothing choices,” Charles said.

“Ah. Well, it’s pretty cold out, snow on the ground, so I’d go with pants, but it’s up to you.”

Charles began sorting through the clothes on the bed as Erik disappeared. “What about these?” he asked, holding up a pair of black trousers with silver vines embroidered along the sides and cuffs. “These are pretty, quite dressy but not too fancy.”

“You think they’ll do?” she asked, unsure.
“Oh, yes. It’s not a fancy dinner, it’s a family one. You could wear your jeans if you wished. But these are prettier.”

He turned away to give her some privacy to put them on, smiling to himself as she huffed while getting her tail in place.

“Do you think I’ll be able to keep the cast after Darwin cuts it off?” she said, pressing her robe to her front as they set about picking a top.

“I don’t see why not. They’re just disposed of, so I can’t see why you wouldn’t be allowed to keep it.” He held up a sleeveless top with a handkerchief hem, patterned with purple butterflies. “This?”

“Perfect. Thanks, Charles.”

He left her to finish getting ready and made his way to his own room, where he slipped into a very quick shower and then dressed in what Erik thrust at him.

The restaurant was a short walk, and then Tabitha froze, staring at the door.

“Hey,” Erik murmured, cuddling her close. “We don’t have to. We can go home, order take out. And even if we do go in, all you need to do is tell Charles in your head and we’ll leave.”

She clung to him for a moment before she stepped back. “I’m okay. I can do this.”

“Okay then.”

They entered and let the hostess take their coats before they realised they were being watched.

The restaurant was an old fashioned place, decorated like a Spanish home, small intimate tables dotted around the room, candles and artwork completing the aesthetic against the terracotta and white walls, the tiled floors, the soft happy music.

“You came,” Sam said with a wide smile as he approached them. “I’m so happy you came.”

“Us too,” Erik said as Maurice and Vianne approached.

“Erik, you look well, my friend,” Maurice said with a smile, embracing him and pressing a kiss to each cheek and then bestowing the same treatment on Charles, Vianne kissing and hugging them after him.

“Maurice, you look well too. And Vianne, you look radiant as always. This is Charles, my partner. And of course, you know Tabitha.”

Anyone else would have thought they were both looking at the crown jewels, the way they looked at Tabitha. As if she were this precious miracle that they had never dreamed to see.

Vianne seemed lost in the sight of her, leaning on her son as her eyes filled with tears, her hand covering her mouth.

Maurice reached out, stroking Tabitha’s hair out of her eyes.

“Ma petite fille,” he murmured. “Oh, I have missed so much. I saw a child, but look at you now. So beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she mumbled, a blush surging across her cheeks. “Grand-père.” She flashed a shy smile at Vianne. “Grand-mère.”
The two surged forwards, sweeping her up in an embrace, stroking her hair and holding her close.

Eventually, they let her go and they all sat down. Portia was as blonde as ever, the dramatic sweep of almost white framing her wide smile. She held Miranda, the newborn, to her breast, letting her nurse as she slipped into conversation with Erik and Charles.

Charles was happy talking to the woman, and it was easy enough to keep an eye on Tabitha, who was talking with Maurice and Vianne. They were catching up on all they’d missed, like what Tabitha was learning in school and what her hobbies were. The conversation seemed to be fixed on Tabitha, the two wanting to know absolutely everything there was to know about the granddaughter they had missed out on these past years.

Miriam had taken one look at Tabitha and turned pink again, making Sam sigh and chuckle. He’d only just managed to get her human coloured again.

The meal turned out to be authentically Spanish, right down to the imported oils used. To start off, they had a selection of tapas. Olives, meatballs, fried squid rings, prawns in three variations, octopus, peppers, cheese, different breads and dips.

It didn’t take Charles much to work out that the LeStrange’s were not the most orthodox of Jews.

Mains was a selection of dishes. Portia and Sam stuck to something simple for Miriam, a cut up mess of vegetables, meat and fish with rice that she could pick at with her fingers when she got bored with her cutlery. As for the adults, there was a general ordering of paella and wine.

Tabitha was happy enough to eat what Erik or Charles put before her, too overwhelmed to choose for herself.

The conversation flowed easily, Charles and Tabitha laughing along as the others reminisced. Tabitha’s mother was discussed in some of the stories, and it was wonderful for Charles to listen to. She had clearly been loved very much, and had loved her daughter with everything she had.

To celebrate the night, Maurice insisted on ordering every desert on the menu, and they all helped themselves to a little of each.

They lingered over wine and fruit, Tabitha nibbling away at the last of the churro’s with Miriam while the conversation flowed around her.

“I do not wish to upset anyone,” Maurice began.

“Uh oh, that means he’s about to say something that will upset someone,” Vianne said with a smile, pouring herself more wine.

“Not always,” he argued.

“Oui, mon amour, always.”

“Beside the point. I was going to say that Tabitha should come with us, back to France. We have good schools, the way of life is better there. It would be better.”

“Why?” Tabitha asked quietly. “Why should I go with you?”

“We are your family.”

“So is Erik. I was born in the US, grew up in the US. I don’t see why I should go to France.”
“It was your mother’s birthplace, her true home.”

“But you moved her here. You only went back once she died.”

“Oui, this is true, but we never meant to stay. We always meant to return. She would have brought
you back to France if she had lived.”

“That doesn’t matter now. She’s gone so it doesn’t matter a damn what she would have wanted or
done, does it? I’ve lived here my whole life, I’ve never even visited France.”

“Oh, it is beautiful. You would love it there.”

“But I live here.”

“You should be with us, your true family.”

“Papa…” Sam began but Tabitha getting to her feet stopped him.

“I haven’t had any contact from any of you in almost five years, and suddenly you think you know
what’s best for me,” she snarled. “One meal, one conversation and you think I’ll just sit here and
let you make plans for me. Let me make it clear to you that I am not some…thing to be bargained
around and talked about. I am not a child anymore, and I am staying right here.” She looked at
Sam. “Uncle Sam, it was nice to see you again. Thank you for dinner. Portia, Grand-mère.
Goodnight.”

She strode over to the coats, retrieved hers and made her way out to the street, heading towards
home.

Erik and Charles said their hasty goodbyes and hurried after her. As they left they could hear
Maurice being berated by a furious Vianne.

“Well, the food was nice,” Erik commented as they caught up to Tabitha.

“Oh, yeah, the food was good,” she agreed. “We should go back there sometime. I’m sure Alex
would like it.”

“Yes, I’m sure. Erik, darling, don’t you have a friend from Spain?”

“Janos, Azazel’s boyfriend.”

“Ah. Maybe we could make a group of it,” Charles said.

Tabitha stopped dead and looked at them both. “Please stop trying to make light of it. He assumed
he knew everything, so I put him in his place. The night was great before that. I’ll keep in contact
with them through emails for now, and maybe the next meal we have together won’t end in
disaster. Now, I want to go home and curl up on the couch with the two of you and watch a stupid
movie. It’s cold, so let’s go.”

Erik and Charles looked at each other with bemused smiles.

“You’re rubbing off on her,” Erik said.

“Oh, no. That was pure Lehnsherr.”
Chapter Ten

Charles, despite being a happy person most of the time, didn’t like early mornings. If given the choice, he would much rather snuggle back into his warm bedding and drift until around about noon. Having Erik to snuggle with him was even better.

But if he had to wake up, being woken by Erik was a very good way to handle mornings.

“Sorry,” Erik murmured, leaning down to kiss him on his way to the wardrobe, a towel around his waist. “Didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Mmmm. It’s okay. Come back to bed and we’ll say no more about it.”

“I can’t. Tabs needs dropping at school and I have a delivery coming.”

“She can take the bus and David can get the delivery,” Charles argued, reaching out grabby hands for the naked man pulling on boxers. “Come keep me company in this big bed.”

“I promised Tabs I would drive her,” he replied, hopping into his slacks. “And the delivery has to be handled by me. It’s a load of diamonds.”

Charles whined and buried himself in the covers, literally turning his back on him. Erik, who was very used to Charles in the morning, didn’t take it personally. He grinned as he grabbed his shirt and made his way over. He sat down and leaned in, nuzzling the little telepath.

[Don’t tease,] Charles complained.

“Not teasing.”

“You can’t follow through, so it’s a tease.”

“Okay! Okay, you win,” he laughed, sitting up and pulling on his shirt.
“No! Come back.”

Erik ducked in, sucking a kiss into his throat. [Make up your mind!]

“Fine. Go. Do grown up responsible things.”

“Thank you.”

“Speaking of responsible things…I had a thought about the estate.”

“Estate?” he asked, grabbing socks.

“In Westchester.”

“Oh, the scary oversized building that should have its own mayor.”

“Yes, that one,” Charles agreed, ignoring the joke. “I was thinking about maybe holding a summer camp there for the kids at the centre.”

“Can you do that? Legally?”

“I don’t know. I wanted to run the idea past you before I started thinking about that. See if you thought it was a good idea.”

“I think it’s good. It would stop all the problems with the insurance companies not wanting them at baseline camps. Could you get insurance for all the kids?”

“I’m not sure. I’d have to look into it. But I’m sure Rosalie would love to feed that many children every day.”
“Well, there’s certainly enough space,” Erik said, sitting on the bed to tie his shoes.

There was a knock at the door and they both paused to make sure Charles was covered and they hadn’t left anything risqué on the floor or nightstands.

“Come in!” Erik called and Tabitha peeked around the door.

“You busy?”

“Nope.”

“Good,” she said, joining them on the bed and holding out a bracelet to Charles. “I can’t do it, I just keep shooting it across the room.”

Erik plucked her hairbrush out of the back pocket of her jeans and set to work on her long pink locks.

“Tabitha, what do you think of a mutant summer camp?” Erik asked, gathering up her hair and detangling the ends before braiding it in one long cord down her back.

“Mutant summer camp? Like a sleep-away camp for mutant kids?”

“Yes, for the ones at the centre,” Charles said.

“What about their human siblings? Would they be welcomed?”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“And what about human friends? Like Troy and Marissa?”

“Well...”
“Guess you’ve got some thinking to do, Yoda,” Erik said as he secured the end of her braid with an elastic.

One of the rules of the Centre was that anyone was welcome, so long as they were accepting of every mutation.

Charles had had a few humans come through his doors. Siblings of the members of the Centre, kids with a mutant parent or guardian, school friends of one of the kids. He’d never had a problem with including baseline’s in the group.

“Can I help you?” Charles asked the young man hovering in the doorway, shifting Yuriko to his other hip.

“Uh, hi,” he said. He was a young man, about fourteen or fifteen, dark hair and eyes, wiry rather than muscular. “I…well, Tabitha said it’d be okay if I came along.”

“Yes, we welcome all here. What’s your mutation?”

“Oh, I’m not a mutant.”

“Troy?” They looked over at Tabitha as she came towards them. “What are you doing here?”

“You said I was okay to come join you.”

“I never expected you to actually show,” she said with a grin.

Charles got Troy to fill in a form listing his important details and then Tabitha led him around the room, showing him the ropes. They ended up at the board game table with Kurt, Ororo and Jean, playing Monopoly.
“You can’t do that,” Ororo said, pointing at the hotel Troy was holding. “You don’t got enough houses.”

“Don’t have enough houses,” Kurt corrected.

“That’s what I said.”

“She’s right,” Jean said. “Tabby, your turn. And no hands!”

Tabitha giggled as she held up her hands, pushing against the dice to move them. It seemed to impress Troy, the way the little cubes skittered across the table top.

The game was going so well, and they were all getting along brilliantly, until something upset Troy and he shoved away from the table, glaring angrily at Jean and pointing an accusing finger at her.

“Get the fuck out,” he snarled and Jean recoiled.

“Excuse you?” the redhead snapped.

“You don’t go in my head, you have no right. Who the hell do you think you are, reading my thoughts?”

“I was just checking you were okay. New place, new people. Some kids find it hard the first time they come here. I was just trying to help.”

“I didn’t ask for it and I don’t want it!” he growled, storming off to the open yard.

Tabitha cast a sorry look at her friend.

“It’s okay, Tabby cat,” Jean promised, hugging her. “He said it, not you. We’re going to keep playing, maybe switch to Scrabble. You wanna go check on him, find out where that came from?”
Tabitha buried her face in Jean’s hair, surrounded by the sugary scent of her. Jean lived with her uncle, who ran a bakery and always sent Jean to the Centre with a load of pastries.

[I’m so sorry.] Tabitha thought, pushing it at Jean the way she pushed things at Charles. [I didn’t know he felt like that.]

[Not your fault, sweetie. Go on, go talk to him.]

Troy was sitting on the jungle gym, swinging his legs.

“Jean didn’t deserve that,” she said, climbing up to perch near him. “It wasn’t fair.”

“I don’t want her in my head, I don’t want anyone in my head.”

Tabitha was silent for a while and then she picked her moment. “Do you hate telepaths or are you afraid of them?”

“I’m not afraid! And I don’t hate anyone. I just don’t want them in my head. Come on! It’s like giving someone free range on your diary! Do you want other people knowing every little thing in your head? Every secret you have?”

“Troy, it’s really not like that.”

“How? How is it not like that?”

“For one, I don’t keep a diary, I never have. And for two, telepaths aren’t looking to know all of your secrets.”

“I don’t get how you’re so sure about that.”

“Because I live with one!” she snapped impatiently.
“Wait. What? You said your cousin was a metal bender.”

“He is. His partner is a telepath. You actually met him on your way in. Charles, British, very cute and sweet and very not interested in your secrets.

Troy was stunned silent for a few minutes.

“So,” he said eventually. “That quiet, gentle-looking English guy who looks like butter wouldn’t melt…he’s in your head?” She nodded. “Is he in mine?”

“Not in the way you’re thinking,” she said with a smile. “You’re thinking of what Jean does. She’s not that strong, she only manifested a few years ago. She’s still learning to use it. Charles is different. He was born with his gifts. Because it’s always been there, he can’t read body language or facial expressions, he can’t understand any of the unconscious social cues we pick up on every day. He uses his gift instead, picking up what we do, just in a different way.”

“And he does that all the time?” Troy asked, and she could tell his curiosity was piqued.

“He’s blind without it, like taking away your eyes or ears. Using telepathy…it’s not a choice, not something they can control. They live every day surrounded by people thinking loud thoughts.”

“It does get rather loud,” Charles said as he joined them, leaning against the frame and fiddling with the end of her braid. “Jean and Kurt were wondering if everything was quite alright out here. Jean is terribly sorry. Poor lamb, she’s still learning when it is and isn’t okay to use her powers.”

“I don’t want her in my head, I don’t want anyone in my head,” Troy argued.

“I do understand, really, I can imagine how terribly off-putting it might be.”

“No, you can’t. You have no clue,” he said, throwing himself off the jungle gym and walking away. “You’re just another mind reader who thinks they know everything. Just another spoilt rich boy who thinks he’s entitled to everything.”

Charles looked absolutely crushed and Tabitha’s temper flared to life.
“Hey!” she snapped, following the boy she thought was her friend. “You don’t get to talk to him like that!”

“Oh, but it’s okay for him to go in my head whenever he wants?” he argued, rounding on her.

“It is not like that! And even if it was, calling him a spoilt rich boy is way out of line! You don’t know him, you can’t call him that!”

“Look, I came here to see you, to spend the day with you! How did this become about some British guy who took you in?”

She reared back, staring at him as if she’d never seen him before.

“Troy, this is my life,” she said. “Powers and learning to control them and telepaths who guide me along. Jean taught me to use my gift, she taught me to not be afraid of it. And you just swore at her. And Charles…he’s my family. The very first time I ever met him, he held me close and called me darling and gave me the most beautiful dream of my mother. He worries about me and tucks me in at night and plays with my hair when we watch movies. He can’t cook, he even manages to burn toast, and he has a serious sweet tooth and he cries at sad movies. He’s my family.”

“He’s not your family, he’s just the guy your cousin is dating, who was there when your asshole dad walked out on you!”

Tabitha froze, looking around at all the kids in the yard watching them fight. Bobby, John, Sean, Warren, Remy, Yuriko and Julian, all of them red-faced and looking away in embarrassment. Charles was quick to shoo them inside with muttered instructions to keep it to themselves.

“How could you?” she whispered. “How could you just blurt it out like that? For all of them to hear?”

“Everyone knows,” he said.

“Well they do now!” she spat, backing away from him, feeling more anger than she had ever felt in her life. “I told you that in confidence, as a friend, as someone I trusted!”
“I didn’t know you hadn’t told people here.”

“That doesn’t make it any better! No, you need to leave, you need to go, now.”

“Wait! Tabitha! Just…let’s talk about this!”

“I don’t want to talk,” she snarled, storming inside. “Get out!”

He followed after her, begging the whole way for her to listen to him. Every inhabitant of the Centre stopped what they were doing to watch, most of them preparing to jump in and defend one of their own.

“Troy, no!” Kitty cried, but she was too late to stop his hand making contact with Tabitha’s arm.

Tabitha whirled around, shrugging him off, wanting him away from her so badly that her mutation flared to life, working on pure rage. Jean had been right, rage got a whole lot done. Not only did she get his hand off her, she got everything else away too. Everything in the entire room was shoved to the edges. People, tables, chairs, toys, pens, everything, all shoved into the walls.

Tabitha screamed as she dropped to the floor, and Kurt popped in beside her, catching her as she went down. Blood was streaming from her nose and ears, bubbling between her lips and cried from her eyes as she sobbed in agony.

“Shit,” Troy muttered, crawling back to her, only to have Kurt hold up a hand to stop him. A hand with only two fingers and a thumb. “I just…”

“You’ve done enough,” Kurt hissed, his fangs glinting. “Just get away from her.”

“She okay?” Jean asked, crawling over.

“No.”
Charles did a quick sweep of all the minds around him, assuring himself that everyone was relatively unharmed, and then made his way over, cuddling Tabitha close.

“J didn’t mean to,” she sobbed, clutching her head. “Did I hurt anyone?”

“No, darling, we’re all fine. A few broken pencils, a few bruises, nothing more.” He accepted the box of tissues Marie passed him and set to mopping up the blood. “Scott, my lamb, be a dear and give Armando a call for me?”

“Sure,” Scott said, hand on his glasses as he glared at Troy. “What do you want done with him?”

“Leave him alone, I don’t need you to handle it, thank you. Keep those on.”

Scott grumbled but did as he was told while Charles tried to mop up the blood.

“Charles?”

Charles looked up as Erik joined him. “What the hell happened? How much did she move?”

Charles pushed the whole sorry thing into his head and Erik groaned, rubbing Tabitha’s leg.

“Yes, quite,” Charles agreed. “Erik, my love, will you please get the poor human boy out of here before someone decides to seek their own brand of justice?”

Erik smirked and gave Charles a quick peck before helping Troy up and walking him out the door. Charles would never be able to say just how much it meant to him that Erik trusted him to take care of Tabitha.

“I didn’t mean for any of that to happen,” Troy said, leaning against the wall. He groaned. “She’s never going to talk to me again.”

“Maybe. She is a Lehnsherr and we are a prickly bunch,” he said with a smile. “Look, what you said was really shitty. And I am not impressed by you calling my partner a spoilt rich boy. But…I
do remember being fifteen. We all say and do stupid things. And then we grow up and pray to God no one ever brings it up again."

“Shit,” he moaned. “I didn’t even mean it. He seems like a really nice guy. I was just-”

“Caught up in the moment?”

“Yeah. You ever say anything you wish you could take back?”

“More times than I want to think about,” Erik said with a laugh. “But I don’t think there’s anything that can be said that can’t be undone.”

Troy shoved off the wall and began to pace, tugging his hands through his hair.

“How do you do it? I hear the word telepath and I get this shiver down my spine, every nerve stands on end.”

Erik pondered how to explain it, and then he glanced around before he picked up a stone from the base of a nearby tree.

“Look at the stone.”

“I see the stone. Very nice. All round, kind of looks like a golf ball.”

“Are you afraid of the stone? Do you dislike the stone?”

“No…”

“What about if I threw it at your head, knocked you unconscious? I bet if I threw it hard enough, I could probably kill you with it. How do you feel about the stone now?”
“Still pretty good. Not so much a fan of you though.”

“Okay, okay, good. So it’s not the stone that gets to you, it’s what I do with it. Now. Imagine telepathy in place of the stone.”

Troy took the stone and rolled it around in his palm. “So…it’s not the mutation that gets me, it’s what someone might do with it.”

“Exactly. Troy, Charles would never hurt you with his power. He would never hurt anyone. Hell, the little fruitcake doesn’t even kill spiders, he does catch and release.”

“I heard that.”

Erik peeked over his shoulder to find Charles standing in the doorway watching them.

“I was making a point.”

“I see that. It was a rather good point.”

“Thank you,” Erik said, giving him a kiss. “I did actually come to have lunch with you and the masses. I left the food with Moira. How’s Tabs?”

“Laying down in the reading area. Kurt is with her, and Armando’s on his way. She seems okay, a little overexerted perhaps, but I don’t think she’s done any lasting damage.”

[Does the poor kid really think you would hurt him?]

[He doesn’t know what to think. He’s young and Jean and I are the first telepaths he’s ever met. Ah. He has an older brother, who dated a telepath. Madelyne Pryor?]

“Oh, shit,” Erik said aloud. “Troy, listen to me. Charles went in your head. I know!” he said, holding up a hand when Troy made to protest. “But he didn’t go very deep. Troy, we know your brother dated Madelyne Pryor.”
Troy cringed.

“Oh,” Charles moaned. “I swear, she is a very different kind of telepath, I promise. Would your brother happen to be named Paris?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, dear. Well, no wonder you’re afraid of me! What she did to that poor boy…well, you know what she did. But I am not like Madelyne, neither is Jean. We would never use our powers to hurt someone like that.”

“He spent a year in that place,” Troy admitted, hugging himself. “They call it a hospital. It’s more like a prison. Like he was being punished. And even when he came home, he couldn’t sleep, could barely eat, and the way he screamed…”

“I know, and I am truly sorry for what she did,” Charles said, carefully putting his hands on Troy’s biceps.

“I didn’t mean what I said…you know…when I called you…”

“It’s quite alright.” He rubbed up and down. “You were upset, we all say things we don’t mean when we’re upset.”

Troy chewed on his lower lip. “I can’t trust you. I’m sorry, I know you’re probably nothing like her, you’re probably a really great guy. And Jean is probably really cool, she seemed it before it all went bad. But I just can’t.”

“I understand. Perhaps some time will help. But, for now, I think it best that you leave. The boys aren’t taking the day’s events terribly well, and I fear for what might happen.”

Troy obediently collected his things and disappeared off down the street just as Armando rounded the corner.
“I hear you’ve got a power problem,” he called happily and Charles chuckled.

“Just a little one. Erik, my love, I wonder if you would straighten out some chair legs for me?”

“Just point me,” Erik said as they made their way inside. Erik made a beeline for the reading area.

The reading area was a carpeted corner filled with armchairs and beanbags and floor pillows, even an oversized couch. There were blankets and stuffed animals, and it was used mostly as a lounging area rather than for reading. It was a calm quiet corner where the kids could go have a moment to themselves if they needed.

Kurt had laid Tabitha on a few of the giant floor pillows and curled up on a beanbag with her head on his lap, one of his strange hands stroking her hair.

“Hey, shayna pritzeh,” Erik murmured, taking her hand as her peculiar eyes opened.

The yellow of her sclera’s were shot through with red, and the cluster of black dots she had in place of pupils were blown wide. There was still a steady stream from her ears and nose, but she’d stopped crying blood.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“Oh, zeeskyte, no. Don’t be sorry. I know you didn’t mean to,” Erik promised, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. He was afraid of hurting her if he pressed it to her forehead. “Accidents happen.”

“Did I hurt anyone?”

“No, my darling, you didn’t hurt anyone,” Charles promised. “But Scott and the others are rather upset with your little friend, so I’ve had to send him home.”

“Hi, Tabitha,” Darwin said. “I hear you pushed some limits.”

“It was dumb,” she said.
“No, not dumb. We all do it when we’re learning to control these gifts. Can you try and explain what happened, what you wanted when you pushed?”

“He grabbed my arm, trying to get me to listen to him. And I was so mad at him, I just wanted him to let go. Jean’s right, rage does get a lot done.”

“It certainly does,” Charles said. “It really was a very impressive show of force.”

“I think I’m gonna hurl,” she moaned and the doctor was quick to produce an emesis basin from his bag.

Kurt tilted her up and she spewed blood into the bowl, her trembling fingers gripping at Erik.

“Easy, Tabitha, take it easy,” Darwin said. “It’s okay.”

Once she was done, he looked her over, pressing at her neck and the base of her skull, shining a penlight into her eyes and generally checking she was okay.

“I very much doubt that you’ve done any real damage to yourself,” he said eventually and her two guardians breathed a sigh of relief. “The blood is most likely just broken capillaries from the pressure, and the vomiting is where you swallowed some of it. I’m not worried. Some rest and you’ll be fine.”

Charles led him to the door, leaving Erik fussing.

“Thank you so much for coming, my friend,” he said. “I’m always so grateful you do.”

“Don’t worry about it. She should be fine, might get a few headaches but nothing to really worry about. Any sharp pains, call me immediately, any time, day or night. And I don’t mind helping you out. After all the help you gave Alex, and then introducing us, and now helping Scotty. It’s all fair,” he assured, rubbing his back. “Speaking of.” He looked around. “Scotty!”
“What’s up?” Scott asked as he joined them.

“Time to leave, buddy,” Armando said. “Your temper is up. Time to go.”

“I wasn’t going to hurt him!”

“I know,” he assured, grasping his shoulders. “Scotty, honey, I know you would never ever want to hurt anyone. But we both know what happens when that temper gets the best of you. We’ve talked about this. What did we say?”

“That it’s okay to screw up.”

“And?”

“You’re not gonna get rid of me if I do,” he whispered and Armando pulled him in for a hug.

“That’s right. So I’m taking you home before you can have the chance to make a mistake. Go get your things. We’ll go and make some burgers, huh?”

Scott nodded and moved off to say his goodbyes.

“I do worry about him,” Charles admitted. “He always seems so much younger than seventeen.”

“Yeah. The system couldn’t have fucked him up more if it tried. You know, when me and Alex started the process of taking him out of the care system, the amount of social workers that told us we were crazy was insane. Seemed like every ‘authority figure’ who ever met him wrote him off.”

“I don’t think you’ve ever told me about that time,” Charles mused as they watched Scott laugh with John and Bobby. “I remember all the work you had to put in. Four years of work…”

“And only two years with us,” he finished. “It was worth it. Those four years, the forms, the visits, the checks, the interviews. It was all worth it.”
“Can we have soda?” Scott asked as he returned to them. Charles had to hide his grin. He knew first-hand what soda did to Scott, and no one needed his powers going haywire.

“One can of soda, no more.”

“Awesome! See you next week, Charles.”

“Next week. Have fun,” Charles said with a smile and a wave. Then he roped in Erik to straighten out chair legs and tables.

Kurt looked up from the book he was reading as Tabitha moved. She stretched and blinked up at him sleepily.

“How long was I out?” she mumbled as she sat up.

“Couple hours,” he said, shaking out his leg and pushing the food he’d saved closer to her. “We saved you some lunch.”

“Thanks.” She bit into the turkey sandwich. “Have you been in here with me the whole time?” He nodded and she smiled. “You didn’t have to.”

“Nah, it was cool. I got the reading done I needed for English class.”

“As long as you weren’t sitting here bored,” she said.

“Not at all. How are you feeling?”

“Okay, all things considered. My head aches, and I feel kind of…off. But nothing major.”
“Good. The doc took Scott home, worried he was going to do something stupid.”

“I think I took all the stupid,” she said opening the bag of chips.

“Not at all. Look, what happened wasn’t stupid. It was a little beyond what you’re capable of normally, but it was really exciting. You’ve got a whole lot of juice.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“It can be, if you want it to be.”

“I guess. Just wasn’t expecting to do something quite so big. Or to have that much blood.”

He nodded in sympathy, remembering all the times he’d teleported somewhere unexpected. He’d not only ended up in the middle of the street in his boxers. He’d once wanted to see a shark at the aquarium so badly he’d managed to pop right into the tank and had to be rescued by his stepfather Mike.

Kurt took a deep breath and kept in mind the advice Mike had given him.

“I was wondering…if you were busy on Friday,” he asked and she shook her head. “Good! Great! No, not great, that’s not what I meant! Okay, shut up Kurt, shut up.”

“Are you okay?”

“Fine! I’m fine! Willyougooutwithme?”

“Uhhh. I’m sorry, I don’t think that was actual words,” she said, and he could see how hard she was trying not to laugh.

“Will you go out with me? Like…a-a date?”
She dropped the cookie she was holding and stared at him, and Kurt was very aware of Charles’
not-so-subtle staring at him.

[Charles, if you can hear me, I swear I have nothing but good intentions.]

Charles nodded at him and Erik looked at Charles in question, to which the shorter man waved him
off.

“You…you want to go out? With me?” Tabitha asked in disbelief.

“Yeah, I do. I was thinking maybe a movie and a burger?”

“Why?”

“Because there’s a really cool looking animated one out at the moment.”

“No! Why me?”

“I know, I was trying to make you see how ridiculous I find it that you’d even have to ask,” he said
with a small smile. “Tabitha, I like you. I like spending time with you. You’re smart and talented
and, as my grandpa would say, a firecracker. And you’re very pretty. And I’d like to spend some
more time with you. And if it doesn’t go well then I’d really like to keep being your friend. And
wow, if I’d known I was going to run on so much I’d of brought some water.”

“Stop,” she said, placing her fingers on his lips. “Take a breath.”

He made a show of taking a deep breath and letting it out.

“So…will you go out with me?”

“Yes, Kurt. I will go out with you.”
The week passed like every other.

Erik worked in the store, cooked most nights, made love to Charles every chance he got and remembered to call his mother at least twice.

Charles continued on with his research, had lunch with Alex and Armando and had them and Scott over for dinner on Wednesday.

Tabitha went to school, kept up with her homework and made sure Charles didn’t kill them all on Thursday morning when he attempted to make instant oatmeal. How he turned it that colour she was afraid to ask.

Friday evening saw Erik and Charles home alone for a few hours with no fear of being interrupted. Kurt had met Tabitha at school and whisked her off for a movie and dinner at a burger place. He’d promised to have her home at a reasonable time, and to be a perfect gentleman.

Surprisingly it was not Erik who was a nervous wreck. Erik had spent the week worrying about the date, that maybe Tabitha was too young to date or she wouldn’t have a good time or, most worryingly, Kurt wasn’t the good boy they took him for.

The actual night of the date, Erik was oddly zen about the whole thing. Charles had a permanent psychic link with Tabitha, he would know if she needed them. And Kurt had been nothing but kind and good to Tabitha since the moment he met her. And Tabitha was a good girl, they could trust her. It was all good.

Charles was the nervous wreck, like a parent sending their child off for the first day of school. He kept wandering to the window and looking out onto the street as if Tabitha would materialise any moment, needing Charles to be her white knight.

It was incredibly sweet and endearing.

So Erik cooked a very romantic steak dinner, they opened a bottle of wine, and before long they
were both naked on the couch.

Erik gasped, fighting for air, as Charles licked the head of his cock. Sex was the most effective way Erik knew to get Charles off a troubling subject.

“Dear fucking Lord, I think I’m going to pass out,” he moaned and then half screamed as Charles sucked him down. “Charles, stop.”

The Englishman pulled off immediately with a worried frown.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No, ziskeit, nothing wrong,” he promised, stroking one high cheekbone. “I just wondered if it would put you off if I asked you to top.”

The look on Charles’ face was priceless, Erik wished he had a camera.

“Oh. Well. Right. Uh.”

Erik rolled his lower lip between his teeth as his lover spluttered in surprise. It had been a long time since Erik had let anyone top him. The last time, he had been young and inexperienced, it had only been his second relationship ever. And it had hurt. The fool he had been dating had convinced him it would be amazing, and neglected to mention that he had no clue how to fuck a man. It had been terrible. So much so that Erik had needed a trip to the emergency room and surgery to repair the tearing.

Erik had refused to bottom ever since.

But this was Charles. Charles who would never ever not in a million years do anything to hurt him.

“You would want me to?” Charles asked.

“I would.”
“You truly trust me so much?”

“I do.”

“Well. That’s quite something.” Erik laughed and Charles couldn’t help but chuckle with him. “I would need you to…guide me. I don’t quite know exactly how to top you. But I would, if you’d like to.”

Erik grinned and tugged him up as he kissed him, leading him to the bedroom. Bailey was lounging on their bed, looking thoroughly depressed that Tabitha wasn’t there. Erik was quick to lead her out, shutting her in Tabitha’s room for the time being.

When he returned he let Charles pin him to the mattress and press his lips anywhere he liked. He wriggled at the gentle nip of teeth, the slide of a hot tongue, the suck of that wonderful mouth. Charles’ hands stroked over his skin, setting a trail of tingling flesh in their wake.

Erik managed to get his own hands to move, touching what he could reach as Charles moved over him. He finally managed to gather himself enough to pull the smaller man up and seal their mouths together.

[This time alone won’t last forever,) Erik reminded and Charles nodded.

[Fair point. I prepare you now, yes?] Charles asked, stroking feather-light fingertips over Erik’s hard cock. [If it were the other way around, you would prepare me about now.]

Erik fumbled in the nightstand and grabbed the tube, shoving it into Charles’ hand while remaining locked at the lips, tongues tickling each other. Charles kept touching him, stroking, circling the head, reaching down to tug his balls before moving back up and stroking.

“Stop it,” he chastised. “I want you inside me, not giving me a handjob.”

“But this is fun!”
“But I want it,” Erik whined and Charles laughed at him, finally letting go.

“How are we doing this? You on top? Me? Some other exciting position?”

Erik kissed him and flipped over onto his belly, curling his arms around a pillow and waiting patiently.

Charles gazed at the strong shoulders, the long naked back, the rounded buttocks, and his mouth watered. He crawled over him, pushing his thighs apart so he could kneel between them, and lowered his mouth to the pale skin. Erik shivered beneath him and pulled up his leg, giving Charles more access.

Charles coated his fingers before drawing back. He stroked his clean hand down Erik’s back and spread his cheeks so he could see his wrinkled hole. He stroked a finger over it, spreading the lube. Erik was so hot right there, it almost burnt his skin, and he pressed against the tight ring, his fingertip slipping in.

Erik gasped, fighting against his urge to push back. He chewed on his lip as Charles pushed a little deeper, his whole finger sliding in,

“Fuck, that’s good,” he moaned.

“Yes? Another?”

“Please.”

[So polite.] Charles said with a kiss to his shoulder.

He removed his one finger and wiggled two of them in, stroking his silken inner walls.

“Ugh. More,” Erik grunted, picturing Charles spreading his fingers, and he was satisfied to feel his lover taking the hint.
Charles tugged at the tight muscles, working them open, and Erik couldn’t help himself any longer; he thrust back, and Charles rewarded him by nibbling at his shoulder.

[Charles, baby, honey, ziskeit, I love you dearly, but hurry the fuck up!]

Charles sniggered and added a final finger, spreading them and finishing up before removing them.

Erik climbed onto his knees and looked back at Charles.

“I couldn’t find it,” Charles said worriedly, pressing against his hole with the tips of his slick fingers.

“Find what?”

“Your sweet spot. You always find mine.”

Erik laughed and sat up, joining their lips and pushing Charles back into the mattress. He climbed astride him, ducking to lick a nipple before he eased himself down onto Charles’ erection. The Brit screamed at the pressure, the heat, the sheer sensation of it.

“I find yours through practice,” Erik said, holding himself still to adjust. Charles was thick and hard and hot within him, and no matter how good it was and how much he wanted to move, he restrained himself. Another surgery in that area was definitely not wanted. “You’ll find mine. I’ll help you find it.” He felt himself adjust. “You can move now. I’m good, I’m ready.”

Charles gripped his hips and rocked up into him and Erik began to move, letting his head fall back at how good it was. He'd forgotten how good it could be to bottom for someone, to be stretched from the inside out.

Erik coaxed him up and kissed him, looping his arms around Charles’ neck as he began to add some force to his movements, thrusting himself down harder and faster. He could feel Charles’ pleasure in the link between them, the almost overwhelming wave of new experience that Charles was riding.
Erik shifted, changing the angle and gripping at his lover as his prostate rubbed against the hard shaft.

[Got it, found it, right there.] Erik babbled.

Charles fell back, taking Erik with him until Charles could thrust up into him as hard as Erik wanted, faster and deeper until Erik couldn’t take anymore and exploded over the smaller man’s stomach and chest. He felt himself clamp down, squeezing the cock within him, and then the heat of Charles’ release as it filled him.

Erik collapsed, Charles holding him close as they panted and shook, clinging to each other.

“Well,” Charles said, when he could breathe again, playing with Erik’s hair. “That was different.”

“Good different?” Erik asked, pressing his hand to Charles’ chest to feel his heartbeat.

“It was good, it was very good,” he assured.

“But…”

“I like it the other way better.”

“Ah. You would rather bottom for me than top me.”

“Yes. Is…is that okay?”

“Oh, ziskeit, of course it’s okay. No matter who tops it’s still good for me. Everything we do together is good for me. And now you’ve tried it this way and made an informed decision on preference.”

Charles grinned and leaned in, kissing him fiercely, pulling Erik between his legs.
“I have a preference.”

“I see that.”

“So fuck me.”

Erik was all too happy to oblige.

Kurt was bold enough to take Tabitha’s hand as they walked out of the movie theatre.

“What did you think of it?” he asked, smiling as she gripped his two fingered hand.

“I liked it. Kind of sad in some parts, but it was pretty good. I felt for the little guy,” she said. “He was very cute.”

“Yeah. The music was good. You hungry?”

“Yeah. Popcorn was good though.”

“It was insanely sweet. I have no clue how you ate it.”

“It was awesome! How you can dislike sweet things is a sin against nature.”

“Oh! That’s harsh, girl. Way, way harsh.”

“You keep asking for honesty,” she said with a grin as they approached the burger place.
“Fine, Miss Honesty. What do you want?”

“No, you bought the tickets, and the popcorn.”

“Hey,” he said, pulling her closer. “I want to. I asked you on this date. Let me buy you dinner.”

She gave him one of those half smiles he loved so very much. “Okay. Chicken burger, please.”

He flashed her a fang filled grin and left her to find a table, returning with their food. They chatted while they ate, and then they decided to walk in Central Park. It wasn’t too late, Kurt still had time to get her home before her guardians skinned him to make a rug.

“Do you miss it?” he asked after a while. They’d been talking about classes and the latest books they’d been reading. “Being baseline.”

“Sometimes,” she admitted, smiling as he wound around her tail with his. “When I break something or give myself a nosebleed, that’s when I hate my powers. And then I think about what my life is now and I don’t hate it. Do you ever wish you looked like baselines?”

“When idiots are hurling abuse at me on the street, yeah. But not usually.”

“I’m glad you don’t look like everyone else,” she said shyly as they left the park. “I mean…I like how you look.”

“Me too. For uh…for you. That’s not it. That’s not how I meant that. I meant that I like how you look. I think you’re beautiful.”

He was rewarded for the compliment with her bashful smile, her cheeks turning pink.

“So…” she said eventually when they stood outside her apartment building. “This is me. Thanks for walking me home. And for tonight. I had a really good time.”

“Me too. I had a really great time.” He took a deep breath and summoned his courage. “I might kiss
you.”

“Might?”

“If you wanted to.”

She looked terrified all of a sudden, looking up at him with alarm in her strange otherworldly eyes.

“I might be bad at it,” she whispered.

“That’s not possible,” he assured as he leaned in.

He gently pressed his lips against hers, settling his hands cautiously on her waist, careful to keep them there. Her hands rose between them, one hand cupping his cheek as she kissed back, her other hand stroking the hair at the nape of his neck.

“See?” he said as he pulled back. “You’re not bad at it.”

“Really?”

“I promise,” he said, pressing a kiss to her cheek. “Do you think Erik and Charles are watching from the window?”

“Oh, I know they are,” she said with a giggle. “It’s a thing, when I get close to home Charles settles in my head. It’s like a warm shadow in the back of my head.”

“Wow. I did not know that. If I had…”

“You wouldn’t have kissed me?”

“I would have kissed you sooner.”
She laughed and he joined her. Strangely it didn’t bother him to know Charles was keeping psychic tabs on her. It was sort of…sweet, in a mildly invasive kind of way.

“Nice. So…am I your girlfriend now?”

“If I say yes, do I get another kiss?”

She leaned in and kissed him, catching him by surprise, and he could feel her smile against his lips.

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“She’s home.”

Erik shook his head at his little fruitcake, who was hovering by the window. “Charles, come away from the window and nobody gets hurt.”

“Awww. He got her a cuddly toy. How sweet. It’s a…I have no clue what that is.”

Erik sighed and set down the remote, crossing the room and looking down.

“That is an Oh. Character from the movie he took her to. Little alien guy,” Erik supplied, and now he was by the window looking down upon the pair, he couldn’t look away.

“It’s very cute,” Charles whispered, as if they could hear them four floors up.

“Does she look happy? I mean, does she look like she had a good time?” Erik asked, tilting his head as she smiled.

“I think so. She feels very happy. Oh! Oh! Oh! Kiss! Kiss!” Charles hissed, waving his hands in sudden excitement.
“Kiss? No way.”

“He wants to, very much.”

“Charles, get out of their heads.”

“I’m not! They’re practically screaming at me. Oh, poor things. They’re both so nervous.”

They fell silent as Kurt leaned in and then looked away as he actually kissed Tabitha, returning to the sofa, even if Erik practically had to pick Charles up and carry him to get him there. Bailey curled up with them, snuggling into Erik, and they tried so very hard to focus on the film.

They managed to act natural as Tabitha came in, and did a fair enough job that she didn’t question it too closely as she made her way to her room to get ready for bed. Though that might have had something to do with the cloud of happiness she was floating on. Bailey followed in a state of delirious happiness.

Eventually Erik shooed Charles off to their room and made his way to the kitchen, putting together some cookies and hot chocolate before he went to Tabitha’s room and knocking.

“Come in!”

He poked his head around the door and found her curled up in bed reading a book, the new stuffed alien cuddled in with her and Bailey laying across her feet.

“Hey. You up for some company? And cookies?”

“Yes to both,” she said, setting the book aside and sitting up.

“So,” he said once he’d folded himself onto the bed and they’d both nibbled at a cookie. “How did it go?”
“It was good,” she said shyly. “The movie was good.” She held out the toy to him. “Kurt got him for me.”

“Very nice. Gifts on the first date, very good sign.”

“He paid for everything, he wouldn’t let me pay for a thing. And he held open doors, and held my hand, and there was a thing where my tail and his wound around each other.”

“The night was a success then,” he said with a grin at her babbling.

“I think so. Erik? Do you like him?”

“No, no, no, this is your boyfriend, not mine. He’s far too young for me.”

“You’re not funny.”

“I am very funny. I am a hoot,” he said with a grin. “I think he’s a very sweet boy, who obviously likes you very much. And I am going to ruin this good moment by asking if he got fresh.”

“No! He didn’t get fresh,” she said. And then she wrinkled her nose in thought. “Does a kiss count as fresh?”

“Tongue?”

“No. Just a very nice, very sweet, simple kiss. Okay two, but the second one was me. And hands stayed in very safe for public places.”

“Then no, he didn’t get fresh. How were the kisses?”

“They were…nice. I liked them.”
“Good. I’m glad it went well. Okay, I’m just going to say this. And I say this because I love you and care about you. No sex with this boy.”

“Erik!” she shrieked, turning bright red.

“Don’t sleep with him, don’t touch anything you shouldn’t, and don’t let him touch anything he shouldn’t, because if that happens I’m going to have to get very violent with him and there will be police and blood and it won’t be pretty. So just…don’t.”

“Erik, I’m not going to have sex with him! Or with anyone! Oy gevalt, we’ve had one date, and I’m only fourteen!”

“I do realise that. But a vague disclaimer is no one’s friend. Oh, and if he hurts you I’m going to have to do painful things then too.”

She rolled her eyes as he gathered the plate and mugs. He leant down and kissed her on the forehead, wishing her sweet dreams as he left the room.

“Goodnight, you Golem!”

“So, I take it that is the girl my son won’t stop raving about?”

Charles looked up from the homework he was looking over for John and grinned at Mike Wagner.

Mike had met Carol when she was six months pregnant with Kurt, and had loved the boy as his own since the second he’d been born. He’d officially adopted Kurt just before his third birthday, and had never found it upsetting that Kurt didn’t call him dad. He knew how much Kurt loved him; a title didn’t matter. He was Kurt’s father in all the ways that mattered.

“Yes, that’s my Tabitha.”
Mike grinned. “Kurt said you and Erik had adopted her.”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that,” Charles mused. “We’ve been thinking of it as taking custody of her. We hadn’t thought of it as an adoption, but I suppose it is.”

“You’re a daddy, Charles. Congrats.”

“Thank you.”

“I actually wanted a favour.”

“And right into it,” Charles said with a grin. “Ask away.”

“It’s about Kurt. I love that kid, he’s my boy, my son, in all the ways that matter. But he’s got questions…about his father. I want him to be able to ask them and get answers. I don’t have those answers.”

“I understand, but I’m not sure I how I can help you.”

“I was thinking, you know a lot of mutants, and Erik knows a lot of mutants…”

“And you would like to know if I know of this particular mutant,” Charles finished, leading him into the office. “Mike, I have to ask. This man, this mutant. Does he even know Kurt exists?”

“No, he doesn’t. Carol…it was one night, and she was going to find him, and then when Kurt was born she decided adding another father figure to the mix would complicate things. For that and a lot of other reasons, she never told him, and now she doesn’t know how to approach him. I understand. How do you track down a man and tell him he’s got a teenager he never knew about after a one night stand?”

“I see,” he said with a nod. “Mike, I am always happy to help you, you know that. And Kurt is a wonderful young man who has the right to know where he comes from. But I have to ask if Carol is aware of you asking me this.”
Mike laughed. “No, she knows, she knows! She’s the one that sent me! She’s got a dentist appointment so I came instead. No, she knows, I promise.”

“Ah, right, good. Alright, what is this mutant’s name?” Charles said, grabbing a paper and pen.

“Carol said his name is Azazel. She doesn’t know his last name.”

Charles didn’t even bother to write it down, instead cringing internally. “Oh, dear. Would Azazel happen to be red and have a tail and be a teleporter?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, dear.”

“You know him?”

“I do.” Charles picked up his phone and speed dialled Erik.

“Lehnsherr Designs.”

“Erik? I think I have a slight situation I could use your assistance with.”

“On my way.”

Charles put down the phone and chewed on his lower lip as he watched Kurt press a quick kiss to Tabitha’s cheek.

Erik arrived in a cloud of smoke with Azazel less than two minutes later.
“Oh my God,” Mike moaned.

“Oh, Erik, no,” Charles moaned.

“Mike?”

Kurt was standing there, staring at the red mutant, who was staring at him with a growing look of horror on his face.

Erik took in the situation, gaze flickering between Azazel and Kurt, before he looked at Charles.

[Azazel was in the shop with me when you called. I thought this would be quicker. Charles, I’m sorry, I didn’t know.] Erik explained.

[Neither did I,] Charles replied. He pushed the conversation with Mike into his mind and Erik buried his face in his hands. [Erik, what do I do?]

[Wait and see what they do. This is out of our hands. It’s up to Kurt and Azazel now.]

The red mutant stared at the blue, and the blue stared back. Charles and Erik were quick to urge the other kids away to other things, and Mike hovered worriedly.

“Mike?” Kurt said quietly. “Is he…you know?”

“I think so, champ,” the human said. “You okay?”

Kurt shrugged but Mike could see how not okay he was by the way he was fiddling with the end of his tail. He’d stopped doing it when he was six, except when he was sleepy or completely freaking out.

“I suppose I should ask how old you are,” Azazel said. “And your mother’s name.”
“I’m fifteen,” Kurt said. “And my mom is Carol.”

Azazel let out a high pitched sound, something that screamed pure panic, and looked at the boy again before he started pacing.

“What is your mutation? Do you have another, aside from the physical? Bozhe moy eti glaza,” he muttered, his Russian strong in the silence.

“I’m a teleporter,” Kurt said and Azazel suddenly puffed out, leaving a cloud of smoke behind himself.

“Easy,” Erik soothed, rubbing Kurt’s shoulders. “Give him a chance to get past the panic and actually use the functioning part of his brain.”

Kurt nodded and let Tabitha lead him to a chair. He took comfort in her twining her tail with his to stop him tugging on it while Mike watched on worriedly. Kurt held out a didactyl hand to him and was relieved when he took it.

“You’re my dad,” Kurt said, reassuring himself as much as Mike. “This isn’t about that. You’re my dad, you’re the one who’s been there. He’s just…I just…”

“I know, Kurtling,” Mike assured, pulling him in for a sudden hug. “You’re still my little blueberry, I still love you. You just have questions, and he has the answers, and that is absolutely okay. You are always going to be my son, no matter what.”
I really hope I got this right. I wanted to try and add in as much Jewish tradition and custom as I could, but I'm not Jewish, I I'm really not sure how close I got.

I really hope you all like this chapter, I worked really hard on this one and there were a whole lot of emotional moments writing this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took a week for Azazel to resurface.

In that time, Tabitha and Kurt went on two more dates, once to bowling and the other to ice skating. Both times Kurt treated Tabitha like a princess and had her home by nine, and managed to get in dinner. He didn’t get fresh, nor did he push any boundaries that his parents or hers had set. It was considered very sweet by everyone. On the days he didn’t take her on a date, he walked her home from school.

Charles continued on with his research. He’d found some fascinating passages about the hidden geneticists, the ones who had made discoveries and never really been credited for them. His favourite new discovery was that it was James Watson and Francis Crick, not Cook, who were the ones to discover the structure of DNA. Maurice Wilkins also shared the Nobel Prize with those two for their work. However, not enough credit goes to Rosalind Franklin, an x-ray crystallographer who worked in the same lab as Wilkins. Wilkins, who had a rocky relationship with Franklin, showed Franklin’s "Photo 51" to competitors Watson and Crick without her permission. The photo showed the double-helix structure of DNA, which gave Watson and Crick the information they needed to finish up and publish their work. Unfortunately, Franklin passed away from cancer before the Nobel Prize was awarded to Watson, Crick, and Wilkins. Only up to 3 people can share an award, and it can't be awarded posthumously.

Charles was just chomping at the bit to find out more about Rosalind Franklin. He was fairly certain Erik was going to strangle him if he mentioned her one more time.

Erik woke to the annoying tone of his cell at the ungodly hour of four AM on Sunday morning.

[Erik, if you don’t shut that up, I will drown it in the toilet,] Charles said, rolling onto his front and curling around his pillow.
The metal bender reached out, grabbing the little device and shoving it to his ear.

“This better be life or death,” he groaned.

“Erik, it is Janos. I need help.”

Erik hauled himself up, swinging his legs out of bed and padding out to the lounge.

“Okay, I’m awake, I’m listening. What kind of help?”

“Is Azazel,” Janos said. “He has come home, but it is very bad. He won’t listen to me, I don’t know what to do.”

“Okay, okay, just calm down. I’m on my way.”

He hung up without further comment and pulled on some actual clothes, writing out a note for Charles before he headed out. It took him ten minutes to run to Janos and Azazel’s apartment, and the Spanish mutant was waiting for him on the front stoop.

“Rough night?” Erik asked as he caught his breath.

“Very rough. He is saying many bad things. I have never seen him like this. You have known him very much longer than I have.”

“I don’t know what I can do,” he said honestly. “He’s just found out he’s a father, to a teenager no less. I don’t know how to help him with this.”

“How old is this child?” Janos asked. “He has not made much sense. His boss was good enough to give a leave of absence once I called, which makes things better. But he will not talk to me about anything. So I wonder. Is this a good child? Is he happy? Healthy?”

“His name’s Kurt, he’s fifteen. He’s a good kid, you’d like him.”
Janos nodded absentmindedly and Erik let him be, making his way inside.

The apartment was pretty tidy, all things considered. But the bedroom was a mess, all centred around the prone form of one highly intoxicated, softly sobbing red teleporter.

“Oh, yes, this is absolutely the most productive and healthy way to deal with the fact that you have a son,” Erik said and Azazel looked up at him mournfully.

“He hates me,” the Russian moaned, taking a swig from the bottle of vodka he held.

“He doesn’t hate you. He doesn’t know you,” he dismissed, plonking himself down on the half-destroyed bed. “Jeez, this mess must be driving Janos’ OCD up the wall.”

“Is good mess. Show my life.”

“Bullshit. Your life is not a mess. You’ve found out something that you’re having a hard time coming to terms with, and that’s okay, but you have got to snap out of this.”

“Is teenage boy with my mama’s eyes. No, no, no snapping out of anything. Vodka?” he muttered, holding out the bottle.

“Thanks,” he said, taking the bottle and using the metal ring left over from the cap to send it to the kitchen. “So. He has your mother’s eyes. Good start. Look, he only wanted to meet you, get some questions answered. He’s not expecting anything else.”

“Boy needs father!”

“Boy has father. Mike, the human with him that day. Legally adopted him when he was a toddler.”

Azazel sprung to his feet, careening wildly as he managed to get upright. “Has no right! My son!”
“Fuck this shit,” Erik muttered, and moved faster than his friend could keep track of.

Azazel managed to land on the crumpled bed as the punch Erik landed to his temple pushed him out of consciousness.

Charles finally woke up of his own accord at just before eleven, to the sound of happy music, giggles, and the smell of something absolutely delicious.

What did he want more, food or to pee, food or to pee? Stomach or bladder?

He rushed through making himself the slightest bit presentable and then joined Tabitha and Kurt in the kitchen, where they were making brunch.

“Morning,” Charles said happily, accepting the plate of kosher turkey bacon, eggs, hash browns and mushrooms. Laid out on the kitchen island was a whole array of fruit and starches. Toast, French toast, croissants, pancakes. Strawberries, grapes, melon, pineapple.

“Erik still sleeping?” Kurt asked as he scrambled more eggs.

“Erik has gone to rescue Janos from a drunk Azazel,” Charles said, adding some cantaloupe to his plate.

“Oh. Does he…do that a lot?”

“Nope,” Tabitha said. “Still freaking out.”

“Precisely,” Charles agreed. “Not to worry. He’ll come around eventually.”

They settled in to eat, the conversation light, until Kurt cleared his throat, trying to seem casual as
he poked at pieces of grape on his plate.

“So…what’s he like?” he said, and he was trying so hard to make it seem like he didn’t care
Charles wanted to hug him.

“Azazel? Well…I don’t know him particularly well,” he admitted. “I’ve met him a few times, he
and Erik used to be roommates. He’s Russian, a teleporter. He works in home security, something
to do with cameras and alarms and whatnot.”

“Is he a good guy?”

“He used to come to Bubbe’s sometimes,” Tabitha said. “When I was little. I think he and Erik
went to college together or something like that. Wait. Can’t be college, Erik didn’t go to college.
High school then. Anyway! He’s really good at hide and seek, but I’m pretty sure he cheats. Like
he uses his gift to move so you can’t find him.”

“That sounds…like a really jerky thing to do.”

“Nah, it’s okay. All part of the game. We have a thing, like a family rule. Everyone can use their
powers whenever they want, so it’s not really cheating, but it is annoying.”

Kurt slumped in his seat.

“Maybe I should have just left it alone,” he said sadly. “I’ve got Mike, I don’t need Azazel to be a
dad. I was just curious. I should have just left it as it was.”

“No, you have done nothing wrong,” Charles promised, taking his hand. “You have the right to
know where you come from. There is no wrong in wanting that. All you did was ask the question
of who he was, that is all. You have not asked him for anything. The way he is acting now is an
indication of him, not you. And, quite frankly, if he will go around having one night stands, then
children are bound to happen eventually.”

“I guess…”
“No, Charles is right,” she said, pouring herself more orange juice. “If you do the dirty, you have to deal with the consequences.”

Kurt grinned and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“Just call me delayed consequences.”

Erik looked up from his phone as Azazel groaned and sat up.

He’d been having a very long and happily pointless text conversation with Charles while he waited for Azazel to come round from his punch.

Erik and Azazel had met on Erik’s first day of school after moving in with Poppa and Bubbe. Azazel had been the senior chosen to show the younger boy around. The two mutant boys had fallen into an easy friendship, and after over a decade of being in each others lives, they knew the other incredibly well.

Azazel knew never to bring up Erik’s father, or Shaw. He knew how Erik took his coffee and that putting an empty milk carton back in the fridge would make Erik furious.

Erik knew Azazel didn’t talk about his mother unless he’d been drinking, heavily. He knew that Azazel couldn’t stand cheese, but loved all kinds of pasta. He knew Azazel would always be happy to spend hour after hour playing with the Lehnsherr children, but never wanted any of his own.

Erik had held his hand while he’d had a vasectomy. Azazel had been sure he didn’t want children, so ten years ago he had paid to put a stop to that possibility.

Too late for that now. Kurt was fifteen.

“That was a strong punch, comrade.”
“That was a strong load of bullshit you were spouting,” Erik replied, holding out the ibuprofen he had waiting. Azazel took them with the glass of water Erik had put on his nightstand.

“Janos?” Azazel asked as he looked around the trashed room

“Gone to visit his sister for the day. Come on. Up, in the shower, brush your teeth.”

“No, I must die,” he groaned, curling into a ball and yanking the duvet over his head.

Erik stood up, composing a new message to Charles one handed, and yanked the bedding off, grabbing a pillow and proceeding to smack his friend repeatedly with it.

“Up, up, up,” he chanted with every hit. “Get up or I’ll put on some aggressively cheerful teenie bopper music full blast.”

“You would not be so cruel.”

“I would absolutely be so cruel, and you know Tabitha has introduced me to a whole plethora of songs. Now get up!”

Through many angry looks and a lot of verbal abuse, including a few names Erik would wash Tabitha’s mouth out for ever using, Erik managed to get his friend up, showered, shaved, dressed and out the door.

“Where are we going?” Azazel asked as they left the coffee shop. He clutched his order like a drowning man clutches a life-raft.

“We’re going to the park,” Erik said. “It’s a beautiful day.”

“You dragged me out of bed for a day in the park?”

“No, I dragged you out of bed because you were being pathetic. We’re going to the park for a picnic.”
“I don’t want a picnic. I was happy wallowing in bed.”

Erik refused to answer him, instead continuing on to the area in Central Park where Charles and Tabitha were waiting for them.

With Kurt.

Erik saw the tiny tick in Azazel’s left eye and grabbed a hold of his tail and one ear, the only way to stop him teleporting. This was why he always carried a metal coffee mug.

“Nuh uh, don’t even think about it,” the metal bender said. “You are going to meet the boy. One picnic, one conversation, it’s the least you can give him. He deserves at least that much.”

“Let go of me!”

“No, not until I’m sure you’ll give this afternoon a real effort.”

“What do I even say?!”

“Words. Look, I’ve called David, and Charles called Kurt’s mom. You won’t be on your own with him. No one is expecting a miracle. You don’t have to be his best friend. But you do have to try with him.”

The red mutant stared across the expanse of grass at the blue mutant, watching him as he threw a ball around with Tabitha and another mutant, one wearing red sunglasses. Charles was setting out the picnic on an honest-to-god red and white checked blanket. Sitting with him were two men, one African American and the other blond.

“Fine. I will have one meal with him. And if it goes wrong?”

“Then we’ll never ask you to do anything even remotely connected to Kurt ever again.”
Erik sat Azazel down on the blanket and moved off to play with the kids while Azazel chatted with Charles and Alex, trying to get comfortable with the idea of having a teenager.

And just as he had managed to settle enough, Carol and Mike arrived and set him on edge again.

“Take it easy,” Darwin urged. “Just remember that this isn’t about you or them or anything that’s happened. It’s about Kurt.”

“But how to know what he needs from me?”

“He’s a teenage boy, believe me, he’ll let you know.”

Kurt was studiously ignoring what was going on, focussing on Tabitha and the ball she was ‘pushing’.

“You know, I think you might have to approach the picnic to get some lunch,” Scott said as he added another ball to Tabitha’s pile.

“Cool it with the adding things!” she laughed. “Much more and I’ll break something.”

“You’re doing fine,” Erik promised as she managed to hover four of them in the air.

“Easy for you, Mr Spectator, to say.”

Azazel took the chance to sneak off to the closest group of trees to light up. He’d promised Erik (and by extension Charles, and holy hell, those eyes should be registered weapons) he wouldn’t leave until he’d had at least one conversation with Kurt. But it didn’t stop him taking cigarette breaks.

“He doesn’t want anything from you.”

Carol was leaning against a tree. He held out his cigarettes and smirked as she took one.
“If he wants nothing, why seek me out?”

“He’s curious,” she said, sparking a flame in her hand to light up. “I never lied to him. I told him that his biological father was a mutant who was red and could teleport. I told him it was a one night stand, and why I didn’t track you down and tell you.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“It seemed like the right thing at the time. I didn’t need your money, I had Mike, I was worried having another daddy would confuse him. I was doing what I thought was best. I didn’t think about what might happen if he wanted to know more about you.”

“Has happened. Now what?”

“I have no fucking clue,” she laughed. “Look, I know I made a bad call with all this. But I only want what’s best for my son. And right now, he has questions, questions he deserves answers to. He just wants a few answers, that’s all. He doesn’t want money or you to step into the father role or holiday visits. He’s not angry at you. He just wants to know.”

She was silent while he processed it all, before he took a deep breath, stubbed out his smoke and determinedly strode over to Kurt.

“We need to talk, and it must be now before I completely lose my nerve,” he said bluntly.

“Okay. Let’s…let’s walk,” Kurt said hesitantly after looking to Erik for guidance and receiving an encouraging nod.

“Your mother, she says you have questions.”

“I do. Can I ask you things?”

“Yes, of course, ask anything.”
“Okay…uhhh…Where are you from originally? Do I have any brothers or sisters?”

“Russia, originally. And no. To tell truth, I never wanted children, so I had vasectomy about ten years ago. Of course, was too late, but still.”

“What about other family? Aunts, uncles? Grandparents?”

“I don’t think so. When I was born, many people were afraid of me. So my mama took me away, hid me. She died when I was a boy, I don’t know if I have any others.”

“Is that why you didn’t want children?”

“Yes. I didn’t want any child to have to live with this,” he said, motioning to himself. He stood still and looked at Kurt, taking in the blue skin, the fangs, the tail. “I am sorry.”

“Don’t be. There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m fine, just the way I am.”

“But people must stare, must say things.”

“I don’t care what they do or say,” the teen said firmly. “They don’t know me, they’re not people I care to have in my life, so nothing they put out means anything to me. And it shouldn’t mean anything to you either.”

“When I was seven, boys in the village we lived in tried to drown me in the church pond while their fathers beat my mother. What I look like, what we look like…it matters.”

“But they don’t,” Kurt argued. He wasn’t angry, Azazel was pretty sure. But he did seem disappointed in him. “What they do, what they say, the way they react to us, it’s proof of them, not us. There’s nothing wrong with me, and you thinking there’s something wrong with you doesn’t make you someone I need to know.”

Azazel watched as Kurt teleported back to the picnic, leaving him standing alone. After a few
minutes, Erik came and joined him.

“Do I truly hate myself so much, Comrade?”

“Seriously? You’re only just asking this now?” Erik asked incredulously. “Azazel, you’ve hated being a mutant for as long as I’ve known you. And you hate baselines even more and make no secret of that.” He sighed. “Look, after what happened to your mom and what people have put you through…I get it. If I had been through things like that, I’d hate humans too. But having so much hatred in your heart will not help you.”

“I cannot change what I feel.”

“Maybe. But this path won’t bring you peace.”

“Peace was never an option,” he said as he teleported out, leaving Erik alone and worried.

Erik placed the tray on the dresser and crawled onto the bed, kissing Charles’ cheek repeatedly until he whimpered and wriggled.

“Good morning. Happy anniversary,” Erik murmured.

“No,” Charles moaned. “No fuss.”

“No, I agreed to making no fuss for your birthday. But this is our anniversary. A whole year since you took me out for our very first date. I get to make a fuss today. So I’ve taken the day off, Tabitha’s off to school, I’ve booked a table at a restaurant for dinner, and I made you breakfast in bed.”

“No! No fuss!”

Erik sealed their mouths together to shut him up and kissed him until he was pliant beneath him.
“Well…I suppose just this once wouldn’t hurt anything. And you’ve already gone to all this trouble. It would be very ungrateful of me to, well, be ungrateful.”

“Yeah, it would,” he said. Erik pressed gentle kisses to his throat and then moved off, his head propped on one elbow. “Do you know how much I love you?”

“I have a fair idea, yes,” Charles said, blinking sleepily as he stroked Erik’s hair.

“When I was growing up, I never wanted to fall in love. I looked at my mom and dad, saw what love did to them, saw how my father always put his needs before hers and how she just let him. And I swore I’d never let myself fall in love. And when he left, and she was so destroyed, I wanted it even less,” he said, taking Charles’ hand and toying with his fingers. “When we moved in with Poppa and Bubbe, I thought maybe love wasn’t such a bad thing. There was so much of it between them. I thought maybe it could be a good thing after all. But when he died…”

“Oh, love, I am sorry.”

“See, here’s the thing. I never wanted to fall in love. I never wanted to make myself vulnerable to that. And then I met you.” He gave a wistful little smile. “You barrelled into my life and took me over and by the time I realised what had happened, I’d fallen for you.”

Charles felt his mouth drop open as Erik pulled out a very small box.

“I never wanted to fall in love, to have someone I couldn’t bear to lose. But I fell in love with you and now I can’t imagine ever not being with you. So I’m making it all legal and official and, like the song says, I’m putting a ring on it. Charles, will you marry me?”

Tears sprung to Charles’ eyes as he nodded, sitting up to join their lips, kissing Erik over and over again as the ring was slid onto his finger.

“I’m breaking Jewish tradition to give you a ring so early, it should be closer to the actual wedding, but I wanted-”

“Hush,” Charles said, kissing him to shut him up. “Wait, why not a ring so soon?”
“Because it makes this a betrothal, and if the engagement is broken we’d need an actual divorce type thing.”

“Oh, my.”

“But you’re not Jewish, so it doesn’t count.”

“Is that what your rabbi says?”

“It’s what I say, so there.”

Charles laughed and looked down at that ring on his finger. It was a shining white gold band, quite thin, with a Star of David bent into the band.

“Oh, Erik. It’s lovely. Hmmm. I’m sure I’ve seen it before. Was it in the store?”

“No,” Erik said with a smile. “You’ve seen that my family aren’t the most orthodox of Jews. We tend to pick and choose traditions, which is probably a sin, but there you go. One of the ones we do follow is the one of the ring. Tradition says that the ring must belong to the groom before the proposal, which includes a ring given to him by a family member. I think. It’s been a long time since Hebrew school. Anyway! This ring was the first thing Poppa ever made for Bubbe when they got out of the camps. Once her arthritis made wearing it on a finger impossible, she wore it on a chain around her neck.”

“Oh, no, Erik. I can’t accept it. If your Poppa made it for her, I can’t take it from her.”

“She offered. I wanted something he’d made, and Bubbe insisted I give this one.” He raised Charles’ hand and pressed his lips to the ring. “When I was a little boy, Poppa would hold me close and say ‘You see the star, Erik? If you can see the star, it means you’re home.’ I want you to be my home.”

Charles started crying again. It was just so sweet, so loving. He climbed onto Erik’s lap and kissed him.
[Make love to me.] he urged and Erik groaned, gripping his hips.

Soon enough, what little clothes they had been wearing were gone, scattered across the floor, and Erik had the little telepath on his back, his lips trailing across the pale flesh of his belly. He teased around his navel with his tongue before going lower, suckling at the head as Charles buried his hands in his hair.

He slowly deepened the hard length as his slick fingers found the tight hole, pressing in. He’d come to find that Charles liked to be fucked slowly at first, and hard and fast at the end, but he always liked to be fingered fast.

“Oh, fuck, Erik! Please, please, please!”

Charles continued to beg as Erik finished his prep and coated himself, and then let out a gasping cry of pleasure as Erik spread his thighs and thrust in.

“Sorry,” Erik said with a kiss as Charles winced. “Too fast.”

“A little. Just a moment?”

[As long as you want,] he promised, kissing and sucking, nipping and licking at his throat.

He gasped a shuddering breath as Charles signalled he was ready by giving his backside a hard squeeze, clenching around his cock at the same time. Erik could track the metal of the ring, this thing he’s known all his life. He’d known the echo of that ring for as long as he’d had an awareness of metal. And now it would always lead him to Charles.

[Always lead you home,] Charles whispered into his mind and he realised he’d been screwing Charles for a good fifteen minutes, lost in the moment.

“Sorry.”
“Shhh. No apologies here. If I wasn’t enjoying myself, I could have done something to change it. Now, I would like you to speed up, please.”

“So very polite and proper, baby,” he crooned, making up for his inattentiveness with a snap of his hips.

Charles threw his head back and squeaked, one hand tugging at Erik’s hair, the other gripping at his shoulder digging his nails in.

Erik surrendered to the kiss Charles pulled him into, the loop of sensations between their link, the rush of blood through Charles’ body, and always the skin-warmed metal of the ring. A gasp escaped his throat as Charles flipped them over, licking his nipples as he began to move.

Sooner than Erik wanted, but exactly when he needed, the pleasure exploded and their bellies were coated in Charles’ release, Erik’s spurting hot and sticky into the pulsing channel around him.

It was his favourite part of making love with Charles. The moments after, when Charles would cuddle into him, gripping at him, trying to make it last that little bit longer as they both came down from the high. Sweat soaked skin slick beneath his fingertips, wavy brown hair gone wild from fingers through it. Sweet kisses pressed to whatever part of him was closest to Charles’ mouth.

“Oh. Oh dear.”

“What’s wrong?” Erik asked.

“I can’t take your name. I’m the last Xavier, I have to keep it or it’ll die out.”

“I can become an Xavier,” he offered and Charles shook his head.

“No, you’re a Lehnsherr, and so is Tabitha. It needs to stay that way.”

“You know, you’re creating problems now.”
“Oh. I am aren’t I? Sorry. My mind was wandering.”

Erik rolled them so he could pin him to the mattress once more.

“Good thing I know just how to stop your brain completely.”

Edie was over the moon, and Bubbe was deliriously happy to have her ring on Charles’ finger. The two women, upon hearing the news, first shrieked and congratulated, and then put their heads together to plan the wedding.

“I’m confused,” Charles admitted as Erik walked with him around the garden.

“How do I know just how to stop your brain completely.”

Edie was over the moon, and Bubbe was deliriously happy to have her ring on Charles’ finger. The two women, upon hearing the news, first shrieked and congratulated, and then put their heads together to plan the wedding.

“I’m confused,” Charles admitted as Erik walked with him around the garden.

“About what?”

“Shouldn’t we be planning the wedding?”

“Ah. It’s a tradition, in the Jewish faith, that the ‘bride’ and groom don’t plan anything. They’ll ask our opinions on things, but the wedding is not planned by us. The time of engagement is supposed to be a time of spiritual reflection.”

“Oh. But, Erik, love, and don’t take this the wrong way, neither of us are particularly religious or spiritual.”

“True. But it makes them happy and we don’t have to get all stressed over place settings and seating charts.”

“Ah. Fair enough.”

Eventually, the two women had organised themselves enough to include the love birds in their plans, and Erik suspected that was only because they didn’t know enough about Charles to do it alone.
“Well, that is a problem,” Charles said. “My father is dead, my mother and stepfather are in prison. I don’t have any aunts or uncles. I’m barely speaking to Raven.”

“Oy gevalt,” Edie muttered, looking embarrassed. “Oh, boychick. Forgive me, I didn’t realise.”

“No, it’s quite alright,” he assured as she hugged him close. “You weren’t to know. But I will need some sort of family member type person. Does it have to be an actual family member, or can it be someone I consider family?”

“It can be,” Bubbe assured. “No rule against it.”

“Hmmm. Let me think a moment. There must be someone I can ask. I need a mother and a father figure, yes?”

“Ideally, but just one would do,” Edie said.

“Call Tony,” Erik said with a grin. “I’m sure he’d be insulted if you even considered anyone else to represent your family in the wedding.”

“That is an excellent point, my love. You three carry on, I’ll be back,” he said, pulling out his phone and slipping into the kitchen.

He’d put it on silent the moment he and Erik had sent out the mass text announcing their engagement. In the space of one single hour, he had forty seven missed calls and five dozen texts.

“Charlie!!!!! The beautiful blushing bride!!!!!” Tony cried as soon as the call connected.

“Tony, back it down,” Steve said somewhere in the background. “Don’t deafen the poor man. Congratulations, Charles!”

“Thank you, Tony,” Charles giggled. “And thank you, Steve. Tony, my lovely one, may I ask you for a rather large favour?”

“Tony!” Steve sounded truly scandalised.

“I need a father of the bride,” Charles said and there was silence on the other end. “Erik and his family, they’re Jewish, and in the ceremony I need parent type people. I don’t have any. Except you. You’re the only family I have, so if you could possibly stand in for the role…?”

“Charles…You’d really want me to?” Tony asked and Charles could hear the tears. It was rare that Tony got emotional in a good way, and it was always best not to point it out.

“I would love you to.”

“Absolutely. When do we plan? Just tell me and I’ll be there.”

“We’re actually at Bubbe’s house at the moment, planning. You could-”

“Address, right now. I’m there.”

The wedding was set for three weeks from the day they got engaged.

Erik had explained that it was expected for the groom to prove that he could provide house and home for the bride in the time of engagement. As he and Charles already lived together, and had adopted Tabitha, and they both had healthy bank balances, there really was no need to take a long time.

The wedding was to be held at the Estate in Westchester. They had seen it as the ancestral home of Charles’ bloodline being inhabited by Erik’s bloodline, in a merging of the two families. Tony and Bubbe had hit it off immediately, as Charles knew they would. He couldn’t imagine anyone ever being anything but completely in love with her. Tony and the Lehnsherr’s were splitting the
wedding costs between them, and no one would listen to him when he assured them he could contribute.

“It just seems wrong to me,” Charles complained as they drove to the cake tasting. “I’m one of the grooms, I should contribute.”

“It’s not done that way,” Erik said. “In this instance, you’re taking the place of the bride, because I’m the one that proposed. If you paid for things, it would be the equivalent of saying I couldn’t provide for you, that I was less of a man, unworthy.”

“Well, no one told me that!”

“Feel better now?”

“Much better, thank you, darling. Erik, is everything in this wedding drowning in tradition and history?”

“Pretty much.”

Tony was already sitting in the bakery surrounded by cake by the time they arrived, and they found that he’d done a lot of the work for them already. There were no cakes with marzipan, nothing with nuts, only fruit based cakes, like strawberry or lemon, and only sweet fluffy icings.

“I like this one,” Tabitha said as she forked up another mouthful. “It’s tingly.”

“That is our lemon cake with raspberry buttercream,” the sales woman said cheerfully.

“I like it,” she mumbled through her mouthful and Charles reached for the sample.

“Oh, that is good,” he agreed.

“Now, this one I can live with,” Erik said. “Not too sweet, kind of refreshing. This is the one.”
“Okay, that’s great,” the sales woman said, jotting it down. “Usually the flavours are the part people have a hard time agreeing on. Now, what about the look? How many guests are we thinking?”

“I’ve lost track of how many we’re up to now,” Tony admitted.

“Somewhere in the ballpark of two hundred,” Erik said. “Around about that.”

“Big wedding. We can handle that. Were you thinking square or round or maybe another shape?”

The two of them looked through the book of pictures she held out, pictures of cakes they’d done in the past. Eventually they agreed on circular cakes, five tiers, white icing with a cascade of purple flowers sweeping in a waterfall down one side with white daisies scattered amongst them.

The wedding preparations seemed unending, even with others doing the planning. Erik and Charles spent most of their time the first week after the engagement answering emails, texts and phone calls on tiny details. Eventually they both snapped and gathered the ‘planning committee’ for an intervention.

“Right,” Erik said, standing at the head of the family table. “Enough is enough. No more phone calls, emails, text messages or smoke signals, asking about stupid things, like how we want the napkins folded. I don’t care, I don’t give a damn.”

“Me neither,” Charles agreed. “So here are the rules. I don’t have a favourite colour, so we’re going with Erik’s, which is purple. The colours are purple and white, and we want it classy, not clown, yes, Tony, I’m looking at you. Invite anyone you like as long as it won’t result in a problem with any other guests. Go forth and enjoy yourselves. Pick any caterer, florist, entertainment, tailor and rabbi you like. Unless you simply cannot go forward in the planning without either of our help, we don’t want to know.”

“I think we broke the bride,” Tony said and Steve literally put one huge hand over Tony’s mouth. He shoved the hand away and carried on. “So…I could order the ice sculptures and the trapeze artists, and you’d let me?”

“For the love of God, I just want to get married!”
The room was silent as Charles stormed from the room and they heard the slam of an upstairs door.

“Well done, shmegegi,” David said.

“Huh?”

“Yiddish,” Anya said, doodling on her pad of paper. “It means idiot.”

“Oh, go to hell. I know Charlie-boy a lot better than you! He never takes me seriously!”

“Go to hell? Gai tren zich!” David spat, standing up suddenly and having to be stopped from rounding the table by Steve. All the marriage talk had sparked some issues between David and his latest bed-partner. It wasn’t taking very much to make him snap.

Erik put his head in his hands, sighing at the table, and Edie rubbed his shoulder.

“We’ll tone it down, zeeskyte, I promise.”

“It’s not that,” he said, ignoring the raising voices and the way Bubbe was ignoring it all and pulling her knitting from one of her huge cardigan pockets.

“Then what?”

“There’s something bothering him, something wrong, and he won’t talk to me about it. Ever since I proposed he’s had this…I don’t know, this edge about him. Every time I ask him about it, he says it’s nothing, but I know he’s lying. He’s a terrible liar,” he said, snorting at the end. “Mom, I think…I think he needs a mom right now.”

“You create peace down here, I’ll go try with Charles.”
She pressed a kiss to his hair and followed the telepath, finding him curled up in the armchair in Bubbe’s room, staring at the table of photos in frames.

Neither of them said anything as she joined him, but he didn’t seem to want her gone because he let her squeeze into the chair with him.

“There’s so many,” Charles said, motioning to the pictures.

“We do seem to do a fair impression of rabbits.”

“Is that Bubbe?” he asked, pointing to a black and white picture of a little girl holding a kitten, held close by her parents and smiling at the camera.

“Yes, when she was a girl, before…well, before. Her parents, Erik and Hannah.

“Erik?”

“Yes. Erik was named for my grandfather, both of them to be honest. Magnus was my father’s father.”

She reached out and snagged a book from the shelf beneath the table top and flipped it open, showing him the family tree. It was a great spiralling thing, filled with numbers and names, other little trees a more thorough accounting of this piece or that of the family line. There were also pages and pages of events through the years, births, deaths, marriages and other notable moments for the family, like graduations and achievements, personal and professional.

Charles learned that Bubbe was born on the 14th of May, 1923, the third daughter of Erik and Hannah Kiepura. Bubbe had three sisters, a brother in law, a nephew, a cousin, an aunt, an uncle, and two grandparents all die in the camps.

Poppa, that Erik talked of so often, was born Joseph Jason Lehnsherr on the 9th of August, 1922. In the camps, he lost his two brothers, sister in law, niece, parents, two aunts, an uncle and all four grandparents.
Of the two families, Lehnsherr and Kiepura, Minka and Josepha were the only two left.

“Seems such an unreal thing,” he murmured. “To lose so many in a single way. To lose them all so quickly. I’m a geneticist, of course I know some of what went on in the camps. But I’d never met anyone who’d lived it before. I’d only read of it in books.”

“Most people have only read things about it. It’s not so surprising that you hadn’t. It’s important to remember what happened, to keep reminding people, so, hopefully, something like it never comes again. I like to think of it like this. It’s important not to forget where you come from, all the steps that led you to where you are. But enjoying your life, carrying on, having all those experiences is important, more important. Mamen told me that she lives her life for all those that cannot live them.”

She was stroking his hair, holding him close, so she was right there when he cuddled in, gripping at her sweater.

“It’s all so different,” he said softly. “You have reasons for everything you do. Everything in the wedding has reasons behind it.”

“You’re talking of our traditions? Charles, your family must have traditions. We can add them in, make it more Xavier, less Lehnsherr.”

“No, we don’t.” He sniffled. “I don’t even have any family to come to my wedding. The only one left is Raven and we haven’t had a true conversation since before Christmas. I don’t have any traditions. Why on earth are you letting me marry your son? What have I to offer him? He has so much to give, so much love, so much history.”

“He’s marrying you because he loves you, and you love him, and you both want to,” she said, her heart hurting for how lost he sounded. “My mother met you and claimed you as one of the family, and I’ve learned that she’s never wrong. You might not know all the traditions yet, but they’re all yours if you want them. You are one of us, and you have so very much to offer. You’re sweet and kind and loving and giving. You’re bright and handsome and, such enthusiasm! You love my son, completely, without reservations, you love him with everything you have. My son is adored by you. Why would I accept anything less than that for him?”

“But is love enough? I love Erik, more than anything. But marriage is a big thing. What if I screw it all up and he ends up hating me? I couldn’t bear it if that happened.”
“You’ve skipped fruitcake and officially hit crazy,” Erik said from the doorway. “Mom, Bubbe is about to rip David a new one. He’s switched to insults in English and Tony’s taking them personally.”

Edie pressed a kiss to Charles’ hair and left the couple alone, pressing a kiss to Erik’s cheek as she passed. Charles huddled into himself and studied the rug as Erik stalked forwards. The taller man was all lean predator.

[Do I give the ring to Bubbe or Erik?] Charles wondered.

“Neither,” Erik said as he squatted down, stroking Charles’ hair. “It stays right here.” He lifted his hand and kissed the ring. “And when we’re married, you’ll have a very nice wedding ring to keep it company. Baby, listen to me. I don’t care where you came from. It’s not important to me. What matters to me is the excitement you get when you find out something new. The way you can’t cook anything, not even instant soup, and I am determined to get that off the ceiling. The way you cuddle into me, when you reach out for me in the night. The way you love Tabitha. The way you love me. Those things matter.”

“I…”

“Shut up, you had your turn to talk about this and you fobbed me off. My turn now,” Erik demanded. “I love you and I want to marry you and teach you every tradition you want to know. I want to wake up next to you every morning, and remind you to eat and watch ridiculously bad science fiction movies because they make you smile with all the ways they’re wrong. The way you moan under me, and the kisses you give. These freckles right here,” he stroked a fingertip over the bridge of his nose, “and the ones under your clothes. I need those. I need it all. And if you can’t give me a valid, legitimate reason as to why we can’t get married, then I’m going to continue as if my lover hasn’t just lost his damn mind.”

[I’m sorry,] he whispered into Erik’s mind as they kissed. [So sorry.]

[I forgive you.] He slipped his tongue into Charles’ mouth, tickling the tip of his. [Just stop trying to handle everything on your own. Lean on me. I want you to.]

Erik held him close as he curled into his arms.
The morning of the wedding dawned with a bright blue sky and a sweet warm breeze.

Erik had, as tradition decreed, stayed at his family home for the week before the wedding. The separation of the marrying couple was supposed to prevent any premarital indiscretions. But Edie had said it would simply make the day, and night, all that much sweeter.

Charles and Tabitha had remained in the apartment, which had become the wedding headquarters. Every day things arrived and were sent to the Westchester Estate, received by Rosalie the cook and Geoffrey the butler.

The day itself had been chosen very carefully. The rabbi had said that it couldn’t be on any Shabbat, not on any birthdays or anniversaries, no dates of death or special significance, and preferably on a Tuesday. There was a whole long list of days they couldn’t use. It was a small miracle that a date had been chosen.

The day before the big day, Charles collected Tabitha from school, the two of them had a Chinese take away, and then they packed their things, climbed into Tony’s car, and made their way to the Estate. Charles and Tony entertained Tabitha with stories of when they’d been younger, like the time they’d decided to conduct a chemistry experiment in Charles’ mothers dressing room and managed to destroy her antique dressing table.

That evening, David and Edie arrived and treated Charles to the Lehnsherr family version of the mikveh, the ritual bath. The tub was filled with hot purified water, sweet oils, rose petals, healing salts. Once actually in the tub, David helped him bathe and clean his hair while Edie sung blessing songs and said prayers in Hebrew. Once he was clean and ‘purified’, he was treated to a massage and he was covered in lotion and oils meant to soften the skin.

By bedtime, Charles was a boneless sprawl that could have been poured into a bowl. The masseuse looked highly pleased with herself.

They were woken in the morning by the florists and caterers arguing over the rightful parking spaces.

“Dear me,” Charles said, watching from the upstairs window with Tabitha. “Should I perhaps go and settle the matter?”
“On it!” Steve called as he sped past them.

“Did he just come from the room you put Tony in?” the teen asked.

“I do believe he did. Ah, it’s all for the best. They’re grown men, they’ll find their way. Now, we should go for breakfast before we’re expected to do things.”

Rosalie was happy to feed them to bursting point, and ecstatic over Steve, who seemed to be bottomless. Tony she was happy to provide with enough coffee to drown himself, which he mainlined as he roamed from this task to that, managing the stream of people that were arriving. As they were nibbling on the last of their meal, Geoffrey appeared.

“Geoffrey, good morning!” Charles called cheerfully. “Would you care to join us?”

“No, thank you, sir, very kind, as always,” he said with an indulgent smile. “Master Charles, Miss Raven has come and is requesting to converse with you.”

“Oh, wonderful! Let her in.”

Raven appeared a moment later, blonde and pale, and slapped her invitation down on the table.

“You’re getting married?”

“You’ve just shown your invite, so I don’t understand why this is in question,” he said. “Raven, have you met Tabitha? I don’t think so, you haven’t come to the Centre in a while. Tabitha, darling, this is my sister, Raven. Raven, this is Tabitha, my daughter.”

Raven spluttered, shimmering blue, which Tabitha watched interestedly, tilting her head as Raven became pale once more.

“Daughter? How…what…how…when…”

“Just after the New Year, I think that’s when it was all settled. I did send you messages, and letters,
and tried to call you, several times. You didn’t answer, so I assumed you’d got them.”

Her cheeks flamed as she looked between Charles and Tabitha.

“Congratulations, but you’re missing the point! Married? To Erik? You can’t!”

“And why not?”

“Because you’ve only known him five minutes!” she cried, waving the invitation in his face.

Charles took a deep breath and reminded himself that it was his wedding day and police arriving because he had lost his temper wouldn’t be a good thing. He pasted a smile on.

“Tabitha, my darling, I’m just going to go with Raven. When you’ve finished eating, be a love and find Tony. He knows what we’re all supposed to be doing.”

She nodded as he rounded the table and put an arm around Raven, leading her to the French doors and out to the garden before he rounded on her.

“How dare you! Those invitations were sent out by bloody courier two weeks ago! You’ve had two weeks to come and talk to me about this and you wait until the morning of my wedding. And for your information, Erik proposed to me on our one year anniversary. Slightly longer than five minutes.”

“I thought it was a joke, some kind of gag gift. It wasn’t until I saw Carol Wagner getting into her car this morning that I actually believed you could be this blind. Charles, you can’t marry him,” she said. “Think about this. It’s your first relationship, the first person you’ve ever slept with. And think of your family name! Charles, he started a relationship with the richest mutant in the country, in several countries!”

Charles felt himself go stiff. “Did you just insinuate…that? That he’s marrying me for my money, my name? Did you honestly just imply that he’s no better than Kurt or Cain?”

“Charles, I just want to protect you!”
“Protect me,” he snarled, shoving her away as she tried to touch him. “Protect me! Where was your fucking protection all those years! All the times I had black eyes and split lips, all the broken bones, all the times I was punished for things that had never happened. You never protected me then!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I think he’s talking about being abused by Kurt and Cain and none of us noticing,” Tony said from behind her, his arms loaded with flowers. “See, I can kind of convince myself that I can ask for his forgiveness, because I didn’t actually live here. But you did, and you didn’t notice a damn thing, and now you’re implying that Charles is too naïve to know if he’s being used.”

“Kurt and Cain were…no, they couldn’t have been,” she argued. “Mother wouldn’t have let them.”

“Mother looked the other way, pretended to see nothing, was conveniently blind to it. Just like you were,” Charles said. “Oh, stop it. Stop it! I don’t want to talk about that, not now, not today.”

“But-”

“No!” he snapped at her. “Not now. You’ve had months to talk to me about that. The problem today is that you think I’m such a fool that I don’t know when I’m being used, that I can’t see it. Let me enlighten you, my dear sister. I see the world for what it is, and people for the way they truly are. I see past the pretty masks they show and the clever lies they tell. I am not an idiot, Raven. I see. I simply choose to believe that they can be better. And I see Erik. He is the sweetest, kindest, most honourable man I have had the privilege of knowing, and for some reason that escapes me completely, he wants to marry me. He thinks I’m worth it.”

“Charles, I didn’t mean-”

“Yes, yes you did. You meant it. You meant to say that he’s a gold digger and I’m a naïve idiot,” he growled. “I don’t care what you said or meant. I love him, and he loves me, and we have a beautiful daughter. We’re happy together and we’re getting married today. Please, by all means, stay and join in the festivities. But don’t think to change anything. If you cause the slightest bit of trouble, meddle in anything, or speak badly to anyone, I will have you removed. Now, Tony, was there something you needed?”
“Yeah. Just wanted you to check everything’s how and where you want it. Just take a look and tell me if I’ve got it overblown.”

“Of course. Lead on.”

The ceremony was a bit of a blur for both Charles and Erik.

They vaguely remembered the pre marriage meeting. The moment they were both shown into the room so they could follow the age old tradition of the ‘groom’ veiling the ‘bride’, just to be sure he was marrying the right person and there had been no replacements.

Charles looked amazing in his three piece suit, all black and white and purple accents.

Then there was the walk down the aisle, something that was particularly hazy. There was a certain order to things, but all they knew was being told when to walk. Erik was walked up the aisle to the khupah by Edie, and Charles by Tony. Erik was sure that Charles could borrow the memories of the ceremony from someone else’s head after it was all over, he really hoped so, because he couldn’t remember a damn thing. He must have answered at the right time and said the right thing, because he was soon sliding the white gold band onto Charles’ finger and he clearly remembered drinking the wine his rabbi had prayed over.

The ketubah was read out at some point, the beautiful ornate piece of calligraphy that outlined his promises as a husband to Charles. He had made sure to include the traditional seven blessings, and all the usual stipulations for the event of divorce and an outline of Charles’ own wealth so there would be no issues if the marriage should fail. He’d also had the calligrapher include a few non-traditional promises. He promised to love Charles even through his cooking, he promised to remind him how precious he was even if he didn’t believe it. He promised to be the rock Charles could lean on, and tell his research to.

It was all in Hebrew, but it would hang on the wall of their home. It would be a reminder to Erik of all Charles meant to him.

Erik broke the glass wrapped in a white bag, a ritual that even Charles and Tony knew of, and then everyone was cheering and shouting their congratulations.
That was it. They were married.

As the guests began to mingle, the group of men that had escorted Erik to his bedeken, his prayers before the wedding, escorted the newlyweds to the room that had been set aside for their yikhud, their seclusion. They were on each other before the door had clicked shut.

“How long do we have in here?” Charles breathed between kisses.

“As long as we need. Mom said to take our time.”

[Good. Erik, my love, my husband, fuck that’s weird. Nice. Weird.]

[Babbling. Missed it.]

“He grabbed Erik’s hand and shoved it to his crotch, where Erik wasted no time and started stroking. Under his mutation, the button and zipper came undone, his belt unbuckled, and suddenly Erik’s cool hand was wrapped around him and his tongue was in Charles’ mouth and it was so perfect that he tumbled over the edge in an embarrassingly short amount of time.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Erik assured, panting hard, coming down from the orgasm Charles had pulled him into. “I missed you, too.”

“I love you.”

“I love you. Always, Charles.”

The dinner was delicious, the toasts short and sweet, and the booze flowing as the meal ended and the party really started.
Erik led Charles onto the dancefloor for the first dance, holding him close and leading him around, smiling as the happiness flowed from Charles to him through the link between them.

“Now, what happened with Raven?” Erik asked as the first dance ended and the floor opened up to others.

“Nothing,” Charles insisted.

“Uh-huh. So why was there yelling?”

“I’m going to kill Tony.”

“Wrong snitch,” Erik said with a grin and a kiss, spinning him before holding him close again. “Tabs told me.”

“Ah, shit. I’m sorry, Erik, I didn’t want her to hear any of it,” he said as he spotted the girl in question. She looked stunning in her bridesmaid dress. It was backless, purple, and worked wonderfully with her pink hair.

“She’s fine, don’t worry about it. I do worry about you though, my husband. So tell me what was said.”

“Erik, can we leave it for now? It’s our wedding day, I don’t want to talk about any of it, not today. Please.”

“Okay, okay. Tomorrow, or the next day, whenever you’re ready. You’re right. It’s our wedding day, and tonight is our wedding night, and then it’s our honeymoon. I see no reason to discuss anything other than all the sex we’re going to have.”

“Erik!” he giggled.

“I’m serious. Tony Stark is lending us his private island and associated staff for ten glorious days.
I’m going to make love to you in every room,” he purred into Charles’ ear, feeling him shiver. “On every surface. On the beach. By the pool. Bent over the kitchen table. And just think. I haven’t even seen the place and its plethora of possibilities.”

“We’re on the dance floor!”

“And? Is that supposed to be a reason for me to stop telling you how much I’m going to worship you? We are going to have so much sex, like, an insane amount. You’ll be too fucked out to walk so I can be sure you won’t leave the bed.”

“Is marital sex the only thing on your mind right now?”

“No. I’m also thinking of how very unique the wedding feast was. Was it really necessary to have every family dish you like served?”

“Your mother asked me what I might like, so I told her. I loved the holiday meal, all the foods your family made. So she put out a call and they all went nuts. I think the caterer was a little upset.”

“Upset? You didn’t hear the explosion. Upset isn’t even close.”

“Well, you all kept telling me I could have anything,” Charles pointed out reasonably.

“We did, and it was delicious.”

Tony strolled over to Moira as she picked up another flute of champagne.

“Come any closer and I’m going to have to waste very fine champagne by dumping it over your head,” she warned.

“Easy there, lushy pants,” Tony said, holding his hands up. “Just coming to ask you to dance. Is that so wrong of me?”
“No, but it would be wrong of me to accept. I still remember the last time.”

“No, but it would be wrong of me to accept. I still remember the last time.”

“And my sister’s wedding? I suppose that wasn’t your fault either?”

“No…entirely mine.”

“The ducks? The blimp? How about the paint cans? You still owe me for a pair of leather boots and the handbag, Stark.”

“Okay, I admit, SOME of that may have been, potentially, my fault, just a little. But it’s Charlie’s wedding, I’m father of the bride. Can’t I get one dance?”

“I don’t trust you to keep your hands in appropriate places.”

“Come on, what do you take me for?”

“An overgrown horny teenager with too much time and far too much money on his hands?”

“Hey!...Actually, not that far off. But still. It’s Charlie’s special day. We can set aside this one day to be nice to each other, right?”

“The sun’s gone down, see the pretty twinkle lights making the whole estate look like a wonderland?”

“Stark, don’t you have better things to be doing right now?”

Moira grinned as the tall bald black man with the eyepatch wrapped an arm around her waist.
“Oh, come on!” Tony complained. “You’ll date the head of the super secret boyband but you won’t dance with me just once?”

“Absolutely,” she said as Nick fury kissed her cheek.

Tony looked down at the tug on his pant leg to find Ororo looking up at him.

“Mr Tony? I wanna dance,” she said. “Will you dance with me?”

“Of course, angel,” he said with a grin, sweeping her up into his arms. He smirked at Moira. “See? This one has taste.”

“That one is too young to know any better,” she said as Tony walked away. “She’ll soon learn!”

Charles leaned back against Erik and smiled.

“Ten bucks on Moira,” Erik offered.

“Too early to call this one. It’s been going on as long as they’ve known each other.”

“How did it start?”

“Not a damn clue,” Charles chuckled. “I think he said something and she took offence and it just spiralled from there.”

“Sounds about right. So, did you enjoy your first official family event?”

“I loved it. Erik, my love, I was thinking…”

“Mmmm, can’t wait. It’s been hard this week, being without you. Not just the sex. I missed the sex but there’s so much more that I missed. I missed you, Charles. Every little piece of you,” he said,
Charles hummed with happiness and snuggled into the embrace, craning back to press kisses to Erik’s throat before his lips were caught by his husbands.

[Does this mean I get you back in my bed? Because I must say I did not enjoy sleeping without you.]

[Absolutely. You were saying that you’d been thinking?]

“Mmmm, yes, thinking,” he mumbled as he detached. “Yes! Thinking. I was thinking about Edie.”

“What about her?”

“Do you think she would mind terribly if I started referring to her as my mum? I know it’s a little odd, and I would understand if she wouldn’t want it. But through all this she’s been so wonderful to me, and I feel so much closer to her than I ever have to my mother.”

“Charles, baby, stop, you’re babbling,” he interrupted. “Are you serious? You really want to call her mom?”

“If it’s okay…”

“She’d love it. Charles…look, I wasn’t planned. My mom…I was a shock. They weren’t ready for me. She hadn’t planned to have children so soon. And then it took her ten years to manage to have David, and then another five years to have Anya. We were hard to have, and we’re all precious to her. And now I’ve just got married. She thinks of you as her third son. Whatever you want to call her is absolutely fine, whether that’s calling her Mrs Lehnsherr, Edie, mom, or something else entirely.”

Charles was beaming at him and he could feel the warm waves of happiness flowing through to him.

“There was one thing…you call her something, a special name, you and David do, not Anya, but
Edie calls Bubbe it.”

“Mamen. It’s mother in Yiddish.”

“Can I call her mamen?”

“Absolutely.”

Azazel, who had come to the wedding and been civil and polite but distant, first teleported their luggage and then Erik and Charles to Tony’s private island. He let go of them, gave them a smile and a wink and then popped out, leaving them perfectly, blissfully alone.

“This is beautiful,” Erik said, looking at the white sandy beach they could touch if they took one small baby step off the porch they were standing on.

“Yes. It’s the one thing Tony actually likes having inherited from his father. Howard bought the island way back in the sixties. This building is new, Tony had it built when he was twenty two, but the original holiday home is still here. I can show you, if you’d like.”

“Maybe later,” Erik growled, scooping him up. He nibbled at Charles’ neck as he carried him to the door, which opened for him.

“Welcome to Stark Island, sirs.”

Erik almost dropped Charles in shock as the voice spoke from the walls.


“I didn’t realise he’d be here.”
“He’s installed everywhere Tony can get him.”

“Indeed, Professor. Mr Lehnsherr, allow me to reassure you that I have been authorised for your use during the duration of your honeymoon to ensure maximum enjoyment and minimum stress. During your stay on the Island, you shall be undisturbed by any humans, and I shall not speak unless you wish it. My orders are to make this time as secluded and romantic as possible. Does this meet your agreement, or shall I notify Mr Stark that you wish the arrangement changed?”

“No, no, it’s fine. I just wasn’t expecting it,” Erik said. “Uh. Which way is the bedroom?”

“Please follow the lights,” JARVIS said, a string of tiny blue lights illuminating the path along the baseboards.

“You don’t want to look around first?” Charles asked as he was carried.

“Nope. I want you naked under me as soon as we possibly can.”

And, true to his word, Erik got him to the bedroom, naked and spread out on the bed as fast as he could. Charles was pretty sure his suit was a goner. There was no chance it had survived attack by horny husband.

“Missed you,” Erik breathed between kisses pressed to Charles’ chest and belly. “Missed you so much.”

Charles tangled his fingers in his hair and tugged him up, kissing him hard and writhing under the hot weight of him.

[Mine, all mine. And I’m yours. Yours and mine and us, forever and always,] Charles pushed, desperate for Erik to know how much he was wanted.

“Hey,” Erik murmured, going still, stroking gentle fingers through chocolate waves. “I know how much I’m wanted. I know how much you love me. It’s not ever in question.”

Charles kissed him, pushing his tongue inside, caressing the back of his neck and shoulders,
stroking down his back.

Erik lost all time kissing and being kissed, letting Charles set the pace. Gentle hands stroked everywhere, lips mapping a trail. They rolled and caressed, gripped and stroked, kissed and nipped until there wasn’t any part of them that hadn’t been touched.

Charles whimpered, panicky, as Erik climbed from the bed, trailing fingertips over his skin.

“Where are you going?” he whined. “Come back.”

“Just a moment,” Erik soothed, throwing open the French doors and letting in a cool breeze with the sound of the ocean. He chuckled as he spotted the whole selection of lube and condoms laid out like a safe sex buffet on a side table. “What do you think, Stark or JARVIS?”

“Both, I’d wager;” Charles giggled. “He was made by Tony, and it’s their idea of funny and helpful.”

Erik grabbed a bottle of unscented lube. They could be adventurous later. “And so much more appreciated than a chocolate on the pillow.”

“I like chocolate,” he said helpfully as Erik settled back on top of him, rubbing their noses.

“Well, I could go to the kitchen…see what’s there…”

“No!” he yelped, wrapping his legs around him.

Erik had had enough of talk. He sealed their mouths together and kissed Charles senseless as he popped open the bottle and coated his fingers, reaching down to circle Charles’ hole. He added more pressure with every pass until two fingers slipped in and the smaller man whimpered, panting high whining breaths as Erik stroked his insides, spreading the slick gel.

“Erik, Erik, Erik!”
“I know. Soon. Little more.”

“No, no more. Please, Erik? Please?”

“Easy,” he said, dipping in for one more kiss.

Charles was pushing back against his fingers, thighs thrown wide, the most wonderful needy sounds escaping his throat. Charles wanted Erik inside, but acted like the world was ending as the metal bender removed his fingers to slick himself.

Charles plastered himself to Erik’s chest as the thick hard member was pushed into him. Slow, so slowly, but not slow enough as Erik seemed to be balls deep in the blink of an eye. Erik gave him a moment, until Charles licked a stripe up his neck and took his earlobe in his teeth. Erik began slow, gradually speeding as pleasure ripped through both of them.

The feel of Charles’ skin, the way he moved, his hips thrusting down to get more, his thighs high on his hips to get the best angle. The connection between them flared, blocking out everything outside their bed, and Erik was dimply aware of his own mutation reaching out, floating the metal in the room.

But the pulse of Charles’ blood in his veins was louder than anything else. Charles ate a very iron rich diet just to make it easier for Erik to feel his blood moving.

He could feel the echo of himself thrusting into Charles, and the pressure of Charles around his cock. It was an intoxicating, heady feeling. All the pleasure passing back and forth between them, the pound of Charles’ blood, the week they’d been separated.

The heat between them exploded, coating Erik’s front and Charles’ insides. Erik collapsed onto his lover, gasping for breath, unwilling to let go for a second.

[My husband.]

[My husband.]
So, what did you all think?

Please comment and let me know how I did.
Charles and Erik finally surfaced for air four days after their wedding. Until that point they’d seen nothing but their bedroom and attached bathroom. They had, one sweaty night, made it as far as the sand outside their bedrooms French doors, but they’d honestly not seen anything but pale bared skin.

On the fourth day in paradise, they packed a picnic. They strolled along the white sands, hand in hand, going slowly for the sake of Charles’ overworked hole. He wasn’t complaining, he loved Erik and making love with him, but he was awfully sore.

They wandered along, chatting about life back home, possible plans for the future, memories of their lives before they met. They talked of how much Edie had come to mean to Charles, the possibility of moving to a new apartment, one they had chosen together, how proud they were of Tabitha.

They picnicked on an outcropping over the water, watching the dolphins play as they ate and then rubbing against each other until they were sticky.

They had found that Charles was sleeping so deeply that he didn’t wake until Erik had already had two cups of coffee and a plate of toast. At first it had worried them, but JARVIS suggested it might be because there were no other minds on the island. Charles had never been so far from other minds before, and he knew the feel of his husbands thoughts as well as his own.

The morning of day five saw Erik heading off to the beach alone, giving the two of them some time apart. No couple, no matter how loved up, could spend every second of the day together.

Charles settled into a soft armchair in the lounge with a fruity cocktail and checked his emails for anything too important to wait (there wasn’t anything). Then he had JARVIS connect him with Tabitha, who was staying with Tony and Steve while they were away. They suspected JARVIS was actually running things.

“Charles?”

“Hello, my darling,” he said with a smile.
She was sat at a workstation in Tony’s lab, smiling in amusement at the camera. Her homework was spread out before her, maths by the looks of things. Dum-E was hovering by her elbow, the primitive AI opening and closing his claw at Charles and beeping, obviously happy to see him.

“Hello to you also, Dum-E.”

“Charles, I’m happy to see you, really I am,” Tabitha said. “But it’s your honeymoon. Shouldn’t you and Erik have vanished off the face of the Earth for the next…” She glanced at her phone, “nine days?”

“We’re taking a breath. Every couple needs time apart. He’s sunbathing and I’m checking up on my lovely girl.”

“I love how you don’t even pretend you’re not checking up on me.”

“Well, I adore Tony, and he is a genius engineer and inventor. But the man rarely remembers to eat. And I’ve left you in his care. I think I have valid reasons to be a little wary.”

“Good point. Yesterday we found him trying to eat a poptart. But it was untoasted, and still in its wrapper. He partnered it with a four day old smoothie Dum-E made with motor oil.”

“Good grief. Good thing Steve is there.”

“And Steve is a really good cook.”

“That too.”

“Seriously, have you tried his meatloaf? It’s amazing!”

“It makes me very happy to know your stomach is very pleased with the current arrangements. How are other things there? How is school?”

“School’s fine, the same old stuff. I have to see the guidance counsellor, some career future thing.
We’re meant to talk about college and my interests and all that."

“Isn’t fourteen a little young to be thinking of all that?”

“We’re supposed to have a goal in mind before we enter high school, which for me is in the fall.”

“I suppose that is a good plan. Have you any thoughts on it?”

“Sort of. Nothing solid. I think I’ll go to the meeting first.”

“Sensible. Tabitha, my darling, I can see you squirming. What’s bothering you?”

She shot him a smile. “I’ve been emailing…with Sam.”

“Sam?”

“Uncle Sam, in France.”

“Oh! How is he? I like Sam.”

“He’s okay. He…ummm…he was wondering what we were doing this summer. Because he and Portia were thinking of making a trip to the south of France and maybe renting a house. And he was wondering if I wanted to go.”

Charles felt himself start in surprise. He knew she’d had contact with Sam and Portia and her grandmother, but he hadn’t known it had progressed to a point where Tabitha would entertain such a suggestion.

“How do you feel about that? Would you like to go?”

“I don’t know if I’m ready for that,” she said. “It’s not just Sam. My mom had two sisters and
another brother and they’ve got kids. And Grandpére. It’s a lot of people I haven’t seen since… before. Maybe…maybe they won’t want to see me.”

“Now, now, none of that,” he said firmly. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with you. Just because Richard made the choice to be a grade one idiot does not have any reflection on you. It is on him and his way of thinking. Sam loves you very much, just the way you are. And he thinks this would be a good idea.”

“Do you?”

“I think it might be nice for you to get to see these family members, to have the chance to make up your own mind about them. And you’d get to spend a little more time with Sam and Portia and the girls. And Vianne, you could see her again. She was very nice.”

“You’ll come, right? You’ll come with me?”

“Oh, of course we will. A very nice family holiday. I assume it’ll be near a beach, which would be lovely.”

“As if you haven’t seen enough beach since the wedding.”

“Well…not an awful lot, if I’m honest,” he chuckled and he could feel himself blush as she turned rosy. Dum-E beeped at her, carefully stroking a claw over her hair.

“Oh…well…uhhh…”

“Sorry, darling.”

“No! No, don’t be sorry! You love each other, it’s a good thing to do…that.”

“Indeed,” he said with a grin.
Erik and Charles returned to New York at about midnight, to World War Three between Tony and Steve.

“This is not about what I want!” Tony roared.

“Oh, it is all about what you want! She’s a kid, Tony! A defenceless kid!” Steve screamed, squaring up to the brunet.

“Yeah! I know! And what the fuck are the police supposed to do that JARVIS isn’t already doing!”

“He’s a computer! He’s not GOD!”

“Ah, excuse me, gentlemen,” Charles said, dropping his bag at his feet. “Bad time?”

“Oh, shit,” Steve whimpered and the two mutants shared a worried look.

“I’m going to take that as confirmation of something being wrong, something you were desperately hoping to fix before we got back and never tell us about,” Erik said. “I’m going to take a wild stab in the dark and guess it’s something to do with Tabitha.”

“Charlie, Charlie boy. You know I love you, right?” Tony said, sidling up and wrapping an arm around his shoulders. “I love you very, very much. And you love me too. Right?”

“Yes, Tony, my dear friend, I love you very much.” Charles cupped his cheek and gave him a reassuring kiss to the cheek. “Now. Tell me what you’ve done. I’m sure we can fix it.”

“Promise me that you won’t let your scary husband kill the father-of-the-bride.”

“I promise. No one will hurt you, Tony. Come now, tell me what’s happened.”

“The thing is…oh, shit,” Tony moaned. “JARVIS, fill them in.”
“Miss Tabitha is currently missing,” the AI said calmly and the whole room went still.

“I’m sorry, I must have had a stroke or something, some kind of brain trauma because I’m sure I must have misheard your floating voice tell me that my fourteen year OLD IS MISSING!” Erik roared.

“Define missing,” Charles begged. “When did you last see her? How long has she been gone?”

“Missing…as in…I dropped her at school and then we got a call she never made it to Homeroom,” Steve admitted.

“What!” Erik yelled, and all the metal in the room started to shake.

“Erik, stop, breathe, calm down,” Charles said. “Steve, tell me the last time you saw her.”

“I took her to school, I took her in one of Tony’s cars, because I didn’t want her on my bike. So I’ve been taking her every morning in a car. I parked up outside the school, made sure she had her bag and phone and everything she needed. And then I sat there and watched her go in. I swear, I saw her enter the building!” Steve promised.

“Alright, I understand,” Charles said. “Now, when did you know she was missing?”

“The Principal called and told me she never made it to Homeroom,” Tony said.

“What about Kurt? Or Jean? Kitty, maybe. She might be with one of them,” Erik suggested.

“Tried them, none have seen her,” Steve said. “And she’s not answering her phone.”

“Now, no one panic,” Charles said. “Panic will help nothing. She’s a sensible girl. I’m sure she’s not done anything silly. The most logical explanation is that she’s simply lost track of the time.”
“And the phone?” Erik pressed.

“Run out of battery. If she’s in a library or museum or gallery she’ll have turned it off.” He pulled Erik in for a kiss. “This is not Tony and Steve’s fault. They’ve done exactly what was expected of them.”

“What if she’s not okay?” he whispered.

“Then we’ll deal with it if it happens. Right now, we have no reason to think she’s in any trouble.”

Charles had JARVIS pull up a map of the city for him and looked over every street, starting with Tabitha’s school, focussing on the connection he’d formed with her.

“No, I can’t feel her. Bigger, make it a bigger area,” Charles said and JARVIS zoomed out, showing a wider search area.

“Hmmm. Better. I feel her.” He closed his eyes and traced a path through the streets, starting at the school and following through the streets. His finger traced the road, so she’d obviously taken a cab or some other form of motor vehicle.

“There, she’s there,” he said eventually, pointing at a wide green patch on the map in upstate New York.

“Is she okay?” Erik asked.

“I think so. Oh. She’s so sad. Oh, my poor sweet girl. Oh.”

Tony loaned them a car and they drove to where the map led, Erik using his ability to turn off the speeding cameras they passed, meaning they made it in a fraction of the time it should have taken.

“Holy fuck, I know where we’re going,” Erik said as they turned into the wide green Charles had seen on the map.
“Where?”

“Pinecrest. It’s a cemetery. Miriam…it’s the anniversary,” Erik said as he parked. “I completely forgot.”

Charles followed Erik up a gentle hill to a grave watched over by a stone angel and canopied by a pretty tree covered in blossoms. Tabitha was asleep on the grass, one hand outstretched to rest on the headstone.

Miriam Catherine LeStrange Lehnsherr. Beloved Mother, Wife, Sister and Friend.

Charles settled down beside the prone figure and swept her hair off her face.

“Tabitha. Tabitha, my darling. Time to wake up now.”

“Mommy?”

“No, my darling. It’s Charles. You’ve fallen asleep visiting your mum. Time to go home now, my lovely,” he said gently, cuddling her as she snuggled into his hold.

She blinked up at Erik, looking around with a frown. “When did it get dark?”

“It’s late, baby,” Erik said as he scooped her up. “And you had Tony and Steve very worried.”

“’M sorry,” she mumbled. “I forgot it was today. But I saw the date when I got to my locker. She’s all alone.”

“I know, Tabby Cat. It’s okay.”

He settled her in the backseat and drove them home where, after a call to reassure Tony and Steve, they all got some sleep.
In the morning, Erik headed off to work at Charles’ assurance, and Charles called the school to tell them Tabitha wouldn’t be in.

“I know you’re awake,” he said after knocking. He opened the door to fond Tabitha sitting on her bed clutching at a stuffed rabbit that had seen better days.

“Are you mad?” she asked.

“Mad? No, not even a little bit. You’re allowed to visit your mother, sweetheart, and you certainly didn’t mean to fall asleep. No one is angry. We were just worried. What happened to your phone?”

“I turned it off. It didn’t seem right to have it on in a cemetery,” she said as he curled up on the bed with her.

“Well, that’s a very respectful thing to think. Now…it occurs to me that you never really talk about your mum,” he said. “I want to make sure you know that you can. I would be very happy to know about her.”

“It wouldn’t make you feel…I don’t know. Like you weren’t enough?”

“Not at all. Tabitha, she is your mother, she always will be. And she means a great deal to you.” He got a sudden blinding mental image of Richard and she blushed. “Oh. Oh, my poor girl. I would never do that to you. Richard was very wrong. Tabitha, I know how much you love me, just as much as I love you. You talking about your mother, who is very important to you, won’t change that.”

“Probably not the homecoming you were expecting,” she said, and Charles let her change the subject.

“Not quite. Shall we go out for breakfast?”

“I can make something.”

“Nonsense. We’ll go get something. My, this poor bunny is looking rather woebegone,” he said,
picking it up and smoothing down the threadbare ears.

“She’s pretty old,” she admitted. “Sometimes I worry she’ll get ripped or something in the night, but I’ve never slept without her.”

“She is rather thin in places,” he mused. “She could use a clean. We could try to find a doll hospital or something of that sort, get her a pampering. She’s a classic model, you know. Proper joints, glass eyes. They don’t make stuffed animals in this way anymore.”

“I know. Mom made her for me, before I was born.”

“Miriam made this? How wonderful!”

“She was a toymaker,” Tabitha explained. “She specialised in traditionally made toys, things that didn’t need batteries or wires. She mostly made dolls and stuffed animals, but she made some wooden ones too, like trains and little animals. I think there’s a load of them at Bubbe’s, in the living room toy box. A little farm set I think.”

Charles left the room while she did what she had to in the bathroom and got some clothes on. He sat in the living room with the bunny still clutched in his hands while he waited, and then they headed out.

“I’ve had a thought,” he said as they placed their order. “It’s a very special toy, and impossible to replace. But she is an elderly lady now. Poor thing might like a retirement, so to speak. We could get a chair or case for her, and have her as display, nice and safe, and then get you another bunny to sleep with.”

“I don’t know,” she said, toying with her napkin. “Wouldn’t that be…like…I don’t know…”

“You wouldn’t be replacing her,” he said gently, taking her hand. “Tabitha, I could never ever replace your mum, and I would never ever want to even try. I would just hate for something to happen to such a precious reminder of her.”

“Well…maybe we could do something. Just so she doesn’t get ruined. It’s not like I can go get another one,” she said slowly. “It’s probably a smart idea to protect her.”
We seem to be getting somewhere,” Charles said to Erik as they were eating. “Tough on the conversation this morning, but we are talking, which is a plus.”

He shared the general gist of the conversation with his husband.

[You want some help or you think you can handle it?] 

[I think I’m good for the moment, but I’ll let you know if it changes.]

“We’re doing family trees in Biology,” Tabitha said, poking at her eggs. “It’s this whole thing about genetics and blood and all that.”

“Oh. I see. And then it was the anniversary… I see now. Perhaps it would make it easier if I had a little talk with your Biology teacher. See if I can’t get you out of it.”

“No, I don’t want to get out of it. I just…it made me think about stuff.” She switched to poking at her hash browns. “My teacher, Mr Pym, he talks about genetic imperatives, and how a mama elephant will always prioritise her baby, so she can preserve the bloodline. But what about me? Does that mean my relationship with you is worth less because we don’t share a bloodline? Or does your mutation take over for the genetics part?”

“I would say no, but that is my view of it,” Charles said carefully. He knew he had to tread delicately. She was fourteen and missing her mother. “Your view might be different than mine, and that’s okay. We don’t always have to agree, you and I.”

“I don’t think so,” she said after a moment, possibly one of the longest moments of Charles’ life. “I don’t think it’s less because we don’t share some chromosomes. We have the same mutation in our genome, so that counts. Right?”

“I like to think so.”

Charles took a deep breath and signalled to the waitress that they would need a refill on their beverages. He cycled through what he wanted to say and what might not be appropriate for a teen to hear while they were replenished and then he took a deep breath.
“Tabitha, I wonder, what has Erik told you of my parents?”

“Not a lot. He basically said that they’re not in your life anymore.”

“Well, that’s a very good way to put it,” he said with a smile. “My father died when I was young. I was younger than you were when you lost your mother. My mother remarried, Kurt, and he has a son, Cain. But I haven’t spoken to my mother in many months. She…well, she broke the law.”

“Your mom is a criminal?”

“She is. She and Kurt tried to…shall we say, relieve me of my inheritance. They’re awaiting trial.”

“That’s horrible.”

“It’s not particularly nice, I agree. But it just goes to show that a blood link isn’t everything. Yes, it is important to know where you come from. And yes, genetics are fascinating. But they aren’t everything. I’ve studied many blood samples from mutants and humans, and the only difference I can find is that mutants have a mutation in one single gene in the sequence of their DNA. From that single difference comes the whole rainbow of abilities. There’s no telling what a mutant’s ability might be, it manifests differently in every single person. So it just goes to show that blood is only a small part of a person.”

“You really believe that?”

“With all my heart.”

Japan had only just started to get its first openly mutant citizens.

Unlike the Western half of the globe, Japan, China, India and parts of Eastern Europe were only just starting to take their place in the worldwide phenomenon of modern mutations. Until very
recently, mutants in these regions had existed in secret. No one knew the reasons for the sudden visibility of the mutant populations in these countries, but it had led to the leaders gathering to discuss the changes.

Charles, as one of the most well respected experts on mutations and the genetic alterations that caused them, was one of the first names even considered for the summit in Japan. As soon as he agreed to attend, the Japanese government had set about getting him across the globe and into a conference room.

So Erik and Tabitha were left alone for the week, and Charles was treated like royalty.

“What time will Erik be home?” Kurt breathed.

“Not until after six,” Tabitha promised as she arched up to kiss him, her back against the soft seat of the sofa.

His tail twined with hers, their legs tangled, and Tabitha thought that it might be the road to hell her Goyim friends sometimes mentioned. It felt like something she probably shouldn’t be doing, but it also felt so good to be kissed by Kurt that she couldn’t bring herself to stop. After all they were only kissing.

And wasn’t that the point? It was all they ever did. Kurt never pushed for them to go further, he never even tried to cop a feel. And it made her wonder if there was something…off about her. Maybe she wasn’t the kind of girl that boys wanted to do those things with.

“You okay?” Kurt asked, pushing himself up so he could look her in the eye.

“Fine.”

“No, you’re not. What’s wrong?” he pressed, sitting up.

“Nothing’s wrong.” He fixed her with a stare and she squirmed. “Okay! Okay, fine. I just…you never want more. You’ve never even tried to grope me.”
“And this is a bad thing?”

“No. Just…am I…is it me?”

“No! Absolutely not! It’s not you, you didn’t do anything,” he promised and she knew that if he weren’t blue he would be flaming red.

“Okay…”

“Look, you’re almost fifteen, but still far from legal, and Erik is big and scary and Charles is a terrifyingly powerful telepath, and I’m…”

“You’re?”

“I’m…a teleporter with a tendency to travel when I don’t concentrate properly,” he mumbled.

“Oh. OH!”

Tabitha was absolutely mortified at having mortified her boyfriend.

“Yeah,” he commiserated. “Look, it’s not you. You’re beautiful, and I do want to, believe me, I want more. But I just…I’m not ready for that.”

“I didn’t mean…I was just…”

“It’s okay. I guess we should be able to talk about this stuff. Isn’t that a couple type thing to do?”

“Erik and Charles are always having talks about their relationship, so I guess it’s a good thing.”

“Tabs, there’s no rush for us. Just because we aren’t doing other things doesn’t mean I don’t want to be your boyfriend. I’m not an idiot, I know what other guys say, about what they’ve done, but
it’s between us. It’s our relationship, so what does it matter about people not in it?”

How did he know what the other girls had said?

“I’m right, aren’t I? The girls at school?”

She felt herself gape at him, managing to make a few spluttering sounds.

“I know what it’s like. The guys in the locker room, they’re not exactly shy,” he mumbled, and he remember all too well how he felt in the locker room. He didn’t look like the other guys, not even close, and they had been sure to point it out to him. Repeatedly.

He stood up and began gathering his stuff.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he pushed his two toed feet into his shoes. “Where are you going?”

“Home. I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said. He pressed a kiss to her lips and teleported out without another word.

Tabitha wondered if she could fix it.

Erik was concentrating very hard on the minute details of an earring when the bell above the door rang.

“One sec,” he mumbled as he eased the millimetre wide ruby into the space. Once he was happy with the placement, he melted the platinum around it and set it with his mutation. He carefully placed the piece in the padded box on his workbench and looked up.

“Kurt. Shouldn’t you be in school?”
“My last period got cancelled, something about the teacher out sick or something. I was wondering...if maybe...I could talk to you? Like...man to man sort of thing?”

“Sure. Is this anything to do with Tabitha slamming doors for the past two days?”

Kurt cringed. “She’s been slamming doors?”

“Yes. And hardly eating, and barely talking. I was going to get worried, until she told me to get lost when I mentioned your name.”

“Damn. I didn’t...it wasn’t supposed to go like this,” he whined. “I didn’t mean to upset her. I just...I got embarrassed and-”

“Teleported out in absolute humiliation?”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, not the best way to handle something, but a pretty unique one,” Erik said with a smile. “Want to talk about it?”

“If you promise you won’t skewer me with a telephone pole.”

“Is your problem based on a hypothetical?”

“Yes.”

“Then I promise. Come on,” he assured, motioning him behind the counter and to the stool he kept for Charles to use when he kept him company. He pulled two sodas from the fridge and settled on his own stool. “Okay. Talk away.”

“Look, before I start, let me just promise you that we haven’t done anything,” he assured. “I swear,
Erik, we’ve only kissed, that’s it.”

“Okay. Thank you for the honesty.”

“She was worried, that maybe she wasn’t pretty or something. That she wasn’t the kind of girl that guys wanted to…you know. But she is, she’s beautiful. She’s very beautiful. I just…”

“Kurt, maybe Mike would be a better person to talk to.” Erik wished Charles was there with him, certain that his little English husband would know what to say.

“No, no he wouldn’t. Mike, he’s great. He’s my dad. But he’s baseline.”

“Ah, I see,” Erik said with a smile. “Can I take a guess here?” Kurt nodded. “You’re having an issue when you’re, uh, alone, shall we say. A problem with teleporting when you…finish. And you’re afraid to have those urges with another person because you can’t control that part. Am I right?”

“Totally right. And…well…”

“You look different than other guys?”

“Exactly!” Kurt gave him a huge relieved smile and Erik was painfully reminded of his own teenage years. He’d shot up before he’d filled out and spent much of his teens feeling like an uncontrolled metal bending piece of overcooked spaghetti.

“Well, first thing is you will grow into controlling yourself. When I was your age I used to mangle every piece of metal in a three room radius every single time. Now, I just make metal in the same room float. It gets easier. Also, I’ve found that it’s easier with another person. Doing it alone, it means there’s no grounding, no anchor, nothing to focus on. I’m not saying you should go out and screw the first willing partner. Tabitha would be majorly pissed. But I am trying to say you’ll get the hang of it.”

“So I should just wait for it to get better?”
“Afraid to say, that’s all you can do with this particular issue.”

“Damn.”

“I know, it’s tough, but I promise we all lived through it, and most of us are doing fine. Now, the appearance issue. I don’t think I can help with that one.”

“Probably not.”

“I guess we could call Azazel-”

“No. No way. Not a chance.”

“Kurt, he would know-”

“NO!” he snapped. “He hasn’t even bothered to answer any of my calls. He all but ran screaming from me at your wedding. I’m NOT asking him for anything.”

“Okay, okay, I understand,” he soothed. He hadn’t realised his friend had handled the whole situation so badly and made a mental note to call Janos and feel out the situation. “Let me think. I must know another mutant with a visible mutation.”

“You’d think there’d be more of us,” he mused, poking at some of Erik’s half-finished pieces. “Think you could possibly keep it to a guy?”

“I know a guy with wings, would that count?”

“Wings? Like a bird?”

“Think less bird more angel,” he said, scrolling through his phone. “His name is Warren, I’ve worked with him a bunch of times. He owns a very exclusive personal shopping business, orders a lot of custom pieces. We’ve been out for drinks a couple of times, he’s a good guy.”
He raised an eyebrow and Kurt nodded, so Erik made the call and, soon enough, Warren Worthington the third was walking through the door.

“Interesting call,” he said with a smile, hugging Erik.

“I try. Warren, this is Kurt.”

Kurt stood and shook his hand, and then watched as the tall blond man shrugged off his coat and then his shirt. When he was topless, he took off the leather harness he was wearing and shook out the most beautiful white wings.

“Such a peacock,” Erik teased. “And shedding feathers all over my floor.”

“Something to remember me by.”

“How big are they?” Kurt asked as Warren stretched one out for him to touch.

“Been a while since they were measured, but last time they were, they measured about 18 feet.”

“Can you fly with them?”

“I can. I quite enjoy flying with them. I only wear the harness while I work. I find they tend to get in the way, and I knock things over, which I can’t afford to do with the expensive breakables I work with.”

“You don’t hide them?”

“Kinda hard to hide two whole limbs,” he chuckled, settling on the stool Erik produced from a store cupboard. “They’re…me, part of me, who and what I am. There’s no shame in being different.”
“You’re not sixteen,” Kurt muttered.

“I was once.” He accepted the coffee Erik offered. “When I manifested I was 12, and terrified, and I took my father’s toolbox into the bathroom with me. I tried to saw them off, and when that didn’t work, I tried filing them down. Neither approach was pleasant. My parents are both baseline, and they didn’t take it well that their only son and heir was a mutant. I hid this for years, for as long as I could, and my father helped me to hide.”

“Why’d you stop hiding?”

“Because I hated my life. I spent my teenage years hiding away on my family estate, trying not to be seen, going to doctors to see if any of them could remove my wings. By age twenty I was basically a recluse.”

“What changed?”

“My father died and I inherited the family money. I was suddenly expected to make appearances, to actually be seen. Needless to say it caused quite a stir. I remember being horrified the first time I had to go to a gala. Room full of people, all wanting to see me and my wings.”

“Was it awful?”

“It was awful. For about an hour.”

“Then what happened?”

“I met a woman called Emma Frost. She’s a lawyer and a telepath. She also has skin that goes like diamond. She stuck around for a few weeks after that, and taught me that there’s nothing wrong with me. And now I teach you. You might look different but that doesn’t make you any less than anyone else.”

They sat talking for a while, Erik working to give Kurt a chance to ask what he wanted. It seemed that Kurt was getting a kick out of being able to ask another mutant with a visible mutation anything he wanted.
That, and Kurt and Warren both loved 80’s movies.

They’d just moved on to discussing the finer points of Short Circuit and Short Circuit 2 when the door jingled.

Tabitha paused in the doorway as she spotted Kurt, and then breezed in like nothing have ever bothered her in the history of the universe. Erik had always wondered how teenage girls did that.

“Erik, should I go to the market to get something for dinner?”

“No, I was thinking Chinese takeout,” he said, giving her a brief hug and getting her a soda. “How was school?”

“School like. How was work?”

“Work like. Tabs, you remember Warren, right? He came to that picnic that time?”

“Oh, yeah, I remember. You brought the shrimp sushi to the Jewish picnic,” she said with a grin and he blushed bashfully.

“Yeah, I’m never living that down,” he said as he shrugged back into his shirt.

“No, you’re not,” she said with a smile. “Erik, I’ll see you at home.”

“Tabitha, wait,” Kurt said and Erik shot to his feet.

“Oh, would you look at that!” he said, scarily cheerful. “A pretzel cart. I need a pretzel, really need one. Right now. Warren, don’t you need a pretzel, right now?”

“Absolutely,” he said, completely confused but smart enough to know they should retreat to a safe distance.
“You suck at subtle!” she called as the two men dashed out of the shop. “So, what am I waiting for?”

“I wanted to talk.”

“I tried to talk. You teleported out and didn’t call.”

“I know, and I didn’t mean to do that. I was embarrassed and then…poof. I didn’t mean to do that. I just…I didn’t know what to say.”

“It’s fine, I get it. You don’t have to explain. You want to date someone else, I get it.”

“No! That’s not what I want, not at all! Tabs, it’s not you, it’s not about you. You’re beautiful, stunning, and I am so blessed to be with you. My issues, what we were talking about…it’s about me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Tabs, look at me. I don’t look anything like the guys at school, and they talk, and I’m weird and different and-”

“What the hell are you talking about?” she interrupted. “Kurt, there’s nothing wrong with you.”

He stood still as she approached and then melted into her touch as she cupped his cheek.

“If I thought there was something wrong with the way you look, I wouldn’t be with you,” she said.

“Same here. But…I just wanted you to know, you’re not the only one who has worries over the way they look.”

“I guess,” she said uncertainly as he wrapped his arms around her.
“We’re different, but I think you’re beautiful. I love the way you look,” he promised. “I think you’re perfect, just the way you are. As for the…other stuff. I do want to, I do. I just…I’m not ready.”

She sagged in his arms with a little giggle. “Me neither!” she laughed. “I just thought you didn’t want to.”

“I do! I very do. Just not yet.”

She leaned in and kissed him and he melted into it, kissing her back, feeling her warm sides under his hands.

They might not be like other teens. But they were perfect, just the way they were.

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Erik had just settled into his bedding when the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Erik? Did I wake you, darling?”

“No, I’m awake,” he said, curling onto his side and smiling into the dark. “I missed you.”

“Mmmm, I’ve missed you too. But I’ve finally figured out the time difference, so I thought it was a good moment to call.”

“A very good moment. I wish you were here. How’s the conference going?”

“Slow. They’re having trouble agreeing on anything except that they can’t agree. Some think mutants should be segregated, others think inclusion is the way, and then there are the endless arguments over education and medical care and marital rights.”
“Sounds like fun. How’s the hotel?”

“Luxurious, but I am a very foolish gentile. You Jews have the right of it. I never should have eaten the shrimp.”

“Oh dear.”

“Indeed. It’s sat very poorly with me. I’ve had barely an appetite, and I’ve felt nauseous since I ate it.”

“Poor baby. I’ll make you some nice chicken soup when you come home. Good Jewish penicillin.”

“That sounds lovely. Anyway, enough about my digestive troubles. What’s gone on at home?”

“Tabitha and Kurt had a fight, she was a terror to live with for two days and then they made up. David split with his girlfriend, got drunk, and threw up on Mamen’s roses. And I found out that Azazel has handled Kurt very badly. You know he won’t talk to the boy? And he practically warded him off with a crucifix at the wedding?”

“No, I wasn’t aware. Have you talked to him?”

“Talked to Janos, who told me to drop it, that Azazel didn’t want to deal with it. I told him that was a bullshit copout and he should be a man about it. Janos hung up on me.”

“That’s very selfish of him, of them both. Kurt is a living breathing person. It’s completely out of line for them to treat him like this.”

“You’re preaching to the already pissed off,” he said with a smile. “I spoke to Sam in Paris. We’re all on track for the trip. They let out of school over there earlier than Tabitha will, but I spoke to the Principal and he doesn’t see a problem with us taking her out for a few weeks. She’s doing well with all her classes, and the high school is all ready for her come September.”
“They’re sure there will be no problem?”

“None.”

“Good. I think it’ll be good for her. Spending time with that side of her family. It’ll give her a chance to ask about her mother, see where she was from, and to get to know them. Having another set of family members can only be a good thing. As much as I love her, and I do love her very much, I’m not Miriam, and I can’t help in questions she might have.”

“But you are enough. She loves you, Charles, and you’re more than enough. She might not be your daughter by blood but you couldn’t do any better even if she were.”

“I might be, but I’m still not Miriam. She deserves the chance to get to know her, and this is the only way she can. What about the Centre? Have you spoken to Moira, see if she can cover me?”

“She said it’d be fine. Yuriko’s dad offered to sub, and Alex, so I think it’s covered. Steve offered to watch Bailey while we’re away. How about flights? We thinking direct or with a stopover?”

“Direct would be best. We’ll deal with that when I get back. Is Sam sure there’s enough room for us?”

“Said it’s fine, Tabs can even bring a friend if she wants. Five bucks says she asks Kurt.”

“No, Jean.”

Erik hummed in a maybe agreement. “I miss you.”

“A few more days, my love, and then I’ll be home.”

“But I want you here now, my little furnace.”

Charles chuckled at him and Erik could feel himself harden.
“I miss touching you,” Erik said, rolling onto his back.

“Mmmm, I wish you could be doing that.”

“Where are you?”

“Laying on my bed in my hotel room.”

“Alone?”

“Yes,” he said and Erik could hear the smile.

“If you’ve got any clothes on, take them off. All of them, everything.”

He could hear the rustle of fabric and he let himself rub at a nipple, rolling it between his fingers, pulling it.

“All off.”

“Good boy. Now. I want you to touch your chest. Stroke the skin, gently. Don’t touch your nipples yet. Are you doing it?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Tell me what you’re thinking of.”

“You.”

He chuckled, “Mmmm, well, I know that, you’re always thinking of me. Be more specific.”
“You…kissing me. Touching me. Your hand on my chest, your tongue in my mouth. I’m thinking of the way you press me into the mattress when you’re on top. How good you feel against me.”

Erik could almost feel it, what Charles was describing, and he could definitely picture it.

“Sounds like a party. Move your hand. Slide it down, stroke to your belly button and back up. Imagine it’s my hand.”

Charles was letting out little huffs of air against the phone.

“Tell me how it feels.”

“Feels good,” Charles said. “Soft. Not quite you, the angle is wrong.”

“Stop touching,” he ordered and Charles actually gave a little whimper. “Reach up. Stroke your neck. Pinch behind your ear, as if it were my teeth.”

As he was talking, Erik had pushed down his boxers and wrapped his fingers around his hard shaft. He slowly started stroking as Charles let out breathy little sighs.

“Mmmm, that’s it, baby. Now down, back to your chest. Pinch those pretty nipples for me, hard, like you mean it. Good boy,” he crooned, pleased when Charles’ breath hitched.


“Please? Please what?”

“I…I need…please…”

“Seeing as you’ve been such a good boy…slide that hand down. Slowly. Mmmm.” He circled the head with his thumb, imagining Charles sprawled on a bed, touching himself. “Where is it?”
“M-my belly.”

“Where on your belly?”

“Just-just under my navel.”

“Mmmm, very good. Would you like to move it a little lower?”

“Yes! Oh, yes, Erik, please!”

“Okay. Down a little more. Stroke the hair. But don’t touch your hard cock. Not yet. Are you touching?”

“Yes. Oh!”

“Good. Very good. Down, down to your thighs now. Spread those legs, nice and wide. Stroke your inner thighs. Light touch, almost tickle.”

Charles sighed down the line at him and he grinned, speeding his strokes, moving down to tug his balls every now and then.

“How hard are you, Charles?”

“V-very.”

Erik loved it when Charles started to stutter at him. His little husband was always so put together, it was erotic to know he could undo him. And now to know he could do it just with words. It was almost enough to make him spill.

“Take a finger. Just one. Stroke your shaft. Don’t touch the head, or your balls. Just the shaft. Keep going, up and down, just a fingertip.”
Charles whimpered at him, his pants loud down the phone and Erik smiled, imagining how debauched he looked.

“Stop. Reach down. Cup your balls. Are they tight?”

“Yes. Erik…”

“Grip them, stroke the skin, tug them a little. How long can you keep going?”

His whimper turned into a full-fledged moan, and he could hear the slide of fabric as Charles shifted on the sheets.

“I…oh fuck…Erik, please!”

“Had enough?”

“YES!” he screamed and Erik moaned.

“Okay. Enough is enough. Wrap your hand around. Stroke yourself, hard, fast, circle the head.”

Charles began to chant his name, high moans mixed in.

Erik waited until he had splattered himself before ordering, “Come for me.”

Charles screamed, loud and long, and Erik waited patiently for him to regain focus, using the time to wipe clean and set his clothing straight.

“Holy hell, I needed that,” Charles mumbled eventually.
“Feel better?”

“Immensely. Thank you, my love.”

“You are very welcome.” He paused, waiting for something to come to mind, something to say. “I don’t want to hang up.”

“Me neither.” Erik could hear him snuggling into the foreign bed. “Tell me a story,” he asked sleepily.

“A story? Seriously?”

“Yes.”

Erik grinned, making himself comfortable.

“Only until you drift off.” Charles hummed sleepily. “Alright. Once upon a time…”
Chapter Thirteen

Erik had never flown first class, but, then again, Charles had never planned international travel before. He should be thankful they weren’t taking Tony’s private jet.

“Charles, this is…”

“It’s too much, isn’t it?” Charles asked, completely crestfallen.

The first class cabin was luxurious and spacious. Just eight seats in the whole cabin, wide seats that could be laid completely flat and had their own personal minibar. Each seat was in its own personal pod that could be closed for privacy, equipped with a full table and flat screen HD TV with a huge selection of entertainment options.

“It’s great,” Tabitha said, wriggling in her own seat. “Seriously, your butt will be so happy in that seat.”

Erik chuckled as he sat down. “She’s right. My butt thanks you.”

“It’s still too much,” Charles lamented.

“Hey,” he soothed, pulling him into his lap. “It’s great. I’ve just never flown first class before. It’s different than I was thinking. But it’s not bad.”

Charles kissed him before taking his own seat and they were soon cruising towards France. Tabitha was content to curl up and watch a movie while dinner was served. Charles had made sure to specify a Kosher option on their requirements. Dinner was a delicious beef bourguignon with noodles, a delightful salad, and it was finished with little baked apples carved into roses and drizzled with honey.

The meal only managed to take up half an hour of an eight hour flight, so Erik and Charles scrolled through the available movies. They were half way through some action flick when Charles noticed the extreme nerves coming from Tabitha.
“I’ll be right back, darling.”

Charles knocked on the door of her pod and let himself in to find her curled up on the bed her seat had become, hugging the bunny he’d gotten her.

“Probably wise we got you a new bunny,” he said, sitting down and stroking her hair. “I don’t think the special one would be taking your hugging very well. How are you doing?”

She shrugged and set her head on his thigh.

“It’s alright, sweetheart, it’s perfectly natural for you to be terribly nervous.”

“What if they don’t like me?” she asked, her voice impossibly young and small.

“Well, that is a possibility,” he said. “A slim one, but it could happen. But, if the worst happens, the three of us can go and get a hotel and just treat it as a vacation. I don’t think we’ll need to. Sam will be there, and you get along well with him. And Maurice won’t be there, so you don’t need to worry about that. I know you’re nervous, and that’s perfectly natural. But I promise it’ll be okay.”

“Swear?”

“I swear it. If it really gets bad, I’m sure there will be plenty of metal for Erik to threaten people with.”

[I heard that, and you’re damn straight.]

“Ah, he’s in agreement. Now, I think it’s best if you get some sleep. You’ve been sleeping very badly for a few days, some sleep will do you good,” he soothed, standing and tucking her in. “It’ll all be okay. Come on, get some sleep.”

“Charles? I…”

He felt only a little guilt dipping into her mind.
“Oh, my darling girl,” he said, kneeling by the bed so he could cuddle her. “No matter what happens, I will never walk away from you. We’re family, you and I. And nothing, absolutely nothing, will ever make me love you any less.”

“Love you too.”

“Now, my lovely girl. Get some sleep. It’ll all seem brighter come morning.”

They landed at 10am Paris time and quickly settled into the rental car, setting off towards their destination.

The Hérault Valley in the south of France was a beautiful place, with a warm Mediterranean landscape and pretty villages, several of which were world heritage sites. They were bound for the Mediterranean paradise of Languedoc, where, just outside Portiragnes, was a huge sprawling vineyard, which would be their home for the next two weeks.

They passed vineyards and scrubland, all of it indescribably beautiful. The warm weather was complimented by a warm breeze that whipped Tabitha’s pink hair around her face. They stopped a few hours away from the vineyard for lunch and then got back on the road.

It was a little after five when they pulled up and Sam was quick to appear in the door, a wide smile on his face and wine glasses in hand.

“You made it!” he said happily. “Welcome to France!”

“Sam, how wonderful to see you,” Charles said, accepting a glass.

“You look great, married life certainly suits you. I’m so sorry we couldn’t make it to the wedding, I just couldn’t take the time off, but the pictures Tabs sent us were gorgeous.”
“Ah, it’s no problem,” Erik said, accepting his own glass. “We really didn’t think you would be able to make it. It was pretty short notice.” He leaned in close. “Give her a minute, she sat awkwardly and made her whole tail numb, which has spread to her left leg,” he said, motioning to the backseat. “That, and she’s incredibly nervous.”

“Her and my sisters both. I think if it’d taken you any longer to get here, one of them would have killed someone.”

Tabitha had to be helped out of the car as pins and needles had taken hold and then she clung to Erik as the feeling returned to her leg and tail.

She looked up at the main house and let out a long whistle.

“Now that is a pile of bricks,” she said. “Who did you have to kill to be able to rent this?”

“Rent? We didn’t rent this…Oh, I think something got lost in translation,” Sam said. “Tabs, we own this. This is where we spent our childhood. There’s a small cottage further into the vineyard where our workers live, the family still produces wine here.”

“You mean…this is…where my mom…?”

“Yeah, this is where we lived before we moved stateside.”

It really was beautiful, all sprawling red brick and tasteful ivy and shrubs. It was two stories with a thick oak door and green shutters. It was obviously old, or at least the windows were. They were wavy in the way of old glass, which added to the charm of the flowers climbing around the front door. The gravel driveway was a pale sand colour, which lightened the potentially dark colour scheme, and held several cars of varying colour.

“I am so sorry,” Sam said, looking to Erik for guidance. “Really, I thought she knew.”

“It’s okay, Sam, take a breath, let her think it over,” Erik soothed, rubbing his shoulder.

Tabitha didn’t get the chance to think anything over. Something tackled her to the floor with a high
shriek of delight, but, try as they might, they couldn’t see anything. Erik actually wondered if Tabitha had collapsed on them.

“Oh my God, you’re here!”

Sam folded over on himself he was laughing so hard. “Carrie, they can’t see you. Phase in.”

There was suddenly a teenage girl on the ground with Tabitha, who looked at her hand for a second before shrugging and returning to hugging the pink haired one.

“That’s Carrie?” Erik asked incredulously. “Last time I saw her she had pigtails.”

And now she was wearing short shorts and a belly top. And was that a belly ring?

“Yeah, Simone is not a happy camper,” Sam said quietly as the girls started babbling at each other. “We’ve got some teenage rebellion going on. Not just Carrie, we’ve got issues with Frankie, Allison, Rosa and Cat. I’m hoping that spending time with Tabs will show them that just because they’re mutant and teen doesn’t mean they need to make everyone else suffer.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Okay, girls, perhaps us getting settled in our rooms would be good,” Charles said and the girls were quick to follow his instructions.

Carrie sped off to inform her cousins and other family members that Tabitha had arrived while Sam showed them to their rooms. Charles and Erik had a very nice double; off-white walls and a dark wood four poster bed, dark wood furniture and an open window overlooking the back garden. Through the attached bathroom was Tabitha’s room.

It was a small double, white like her parents room but with a decidedly more personal feel. There was a patchwork quilt on the bed, photographs of LeStrange family members on the walls, and a ragdoll in a pinafore sitting on a wicker chair by the window.

“Is this someone else’s room?” she asked as she set her suitcase on the floor, backpack on the bed.
“Now, see, when we decided to give you this room we really thought you know this was family property,” Sam said awkwardly. “And if you want another room, we would all totally understand.”

“Sam,” she interrupted firmly. “Who’s room is this?”

“It was your moms room, when we were kids,” he admitted. “And we thought, since this trip is sort of a way to learn about her, that you might like to stay in it. But that was before it became clear that you had no clue that we used to live here.”

“It’s fine,” she said. “Really.” She looked around, running her fingers over the quilt. “When did she last use it?”

“She last lived in it when she was about your age. But she actually stayed here when you were a toddler.”

“What?”

“Yeah,” he said with a smile. “You were about two the last time she brought you. Just you and her that summer. You’d be too young to remember it now, it was a long time ago, which I realised when you told Papa that you’d never been to France.”

“So, I’ve stayed in this room before?”

“Yes. She put your crib under the window.”

“Cool.”

Sam, sensing everything was okay and she didn’t need a different room, left her to unpack and settle in and then she and Charles and Erik joined them in the garden. They’d changed their clothes, something more appropriate to the sweltering weather. New York had been warm, but this was an oven.
“Okay, introductions,” Sam said, clapping his hands together. “Don’t worry if you can’t remember any names, we can’t either. Right. Papa’s side of the family is his brother Pascal, over there by the azaleas, with his sons Aaron and Ramsey. Ramsey is the one with the blue shirt, and standing with him is his partner Jacob. Aaron is married to Petra, the one in the red dress, and they have Catherine, Persephone and Andromeche, who go by Cat, Seph and Romy respectively.”

“How old?” Charles asked as he set a name to faces as they waved.

“Cat is 13, Seph is 11 and Romy is 9. Then over to Mama’s side. Her brother Benjamin, the one pouring drinks, then his son Thomas, the one with the Mohawk, his wife Stephanie is the one with the piercings, and their children, Guys! Wave! Yeah, that’s Troy, who’s 22, Rosa in the middle is 18 and Helene with the chips is 14.”

“Is everyone here a mutant?” Erik asked.

“Yes, absolutely all of us. Mama’s sister Simone is the one with the cake, she’s married to Adam, the one with the beer, and they have two children, Elouise, who isn’t here, and Edward, who is standing over by the tree with his wife Bethan. They’re the bunnies of the family, they have six kids. See the group over by the pond? Carter is the oldest at 27, then the twins, Jason and Jude, they’re 24. Be on guard, they still like to pull the switcheroo. Then Arielle is 21, Amanda is 19 and Allison is the baby there at 16.”

“No wonder you can’t remember names,” Charles said.

“You see the issue. Then we get to Mama and Papa’s line, which is only five of us. You’ve met me, Portia and our girls,” he said with a smile as Miriam toddled up and attached herself to Charles. “You made quite the impression, she’s been babbling with excitement every time you’ve been mentioned. Now, this beauty here is my sister Simone, that’s her husband Augustus, we call him Gus, you’ve met their daughter Carrie, she’s 15, and they have the little girl running with the dog, that’s Vianne, who’s 5.”

“She’s beautiful,” Erik said.

“Thank you,” Simone said with a heavy accent.

“This is John,” Sam said as he slung an arm around a short guy who looked like an accountant. “He’s the better half of my sister Arielle, the redhead. They have three kids, Maurice is 19,
François we call Frankie, he’s 16, and Renaud is 12.”

“It’s Reny, Uncle Sam,” he moaned as he walked past.

“Sorry, I forgot. Then there’s just my brother Benny, who hasn’t arrived, he and Mama will be here sometime after dinner.”

The teenage cousins were quick to pull Tabitha off to the huge oak tree, for general lounging about and talking, and Erik grinned as Charles was ambushed by little Vianne.

“Does he never get tired of being a kid magnet?” Sam asked as he and his sisters settled at the table with cold drinks.

“Never,” Erik said with a smile. “I think, if he could get away with it, he’d keep the kids from the Centre.”

“A shame you can’t make one to keep him happy,” Simone said, pouring him a drink.

“Ah, he’s happy enough with borrowing little ones. Plus, he’s amazing with Tabs. Honestly, sometimes I feel left out, they’re so in sync.”

“She’s so grown up,” Arielle said wistfully. “Last time we saw her, she was this tiny little thing. I remember me and Miriam finding Tabitha and Frankie creeping out one night so they could look at the stars.”

“Oh yeah, I remember that,” Simone agreed. “I remember catching Carrie trying to sneak from her room and getting some silly story of sleepwalking. She had her sleeping bag with her too.” She smiled at her daughter and niece, animatedly chattering away. “Where did the time go? Seems only yesterday they were putting on silly puppet shows for us.”

“It’s easy to miss things when you’re not there,” Sam said darkly.

“Hey, you’re here now,” Erik assured. “Don’t focus on the time you lost, focus on the time you have. It took a lot for Tabs to make this trip, but she’s willing to try.”
“Erik, what exactly does she want from this trip?” Arielle asked. “I mean, does she wish to know about her mother? To get to know us? Something else?”

“A bit of both. She’s curious about you all. She remembers you from when she was a kid, remembers how much you meant to her back then. She wants to know about Miriam too. To be perfectly honest, she’s terrified of you all, in a nervous kind of way.”

“Wouldn’t know it from looking at her,” Edward said as he joined them.

Tabitha was lounging on a teenage boy, Erik vaguely remembered that it was Frankie, and laughing at something Carrie was saying. There was something…different about Tabitha. It wasn’t her mutation, even though that did make her stand out in general. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it. There was something that made her different from her cousins.

“Kids are easier. They all got swept up in it all. See, all of you knew why you couldn’t see Tabitha. All the kids knew was that suddenly things had changed and she wasn’t around to play anymore.”

“So…how do we handle this?” Carter asked as he sat down.

“Just go about everything as you normally would. Once she’s figured things out a little, she’ll let you know what she needs. For now, she just wants to blend into the crowd, so to speak.” He glanced at the mini burgers Stephanie placed on the table and did a double take. “Uhhh, Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“Those burgers, are they…”

“Mini bacon cheeseburgers.” He held out the plate and Erik shook his head.

“Can I take a wild stab in the dark, just a hunch, no one here is Kosher?”

“No. Why? I didn’t think you were. Is Charles?”
“No, Charles is a gentile,” he said, a breath away from calling said gentile for backup. “And no, I’m not Kosher. But Tabitha is.”

“Wait, what?” Carter said as Arielle choked on the sip of wine she’d just taken. “Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously.”

“Oh, shit,” Sam moaned, staring at the burgers. “I had no clue. I never even thought to ask. Mir wasn’t Kosher. Shit, she barely identified as Jewish. And Richard…he wasn’t exactly Orthodox. Tabs was never Orthodox, they weren’t raising her that way.”

“No, but she’s now five years older and has had her bat mitzvah. She’s been Kosher for a few years now.”

“I didn’t even think.”

“Think about what?” Tabitha asked as she plucked a soda from the table.

“Tabs, have you seen the burgers?” Erik asked lightly.

She looked down the table and tilted her head before smiling. “Is that…bacon in those things?”

“Yup. Mini bacon cheeseburgers.”

Erik helped her stay upright as she dissolved into tear-causing laughter.

“Is that dinner?” she asked when she’d caught her breath.

“No, that’s a snack,” Arielle said. “Dinner is Moroccan fish with chickpeas.”
“Kosher?” Erik prompted.

“I think so. Honestly, it’s been so long since any of us even thought about making anything Kosher. How strict are you with your observance of the Torah?”

“Not that strict, it’s hard sometimes to keep to the laws, but I do as best I can. Charles and Erik don’t observe, so we don’t have separate kitchens or refrigerators or anything like that.”

“But we do have two sets of pots and pans and things, red for meat, blue for dairy. Wait, make that three, we have the green set for parve,” Charles added as he flopped into a seat. “Goodness, that little girl has so much energy! She could give my kids a run for their money.”

“Feel free to tell her to go annoy her sister,” Simone said.

“Oh, no, she’s a lovely little girl. I think I’m just getting old.”

“You didn’t say anything,” Sam said to Tabitha as she nibbled at an apple. “All those emails and you never mentioned anything about being observant.”

“It didn’t seem like something I needed to mention,” she said. “I thought you knew.”

“How long have you been?”

“Two? Two and a half years? Something like that. Before my bat mitzvah. I was studying with the rabbi and made the choice that it was the way I wanted to live my life.”

“But Richard was never…”

“It’s not about him, it’s my choice,” she interrupted.

She and Sam were now alone at the table, the others having moved off to give them some space to talk. Sam had been closest to Miriam; of all her siblings, he had been hit the hardest by her death. Tabitha couldn’t imagine what it was like to lose your twin.
“I don’t understand how you can still have faith,” he said. “Aren’t you angry at Him?”

“No. Why would I be? He didn’t give her cancer, and He wasn’t the one who ignored it. She did. She knew she was sick again and didn’t go to the doctor.”

“She was scared,” he argued.

“She made a bad choice. She should have gone to the doctor sooner, let them catch it sooner. She was in remission, she knew what cancer could do, and still she didn’t go. That wasn’t God, that was human choice.”

“He let her suffer.”

“He didn’t let her suffer. He didn’t pick her out specifically to be in pain, to be sick.” She sighed. “I don’t understand how you can blame God for this.”

“Because I was taught that He is loving and giving, and all knowing and all powerful,” he said. “If all of that is true, then why did He leave my sister to suffer.”

Charles flinched as Tabitha’s anger hit him. “Oh dear. Perhaps the theological discussion should have happened later.”

“Scale of one to ten?” Erik pressed, watching their daughter worriedly.

“About a six and rising.”

“I can’t believe you,” Tabitha seethed. “You talk about her suffering but you don’t know anything about it. Did you wake up every morning for eight months to the sound of her throwing up? Did you see her devastated when her hair fell out again? How about when she was screaming in pain and the pills didn’t even make a dent? You saw none of that. No, you got to see the good moments, you got to see her smile and put on a brave face, so don’t sit there and blame God for her suffering when you didn’t have to see it.”
She shot up and stormed inside. The younger cousins watched in shock, staring at their uncle in amazement. Simone was the first to move, smacking Sam around the head, hard.

“You fool. She’s not even been here an hour and you’re already putting your foot in it!”

“I didn’t mean to!” he defended. “We were talking and then it just sort of…happened.”

“Do I even want to ask what you’ve done to upset my granddaughter?” Vianne asked as she arrived, glaring at her son.

Sam felt about ten years old again when faced with his mother’s wrath.

Tabitha looked up from her sketchbook at the knock and her bedroom door opened a crack.

“Uncle Benny?”

“Hey, Squirt. Can I come in?” he asked. He was short, like Charles, and dark haired, like the majority of the LeStrange’s. He was the youngest of his siblings, having been a very late surprise for his parents. He was only 19.

“Sure! Come on in,” she said, moving her tin of pencils so he could join her. “When did you get here?”

“Around about the end of the theology debate,” he said, lounging across the patchwork. “He can be a dick, huh? So high and mighty? Believe me, I’ve wanted to punch him more than I can count. Only reason I don’t is because of mama.”

“It was me,” she said, hugging her knees. “I guess…I just…this trip is hard. It’s a lot to take in. And then…I was kind of blindsided.”

“Ah, so this is what Arielle meant by springing things on you. What was it my beloved bighead
brother ‘forgot’ to tell you?”

“I didn’t know this was your house, I thought you were renting it.”

“Holy shit. Seriously? What a dick move!” he half-yelled. “I mean, we all knew he was desperate to get to over here, but lying to you? Pure dickishness.”

“He didn’t lie,” she said. “It just got a little…mistranslated. He’s not the only one who screwed up. He didn’t mention who owned this place, I didn’t tell him I was Kosher.”

“Woah, really? Very cool. I’ve never met someone Kosher. I don’t actually know how to cook Kosher…but still, very cool.”

“Thanks. Shame Sam didn’t take it that well. He found out and it got all deep and meaningful…”

“Let me take a guess. He belittled your faith in God?”

“Has he done this before?”

“Tabs, sweetie, he’s always had a lack of faith. He’s too scientifically minded to take anything that has no definitive proof. But when Mir died…it was like he couldn’t bring himself to believe in anything. It’s almost like he takes offence at anyone having belief in anything.”

“That’s stupid,” she said.

“That’s Sam for you. You know, this is really good,” he praised, looking at her drawing. It was a portrait of Carrie. “I mean it. You’ve got a gift, kiddo.”

“It’s just a sketch.”

“No, it’s real talent. Have you looked into selling some of your work?” he said, looking through the pages at the drawings within. There were a variety of mediums, but she seemed to favour graphite and colour pencils.
“No. It’s just a hobby.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You should think about art school.”

“I haven’t even started high school yet!” she laughed. “You and Mr. Wilson, both looking at college. Can I graduate first?”

“Of course, but you should think about it. Who’s Mr. Wilson?”

“Guidance Counsellor. I had to meet with him before I transferred over to the high school. Kind of a final adjustment thing. He has to make sure I’m in the right classes and all that good stuff. Plus, I think he was checking up on me, making sure I’m happy with Charles and Erik.”

“Are you? Happy?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?” she asked defensively.

“Just checking. I wouldn’t be much of an uncle if I didn’t check. Hey. Can you pick things up with that thing?”

“What thing? My tail?”

“Yeah. Is it just there or can you use it like another hand?”

“I’m learning to pick things up. It’s harder than it looks,” she said. She carefully wrapped her tail around her cell phone and managed to lift it about an inch before it dropped back to the mattress. “Round things are easier.”

“Tabs?” Erik interrupted from the open door. “Dinner’s ready. You want to eat with us or you want a tray up here?”
“No, I’ll come down,” she said, piling up her art stuff to put on the bedside table. “It’s really not a big deal. I’m sure there’s something I can eat.”

“I know, baby,” he said, hugging her. “Be patient with him. He’s a well-meaning bonehead. Ben? You okay?”

“Your…” He cleared his throat. “Your hands. They’re…”

Erik and Tabitha both looked at their hands but couldn’t see anything strange. There was nothing out of the ordinary.

“Tabitha, your fingers,” he hissed.

“Oh! You mean the extra section.” She flexed her fingers and it suddenly occurred to Erik that none of them had thought to mention it. He and Charles were so used to how she looked, it never occurred to them that they should forewarn anyone.

Instead of the usual knuckle leading to three sections of finger, Tabitha had four sections. It made her always slim fingers look even more thin, and Erik could see why someone might find them off-putting. Her toes were the same, an extra section.

It had been one of the last parts of her manifestation, occurring sometime between her moving in with them and the argument with Troy.

“You…they…I don’t remember that,” Ben spluttered.

“It was part of my manifestation,” she said. “They just sort of…grew. Overnight.”

“Yeah, no! They’re…they’re great!” he babbled, absolutely fooling no one. “Dinner! I’m starved!”

Erik and Tabitha grinned at each other as he sped from the room.

“How long before they crack with the nice act?” she asked.
“Two days, max.”

Charles couldn’t ever imagine getting bored of the beauty of the vineyard. He loved the colours of it, the wide open sky, the sunsets, the dawns. He loved the smell of the earth and the taste of the wine, the heat of the sunlight, the creaminess of the cheese. He spent his free time wandering through the vines, trailing his fingers over the leaves, seeing the grapes appear day by day, darkening and growing heavy.

It was their sixth day in France. The morning after they had arrived, they’d taken a trip down to the local village and equipped the kitchen with everything needed to make Kosher food. Tabitha had written out cheat sheets for them, taped up on the fridge. Once the food situation was under control, Charles and Erik had thought things would be simpler, but there was still a heaviness in the air, something unsaid. The LeStrange’s were afraid of upsetting Tabitha and being cut out of her life once again.

That morning, Charles found himself sitting on the front step, looking out at the vines and sipping his tea as he waited for the others to be ready. The family were going to be taking a trip to the beach not too far away.

“May I join?” Simone asked.

“Of course,” he said and she sat with him on the step. “Are they almost ready?”

“Not quite, still working on what to wear. I have upset my daughter again,” she admitted. “It is difficult, parenting a teenage girl. It was so much easier when she was Vianne’s age. When she was Vianne’s age, if I told her I preferred a different bathing suit, she would not believe I was calling her fat.”

“Yes, teenage girls can be a little challenging at times. But Carrie seems like a good girl. Lively, smart, beautiful.”

“And with an attitude the size of Texas. Everything I do, she wants to kill me.” She sighed. “I am sorry. You don’t want to hear my woes.”
“No, it’s perfectly alright. I think every parent of teenagers has similar worries, but I think parents of mutant teens have more than the average. Sometimes I think the world just isn’t ready for us. Other times I think it should be. If evolution thinks the time is right for us, then human nature should damn well catch up. Parenting in these circumstances was never going to be easy.”

“It must be especially difficult for you,” she said. “That she is not yours.”

Alarms of worry started to ring in his head but he resolutely pushed it back down. “Oh no, she is mine, just not by blood. She is mine in all the ways that matter.”

“I didn’t mean to imply that you don’t love her, it is clear that you do. It just must be hard to care for a child when you have missed so many years. And then suddenly she is mutant.”

“Actually, I didn’t meet Tabitha until she had manifested. I’ve never known her as any different. True, there are many things about her that I don’t know, but I delight in learning them.”

“You will come to learn that one of the curses of the LeStrange bloodline is that we very often say the wrong thing, or what we mean to say comes out wrong.”

“And what of when you mean the things you say that are supposedly wrong?” he asked quietly. “I don’t want to cause trouble, truly I don’t, but I worry about Tabitha. And it’s that worry that makes me question how many of you agree with Maurice. How many of you think Tabitha should live with one of you?”

“Some of us, but not many,” she admitted. She looked embarrassed and defiant all at once. “I’m sure we all only want what’s best.”

“What’s best for Tabitha is to be listened to,” he stated firmly. “She is fifteen in just a few days. She knows her own mind, she won’t be dictated to.”

“But you assume living with you is what she wants,” she said defiantly.

“She told Maurice it’s what she wants.”
“She was angry. It was poor timing on Papa’s part. Perhaps now that things have calmed…she might be more open to the idea.”

He really didn’t mean to let his temper get the better of him, nor did he mean to dip into her mind, but she was thinking so loudly. And those loud thoughts were screaming at him that he wasn’t good enough and Tabitha was a child who didn’t know anything.

“She is a US citizen, who is old enough to know what she wants. She was born and raised in the States, and not a judge in the world will remove her from our custody if she doesn’t want to go,” he argued, getting to his feet. “Tabitha is not forced to live with Erik and I, we didn’t abduct her. She chooses to stay with us, and I won’t let any of you take her choices away.”

He stormed into the house and out to the garden, finding Erik chatting with one of Tabitha’s cousins, who took one look at Charles’ angry face and made a hasty retreat.

“Okay, baby, take a breath before you render them unconscious,” the metal bender urged. Charles let himself be hugged and took some deep breaths. “Okay, now show me what happened.”

Charles pushed the memory of it into Erik’s head and waited for the reaction.

“Well, that sucked. How many of them feel like this?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where’s Vianne? Adult Vianne, not the little one.”

“In the kitchen.”

Erik pecked him on the lips before taking his hand and leading him to the kitchen, where Vianne was checking the picnic basket.

“Ah, my favourite Americans,” she said happily. “Is Tabitha ready?”
“We don’t know, but we’re hoping you can help us with a problem,” Erik said.

“Anything. If I can help, I will.”

“I’m just wondering how many of your family think Charles isn’t worth anything? Because if they’re all going to be talking about us behind our backs, saying how Tabitha should be with one of you, then I swear, we’re going to have a very big problem.”

She looked horrified, and then surged forwards, wrapping Charles in a hug. “Tell me who said this,” she demanded.

“I…it’s nothing…I just…”

“No, no excuses,” she interrupted. “I want to know who has said such a thing, and I want to know now.”

“It was me, mama,” Simone said from the doorway. “Tabitha should be with us, her family, and I am not the only one who thinks that.”

“You will go and gather every person here who thinks in this way and bring them to me, right this moment.”

Simone looked like she was going to argue before she spun on her heel and stormed out. Within moments there were four of them standing in the kitchen, shame-facedly waiting for Vianne to tear them a new one.

Simone, her sister Arielle, and their cousins Edward and Aaron.

“The four of you will listen to me and you will listen good,” Vianne said, her brother, sister and brother-in-law standing with her, angry at their children. “This is the first time in almost five years that I have been able to spend any time with my granddaughter. And that is, in very large part, thanks to Charles and Erik. Without their love and support, their encouragement, she would not have come. They are her parents, legally and emotionally. They love her without reservations, without limits. She is exactly where she is supposed to be.”
“Mama, she should be with a LeStrange. Miriam would have wanted her to be with you and papa, or with me, or Sam. One of us should have custody of her,” Simone argued.

“What makes you any more important than Charles and Erik?” Pascal asked. “What makes your genetics worth more than their love and care?”

“She was my sister!”

“Neither of us are denying that,” Charles said. “Tabitha is your niece, your family. And that is a wonderful thing. But to be perfectly honest, you haven’t been there for her. You don’t know her friends, her likes, her dislikes, you didn’t even know her dietary needs.”

“Neither did you,” Edward said.

“But he was there when mutant-phobic assholes broke her tail,” Erik snarled. “He was there the night she had to have her dislocated tail reset. Charles is the man who took responsibility for a child he had no possible connection to. He’s sat up with her in the night and worried about her and helped her with her homework. He knows her favourite pizza and what vegetables she hates and which movie she knows all the words to. In six months he has learnt more about her than he could ever list.”

“We can learn,” Arielle said sulkily.

“You didn’t even bother to fight for her,” Charles said, his temper taking over. “Richard said no and you all scuttled away, leaving that poor girl to a man who did his level best to destroy her. You’re all acting like she’s a child, ten years old and in need of a white knight. She is NOT! She is a beautiful, intelligent, fiery, stubborn, breath taking young woman who is growing into someone spectacular. And I won’t let anyone ruin that. She chooses to stay with me and Erik, and until she tells me herself that she wants something else, I will continue in the way we have. She is my daughter, and I won’t let any of you take her from me.”

He stormed to the door and paused, spinning to look at them all.

“I won’t be telling Tabitha about this, and I would appreciate if none of you did either. She doesn’t need to know what selfish idiots you’re being, nor how incompetent you think she is.”
Charles paused outside of Tabitha’s room and took a deep breath, calming himself down, before he knocked and waited for her answer.

“Oh, that’s lovely, darling,” he said, looking at the blue swimsuit she was tugging at.

“Yeah? You don’t think it’s… I don’t know. Too revealing?”

It was a swimming dress, cut high at the bust, with a hemline that hit on the knee. It was backless, but not revealing. Compared to everything he saw her cousins wearing, it was practically a tent.

“No, I think it’s very modest. Oh. That’s what it is.”

“What?”

“Erik and I have been trying to put our fingers on what sets you apart from Carrie and the others. I’ve just figured it out.”

“And…it is…?”

“You’re always modestly dressed. I don’t think I’ve ever really noticed before.”

“Tzniut,” she said, comparing two dresses she could wear over her bathing suit. One was blue and the other white. “The Jewish laws of modesty. I’m not super observant, but I try to remain modest as much as I can. It’s difficult, looking the way I do, but I try.”

“I think you do very well,” he praised as she slipped on the blue one and wriggled her feet into her sandals. “Of course, I know nothing of the law of… what was it called?”

“Tzniut. It’s used to describe both the character trait of modesty and humility, as well as laws about
conduct in general and especially between the sexes. It’s mostly aimed towards women, but there are guidelines for both.”

“And this was something you decided on when you gave consideration to the more orthodox ways?”

“Yes. It’s one of the tougher ones, a harder sell. Most girls don’t want to follow it, it doesn’t really mesh with modern fashion.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Carrie?”

“She is rather…revealing.”

“Understatement.”

Sam appeared in the door and smiled as Tabitha checked her bag one more time.

[Can you hear me?]

Charles nodded slightly and Sam’s lips quirked at the edges.

“You ready, Pipsqueak?” he asked and she smiled.

“Almost.”

[Mama has dealt with it. They won’t say anything else, or give any judgy faces, nothing whatsoever. I swear. I’m sorry, Charles, I had no idea they felt like that. I would have warned you, I promise I would.]
Tabitha was halfway down the stairs before Charles answered.

“I know you would,” he said, squeezing Sam’s shoulder. “Truth be told I was expecting something like this to happen before now. Your father couldn’t possibly be the only one to feel such things. I expected there to be more of them, truth be told.”

“I think there probably are, but those four are the only ones with enough balls to actually admit it.”

The trip to the beach was surprisingly pleasant, considering what had gone on. It took several cars to transport everyone, and Charles and Erik ended up with Carrie and Frankie as well as Tabitha in the backseat.

The two girls were lively, chattering away, and Charles was determined he would not, under any circumstances, look at the all-too abundant spill of Carrie’s breasts. That bikini top is definitely not enough and he can understand why Simone didn’t like the bathing suit.

Frankie seemed to be permanently scowling at the world. Charles wasn’t sure of the problem, nor was he sure of his mutation. It wasn’t visible, as far as Charles could see, and the curiosity was pressing down on him.

“Oh, this is beautiful,” Erik said as they left the car.

They’d managed to find a fairly empty spot. There were a few other groups scattered along the pale sand, some children paddling in the crystal blue water. The sky was a beautiful blue with not a cloud in sight, the sun hot and glorious, with a gentle breeze to take the edge off.

The assorted family (by far the largest group on the beach) set about laying out various towels and umbrellas, and there was a general slathering of lotions before the little ones sped off to build castles and paddle in the waves.

Tabitha was lingering by the car, looking at the assorted people with an expression of barely concealed terror.
“What’s wrong, baby?” Erik crooned, perching on the hood. “You look like we’ve asked you to jump into fire.”

“I don’t do this,” she whispered. “Let everyone see? I…it’s different with you and Charles. You’re my parents. This…it’s different.”

“Yes, it’s different.” He sighed, watching Charles chase little Vianne into the water. “Tabitha, do you like the way you look?”

“Yes.”

“Then it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks. Yes, you look very different than anyone else. But different is a good thing. If everyone were the same, think how boring the world would be! The world is a huge place full of wonderful, infinite variety.”

“That’s not it,” she said. “Well, not all of it. Some of it, but not all of it.”

“Then what is it? What’s holding you back?”

“You don’t think that it’s…immodest?”

And Erik suddenly understood her problem. As modern teenage Jewish girls went, Tabitha was on the more conservative end of the spectrum. It was something, as well as being Kosher, that she’d decided on in the run up to her Bat Mitzvah. She didn’t go to Temple as a general rule, because she didn’t believe God could only be found in a building. But she believed in modesty as a way of living, that God had created her physical form and honouring that creation was a way of showing her faith.

“Want to know how I see it?” he asked and she nodded. “Okay, the way I see it. God made everything, the whole world, everything. The sky, the air, the trees, the water. I can think of no better way to honour and respect His glorious miracles than to go and enjoy them. Walk on the beach, feel the sand between your toes. Feel the sun on your skin, smell the salt air.”

“So…you don’t think I’m…indecent?”
“Show me the suit.”

She pulled off the dress she’d thrown on over the top and held out her arms, showing him. He twirled a finger and she spun slowly for him, before waiting for his assessment.

“I think it is very modest. High cut, no cleavage showing. Good length to the skirt, thighs and above covered. I see no issues with it. You look lovely, baby.”

She smiled in relief and pecked him on the cheek before she moved off to join her cousins splashing in the waves. It was only then that Erik noticed how much attention she was drawing.

“Sam? Is something wrong?” he asked as he settled on one of the towels.

“Wrong? No, I don’t think so,” he said, holding Miranda so she was sitting and could see what was going on. “Why?”

“Because there are a hell of a lot of people staring at Tabs.”

“Oh, that. She’s pretty unusual looking. It draws the eye.”

“Does that mean her family should stare at her?”

“Oh, that! No, man, that’s just because she’s suddenly all woman shaped. Despite the obvious, she looks a lot like Miriam, she always has, but now she’s taller and, well, curvy. It’s taking them some time to get their heads around it.”

“That I can understand,” he mused, watching as Carrie splashed Tabitha, the pink haired girl shrieking.

“How’s Charles? After this morning, I mean.”

“He’s okay. We were waiting for it, waiting for someone to say it. Your dad couldn’t be the only one, it just wasn’t possible.”
“He regrets that night,” Sam said as Miriam toddled over to show him a shell she’d found. “I see! Very pretty!” She toddled off with a huge grin, back to her mother to continue exploring. “When I told him he wasn’t welcome to come, I thought he was going to have a nervous breakdown. It was mama who pointed out how badly he screwed up.”

“Charles doesn’t want Tabs to know what went on.”

“Yeah, mama said. Not sure I could do the same, if I were him. If it were me, I think I would have packed her up and taken her home.”

“He’s tempted. Hell, I’m tempted. Having someone say he isn’t good enough...yeah, it doesn’t sit well.”

“Thank you for your restraint.”

“It’s not restraint,” he said as he accepted Miranda, holding up a handful of sand for her to poke at. “Charles wants this to work, he wants Tabs to have as much family as she can. That’s it, that’s the only reason we’re still here.”

“You really would do anything for him,” Sam mused. “I’m glad you found someone. We were all convinced you were too much of a grouch to fall in love.”

“I am not a grouch!” Erik argued with a smile, making Miranda smile up at him. “Am I a grouch? No, I’m not. Your daddy is a funny man! Yes, yes he is!”

She dissolved, giggling at him so hard she listed to the side.

“Oh, you’re hilarious, getting a four month old baby to laugh,” Sam said, opening a soda. “Really impressive.”

“I think so!” Erik said, exaggerating his words to Miranda, who just couldn’t stop laughing at him. “Yes, I think it’s very good to make a baby laugh! Best sound in the whole wide world!”
[Good for the soul,] Charles said from where he was building a sandcastle with Romy.

[Nothing better.]

Kurt dropped to his knees and waited for the world to right itself.

It had been years since he’d done a major jump in his sleep. The last time, he had been six and had ended up in Washington. The police had found it hilarious, this little blue boy in his pyjamas suddenly appearing on the steps of the White House.

He still had the photograph of himself being held by the First Lady, the President smiling at the camera.

His stomach was trying to make an escape from his body through his throat, his skeleton had turned to overcooked noodles, his heart was pounding. He and his parents had a theory that the feeling he had after a huge jump were his molecules all catching up.

After a few minutes, he managed to look up, seeing where he was. Oh, shit. He was in someone’s home, in their bedroom.

“Oh God,” he whispered. “Oh dear God.”

He managed to get to his feet, gripping at a chair to keep himself upright. And then, mercy of mercies, he saw bright pink hair on the pillow.

“Tabs,” he moaned, gripping the blanket. “Tabitha, wake up.”

“Mmmm? Kurt?” she said, sitting up to look at him and letting out a little squeak as his knees gave out, depositing him on the floor. “What happened? How did you get here?”

She clambered from the bed, holding him close and he gripped at her, trying to ground himself.
“Did…did you jump all this way?” she asked incredulously.

“Was dreaming,” he moaned as she stroked gentle fingers through his hair. “Missed you. Woke up here.”

“I missed you too,” she said and he could hear the smile. “I can’t wait for you to see this place. My mom grew up here. It’s beautiful.”

“Tabitha? Darling? Oh, sweet heavens! Erik!”

Kurt felt Charles’ gentle hands on his shoulders, helping him sit up, and then Erik’s joined them, the two of them checking him over. He wiggled his toes and fingers and answered their questions.

“He seems to be all there,” Charles said after gently sweeping through his mind. “But exhausted, poor thing.”

“How did he even manage to travel so far?” Erik asked as he helped Kurt up onto the bed.

“He’s done it before,” Charles said. “Not quite this far, but still. I should call Carol and Mike, let them know he’s here.”

Erik and Tabitha tucked Kurt into her bed, the girl stroking his hair. He was so very tired, and it was so soothing, he was soon asleep. Erik led Tabitha to his room and she perched on the bed while Charles finished his conversation.

“Well,” he said as he put his phone on the bedside table. “They’re relieved to know where he is, and when Mike stopped laughing, they decided to send us his passport and some of his things. I’ll call the airline in the morning and get him put on our ticket.”

“What about Sam and the others, won’t they mind?” Tabitha asked.

Erik rubbed her shoulder and left the room, knocking at Vianne’s door until she answered. Erik and
Charles had come to learn that if they wanted something done right, then Vianne was the one to go to.

“Erik, it is late!” she exclaimed.

“I know, I’m really sorry to wake you, but something’s happened. Tabitha’s boyfriend, Kurt, he’s a teleporter. He’s just accidentally popped into Tab’s bedroom.”

“Oh, the poor thing. Is he alright?”

“Exhausted, but he’s all there. We’re agreed with his parents that he stays with us until we leave, and then he joins our travelling party back to the states. They’re going to send his passport and clothes and things. Is it okay if he stays?”

“Oh, of course. We will sort out clothes for the boy in the morning. For now, you should all get some sleep. Go now, go to bed, and we shall sort everything come breakfast.”

She pulled him down so she could kiss his cheek and stroke his hair and then she disappeared back to bed.

Erik felt for sure it must be the wisdom of age that made older women so unflappable.

Kurt awoke to bright sunlight, a warm breeze, and Tabitha’s head on his shoulder. She woke when he did, and he could feel her tail tangle with his.

“Morning,” he whispered and she smiled against his skin.

At least he had been wearing boxers when he travelled, and at least they had travelled with him.

“Hey,” she said, wriggling sleepily. “I didn’t dream it.”
“Nope, I’m here.”

“Mmmm. Did it hurt?”

“Kinda. It feels…it feels like everything is being pulled apart and pushed together all at once. It’s fine for a small jump, I barely feel anything. But a big jump…yeah, I already know I’m going to be sore today.”

“Is there anything I can do to help, you know, to make it better?”

He pressed a kiss to the top of her bright head. “Just being with me helps.”

She helped him sit up and then he limped to the bathroom, where Charles or Erik had laid out a toothbrush and other necessaries, and when he’s finished, Tabitha had managed to dig up some clothes for him.

“Is it true?” Carrie hissed as Tabitha opened to door. “You had a boy in your bed last night?”

“Carrie, he teleported clear across the Atlantic,” she hissed back, glancing over her shoulder. Kurt was seeing if Charles or Kurt had some kind of footwear he could borrow. “We just slept!”

“You had a boy in your bed!”

“Oh…go to breakfast!” she snapped, shoving her away from the door. Carrie cackled all the way down the stairs.

“Scandalous.”

She grinned as she looked at Kurt, leaning in the bathroom doorway.

“Hush it.”
“I mean it. Your passed out illegal traveller boyfriend in your bed all night long? Shameful,” he mocked, a playful smile playing around the corners of his mouth.

“Grandmére said it was fine.”

“And your aunts and uncles? Will they think it’s fine that I’m here?”

“I don’t care,” she said angrily. “They can go hang.”

“Hey, whoa, what conversation did we just tip into?”

“It’s nothing,” she said, reaching for her hairbrush.

“Hey, it’s not nothing if it’s bothering you,” he said, plucking it from her hand. He pulled her in, his arms around her waist. “Talk to me. It’s just you and me, Erik and Charles have already gone down, your cousin is gone. Come on. Tell me.”

“A few of them agree with Grandpère,” she admitted, tracing the cartoon on his t-shirt. “They upset Charles. They don’t know I know.”

“They upset Charles? But…that’s like kicking Bambi!”

“I know! How could they be mean to him? He’s like a little puppy. And he’s my family. How could they think he’s not good enough?”

“Okay, listen to me. You think he’s good enough, Erik thinks it, and that’s all that matters. The three of you are a family, so who cares what a load of strange relatives think? They didn’t fight for you. Charles has, and always will.” He stole a quick kiss. “I’m sure we could find a hotel somewhere, if you didn’t want to stay. I’m positive Charles and Erik would be okay with it.”

“They would, they’ve already promised me we can leave whenever I want to,” she said, letting him hug her, listening to his heart beat. “I don’t want to.”
“Then we stay. I mean it’s not like I can leave anyway,” he said with a laugh. “Now, let me brush this neon mess and we’ll go have some breakfast. And then you can show me how beautiful this place is.”

Kurt loved brushing hair. When he was little, his mom used to let him brush hers. It started after a little girl in school had said his hands were disgusting and she didn’t want him near her.

Once he’d brushed it to a high gloss, he let Tabitha lead him out to the garden where everyone was already sitting, two empty chairs between Charles and Erik.

“Holy shit!” Carrie squealed as she caught sight of him.

“Language!” Vianne snapped before turning a kind gaze on Kurt. “Welcome to our home. Please, come, sit, eat! And ignore the ones of us that were obviously raised by wolves.”

After breakfast (where the atmosphere had been tense), Tabitha took Kurt out into the vineyard, the two of them hand in hand and tails entwined.

“All they did was sleep,” Erik said, handing Sam a cup of coffee.

“I know! You’ve already said that!” he said, way too cheerful, his gaze fixed on the young couple wandering through the vines. “You swear?” he asked worriedly.

“I swear. Look, something that neither of us have to deal with is a physical mutation. Both of them do, and both of them have issues surrounding it. Trust me when I say they are not even close to doing anything like that.”

Sam sighed and sipped his coffee.

“I guess I’m having trouble seeing her as a young woman too. Man, I have so much guilt going on! We missed five really important years, and I wish I could say that it was all his fault, that it was all down to Richard. But I can’t. We fucked up, really fucked up. And I don’t think we can ever make up for it, not really.”
“So stop trying to make up for it,” Erik said. “Look, no one is dismissing that the whole situation is fucked up. No one is saying you didn’t screw up. But you can’t go back in time, you can’t undo it. Stop focussing on what was and who she used to be. Focus on now and who she is now.”

He hummed, watching with narrowed eyes as Kurt pressed a kiss to Tabitha’s cheek.

“She’s too young to date, I’m sure of that much.”

“We’ve got it all under control,” Erik assured. “Worry about your own daughters. Soon enough, it’ll be them that’s dating.”

He took a sick pleasure in the look of absolute terror on Sam’s face.

Charles wobbled back from the bathroom and curled into Erik’s hold.

“Poor baby,” Erik crooned, stroking his hair.

“Too much wine. Or maybe it was the cheese, maybe it didn’t agree with me.”

“It’s probably something you ate in Japan. You said the shrimp didn’t sit well.”


“Boring or not, that’s probably what it is. How’s Kurt?”

“Happily playing video games with Troy and Amanda, and he’s got a camp bed waiting for him in with Jude and Jason. I spoke to Mike again. Kurt’s things should be here tomorrow, they had them shipped express.”
“Good.”

“I called the airline, got him put on our ticket. It’s all taken care of.”

Erik hummed and pressed kisses to his hair. Feeling Charles pressed against him, knowing he was his husband, that they were a part of each other forever. It was a heady feeling, knowing he loved completely and was loved completely in return. That their daughter was sleeping in the next room. Their daughter. And wasn’t that a trippy sentence to think. A husband, a daughter, a successful business, they even had a dog. It was amazing to him that he had so very much in his life. When he thought back to being Tabitha’s age, a few days before her fifteenth birthday, he remembered being intensely unhappy, feeling like his life was never going to be anything more than being dragged around by his father.

He held Charles closer, knowing that his life was amazing.
Tabitha’s birthday dawned bright and beautiful. And Erik chuckled to himself at Charles’ excitement.

It was the first birthday she had been with them, and fifteen was pretty big as birthdays went. It was the last one before she started high school, and the last one before her sweet sixteen. Erik suspected that Charles was using it for a practice run for her 16th, though he didn’t rule out that Charles would go all out every birthday she had. Just because he couldn’t stand to celebrate his own, didn’t mean he wouldn’t delight in their daughter’s.

“Alls, it’s too early,” he complained as Charles wriggled from the bed.

“But…it’s daylight,” the telepath argued, twitching back the curtains to take a look. He was practically vibrating in excitement.

“It’s barely 5. Tabs isn’t awake yet.”

“Oh,” he said as he settled back into the sheets.

Erik pulled him close and pressed a kiss to the smooth skin behind his ear. “It’s okay to be excited,” he said. “I think it’s adorable how much you want today to be good for her.”

“I just-”

“Shhh. I know, I know. It’ll be a good day, I promise. She’ll love her gifts and the cake and everything else. Now. Think you can sleep a little more?”

“Probably not,” he admitted.

Erik moaned and pulled him closer, sliding a hand over the soft smooth skin of his back.
“One of these days, you’re going to pass out and sleep for a week,” he whispered as he squeezed a cheek, Charles thrusting against him. He could feel Charles growing against him and smiled as he kissed his throat.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Charles said, sighing as Erik slid that long fingered hand under the thin fabric of his sleep pants. “I’ve never had this problem before.”

“It’ll pass. We’ll go home and back into routine and you’ll sleep much better. Now, let me tucker you out so we can have a few more hours.”

Charles gave a high whine as Erik’s warm palm pressed against his growing erection, long fingers wrapping around and slow strokes starting a tremble in his thighs. He pressed his hands to Erik’s chest and his mouth to his shoulder as his husband worked him up, thumb circling the sticky head a few times before the stroking began again, dipping down to tug and stroke at his balls, gripping him tight once more. Teasing kisses against his skin, an arm holding him close, and he found himself tipping over the edge, making a mess of his pyjamas before very long.

“Better?” Erik asked once he’d cleaned up with some tissues from the nightstand.

Charles could only send a sleepy telepathic hum.

Breakfast was a huge assortment of fruits, with toast and yogurt for those that wanted it, juice, tea and coffee flowing freely.

Once everyone had eaten their first portions and were happy enough to nibble, the gifts were presented.

It was testament to how very little they really knew Tabitha that the LeStrange’s had gifted an assortment of generic gifts. Hairbands, fashionable jewellery, nail varnishes, various stuffed animals. Clothes she would never wear, CD’s she already had, books she’d already read. Charles could feel her general lack of excitement over the gifts, but she managed to seem genuinely pleased. There were a few gifts, however, that truly made her happy.
Vianne had given her a locket containing two pictures. One picture was of Miriam, taken when Tabitha was young, and the other was of Charles, taken just a few days before.

“I never want you to forget her, she was your mother,” Vianne said. “But Charles is important too, very important. You should have them both, carry them with you, resting close to your heart, where they both belong.”

Tabitha gave her a long hug and when they pulled back they both had glistening eyes.

Kurt had managed to get his parents to include his gift in his package of stuff, and when the paper was removed Erik thought it must have cost a small fortune for a teenage boy.

“Kurt, this is…”

“Just to be clear, it’s a ring with a diamond, not a diamond ring,” he babbled as she pulled it out to look at it.

A white gold band with a Celtic knot engraved into it, it led into two hands holding a heart, into which a diamond was set.

“It’s a Claddagh ring, isn’t it?” Charles asked.

“Yeah. Mike, his family, they’re Irish, so I grew up with the traditions. You give a Claddagh to someone you love. If you wear it like this,” he said, holding up his hand and showing Tabitha the diamond less one he wore, “with the heart pointing in towards you, it means your heart belongs to someone.”

[Charles, where the fuck does a sixteen year old find the money for that?]

[Working Sundays and after school with Mike as an accountant. He’s been saving for months. He does it all the time, save his money. His gaming system is quite impressive really. He saves for a while and then blows it on something big.]

“It’s too much,” Tabitha protested as he slid it onto her ring finger, the same place Charles had his
own rings.

“It’s perfect,” Carrie said. “The guy just got you a rock, be happy.”

“Back off,” Frankie said. “It’s her gift. Just because you’re a gold-digger.”

“At least I’m not a freak of nature,” she hissed and Frankie finally let Charles see his mutation as the fruit on the table all burst into bloom, a whole array of beautiful blossoms.

“Enough, both of you,” Erik said firmly. “Apologise, now.”

“I am not apologising to her,” Frankie snapped.

“Why should I? He started it,” Carrie pouted.

“Oh, would the two of you stop!” Tabitha cried. “Every day it’s the same, you two sniping at each other. I’m sick of listening to it. Either get along or stay apart, I don’t care which. Now stow it, you’re ruining my romantic moment.”

Kurt chuckled as he kissed the ring, stroking her hair. “It’s not too much, it’s a special gift for my special girl on her special day.”

She giggled at him and then let Erik and Charles see it, the two of them exclaiming over the, admittedly small, diamond.

“I’m afraid our efforts aren’t quite so surprising,” Charles said as Erik retrieved his gift from the house. It had been a test for them to get it into his suitcase.

“This one is from me,” Erik said, holding up a black garment bag with a bow on it. “There’s another gift back in New York too. A new desk, one for artists. Couldn’t get it in my suitcase.”

“Thank you,” she said with a hug before opening the bag. “Oh, it’s so pretty!”
The dress was a pale purple, cut straight across the shoulders so it would cover her collarbone. The lace of the bodice continued down so the sleeves would end at her elbows, the sheer lace giving the impression of skin without showing anything. The dress continued down into a knee-length skirt of tulle and petticoats. Erik had also included a pair of ballet flats in the same pale shade.

She held it up to herself and twirled.

“I thought you could wear it tonight,” he suggested. “There’s a festival thing going on in the village tonight.”

“I can’t wait.” She carefully hung the dress on one of the hanging baskets.

“Well my gift seems a little boring now,” Charles said, holding out the flat box, wrapped with a bow.

“Don’t be stupid,” she said, hugging him and taking the box. “There is nothing boring about you. Ever.”

She unwrapped it to find a travel art kit. Paper, pencils, erasers and charcoal all in a pouch that zipped up and had a strap that looped around the wrist. Inside one of the pockets was an instruction manual.

“Ah, yes, that’s your other gift from me, the one at home in New York. I’m told it’s a perfect model for beginners.”

A graphics tablet, all shiny and new and just waiting for her.

“Seriously?” she asked. “This is awesome!”

“I know you haven’t done any digital art before, so I thought a simple one would be best for your first foray into it.”
She hugged him once more and the family settled into another day together. Most of the younger cousins took their usual place on the grass under the large tree, Tabitha lounging against Kurt. Some disappeared inside to work on projects or get away from the others for a while. Erik and some of the cousins his age decided to drive through the countryside to pick up some meat or something from the local farmers. Charles suspected they were off to drink and shoot the shit.

Charles found himself wandering through the vines until he found Frankie. The young man had seated himself right in the middle of the vineyard, though Charles knew he shouldn't point out that he was hiding.

“Would you mind some company? Or if you would rather I can leave you to your thoughts.”

“No, you can stay.”

He settled himself down on the dirt, enjoying the shade the low position afforded him. “Can I ask… I can’t quite place your accent.”

“Canadian. Quebec.”

“Ah, that’s it. You’ve got a slight French undertone. Barely noticeable, but enough to tell me you weren’t American like Erik is.”

“Where are you from?”

“Me? I was born in America, upstate New York, to English parents. I spent summers in England, and my tutors when I was small were all English.”

“So you’re not an American?”

“Oh, no, I am. I am both, I have dual nationality, British and American.”

“Oh. Are you really a professor? Because Carter said you were but Helene said you weren’t.”
“I am actually. I have a PhD in Genetics and a Masters in Mutant Education.”

“Either you’re a lot older than you look or you’re a scary brain.”

“The latter I’m afraid,” Charles said with a laugh. “I love to learn, and to teach others. And genetics! It’s fascinating.”

“Only if you get to have normal ones,” he said sulkily.

Charles watched as he dug his fingers into the dirt, and then, before his very eyes, a patch of bluebells pushed up by his feet, shooting up and blooming in a matter of moments.

Normal genetics, what on earth? Oh. Oh!

“Frankie, do you believe me to be baseline?”

“Aren’t you?”

“No! Goodness me, no!” he laughed. “Oh dear. Who gave you that impression?”

“Uncle Benny.”

“No, no, I’m a telepath. I thought everyone knew.”

“No. We just assumed. You know, ‘cause Tab’s looks so different. We just thought you’d be visible, like her,” he said, blushing.

“Like Tabitha? Oh! No, Frankie, there’s no blood link between Tabitha and I. We adopted her, Erik and I. Erik is biologically related, but she’s not ours by blood.”

“Is that why you let her do it?”
“Do what?”

“Dye her hair like that. If I tried my mom would kill me.”

Charles had a sinking feeling in his stomach. “Ah, oh dear. Tabitha, the way she looks. That is natural. It was a part of her manifestation. She doesn’t even wear makeup, she finds it too hard to co-ordinate with her natural colouring.”

“Holy crap!” Frankie cried. “That hair is natural?”

“Yes, very.”

“Oh no. Oh crap.”

Charles flinched as Tabitha’s distress hit him, followed by the hilarity from some of her cousins and the blinding rage from Simone, and the almost crippling horror from Carrie.

Charles and Frankie made their way back to find Simone screaming at her daughter, the cousins (mostly) laughing, and Tabitha cringing. The reason for it all was standing in the centre of the living room crying.

Carrie had attempted to dye her hair, and it had come out a horrible muddy green.

“It’s not fair!” Carrie screamed back at her mother. “She gets to do it!”

“Carrie…” Tabitha began but the other girl shot her an angry look that shut her up.

“Carrie,” Charles said, as gently as he could. “Tabitha doesn’t dye her hair. This is a natural part of her mutation, my lovely. She does not alter herself in anyway, it’s against her following of the Laws.”
“What? THAT is natural?!” she shrieked, pointing at Tabitha. “What kind of mutant is she! Looking like a circus attraction, that’s a pathetic mutation!”

Charles hung his head and stepped out of the room, pulling Frankie with him. The teen looked confused until there was a series of loud crashes and cries of alarm, then Tabitha stormed past them, out into the vines.

“Did she…whoa,” Frankie said as he looked into the living room.

Just like when Troy had pissed Tabitha off, everything and everyone had been pushed to the edges of the room.

“What was that?” Carter asked as he got to his feet.

“That was Tabitha, and her mutation,” Charles said, standing little Vianne up. “She’s telekinetic, not just physical.”

“That was fun,” Kurt said sarcastically as he walked back in. He had popped right out when it all exploded. “You’re a bitch, do you know that?”

“I am not a bitch!” Carrie screamed. “How dare you! You weren’t even invited!”

“You called her a circus freak on her birthday,” Frankie said.

“Why are you so mean!” Vianne yelled at her sister, marching up in all her glory and shoving her. “It’s her birthday, you be nice to people on their birthday. And Tabby is always nice and you were mean. You’re always mean, you’re horrible. I hate you!”

Simone scooped up her daughter and murmured in her ear before the little girl nodded and scampered off to the garden. She then looked at her teen and sighed.

“Go to your room, now,” she said and Carrie opened her mouth to argue. “No. Enough. Enough of your attitude and your mouth. Go to your room and stay there.”
Carrie glared at her mother for a moment before she flounced out, shoving Frankie on her way.

“I’ll go find Tabs,” Frankie said, rubbing his shoulder as a door slammed upstairs. “We can swap notes.”

Erik popped off the top of his beer and hovered it in the air, spinning lazily.

“That has always been very cool,” Benny said, lounging back on the grass.

“I know, that’s why I do it.”

“Dude, your life is stupidly perfect,” Sam said.

“Okay, one, how can anything be stupidly perfect? That makes no sense,” Benny argued. “And two, he deserves to be happy. Everyone does.”

“Thank you,” Erik said. “And besides, it is not perfect.”

“You and Charles are all fluffy in love,” Thomas said.

“Maybe, but we’re still technically newlyweds, which helps. And we do argue, you just don’t hear it.”

“How do we not hear it?” Aaron said. “An argument is pretty obvious.”

“Ah shit, I forgot,” Sam moaned. “I forgot to tell them, Erik. They don’t know who he is.”
Erik dissolved, laughing so hard he had tears running down his cheeks. “Charles is Professor Charles Xavier. The geneticist.”

“Holy shit!” Benny cried, the others echoing the sentiment. “You’re married to a guy that famous and didn’t tell us. Feeling a lack of love here, man.”

“Hey, it wasn’t my job to tell you. I thought you knew.”

“You’re a menace,” Thomas said to Sam. “First that whole business of not telling Tabitha who the vineyard belonged to, then you failed to find out dietary restrictions, and now this. Is there anything else you’ve forgotten?”

“How would I know I’ve forgotten something I can’t remember?” Sam protested.

“These are basics,” Benny pointed out. “What the girl can eat is a basic thing.”

“That’s all settled now,” Augustus said. “Erik, tell me honestly, because I fear asking anyone else. But you’re pretty laid back, hard to offend. Is it different being married to a man than a woman?”

“Different? I’m not sure what you mean,” Erik said with a gentle smile to show he wasn’t offended.

“My wife loves to cook, and she keeps house. Is that different?”

“Not because he’s a man, because he’s Charles. He can’t cook, I mean literally can’t cook. It’s painful what he does to food. Me and Tabs cook, he orders take out. Keeping house, we all pitch in. We all live there, so we all pitch in. Charles usually ends up doing more because he’s home more, but I do my share.”

“Laundry?”

“Usually me.”
“Cleaning the bathroom?”

“We take turns.”

“Who earns the money?”

“We both do,” he said, amused at how old fashioned Augustus and Simone seemed to be. He thought that type of home life went out years ago. “I guess I could just stay home and be a lounge lizard if I wanted. Charles is the last Xavier, so he’s got the fortune. Plus he’s published, and consults with different organisations, so he makes money there. I have the store. We both earn, we both pay bills. We’ve got a whole chart thing on the kitchen wall.”

“What about Tabitha?” Aaron asked. “How do you work out paying for her stuff? Her allowance, her trips to the mall?”

“I do the allowance, which she gets for doing well in school and her share of chores, and Charles gave her a credit card when we adopted her. She buys her own clothes and shoes, her own books. She’s careful with how much she spends. Charles said it’s barely anything on the credit card bill. The allowance goes straight to the credit card bill, so she has an easier time keeping track of everything.” He grinned. “She takes it all seriously. She’s got a notebook to keep track of her spending. Her math teacher is impressed.”

“It can’t be that simple,” Augustus complained. “Carrie makes my life a living hell. I’ve gone from being her hero to being an outsider in my own home.”

“Tabs is different than Carrie,” Benny said, grabbing another beer. “A lot different.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means your daughter gives everyone a hard time,” Thomas said. “Tabitha is softer, gentler. I can’t imagine Tabitha verbally attacking anyone.”

“She doesn’t,” Erik said. “She had enough of that from Richard, she knows what it’s like to be on the receiving end.”
“You’re Miriam’s twin,” Aaron said to Sam. “What the hell did she see in that idiot?”

“Not a damn clue. I suggested a Doberman.”

Tabitha was sitting on the bank of the small stream that passed through the vineyard, levitating stones and pushing them out into the water.

“She’s a piece of work huh?” he asked as he sat beside her, his toes dipping in the water.

“That’s one way to put it.” Her latest pebble made a large splosh. “I didn’t know she didn’t know.”

“Hey, no one knew, not really. Maybe the adults did, but none of us. And we should have realised. How do you even manage to dye hair that colour?”

“No idea. When did she become so mean? Carrie has always been a little too full of herself, a bit too much for anything other than small doses. I remember that much. But now…When did she become cruel?”

“When hormones hit. It’s like she graduated from a training bra and became a complete nightmare to be around.”

“And her clothes! I try not to be judgy, but she’s making everyone uncomfortable. Poor Charles is going to implode if he blushes much harder.”

“Yup. It’s tough. You should see what the guys at school make of it.”

“So you guys live pretty close?”

“Yeah, my mom and Aunt Simone are really close, so we live a few streets from each other.”
“I kind of remember that part,” she said, pushing a whole shower of pebbles into the water. “It’s strange, what I remember, what I forgot. And everyone being all nice to me all the damn time is not helping.”

“I think maybe they’re afraid you’ll push them away,” he said, picking at a twig. “That if they say something stupid, you’ll leave and never come back.”

“Which is stupid. I never wanted that in the first place.”

“Adults are dumb.”

She was quiet for a long time, the two of them watching the water trickle past, before she mumbled, “I’m not a freak.”

He swung an arm around her and hugged her. “Of course you’re not. I’m not either. She’s just… Carrie. No one takes her seriously. She’s just full of it.”

They moved on to chatting about random things when Tabitha prompted, wanting to change the subject. Frankie was smart enough to realise she hadn’t changed too much from the little girl he remembered. She couldn’t be rushed, she could only do things in her own time. He couldn’t push her, or she’d just stop talking altogether. They talked about their lives, their hobbies, things they remembered, things they wished they could forget. It was very much like they had simply picked up where they left off.

“Doesn’t it get hard, walking with toes like that?” he asked, motioning to her feet. “They’re so long. Kinda looks like they’d be easy to break.”

She held out a foot for him to take a closer look and he gently poked at the elongated digits. It was like when they were children, counting each other’s freckles after a summer in the sun.

“They’re not as fragile as they look,” he declared. “Are your fingers?”

She let him explore those and he smiled at them.
“Very cool. Kinda like a space alien, like on Star Trek.”

“Thanks a lot!” she giggled.

“No! I mean like one of the exotic hot ones, not one of the nasty ones.”

“I’m not sure if I should be insulted or flattered,” she said. “Can you make any kind of flower?”

“Pretty much. I can make fruit and vegetables grow too. The City back home told me it was against the rules, messing with the ecosystem or something.”

“That’s bogus,” she said as he made a strawberry plant spring up, keeling over under the weight of all the fruit he made form.

“Don’t Charles and Erik get worried about your art?” he asked after a dozen berries each.

The little apple tree he grew next was very disproportionate to the large fruit it held; the poor skinny trunk flopped right over.

“Worried? Why would they worry about art?” she asked, nibbling an apple.

“Because you can’t make a career out of it, because it’s not a proper job.”

“Yes, it is. Graphic designers, illustrators, set designers, that’s just a few. Art isn’t just stuff that hangs on walls, though that stuff’s pretty great too.”

“What about dance? I bet they couldn’t make a career out of that.”

“Dance teacher, choreographer, performer, stunt coordinator. There are all kinds of careers out there. Just because it isn’t the nine to five doesn’t make it any less worth doing.”
“Can you tell my parents that?” he pressed quietly, ripping a strawberry into tiny little mushy pieces.

“Is that what you’ve been pissed about? That your parents don’t think you dancing is worth anything?”

Honestly, she hadn’t thought he still danced. She remembered him doing summer classes when they were young. One year had been tap, another had been ballroom.

“They want me to go to business school,” he admitted. “I hate math, it’s boring as hell, but they still want me to become an accountant. They say it’s a good future, a stable future.”

“What’s the point of stable and secure if you’re miserable?” she asked. “Look, if you really want it, then go for it. It’s your life, you’re the one who has to live it. It’s very noble to try and make them happy, but what’s the point if you hate yourself? Frankie, do you want to dance?”

“More than anything.”

“Will dancing make you happy?”

“Yes.”

“Then do it. Screw what they want, it’s you that has to live with it.”

“I want to apply to Juilliard,” he confessed. “I’ve got the forms, and they’re holding auditions in Quebec in October. I’ve only got one more year before graduation, I’m supposed to be applying to colleges, but all I want is to go to Juilliard.”

“If it’s what you want, why does it make you look like someone shot your puppy?”

“Juilliard is in New York. My parents would freak. And there’s no way they’d pay the tuition.”

“Ask Charles. He’d loan you the money, let you pay it back when you’re earning. He’s very into
helping people, especially mutant teens. Or there’s student loans, or scholarships. If you want it, we’ll find a way.”

He grinned at her and a whole mass of strawberries popped up around him.

“You’re kind of awesome, you know that?”

The family had a large dinner, at which Carrie and Tabitha were sat at opposite ends of the table, which ended in a huge cake, and then they dispersed to get ready. Erik had stayed out of the whole fiasco with Carrie, leaving it to Charles to handle. The telepath handled it by leaving them to it. It seemed to work, if the two of them ignoring each other was progress.

“Mmmm, you look good,” Erik hummed as Charles finished buttoning his shirt.

“Not looking too bad yourself,” he said with a grin as Erik pulled him close. “Now, Erik, you know we don’t have time for this.”

“But I want it. We can be a little late.”

“It’s her birthday, we can’t be late.”

Erik groaned and kissed him quickly before pulling away and knocking on Tabitha’s door.

“Oh,” he breathed as she opened it. “You look so beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she said, spinning once for him. “Am I covered?”

“Just the way you should be.”
She’d scraped back the top of her hair and done something that made it look all swirly and intricate, the rest of it loose against her back, and it looked amazing against the pale purple of her dress. The lace covered everything it should, but still managed to give a peek of her skin through it; he could see the strange marks she had along her spine and shoulders, and the dressmaker had been happy to add a hole for her tail at the back.

He helped her put on the necklace Vianne had given her, the ring from Kurt glinting as she held her hair out of the way.

Charles was choked up when he saw her, and she was quick to press a kiss to his cheek.

The walk to the village was a fair trek, but the night was warm and the atmosphere celebratory.

The festival was something the town had been putting on annually for the last decade to celebrate the mutant residents of their community. There was music, food, performers and stalls selling various mutant friendly products. Clothes that accommodated extra limbs, toys for mutant children, story books, makeup.

Charles dug out his wallet immediately and gave Kurt and Tabitha €100 each so they could buy what they liked. It was a necessity as nothing in the village took credit cards; most places barely had a phone, a cash register was a novelty.

He watched them move off to investigate the first stall and then focussed his telepathy to keep a constant watch on them before he looked around for his husband. Erik was watching him, leaning against a wall. His lean body looked almost fluid in the light of the setting sun, all long lines and careful curves. It made his mouth water.

Such a beautiful man, and all his.

“Come with me, Professor,” Erik husked as Charles drew near. “Come and try some food and drink and then a dance or two.”

Charles giggled as Erik nibbled at his neck and then followed where he was led. First some cheese and meat, then bread and some olives. It really was much closer to Spanish food than French, but they were rather close to the border.
They happened upon a stall of bright cakes, decorated with flowers and citrus blossoms. The lemon ones were delicious and Erik made sure to buy the book containing the recipe from the smiling woman. She found Charles adorable, everyone did, and Erik had come to love people admiring his little lover.

Confectionaries took Charles’ fancy next, and the stallholder was all too happy to let him sample a little of everything before putting a selection together in a big jar. He achieved his selection fast owing to his extra pair of arms.

A few glasses of wine had them very merry, and then they got to the real shopping. Erik found a stall selling absolutely anything you could think off, all of it made of metal. Pens and pencils, buttons, crockery, cooking dishes, even shoelaces. He spent a good long while picking out a selection of things he had never seen before.

Charles found a stall selling strange headbands which turned out to be psionic suppressors. They would block the abilities of telepaths and telekinetics, which could be useful in a medical situation. Charles bought two of them, one for himself and another to put away for Tabitha, should she ever need it.

After a wander around the stalls, they stopped to watch some performers. There was a little girl who could levitate (or possibly fly, they weren’t too sure) and a young man with a chameleon like ability, similar to little Miriam. Another act had a telekinetic levitating a Firestarter, who had flames shooting off to be contained by an elemental.

“This is wonderful,” Charles said before his internal monitoring of the kids went off. He and Erik found them looking confusedly at a woman who was speaking French.

“I don’t know what she’s saying,” Tabitha said. “She doesn’t seem mad.”

Erik knew enough French to know he needed another translator, one with better skills, so they took the woman with them to Sam.

Sam listened and conversed with her and then smiled. Miranda was in his arms and squealed as she caught sight of Erik. He was happy to take hold of her, pressing kisses to her cheek.

“She’s a photographer, she works with a mutant modelling company,” he said. “She’s never seen people who look like the two of you, visible mutations so extreme are a rarity. She’d like to take
some pictures.” He chuckled. “She fears no one would believe her if she didn’t.”

“Oh! Is that all? I thought we’d done something wrong,” Kurt said. He looked at Tabitha who nodded and then Sam gave the woman the go ahead.

After a few minutes of furious clicking, she seemed satisfied and Charles was quick to give her his business card, should she need anything else. She gave him hers and then thanked them before moving off to take more pictures of the festival.

It seemed like every mutant within 50 miles had descended upon the town square, and Charles found himself pulled into a dance by Erik. The music was provided by a small orchestra of local musicians.

“Seeing as we’re leaving day after tomorrow, I think this is a good moment for me to ask how you found the trip,” Erik asked, holding him close and leading.

“I’ve enjoyed it. The place, the food, the chance to spend two weeks with you. No work, no Centre, just us. Admittedly, the people have been an issue, but that’s not a big thing. Most of them are nice.”

“Would you come back?”

“To here?”

“Yeah.”

“I think I would,” he said after careful thought. “It’s beautiful here.”

“Maybe we could get Sam to let us use the vineyard sometime. Me, you, Tabs.”

“I’m game if she is. It’s not been the easiest trip,” Charles said, giggling as Erik dipped him. “A little warning! I’d hate for my feet to go.”
“I’d catch you,” he said, holding him close. “I’ll always catch you.”

They returned to New York and settled back into their routines.

Erik went back to work and David was happy to have him back. Two weeks without Erik had meant a few irate customers wanting the actual jeweller. Erik was happy enough to catch up on work, and the two discussed maybe having David become a co-owner with Erik, or possibly Erik hiring a manager for the store. His popularity had exploded all of a sudden and he was finding the workload more than he could handle on his own.

For the time being, Tabitha had taken over manning the counter. She was on summer break and therefore had some free time on her hands. She was happy to help out, and Erik was happy to have her. She quickly rearranged the counter to make it more appealing, something her artistic eye was useful for, and had a sketchbook by the cash register for quieter moments.

Bailey the dog had her own basket in a corner of the store, and was happy enough to lie on a pillow the size of a car tyre while her humans worked.

Of course, Erik had gotten used to a steady stream of Tabitha’s friends in and out of the store, all wanting to help out. The store had never been cleaner.

Charles returned to his research, spending time holding a summer playgroup in the afternoons. The parents were increasingly grateful for the three afternoons a week and Saturday mornings they could drop off their little mutants.

About a fortnight after they returned from their trip, Charles couldn’t sleep. He had thought the trouble would pass once they returned home, but it hadn’t. He was having trouble drifting off and then waking up unreasonably early.

That particular morning found him curled up in an armchair watching the sun rise. He had tea in one hand and an uneaten plate of toast in the other.

“Charles?”
“Tabitha? Darling, what are you doing up? It’s incredibly early.”

“I know,” she said, settling on the sofa. “Charles…”

“Come now, tell me what’s on your mind.”

“Charles, are you sick?”

“Sick? No, of course not.”

“But you’re not sleeping properly, or eating. And you feel sick all the time.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s nothing,” he assured. “I’m sure my tummy troubles are only because of what I ate while I was away. And as for the sleep, it happens to everyone from time to time.”

“But it might not be the shrimp,” she persisted and he tried to figure out what it was that had her so worked up.

“Tabitha, my darling, I promise you, I’m alright,” he said, joining her on the sofa. He hugged her close, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“You should see a doctor.”

“I don’t need a doctor,” he said with a chuckle.

“You might. You should go anyway.”

“Tabitha…”
“She wouldn’t go,” she whispered. “She found a lump, in the breast that she still had. And she was
tired all the time. But she wouldn’t go to the doctor. Not until she collapsed and the ambulance
came. It came back and she didn’t do anything.”

“Darling, no, I wouldn’t do that. If I really thought there was something wrong, I would have gone
to the doctor long before now,” he swore, feeling his heart break for her.

His father’s death, while devastating for him, had been quick, the work of mere moments. He
couldn’t imagine watching someone you love waste away slowly, and knowing it might have been
different if action had been taken sooner.

“Would you feel better if I went and saw Darwin? Would it set your mind at ease?”

“Would you?”

“If you need that, then yes, I will. Anything for my girl.”

Darwin managed to fit him in before his regular appointments but couldn’t find anything wrong
with him, so he sent him off to the hospital for some tests, just to be safe.

Dr Elizabeth Banner, who went by Betty, was a haematologist specialising in mutant blood. She
was a bright, dark haired young woman with a husband and small son, who could pick out a flaw in
the bloodwork of a mutant in 90 seconds or less. She actually had it printed on a t-shirt.

“Charles! How wonderful to see you!” she cried, hugging him and pressing a kiss to his cheek. “Of
course, this isn’t how I would have chosen to see you again, but it’s still wonderful.”

“It’s wonderful to see you too,” he said with a smile and then grinned at the happy giggle from a
corner of the lab. “Oh! He’s getting so big!”

“I know. He’s starting to figure out crawling,” she said as she sat him down. “The department have
said I can have him here in the lab with me until he’s mobile. Then I need a sitter. And yes, you
can hold him. Let me take some blood first and then he’s all yours.”

He dutifully sat and let her draw the samples she needed, and then drank the juice and ate the cookies she presented him with, and then she smiled and waved a hand, giving him permission to approach the playpen behind a safety screen.

“Hello, Hank,” he cooed, picking up the furry blue baby gnawing on a teething ring. “Hello, beautiful boy.”

He settled back in his seat and Hank happily snuggled into him, gripping Charles’ hand with both his hands and his hand-like feet. His yellow eyes looked around and he smiled as he saw his mother.

“That’s it, you’re done for,” she said, setting some of his samples in the centrifuge to separate. “He’s very cuddly at the moment. He’ll cuddle all day if you let him.”

“I’m very happy to have fuzzy cuddles.”

“He’s taken to staring at things,” she said, waiting for the computer to accept the slide she’d prepared. “He’ll find something, usually something ordinary like a light switch or a pen, and stare for hours. It’s like he’s trying to fix it or improve it.”

“Doesn’t Bruce do that?” he asked as she peered into the microscope, his free hand stroking the fur on Hank’s cheek.

“Yes, he does. It’s just a little startling to see on an eight month old. Hmmm. That’s a little off,” she muttered, typing a few commands into the computer. “You don’t have an active secondary, do you?”

“Not that I’m aware. I’ve never displayed one.”

“You’ve got a change in the proteins around the white blood cells. It’s usually an indicator of a recent manifestation.” She looked at the computer as it beeped. “And the white cell count is higher, as if you’ve had a cold or some other bug you’ve fought off. There’s definitely something, but I’m not worried. It’s probably a late manifesting secondary mutation, which isn’t uncommon in telepaths.”
“So I’ve got time for more cuddles.”

She smiled at him. “Always seeing the bright side. Yes, you’ve got time. I might need more blood.”

“Lovely,” he smiled down at Hank, who was looking up at him. “Your mummy is a very determined woman, Hank. She’ll solve this if it takes all day.”

Hank gurgled in agreement.

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It was just after lunch when there was a knock at the lab door and it opened to reveal Dr Bruce Banner.

“I see he’s found a willing body pillow,” he chuckled. “Charles, good to see you.”

“Good to see you too. I think the wedding was the last time, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, the wedding. It was beautiful, by the way. And your daughter is stunning. I got a chance to talk with her a little. She’s so bright and engaging. You should be very proud, Charles.”

“I am, every day. You should be proud of this little man too. He’s fabulous.”

“Thank you. Bit of a shock, seeing him all fuzzy when he was born, but I think we’re all used to it now,” he said with a smile.

Dr Bruce Banner and Betty were both baseline, without a single mutant in either of their known families. When Hank had been born, they’d both almost keeled over in shock, but they delighted in their little fluff ball. While Betty specialised in mutant blood and all the possible flaws that might be found, Bruce had chosen a more noticeable path of mutant medicine.
He was a Mutant Specialist Obstetrician.

He also had qualifications in mutant genetics and illnesses, and organic chemistry. Betty often called him to the lab to give a second opinion on what she was working on. It also allowed him to see Hank during the day.

“Now, what do you need me for?” Bruce asked, handing Hank back to Charles once he’d had his own cuddle.

“I want you to take a look at these numbers for me,” Betty said.

He leaned over her shoulder, pressing a kiss to her neck, and looked at the screen, adjusting his glasses.

“There’s definitely a secondary,” he said, pointing at the visual Betty had of Charles’ X-gene. “Late too. Charles, you’re how old now?”

“26.”

“Very late. This can’t be more than a few months, it’s not even fully settled yet. Six months, maybe eight. A year at an absolute push. What else do you have?”

“These,” she said, pulling up the numbers.

He hummed and rattled off a question full of numbers and Latin, the two of them disappearing down the rabbit hole of science and maths. Charles happily sung nursery rhymes with Hank while they geeked out.

“Okay, Charles, I think I should take over now,” Bruce said eventually, taking a stool. Charles was on his sixth rendition of Humpty Dumpty.

“You’ve found something?”
“We have, but I’ll need to do some other tests to confirm it.”

“Very well. Blood tests or scans?”

“An ultrasound,” Bruce said as Betty took Hank from Charles.

“Judging by the fact that you’ve just taken the tiny person from me, this is a large piece of information to process,” he said as Hank was lowered into his playpen. “Is there something wrong with me?”

“No, no, not wrong, wrong is the wrong way to look at it,” Bruce assured. “Unusual is better. Almost unique is even better. Charles, what we’re seeing in your bloodwork is the emergence of a secondary mutation. It’s a very late manifestation, but not entirely unusual when it comes to a secondary.”

“So I’m not sick?”

“No, you’re not,” Betty promised. “There is nothing wrong with you. You’re just a little different.”

“Alright, that’s a weight off. Now, what is this mutation?”

“What we’re seeing in your bloodwork is an increase in oestrogen and progesterone and a lowering of testosterone, along with a high level of human chorionic gonadotrophin. All put together, what I think is going on is a male pregnancy.”

Charles sat in shocked silence, trying to process it.

[Eric, my love.]

[Hey, ziskeit. How’s it going?]

[Eric, I need you to come to the hospital, but not tell Tabitha.]
He could feel Erik’s alarm. [What is it, what’s wrong?]

[I have a secondary mutation.]

[I haven’t noticed.] he said, wary but less alarmed.

[It’s…unusual. Please, Erik, just come to the hospital. I’ll explain everything.]

[On my way.]

“Erik’s coming,” he mumbled and Bruce smiled gently. “Are you sure I’m…”

“Fairly sure. I want to do an ultrasound to be absolute,” he said. He was very carefully projecting calm and serenity in an effort to keep Charles level. “How about we go get some air while we wait for Erik? Come on, that’s it.”

He took Charles by the biceps and led him from the room, guiding him out to the neat planters in front of the hospital and sitting him on a bench.

“Just take some deep breaths, Charles. Don’t pass out on me.”

“I’m not going to pass out. I just…I’m having a little trouble processing is all. Bruce, have you seen this before?”

“I have, about a half dozen times. It’s a hidden mutation. It’s likely that more men have it but don’t know because they haven’t engaged in activities that would reveal it. I take it that you and Erik… have you been the receiving partner?”

“Yes, I always am,” he said. “I prefer it.”

“And do you use any kind of prophylactic?”
“No. We agreed that we were both clean and monogamous. We didn’t see the need for them.”

“Usually there wouldn’t be,” Bruce agreed as he spotted Erik approaching. “What did he do, run?”

“Possibly,” Charles agreed as Erik reached them. He kissed Charles gently and then looked at them expectantly.

“I’ll explain on the way up,” Bruce said and they followed him inside, riding the elevator.

“That’s…” Erik trailed off as they entered the imaging suite.

“Quite,” Charles agreed.

Bruce directed Charles to lay back and expose his abdomen before he dimmed the lights and set up the machine.

“Little cold here,” he said as he squirted some gel on his pale abdomen. Charles flinched and Bruce smiled apologetically as he applied the probe. “Okay, let’s take a look.”

“Erik,” Charles murmured as Bruce got his bearings of his insides. “Are you okay?”

“Not a clue,” he said, finally taking a seat in the chair provided by Charles’ side. “I just…this is…I can’t even get my head around it. Secondary mutations…I thought they were only for mutants like Tabs and Kurt. A physical as well as a power. I never thought…”

“I would assume most men don’t,” he said, stroking his hair. “It’s not something men are really taught to worry about, is it?”

“Not really.”

“What did you tell Tabitha?”
“The truth, as I knew it,” he said, taking Charles’ hand and toying with his rings. “That you’ve got a secondary and you needed me there to help you understand it. I left Tabs manning the counter, and Kurt popped me over. Well, a block and a half, but he got me close.”

“His control is coming on splendidly.”

“Guys,” Bruce said, apologetic for having interrupted. He turned the screen so they could see and pointed out what they were looking at. “Okay, this is your womb, Charles. It’s not dissimilar to a woman’s, but there are differences. This here, it’s a passage that leads directly to your intestines. It’s why you’re not having menses, your body is reabsorbing the majority of the blood and then expelling anything left.”

“I suppose that is a plus, not having to deal with something so messy,” Charles said practically.

“A definite plus. It’s too small to be a birth canal, it’s only for waste. But, it is how you got pregnant. Erik’s semen has entered here. You don’t actually have a birth canal, or external components to this particular set of body parts. But, you do have a cervix, even if it’s not connected to anything external. It’s just there. It might be vestigial, or it might have an actual function, I can’t say yet. Now, up here,” he said, moving the probe. “This is a fallopian tube, which leads to an ovary. I could only find one, which is common in males with this occurrence.”

“Bruce, I know you’re trying to be thorough,” Erik said tensely. “But you know what we really want you to show us.”

“Right, right, sorry,” he said, moving the probe and angling it before pointing out the strange little jelly bean. “There it is, your baby.”

“Oh,” Charles breathed, staring at it.

It was a very round jelly bean, closer to an oval than a bean, and it had little bumpy bits. It didn’t look very much like a baby.

“How far?” Erik asked.
“By growth and development, I’d say about nine weeks. It’s not much more than a head and a heart right now, but you don’t need much else when it comes down to it. It’s roughly the size of a strawberry.”

He took some measurements and printed out a whole ream of pictures before he finished up the scan and asked them to meet him in his office when Charles had cleaned himself up.

“Hey,” Erik murmured as his husband threw the paper towels in the trash. “Talk to me.”

“And say what?”

“I don’t know. Anything. Whatever is on your mind, I want it to come out of your mouth. Or just pushed into my mind, I’m flexible.”

“I don’t know how to feel,” he admitted in a whisper. “I feel numb, Erik.”

“It’s okay to feel numb. If that’s how you feel then so be it. It’s probably exactly what you need to feel right now.”

Charles seemed a little less blank after that and he let Erik take him to Bruce, where they listened to a list of dos and don’ts and then Bruce cleared his throat.

“Look, I wouldn’t be much of a doctor if I didn’t bring this up,” he said. “Some patients think I’m suggesting that they do, but I’m simply giving the facts.”

“Facts of what?” Charles asked.

“This pregnancy was unplanned, and possibly unwanted, I don’t know how you feel about it. If you wanted to, this can be terminated.”

“You pointed out that I don’t have a birth canal. How would that work? How would birth work, for that matter?”
“Birth goes one of two ways. You might develop a birth canal. I’ve had two patients grow one in their last few weeks, and one who developed his once he actually began to labour. So if you do, a natural birth is possible. If you don’t, you would have a caesarean. As for a termination, it would be keyhole surgery to remove the foetal tissue and then you would absorb and excrete the waste as a normal menstruation.”

“Is it safe?” Erik pressed.

“Everything has risks,” Bruce allowed. “But it’s a relatively safe procedure. Look, don’t make any decisions right now. I’m going to book you in for a week from today, that way you have time to let this sink in, time to process it.”

He gave them a few more instructions, and his personal contact details so they could ask him anything at any time, and then they took a walk, trying to get it to sink in.

“I don’t know what to do, Erik,” Charles said as they settled on a bench on Central Park.

“Don’t think about it that way yet. Just try and let it sink in, like he said. This is a big thing. And I want you to know, whatever you choose, I’m right here. I’ll back you all the way.”

“Do you want it?”

“Not a damn clue,” Erik confessed. “I sort of gave up on the thought of children round about the time I came out of the closet. I thought maybe one day I’d get a cat. Maybe I’d adopt one day, maybe. But I never thought of my male lover actually growing a baby we made.”

“Holy fuck,” Charles moaned, burying his head in his hands.

“Easy, baby, come on. Head down, between your knees, that’s it,” he urged, hand on his back, folding him down. “Slow breaths, slowly. Just breathe, that’s all you need to do right now. Just breathe for me. Nice breaths in and out.”

It took a while for Charles to stop hyperventilating, and then he curled into Erik’s arms and trembled.
“Erik,” he whimpered.

“I know, I know. It’s okay, ziskeit. We can handle this. Just breathe.”

Erik sat with a tumbler of whiskey, watching a black and white movie without the sound.

A baby. A whole little person they made. But this one wouldn’t be like Tabitha, it wouldn’t be a teenager who could tell them when they fucked up. A helpless infant who couldn’t even hold their own head up.

And how could he even be a father? His was terrible at the job, selfish to the extreme. Poppa managed to make it look easy, but then Richard showed how easy it was to get it wrong. He had no idea what he was doing. Marriage was one thing, a marriage was built on a foundation of love and he and Charles had plenty of that, so marriage was something he knew could work. A husband he could be.

But a father.

He didn’t really notice himself moving until he was in his car and half way down the block. One of the perks of being married to a telepath was that Charles could find him wherever he was, so he didn’t worry about not having left a note. He didn’t realise where he was going until he was unlocking the door.

His mother met him at the bottom of the stairs.

“Erik, you’re soaked!” she complained, wrapping him in a towel.

“I didn’t see the rain,” he mumbled. “Mamen, I don’t know what to do.”

She held him close as he shook and then sent him to dry off. He found her in the kitchen once he’d changed into warm dry clothes he’d left behind. He plied him with hot chocolate and waited.
“Geheimnis,” he demanded and she nodded.

They’d come up with it in his teens, when he was desperate to talk to her without having anyone know what was said. German for secret was the simplest code in the world. Poppa had originally been from Germany, and all of them knew a few words.

“Charles is pregnant,” he said and her jaw dropped. “He has a secondary mutation, he didn’t know. No one knew, why would we? It’s not as if he gets moody and demands chocolate once a month.”

“Erik, no one would have guessed this was possible, you’re right there. But it apparently is, and it has happened. So what is the question now?”

“Mom, how did you know you should have kids with dad? What made you think he’d be good at it?”

She chuckled. “I didn’t,” she said. “It wasn’t about him. I wanted you, more than anything. Granted, you took me by surprise. You happened a little sooner than I had pictured it. Erik, I don’t think any man is entirely prepared to become a father. No woman is ever truly prepared for motherhood either. You don’t get an instruction manual, you learn on the job.”

“So you don’t regret marrying him?”

“Oh, boychick, no, not at all. If I hadn’t had him in my life, I wouldn’t have my babies. And you three are the most precious thing to me.” She sighed and poured herself more chocolate. “Erik, are you truly wondering if you can be a good father?”

“Of course I am,” he said. “I stopped considering children when I came out of the closet. Maybe adoption, but not a pregnancy.”

“You have Tabitha.”

“That’s different,” he argued. “She’s 15, totally capable of feeding and clothing herself if need be. She can tell me, unequivocally, when I fuck up. A baby…they’re small and fragile and helpless and so easy to screw up.”
She rounded the table and hugged him close. “Oh, my sweet boy. You don’t see at all. You’ve been a father since the moment he left us. You were the one who let Anya teethe on your fingers, who taught David to tie his shoes. When I was so tired I couldn’t see, you got up with your sister in the night and made sure David got to school. You’ve been a father for fifteen years, and no one has ever doubted you.”

He hadn’t thought of it that way, hadn’t considered that he had taken on that role. He’d always thought of it as helping, as being there for his mother when she needed him.

She was right. He knew how to be a father, and how to be a good one.

Now he just needed to wait for Charles to think things through. Whatever Charles wanted, Erik would do. If he didn’t want to continue in the pregnancy, didn’t feel ready or able, he would support him wholeheartedly. And if he did, he’d back him in that too.

He just needed Charles to let him know.

It took almost the whole week before Charles talked to Erik about the pregnancy.

The night before the follow up appointment with Bruce, neither of them were asleep, each laying in the dark, waiting for the other to say something.

“This apartment isn’t big enough,” Charles said quietly.

“Big enough?” Erik asked, rolling onto his back so he could look at him, curled on his side. Charles reached out to lay a hand on his chest.

“The apartment isn’t big enough. Not for another person.”

“Oh. You mean, a baby.”
“Yes. I know that a baby is a big responsibility, but I think we do well with Tabitha,” he said. “True, a baby is much less able to tell us what it needs, not with words, but they do make it clear enough. We’re smart men, we’ll figure it out. And… I am not my mother,” he whispered. “Nor my father, nor Kurt. I would never treat a child the way I was treated.”

“Charles, that isn’t even a remote possibility. You are so much more than they are. Even combined they don’t even come close to you,” he swore, stroking his hair.

“We’ll need somewhere bigger,” Charles said, a sort of calm radiating from him. “Yes. Perhaps a house. And we need to tell Tabitha she’s going to be a big sister. What do you think she’d like, a brother or a sister?”

“Not a clue.”

“What would you like?”

“Either works for me. A boy might be nice. We’ve got a girl, so maybe a boy, to even it out. But, then again, a girl would even the whole family out. Two girls, us two men.”

“Hmmm, that is a point. The dog is female. That must tip a scale.”

“Possibly.”

“Erik, I have been thinking,” he said. “I know this is too soon, it doesn’t even look like a real baby yet, more like a strange bean, but I would like this child to be raised as one of the People. A bris for a boy, Temple, Hebrew school. Our child to be raised in the faith, like you were. I would like that.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. I’ll need help to do that, but I have Mamen to guide me, and you, and Bubbe. We’ll make it work.”
“We always make it work. So this is official? This is you telling me that you definitely want to continue with this pregnancy?”

“Yes, I definitely want it.” He looked at Erik worriedly. “Do you…not?”

“Charles, we made a person, me and you, little bits of both of us. Of course I want it. But I’m not growing it, you are. I’m not the boss of your body.”

“Sometimes you are.”

He grinned, naughty images flashing through his head.

“Yes, sometimes,” Erik agreed. “But not in this. This is your choice, your body. So I didn’t have any right to try and influence your decision. But now you’ve made one. Yes, Charles, I want this baby.”

“Our baby. Look at what we did.”

“Yeah,” Erik agreed, pulling him in to hold him close, his hand trailing down to settle over where their child was growing. “Look what we did.”

Chapter End Notes

Kudos lets me know you care, and a comment makes me all happy. Let me know what you thought. Likes, dislikes, good, bad, what you'd like to see, wild guesses as to what's coming next, I want to hear it all. I know it doesn't seem like much, but it really does mean a whole lot to me.
They told Tabitha over breakfast the next morning.

They told her the bare facts. Charles had a secondary mutation allowing for a pregnancy. He was about 10 weeks along. He had an appointment later that day with Bruce. They didn’t get emotional, they didn’t express any opinions on anything, to give her the chance to handle it the way she wanted.

She didn’t say anything.

They spent the morning at the store, Charles puttering around putting things away, organising stock, making coffees. His research had stalled, he was waiting for some obscure scientific papers to arrive in the library, but it could be weeks before they appeared, maybe months. The release of the papers took special permissions from several genetics labs scattered across Europe, labs headed by people often too busy to remember to eat, let alone grant his request for material.

There was a steady stream of customers, and David arrived a little after eleven. He knew there was an appointment, and that Charles had a secondary, but that was all. He was a good guy, he didn’t ask questions, waiting for them to tell him.

Still Tabitha stayed silent. Erik and Charles kept exchanging worried looks but decided to wait until it was a little more clear what the right way to handle it would be. She had eaten breakfast, she was helping in the store. The only difference was that she was silent. She was probably just thinking things through. They would give her time.

“Hey, Charles, where are the timepiece request slips?” David asked, looking up from the order book. “This one calls for one, and we have to order it by tomorrow at the latest to be done in time.”

“We? I think you’ll find I’m the one making the band for that timepiece,” Erik joked.

“You’d be lost without me, admit it.”
“Boys,” Charles chided as he handed over the book of slips.

“Sorry, Charles,” David said, as if his mother had scolded him. “I’m going for sandwiches, be back in a sec.”

Charles waited until the door closed before he made his way over to Tabitha, who was doodling aimlessly at the register.

“Would you like to come with us, to this appointment?” he asked. “I’d like you to. You could see the baby on the screen.”

She shrugged and he smoothed her hair back.

“Darling, please say something. You haven’t said a word all morning.”

“When do I go?” she asked quietly.

“Go? Go where?”

“Move in with someone else, live with another Lehnsherr. You’ll need the room for the baby, and I’m not your kid anyway.”

“No, Tabitha, that is not true,” he said firmly, loudly enough to catch Erik’s attention. “You are mine, my beautiful girl, my lovely little artist, and there will always be a place for you with us. You are my daughter, you are, no matter what. Tabitha, this baby doesn’t change any of that.”

“I’d listen to him,” Erik said, leaning against the counter. “He’s got his determined face on.”

“But…”

“No,” Charles demanded. “If you want to live with someone else, that’s fair enough, I’ll go with that. But don’t you ever EVER think that we don’t love you every bit as much as we love this one. More, seeing as we haven’t even met this one yet. You are important, you are incredibly important
to me, to us. The three of us are a family. All this baby means is that there will be another member of that family.”

“You swear?” she whispered.

“Hand on heart, baby,” Erik vowed. “Tabby Cat, we’re a family, the three of us. Nothing will ever change that.”

She snuggled into Charles’ arms, and he held her tight, murmuring reassurances. He wondered if she would ever trust that they wouldn’t get rid of her. The damage Richard had done went deep, so deep it probably would never be gone completely.

“Oh, my darling girl,” he cooed. “My darling, darling girl.”

“You know, we’re both downplaying this,” Erik said conversationally, strolling back to his workbench. “What we really want is for you to tell us what you want.”

“What I want?” she asked, wiping at her face.

“A boy or girl. Either way, you’re going to be a big sister, but you’ve got to have a preference for what you want the baby to be.”

“Baby?” David asked from the doorway. “What baby?”

Erik and Charles blinked at each other before Charles nodded and Erik filled his brother in. David flopped down into a chair as Erik finished.

“David? Oh dear,” Charles said. “David, are you alright?”

“I’m going to be an uncle,” he said with a huge grin. “This is huge!”

“This is a secret,” Erik corrected. “We’re waiting to tell everyone.”
“Why? That’s stupid. You should put an ad in the paper, maybe a billboard in Times Square.”

“Because it’s bad luck to announce before 12 weeks,” Charles said with an indulgent smile. “The likelihood of something going wrong drops significantly after the first trimester. Not that something will go wrong, but I’d just like to keep to that.”

“Okay, okay, but I hope you realise that making me keep this to myself is akin to torturing me,” he said. “This is huge news. I might burst.”

“Talk to mom, she knows,” Erik suggested.

“Wait, why does mom know if it’s a secret?”

“I freaked out slightly,” he said and Charles snorted. “Alright, I lost my mind for a moment there, but it was just a moment! Anyway, I ended up talking to mom, she calmed me down.”

“Fine, I’ll talk to mom,” he grumbled before perking up once more. “Can I name it?”

“Not a chance. You named your hamster Moron.”

“Right on time,” Bruce said as they arrived. “And with an extra one.”

They’d been through the nurse screening, the woman taking his blood pressure and other vitals and then they had waited for Bruce to appear.

He led them into the imaging suite and Charles hopped onto the bench, assuming the position.

“I need to have a little press here, before I get to the exciting bit,” Bruce said, placing his hands on Charles’ abdomen, pressing and moving things. “Is there any pain when I put pressure?”
“No. Feels a little strange.”

“That’s perfectly normal,” he said, finishing up with his prodding and picking up the bottle. “Sorry, Charles, cold again,” he said as he squirted the gel onto his skin.

He let out a little ‘meep’ and they all giggled at him.

“Let’s take a look,” Bruce murmured. “Bear with me, these foetuses can be tricky to get a good look at. We’re taking a look into his or her home, after all. They don’t like us telling them what to do. Have the two of you decided on the course of action?”

“Yes. We’re going to be needing you for the next seven months at least,” Erik said and Bruce nodded, not once looking at Tabitha.

“Good, good. I’ll put you on the books. Procedure says that an ultrasound should be performed once a week, bare minimum,” Bruce said as he adjusted the transducer. “You are, after all, male. This might be a mutation of your genetics but that doesn’t make it perfect. Better safe than sorry. Ah! There you are! Come on, hold still for your picture.”

Tabitha giggled and then fell silent as the baby appeared on the screen.

“It’s changed,” Charles said in surprise. “I didn’t think it would, not so much in only a week.”

“Yeah, they develop pretty fast in the early weeks. Gestation is so long because organs and other internal development is happening. External development looks faster, but they still need the baking time. I think we can give this little one a due date of…20th of February.”

“Can you see it?” Erik asked Tabitha and she nodded.

“That round bit,” she said, pointing. “That’s the head, right?”

“Yes, that’s the head,” Bruce agreed. “And if I move a little…There, you can see the facial profile.
There’s baby’s mouth, and the nose.”

“Is everything…okay?” she asked.

“Everything looks good. See? Baby’s kicking.”

“I don’t feel anything,” Charles said as they watched the little nub of a leg move.

It was no longer a misshapen bean, it was now a bean with extras.

“No, too soon for you to feel, but it is moving,” he assured. “Looks very healthy to me. Let’s see…” He adjusted again and they could see a tiny flickering on the screen. A few button presses later and the fast thrum of the heartbeat echoed through the room. “Heart looks good. We’ve got…oh, about 160 bpm, round about. Very nice. You know, at this point the heart is fully formed, and the jawbone is starting to grow in. Fingers are all separated and the elbows have got mobility. Even growing nailbeds for fingernails.”

“Goodness, they really are working hard.”

“Yes, very hard, but all normal. You know, if this is a girl, she’s already got her tiny little ovaries, and if this is a boy, he’ll already be producing testosterone of his own.”

“No,” Charles demanded. “No, you can’t tell us. I don’t want to know until it’s born. Erik, don’t you dare ask.”

“Okay, okay!” Erik chuckled, holding his hands up in surrender as a finger was wagged at him. “No asking, got it, loud and clear.”

“It’s too soon to tell,” Bruce said with an indulgent smile. “Do you have a preference?”

“No, just so long as it’s all there, we’re good,” Erik said, watching the jerky little kicks.

“When can you tell?” Tabitha asked.
“In most patients we can tell around about 18 to 20 weeks, but some babies are a surprise the whole way. It’s sometimes hard to get the baby in the right position to see what we need to. I just need a few measurements and then we can move on. Do you want some pictures?”

“Oh, yes please,” Charles cooed and Bruce smiled before going to work.

Ten minutes later, he was done with the scan and turned on the lights while Charles wiped himself clean. Tabitha got the long string of pictures and she carefully folded it in an accordion before putting it in her bag.

“Okay. Everything looks good. Erik, can I get you to fill this out,” he said, handing him the clipboard. “You need to hand it to the receptionist on your way out.”

Erik nodded and started filling things in, looking at Charles for a telepathic assist every now and then, while Bruce worked on the paperwork.

“Okay, I think we’re about done for today. All on track,” Bruce said as Charles settled his clothes and they moved to the door. “Make an appointment at the reception for next week, and I’ll see you then.”

Erik and his mother had arranged for a family dinner the day of Charles’ twelve week scan so the couple could announce their news.

The morning of the scan saw Erik and Tabitha up and ready and Charles still asleep as they walked out of the door. It was the first time in weeks Charles had slept through the night and neither Lehnsherr wanted to disturb him, but they knew he’d panic if he woke and they were gone.

“Hey,” Erik hummed, pressing a kiss to Charles’ cheek.

“Mmmm.”
“Me and Tabs are off to open up,” he said gently as Charles wriggled. “We left you some oatmeal in a thermos on the table, and a package arrived for you. I left it on the table.”

“Mmmm. I come,” he mumbled and Erik kissed him softly.

“No, ziskeit, you rest. I’ll call you in time for you to get to the appointment. Sleep, baby.”

He gave Charles a final kiss before tucking him in and leaving him to it.

The next awareness Charles had was a pressure in his bladder, and the sunlight shining through the gap in the curtains. The clock showed it was inching towards noon, and he felt amazing. For the first time in months he wasn’t tired, or nauseated.

He took his time showering, luxuriating under the spray, before he made the bed and generally straightened up the room. Then he devoured the oatmeal, and opened his package.

It was a very large box, and it didn’t really occur to him just how much he’d ordered until he saw it, but he didn’t regret a single penny. It was all worth it.

First out of the packaging came the pregnancy journal and baby book. His journal had a cartoon giraffe on the front, and he was quick to put copies of his three scan pictures in. Each week had a page, and each page had a little bubble declaring how big his baby was. Week twelve told him his little bean was about the size of a lime.

The baby book was white, very gender neutral, and would start when the baby was born, so he took a look and then placed it back in its box, safe and sound.

Next out of the box were some maternity jeans and tops. He assumed he’d need them in the coming months. From the blogs he’d read, he also assumed he’d need the lotion for the growing skin of his belly. It smelled of peaches and he had the urge to eat it. It looked like yogurt.

Then came the mug for Erik. The metal travel coffee mug proclaimed he was ‘The Best Daddy-To-Be Ever’.
Tabitha’s present was the hardest thing he’d had to find. Most things for big sisters-to-be were aimed at little girls. Teddy bears, t-shirts, picture books. But he wanted it to be special, wanted her to know how much it meant to him when she made him ginger tea and proclaimed another random pregnancy fact she’d found.

He’d gotten her a bracelet. Silver with pink accents, it had a star shaped charm proclaiming her to be the big sister. He could have gotten Erik to make something, but he’d seen it and decided it was just the right one.

He’d gotten Edie a frame proclaiming ‘I love my grandma’. He slipped one of the scan pictures into it, his eleven week, and put it back in its box.

David and Anya both got t-shirts, saying Best Uncle and Best Aunt respectively. He was hopeful on his sizing being right, but he knew they’d like them even if he was off.

Bubbe’s gift was a photo frame, like Edie’s, but with Great Grandma, and a mug for her tea. The mug had a stick figure drawing of a woman and a little girl and the writing ‘I’m going to be a great grandma (again!)’. He added a scan picture to the frame and boxed them back up. He hoped she liked them.

He’d broken his own rules when he’d seen the little baby onesie. He knew it was bad luck, all those superstitions, but it was perfect, he had to have it. It was patterned all over with the double helix, and across the back it said ‘Little Genetic Cocktail’. It was perfect.

Charles had spent a long time thinking on the best way to announce his pregnancy. He’d heard of people putting a bun into their kitchen oven and waiting for someone to figure it out. Some people sent out a mass text or a picture postcard to announce, but that didn’t feel right to him either. Pictures of the mothers and fathers shoes with a little pair of baby shoes. The same sort of thing with two coffee mugs and an espresso cup. There seemed to be an abundance of chalkboards.

But they weren’t right, they weren’t the way he wanted to announce.

This baby was his little surprise, his secret hitchhiker. He had to announce properly.

Erik had given him free reign with the announcement. If it were up to Erik, they would have put it on Facebook and been done with it.
But Charles had taken the time to order a whole load of empty baby food jars, sticky labels announcing the ‘Xavier-Lehnsherr Joint Venture’ with a pattern of baby blocks, and about a ton of jellybeans. He’d been delighted to find out Jelly Belly were kosher, and he had gone a little overboard when picking a selection of flavours. He spent the next hour labelling and filling the jars, and by the time Erik called to make sure he was up, he had enough to be sure everyone would get one.

Erik had stopped coming to the scans with him. They’d agreed that it wasn’t necessary for him to come every single week, and missing around about two hours every Friday wasn’t helping his workload any. Charles had suggested he miss them, and Charles would fill him in afterwards. He looped Erik into his thoughts as he was scanned, and he got back thoughts that were pure mush.

He toddled off to his appointment, where he got a whole new ream of pictures, and then off to see Tony. JARVIS let him into the building and then directed him to the workshop, where Charles could hear the music from outside the glass doors.

He punched in his code and then the music was lowered at his request, and then he was swept up into a huge hug.

“So, how’s my favourite little mutant?” Tony asked as they settled in the penthouse with Steve.

“Would that be me or Tabitha?” he said with a chuckle.

“You! Of course you’re my favourite,” Tony protested. “But Tabitha is pretty great too.”

“I’m very well, and Tabitha is doing wonderfully. She’s helping Erik in the store for the summer.”

“I would have thought she’d be lazing the days away,” Steve said, pouring tea and coffee.

“She’s not that kind of girl, she’s too active and bouncy to laze about,” Charles said. He dug around in his bag. “I have a gift for the two of you.”

“Oooo, I love pressies,” Tony said, rubbing his hands together. “Gimme.”
“Tony,” Steve scolded before giving Charles a smile. “That’s very kind of you, but really, you didn’t have to get us anything.”

“No, I didn’t, but I do have an announcement and this seemed the most perfect way to do that,” he said, placing the little jars on the table.

Tony was quick to tear in, chucking a handful of beans into his mouth before he even noticed there was a label. Steve noticed the label first and his eyebrows drew together in confusion.

Charles watched them both mouth the words joint venture to themselves and smiled.

“You and Erik are going to do a project together?” Steve asked.

“We’ve already started, actually.”

“Is it a big project?”

“Not yet, but it’s growing rapidly.”

“What are these funny little squares?” Tony asked, peering at it, his mouth full. “Charlie, are these…blocks? Why are there blocks on this jar?”

Charles just smiled at him and enjoyed the play of emotions over his friend’s face. First confusion, then shock, then delight, all in the span of about 40 seconds.

“Holy…Charlie, are you and Erik having a baby?”

“Yes, we are. I’m pregnant, due in February,” he said and took a great pleasure in the stunned looks they wore. “Yes, a rather unusual secondary mutation. Took us by surprise.”

“Oh, thank the Lord,” Steve gasped. “For a moment there I thought maybe the species had become…different. I was worried.”
“Excuse you, we use condoms every damn time,” Tony griped.

“Tony!”

“Steve has a point, condoms are not 100%, Tony.”

“Been working for me all these years.”

“Can we change the focus of this?” Steve begged, beet red. “A baby. That’s swell, Charles. I’m sure you and Erik are over the moon.”

“Yes, it is rather exciting.” He pulled out his twelve week scan picture for them and Tony practically glued it to the end of his nose to get the best look. Charles pulled out a second one for Steve, so he could actually get a look.

“Well, would you look at that,” Steve breathed. “It’s like a whole little person, all its bits and pieces.”

“Yes! Remarkable, isn’t it! At nine weeks it looked like a strange bean, and now it looks all formed!”

“JARVIS, analyse this, make sure everything’s tip top!” Tony demanded, holding up the picture. JARVIS dutifully scanned it.

“Tony, honestly, I’m sure Charles’ doctors have everything under control.”

“I don’t care, I’ll have JARVIS make sure. This is my Charlie-boy we’re talking about! Nothing will go wrong with his strange little bean, absolutely nothing!”

“Tony, don’t ever let anyone tell you that you’re not the sweetest man in New York,” Charles said happily.
“Not sweet, just keeping an eye,” Tony said. “Who is your obstetrician?”

“Bruce Banner.”

“Excellent! He delivered Pep.”

“How is Pepper? And Happy?”

“They’re doing great. He’s enjoying staying home with that beautiful little girl, and she’s running my empire in scary high heels.”

“How old is the little one?”

“Eleven months, about to figure out walking Pep says. Anyway, this is about your little one, not theirs. How are you feeling? You need anything?” Tony said.

“I’m feeling wonderful. The insomnia seems to have passed, and the nausea, which is very welcomed,” Charles said, opening his own jar of jellybeans. “And I don’t need anything, I’m doing quite alright.”

“If you do, call me. Anything, absolutely anything.”

“I’ll keep it in mind. Oh! That reminds me, there is something you can do for me, a project of sorts,” he said and he shared a sly grin with Steve as Tony perked up considerably, practically vibrating with excitement.

“Yay! Project!”

“See, the problem is that the apartment isn’t really big enough to add in another person. True, a baby starts off rather small, but they soon grow and need space. So I’d like some help in looking for a new property. An apartment or house, either will do. Something a little larger than what we have now. Do you think you could find a few for us to consider?”
“Absolutely, I can do that,” he babbled. He pressed a kiss to Charles’ forehead and sped off to the elevator. Charles watched him go with an indulgent smile.

He and Steve chatted for a long while before Erik popped into his head and told him that he and Tabitha were on the way to pick him up so they could head to dinner. He said his goodbyes, which Steve assured he would pass along to Tony, and made his way to the lobby to wait.

“How’d he take it?” Erik asked as he buckled in, leaning in to kiss him.

“Excellently,” Charles said, reaching back to squeeze Tabitha’s fingers. “Did you pick up my box from the table?”

“In the trunk. Are we ready to do this?”

“Absolutely,” Tabitha said. “Let’s go break some brains.”

Edie made brisket for dinner, and the whole family assumed it was for the Sabbath. It was a fair turnout. All the members who lived in New York were present, which made it about a third of the number from the holidays, but still a fair number.

Erik smiled indulgently as Charles managed a third helping of dinner, and then a hefty portion of cake, and then he was happily given a plate of cinnamon stars by Edie.

[I take it the nausea has passed?]

[Absolutely. Erik, these are amazing. Will you make them for home?]

He chuckled, nodding, and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

“We going to temple?” Elijah asked. “Because honestly, I beg to be left home.”
“I second that begging,” Johnathan agreed. “I’m too full to move. Charles, how are you still eating?”

“It’s yummy,” Charles said, Edie supplying more stars and making him bounce in delight.

“It’s good to see him eating,” Bubbe said.

“Yes, it is,” Edie said. “And we’re not going to temple unless you want to go. No, tonight is a special night, so Charles and Erik can make an announcement.”

“Well,” Erik said as David grinned. “We have a gift for each of you.”

Tabitha handed out the jars and they looked at the labels, trying to figure it out. “They’re kosher,” she said. “Enjoy.”

“What’s the venture?” Anya asked.

“It’s baby blocks!” Pietro said excitedly. “Look, mama, blocks!”

They peered at the labels and then at Charles.

“Is there going to be a baby?” Elijah asked.

“Yes, we’re having a baby,” Erik said.

There was a general outpouring of celebration, Erik and Charles being clapped on the back in congratulations, the little ones bouncing in excitement.

“So how is this going to work?” Cain asked. “Another adoption? Or, I guess you could have a surrogate.”
“Neither,” Erik said with a grin.

“I’m pregnant,” Charles declared and they all went silent, save for Bubbe, who started chuckling to herself. There was a general sweep of his figure, all of them looking for breasts. “I have a secondary mutation.”

“Whoa,” Rebekah breathed. “Talk about breaking the norm. The chances of that mutation are…I can’t even do that math.”

“One in thirty male mutants have it,” Emily said. She worked in the national audit service, of course she would have the information. “And one in ten people are mutants, thought the data is fast becoming out of date. So that’s…it’s like less than one percent of men have the mutation.”

“Only you could marry someone who could defy the odds so massively,” Anya told her brother and he smiled unrepentantly.

“Happily,” he said, hugging Charles. “It’s good news, I’m allowed to be happy.”

“Is it weird that this kid is going to have an aunt and a sister who are the same age?” Anya asked and Charles jumped up to get his other gifts.

As they were handed out to the smiling recipients, and a general munching of jellybeans happened, Charles dug out the new scan pictures and passed them around.

“How are you feeling?”

“How far along are you?”

“Is it a boy?”

“Is it a mutant?”
“When are you due?”

“One at a time!” Charles giggled. “I’m feeling wonderful, my nausea has passed, my appetite is back, I’m getting some sleep. I’m at twelve weeks, we don’t know the sex or its mutant status yet, and I’m due 20th of February.”

“Have you thought of names yet?” Anya asked and David perked right up.

“No, you can’t name it,” Edie scolded. “It’s not your baby. You can name one when you make one.”

“We’ve got a few ideas, but nothing solid yet,” Erik said. “For now we’re going with Little Bean.”

“It’d be best if it was a mutant,” Elijah said. “Not that baseline would be bad. Just that it’s a whole family of mutants.”

“No, I see your point,” Charles said. “But honestly, Erik and I both come from long lines of mutants, the chances of it being baseline are fairly slim. I’ve looked at my genealogy, and the men in my bloodline have been telepaths for over four hundred years. There are incidents of ‘psychics’ as far back as the records go. But, all the mothers seem to have been baseline, so I really have no idea what this one will be, if it is mutant.”

The family broke off into smaller groups, and some left for home not too much later, needing to get little ones to bed. Little Pietro wasn’t a fan and wanted to stay. Charles gave him another jar of jellybeans and he was happy to follow his parents.

His gifts were liked. Anya and David’s t-shirts fit, Bubbe was overjoyed with hers, and Edie had loved her picture. He was happy to share out the twelve week scan pictures, and several of the family left with them in their pockets.

“Don’t be silly, I’ll do those,” Edie scolded as Charles moved to start the dishes.

“But you cooked. I don’t mind.”
“I know, but I’ll do it,” she said, pressing more cinnamon stars into his hands.

“Distraction with cookies. Little Bean is going to love visiting with grandma.”

“I should hope so too.”

She’d made it through all the glasses and half the cutlery before he spoke.

“Mamen, I…will you help me?” he asked quietly and she dried off her hands before turning to him. “I don’t have my mum to tell me what to do, I don’t even think I’ve ever held a newborn, let alone taken care of one. The kids at the Centre, I get to give those back. I have no idea how to raise a baby. And I want it to be raised in the faith, be one of the Chosen People, the way Erik was, but I don’t know how to do that. Mamen, I…”

“Oh, oh, oh,” she hummed, hugging him close, stroking his hair. “Of course I’ll help you. Look at me, come on, look at me.” She cupped his cheeks, smiling at him. “I know that this is a very big change in your life, a huge life event. But you will do just fine. Whatever you need, just give me a call and I’ll be right there. And as for the faith, of course I’ll help you. Me and Bubbe and Tabitha, all of us for that matter. We’ll all help you to find your way.”

“I don’t want this child to ever feel the way I did,” he begged. “Please. Not ever. This baby is wanted and loved and never a nuisance.”

“Of course! This baby will have so much love that it will never question that it was wanted.”

She sat him down at the kitchen table and let him babble on about his own childhood, about what his upbringing had been, about his fears for the future.

“I have no one,” he admitted. “No family. My mother and stepfather are in jail, my stepbrother hates me. My father is gone. No aunts no uncles no cousins. I don’t even have Raven anymore, we haven’t spoken since the wedding. There’s no one to guide me, to tell me what should be happening.”

“Now you have our family,” she said firmly. “You’re carrying a Lehnsherr baby, that makes you officially one of us.”
Charles woke to the dark of their bedroom and wondered what had startled him so badly.

13 weeks and doing well, Bruce said. He’d gotten a list of possible properties from Tony and had arranged to view some of them.

Maybe it was the weather. The temperature had suddenly shot up and they had taken to sleeping with the bedroom windows open, trying to entice a breeze.

No luck so far.

He propped himself up on his elbows as he tried to figure out what it was.

What was that? That little pulse, a little flicker. Erik? No, it wasn’t him. His dreams were rather pretty, all filled with candyfloss at the fair. Tabitha? No, her dreams were gardens in watercolour. Sometimes she dreamed in oils or acrylics, or sometimes even pastels. Her nightmares were becoming less and less frequent, which was a positive development.

“Oh,” he gasped. “Erik. Erik, wake up.”


“I can feel it.”

“Feel it?”

“The baby. I can feel it. In here,” he said, tapping his temple.

“Holy shit! Seriously? What’s it like?”
“It’s…” He giggled. “It’s like stars. Tiny little points of light. It’s not words, or full feeling, more like…a spark. Here, I’ll show you.”

He reached out and pulled Erik into his head, showing him the feeling, like bubbles suddenly appearing in still water, like the first faint stars in the dark sky. A flicker of awareness, of existence. Of a being just becoming a being.

“Wow,” Erik breathed. He pulled Charles in for a kiss. “That is, hands down, the coolest thing ever.”

“Yes, it really is.”

“Wow. That’s a…a person,” he said, sliding his hand down to rest over where Charles’ womb was. “Charles…you’ve got…there’s a bump.”

“What?”

“Look, look, it’s little, but it’s a bump, right here,” he said, pushing back the sheet to show the slight curve where there had been none.

“Oh, my. That’s new. Well. I suppose this means this is truly happening then.”

“Yeah. Physical proof of what’s inside,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to it before laying back down, watching his husband as he snuggled back into his pillow, his hand cupping the little bulge protectively. “Hey. Talk to me.”

“I was thinking, earlier. I’d like the baby to sleep in our room at first. Like a basket type thing.”

“Sure. Probably best, keep it close.”

“And then a nursery, after a few weeks or months. I’m not sure exactly how long they use the basket. Mamen will know. We could have a theme one. Maybe fish, an ocean theme. Or maybe a
farmyard. That could be sweet.”

“I like the farm idea. A zoo might work.”

Erik had gotten used to Charles’ random musings about the future. He was unsure of what was coming, and the talks seemed to help. Erik was very clear that, at this point, his job was to be a support. Charles was the one doing all the hard work, there was very little Erik could do to facilitate the process. Biologically speaking, he’d done his part. His role now was to support Charles, to help him in any way possible.

“Bruce suggested you come to the 20 weeks scan. He’d like to start talking about delivery then, get ideas going, try and figure out which options might work best.”

“Sure. Just remind me a few days before. 20 weeks. That’s…oh, around about beginning of October, right?”

“Yes. I think it would probably be best for us to move before the baby arrives. The absolute best would be to move before Tabitha starts the new school. That way she could be all settled and able to focus without undue stress.”

“Okay, we can aim for that. You go with Tony and do the first viewings, and then, when you’ve picked some that you like, we can go, the three of us.”

“Oh, yes, I like that idea,” he said, sounding much more sleepy. “We should think of names.”

“Sure, but we can’t announce a name until the naming ceremony, eight days after birth.”

“Mmmm. Why?”

“It’s to protect the baby. If it doesn’t have a name, evil spirits can’t find it and take it.”

“Oh. Jewish tradition, I see. But we can discuss it, yes?”
“Yes, we can,” he said with a smile.

“A shame Minka is already taken. We can’t have another baby Minka, that would be confusing.”

“A shame, but there are plenty of names.”

“Is there a Hannah?”

“My aunt.”

“Mmmm. There’s a Joseph, I know that one. Oh, you’ll have to write me a list of names that are taken. Are there any names you don’t want for the baby?”

“Jacob,” he said. “My father’s name. I don’t want it used.”

“Alright. No Kurt or Cain, no Sharon. Not Raven either, or Brian.” He was almost asleep, and Erik had been carefully gentling his voice to get him to drop off.

“See? We’re already coming up with a list of no names. There’s a start. We have months to figure something out. And the baby already has a nickname.”

“Mmmm, Little Bean.”

Charles began looking at properties in week 14 of his pregnancy, and every day brought a very similar conversation.

It went a little like this:

“Charles, we don’t need that many bedrooms.”
“But what about David and Anya and Mamen and Bubbe? What if they want to stay?” he argued.

“That’s what pull out couches and air mattresses are for,” Tabitha said. “Fourteen bedrooms is too much.”

“Fine,” Charles grumbled. “What about the one with the pool?”

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“What about this one?” Charles asked, showing Erik the townhouse he’d viewed that day.

“Charles,” he moaned. “We do not need crystal chandeliers.”

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“Charles, you don’t cook. We don’t require three kitchens.”

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“Charles, what the fuck would we do with servants living quarters?”

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“Charles, go with Steve, not Tony. I beg of you.”

“But-”

“No, Charles. We don’t need a butler.”
It took two weeks of that madness before they finally managed to narrow down the choices between ten properties. Then they sat down with Tabitha and narrowed it to six. They arranged with their relator to take a look at all six one Sunday. All the properties were in the same general area, three in the same building. It was not too far from the store and the Centre or from Tabitha’s new school, easy access for Charles to go to the library, and fairly close access to the hospital. It was a good catchment area, and very mutant friendly. There were several farmers markets nearby (which Erik wanted) and it was a pretty pleasant walk to get to Central Park.

The first was nice, but bland, obviously made up for showcasing purposes. The windows let in a lot of light, and the floors were nice, but it didn’t inspire any of them.

“As you can see, there are great views,” said Maggie, their relator.

“How many bedrooms?” Erik asked, poking his head into the kitchen.

“Four bed, four bath.”

[Charles?]

[You picked this one, not me.]

[Okay, you were right, this one is not for us.]

“Tabitha, darling, what do you think?” Charles asked.

“It’s not home,” she said certainly. “This one isn’t ours.”

“Quite right,” he said, looking at Maggie. “Next?”
The next apartment was two floors down, and just as dull as the last one, with less impressive views.

“Nope,” Erik said. “Next!”

They travelled down another two floors and despained.

“I think I made a mistake,” Erik said as Tabitha poked around in the closet nearest the front door, if you could call something so small a closet. “This building isn’t for us. It’s too…”

“Boring,” Tabitha said.

“It’s just not for us,” Charles said. “Look, it’s getting on. Why don’t we have some lunch and then start on the other apartments. Perhaps we’ll get lucky.”

They didn’t. The next three apartments were just as disappointing. One had only three bedrooms, the next smelt of damp, and the last had fixtures and appliances that probably came from the Ark.

“I did try to tell you, darling,” Charles said, smug.

“I thought you were joking because you wanted me to let you have the gold plated private elevator.”

“No,” he said lightly, patting his little bump. “Can we look at my choice next time?”

“Yeah, sure. Can’t be any worse than these.”

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Next Sunday came, and with it Charles’ choice of properties to view.
They were worse, but in the opposite way. Five apartments and none of them had ever had anything as messy as a child or a pet in them. Too immaculate, to extravagant, and Maggie sighed.

“When did you say you wanted to move by?” she asked, scratching the lime green monstrosity they had just viewed off the list. No one needed a disco ball in their bathroom.

No one needed a disco ball, period.

“Ideally we were hoping for some time before the new academic year begins,” Charles said as they emerged out onto the sweltering sidewalk. Tabitha popped into the deli two doors down. “But we’re very interested in this area. It has everything we’d like to have.”

“I think that estimate might be a little ambitious,” she said. “This area is very sought after. Truth be told, people often spend years looking for a New York property and never find what they’re looking for.”

“It doesn’t need to be perfect, or worthy of a magazine cover,” Erik said exasperatedly while she checked her phone. “We just want somewhere with enough room for all four of us, somewhere we can be happy. Home improvements, I can do that.”

“Well…I do have one,” she said. “It’s not quite what you outlined in your specifications, and it’s a little more than you were looking to pay. But it’s in the area and is going to be listed this afternoon.”

“Well is it?” Tabitha asked, handing out bottles of artisan lemonade.

Maggie looked around and pointed to a large ornate building. “That one. We can go right now if you’re up to it.”

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It was perfect.

The walls were a pastel rainbow of warm soft colours, the floors all warm wood and clean marble.

The private elevator opened out into the entrance hall of the spacious penthouse. It boasted three bedroom suites and two double bedrooms, five and a half bathrooms, a kitchen with a walk in pantry, dining room, two studies and two lounges. The penthouse was built around a central open area that housed a garden, which could be accessed through French doors from every bedroom and both lounges.

“You’ll notice the high ceilings and extensive windows, giving lots of light and a real sense of space,” Maggie said, leading them through the first lounge. “The garden needs some sprucing up, but nothing too strenuous. A little pruning, a few weeds. If you follow me, this is the main bedroom suite.”

The suite was huge, luxuriously spacious. Sleeping area, sitting area, a large built in closet that you walked through to get to the generous bathroom, tiled in soft blues and white.

“All the suites are similarly laid out, but this is the biggest.”

“It’s incredible,” Charles said, looking out of the French doors at the garden. “What’s wrong with it? Why would anyone sell this? It’s real estate paradise.”

“Divorce. The couple are divorcing and need to split the assets. This is in both their names, and neither will let the other buy them out, so it needs to be sold. They’re looking for a quick sale,” she said lightly. “I’m sure you could get them to drop the asking price if you could agree to close quickly.” She looked between the three of them. “I’ll go make some calls, and you can talk it over.”

Tabitha wandered off to look at the other suites and Charles poked around what could, potentially, be their closet.

“You like it?” Erik asked.

“It’s beautiful,” he breathed. “Erik, it’s incredible.”
“You want it?”

“You said no to a private elevator. And to penthouses in general,” he pointed out with a smile.

“I know, I know. But that was before I saw this. Think of it. Our own garden. Do you know how rare that is in New York? And the kitchen...okay, it needs new appliances, especially a new stove, and that garden does need some work. But...I get a really good feeling here. It feels right, you know?”

“I do,” he hummed, moving to hug him. “Do you like it? Do you want it?”

“I really do. It’s perfect, Charles.” He glanced at the specification paperwork they’d been left with. “But it’s more than we were looking to pay. Can we even afford this?”

“Think about who you just asked that question to, and then see how silly it is.”

“Right, old money, rich family, last in line, all that good stuff. Okay, so we can afford it. Actually, you can afford it. Anyway! Is this the one? Does this feel like somewhere you can bring Little Bean home to?”

“Yes, it is,” he said happily, a little dreamy at the thought of bringing the baby home. “I love our apartment, truly. But it won’t work once Little Bean comes. This will work nicely. Just think,” he said, moving to the sitting area. “We could have this as the first nursery, when Bean is new. And then, when they’re a little older, one of the suites for a proper nursery. There’s plenty of room to play, the elevator needs a key card, so it’s secure here. There are no stairs for him or her to fall down when they start walking.”

“Plus the concierge and doorman, and the 24 hour security guards,” he agreed, testing the sweep of the French doors. “It’s safe, and there will always be someone here for you to call on if I’m not home. I like the idea of that, someone always there for you.”

“You are sweet, love.”

They left the room in agreement to find Tabitha, who was standing in the third suite, the one furthest from theirs.
“My room, definitely my room,” she declared and they grinned.

Maggie smiled as they signed the paperwork her assistant had brought.

“So much for years of property search.”

They moved the weekend after Tabitha started High School. It wasn’t what Charles had wanted, but it was as close as they could get considering.

Moira called in a few subs to work the Centre so Charles didn’t have to worry. It would have been more helpful if Raven hadn’t removed herself from the employment records. Charles didn’t know what to do about Raven. He truly felt that he’d lost his sister, and he didn’t know how he felt about it. He was saddened that a part of him was relieved to have her leave his life.

Raven had done nothing but criticise him for years. Small little comments, tiny changes, moments of her distancing herself from him. Their relationship hadn’t been the same since she suddenly decided to move out, and the fiasco at the wedding had been some sort of turning point for them. She didn’t need him, and he honestly didn’t want her.

They were descended upon by Tony, Steve, David, Anya and a whole flock of Erik’s relatives. They arrived early Saturday morning and swept through the apartment like a tornado, watched over by Edie, leaving order in their wake. She ordered them about and got everything working like a well-oiled machine.

Steve was highly useful in lifting heavy things, and Tony was put to work unhooking electronics and packing them up. David, Anya and Tabitha happily made trip after trip up and down the stairs to take boxes to the trucks, which were driven over and unloaded by Erik’s uncles, Samuel and Elijah. Robert, Kaitlyn and Joseph accepted the loads and hefted things to where Charles directed.

Together the Lehnsherr’s could rule the world. If they ever turned supervillain, the world didn’t stand a chance.
Charles was forbidden from lifting anything at all, not even scatter cushions. Kurt had popped over, along with Armando, Alex and Scott, to make sure he stayed calm and didn’t have to reach for anything. They fed him, got him drinks, moved things for him, fluffed blankets, made beds. Anything he wanted to do, they did for him.

With so many people all working together, the move was totally completed in under four hours. They took their helpful angels out to lunch as a thank you and then they all dispersed.

“Your relatives are terrifying when they get down to it,” Charles said, organising books in his bookcase.

Erik was organising his desk, unpacking tiny boxes that slotted into an organiser. They’d decided to stick to a shared office. They’d come to love working side by side and would miss the quiet comfort of working together. The other study would be used as a snug movie room. They’d have to get a larger screen and some squishy chairs. Perhaps a popcorn machine.

“You should have seen my Bar Mitzvah,” he laughed.

“I can imagine,” he said, smoothing the spines. “I’m going to check on Tabby.”

She was in her room, arranging things the way she wanted. Her bed was central in the wall furthest from the door, nightstands flanking it, and her clothes were meticulously organised in her closet. He especially liked the little hooks she’d put up on part of the wall for her necklaces. She’d even managed to wedge her dressing table into a section of it.

Her desk for schoolwork and small bookcase were set up in the sitting area, a small section of it set aside for an armchair and side table for reading. The majority of the sitting room was taken over by her art desk and easel, a clear mat beneath them to protect the hardwood flooring.

She hadn’t put up any posters of bands or movie stars. Instead her cream walls were decorated with framed prints of paintings she liked, stills from her favourite animated pictures, and some of her own pieces.

The bunny her mother had made stood in her glass display case in one corner of the room.

“This looks lovely, darling,” he said, crossing one of her rugs.
“You think so?” she asked, moving her easel so the light from the window would hit a canvas. “I’ve put things where I think they’ll work best.”

“I think it works wonderfully.” He peered out of her window. “You’ll get the morning sun waking you,” he noted. “Will it hit your bed do you think?”

“I think so. I’m pretty sure. Elijah had a compass on his keyring, and he said this was the best position to get the sunrise.” She looked around the room. “The suite between us, that’s going to be the nursery, right?”

“I thought so.”

“I was thinking…when you and Erik have picked out a theme for it…maybe I could do a mural,” she said and he felt himself tearing up.

“Oh, darling, that would be wonderful! Oh, damn hormones. Happy tears, happy tears!”

The 20 week scan came around and Erik went with Charles to the scan. After Bruce had done the necessary things, they settled in his office to talk about possible avenues for the birth.

“Almost three quarters of all male pregnancies can end in a natural birth,” Bruce said. “The mothers, for lack of a better word, develop a birth canal, which opens between the scrotum and the anus. So I don’t think it’s too much of a stretch for you to want to do it naturally.”

Charles grinned in triumph. He had been reading and he was absolutely sure that he’d like to be as natural as possible for his labour, that it would be best.

“However,” Bruce said, making his smile falter. “Charles, your hips are very narrow, as is your pelvis. Just because you might develop the physical capability to birth in the traditional way doesn’t mean you will be able to. There are a lot of things to consider.”
“But I want to do it naturally. It’s best for the baby,” he argued.

“I know, it is usually best, but not always. Labour very rarely goes to plan, Charles. The birth plan is only a guide, a wish list if you will. It outlines what you want to happen, but not what actually will happen. I like to have backups outlined, for patients to talk about what might be another course of action if the first one doesn’t work.”

“So what is the backup?” Erik asked.

“I think we’re looking at a caesarean section,” he said. “Only as a last resort.” That halted Charles’ protests in their tracks. “I want you to have the birth experience you want, but I also want to be prepared for every possibility. Let’s back up a little. Go back to the actual labour, the time you spend contracting and moving towards the birth.”

“Sounds sensible,” Erik said and he covertly watched Charles nod.

Erik knew why Bruce had wanted him present for this discussion. Charles could be stubborn when he set his mind to something, and Charles had set his mind to actually pushing their baby out drug-free. Erik personally thought he was crazy. If it were him he’d be lining up the drugs. Knock him out and tell him when it was done sounded pretty good to him. But Charles had made up his mind. Bruce just needed to get it through to him that things might not go that way, and Erik was his support.

“Have you thought about what might help you through your labour?”

“Not really,” Charles admitted. “I was sort of focussed on the actual business part of things.”

Bruce chuckled. “Don’t worry, lots of time to think about it. Let’s see now. Some women labour in a bathtub, or a birth pool. The water helps them.”

“No, I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Alright. How about music and low lighting?”
“I’d like the gentle lights but not the music.”

“Fine,” he said, noting it down. “How much medical monitoring are you happy with as a general rule? Would you like a labour and delivery nurse to stay in the room with you, or would you prefer us to be as hands off as we can, or somewhere in the middle?”

“Oh, I know this one!” he said happily. “I’d like it quite peaceful, with not too much interference. I don’t mind wearing a monitor, but I don’t want to be watched. And I don’t particularly like the idea of random nurses and such manhandling me.”

“That’s simple enough. We can go with a simple foetal monitor across the belly to keep an eye on heartrate and contractions and stuff, and restrict physical exams to a select few medical staff. Perhaps me and a labour nurse, you can pick which one?”

“That sounds good.”

“A lot of these questions I don’t ask until labour has begun, because what you want can change, so I’ll leave most of these blank. I just want a general sense of things. What are your thoughts on inhibitors? Some psionic patients like them, some don’t. It might help you to labour if things are quieter.”

“No, I don’t like not being able to hear things,” he said with absolute certainty. “I have an inhibitor, and I’ll bring it, put it in my hospital bag, but I’d rather not use it.”

“Okay, that’s fine. If you do end up needing a section, I insist on it though. I don’t want you to be able to get an accidental look at your own surgery.”

“I suppose I can agree with that,” Charles grumbled as Erik squeezed his thigh.

“I think I’ve got all I need to. Are you sure you don’t want to pick a painkiller?”

“No. I want to do it without.”

“Not a problem. Just remember, you can always change your mind, any time, right up until Little
Bean pops out.”

“I won’t.”

“Charles,” Erik said. “It’s just in case, so you’ve got the choice.”

“I understand that, but I know I won’t change my mind.”

“Whatever you say, ziskeit. Bruce, I was wondering when I should bring him, when I’ll know it’s real labour? Because I’ve read about false labour, and that labour can take hours and hours. And I know he’ll be more relaxed and comfortable at home for as long as possible.”

“That’s a good question. Firstly, you’ll know it’s real labour when the pains have been consistent for an hour or more. They’ll be evenly spaced and last about a half minute, gradually increasing in strength, frequency and duration as things progress. Labour isn’t like the movies. Usually things don’t start with a bang, they start slowly. Early signs of labour can include nausea, restlessness, sometimes an ache along the groin. Some mothers feel very tired before the birth, it depends on the person. Charles knows his body, he’ll let you know when he thinks things are moving along.”

“Okay, I think I can remember that. When do I call you?”

“Ordinarily I would say when the pains are about five to six minutes apart, then it’s time for the hospital. And yes, Charles, before you interrupt, you have to deliver in the hospital. There are too many risks and unknowns with this pregnancy. You’re classed as high dependency gestation, so you have to deliver here.”

“Fine,” he grumbled.

[I'll buy you ice cream on the way home,] Erik promised and Charles sighed in agreement.

“You said ordinarily it would be five to six minutes,” Erik prompted.

“Yes, ordinarily, for a standard pregnancy in a woman who has a ‘normal’ pregnancy,” he said, making air quotes to show his opinion on the word normal. “For Charles, I’d like you to call me at
about ten minutes or so, or as soon as you think it’s real labour. I just want to be safe here, do everything possible to make sure you end up with a healthy baby at the end."

Bruce gave them a whole forests worth of pamphlets and booklets and leaflets to read over, so they could consider the future and what would work best for them. They left and Bruce slumped at his desk. He felt like he’d just battled a dragon and won.

For someone so small and soft looking, Charles could be terrifying when he didn’t get his way.

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“No, no, I understand,” Charles said. “No, I’m fine. I’m absolutely fine, Peter, really. Yes, alright. Yes. Thank you for calling to let me know.”

He hung up and hugged himself, looking down at his bump. 25 weeks, he was now in the zone for survival. If his Little Bean decided to make a bid for freedom now, there was a chance that he or she would survive. Bruce was very happy with their progress.

He’d felt the baby move for a while, and now he could get Little Bean to kick on command by pressing his bump. Wherever he pressed, Bean would kick. Erik loved to play that game every evening and whenever Charles stayed still long enough for him to get his hands on him. Little Bean especially liked listening to Tabitha talk, and she’d taken to reading her school textbooks aloud to him to make the baby wriggle. It was fun to watch his skin ripple with the movements, and it helped her to study too.

Charles took a walk every day, wandering around the city as the leaves turned pretty colours, he and Bailey walking aimlessly as he pondered names and birth plans. He managed to pass his favourite baby boutique every afternoon, and his favourite bakery.

He and Erik had chosen the barnyard theme for the nursery, Tabitha had begun planning her mural, and they had begun to buy things. A few onesies here, a pack of diapers there. They had a nice little pile in the nursery closet. Edie was happily picking up things too, and David and Anya had already gifted more toys than a child could possibly need at birth. Erik was researching car seats, trying to find the absolute best one. Charles had seen less consideration go into their apartment hunt.

Their favourite piece of news was that Little Bean would be getting a Lehnsherr family blanket. It
was a family tradition that Bubbe knitted a blanket for every new edition. She was knitting theirs in a soft pastel green and Charles couldn’t wait to wrap his Little Bean in it.

“Charles?”

“Good morning,” Charles said as Erik joined him at the kitchen island, the new appliances gleaming behind him.

“Not from what you’re projecting,” he said, entwining their fingers. “Who was on the phone?”

“Peter Rasputin. He’s had some developments with Mother and Kurt.”

“What developments?”

“Mother has decided to plead guilty to the charges,” he said, standing to make more tea. “Which means no trial. Peter thinks she’ll get a year in prison, if her sentencing judge is lenient.”

“Sounds fair,” Erik said cautiously. “And Kurt?”

“He’s…he’s dead. His cellmate…there was an incident. He died yesterday.”

Erik stood and moved to him, hugging him from behind, cupping his bump.

[How do you feel about that?]

[I think I’m a little…sad. I’ve known him my whole life. No matter what he’s done, he was in my life for an awfully long time. I’m sad for him. And for Cain. Losing your father…he must be terribly upset.]

“Hey, no, don’t worry about him,” Erik murmured. “You have enough to contend with, without taking him on. Would he do the same if it were you?”
“Probably not,” he mumbled.

“I’m sure he has lots of people who can help him through this. You don’t need to worry about him.”

“You’re right, I know, you’re right,” Charles agreed, leaning back into him. “It’s just not how I expected things to play out. I was so sure I’d end up in court. Peter said mother only changed her plea once she heard he was gone. Erik…I don’t know how to forgive her.”

“Stop trying. Give it time, let things settle. Everything will become clear when the time is right. For now, just feel whatever it is you feel. There’s no right or wrong. Anything goes now.”

“I do love you,” Charles said, turning in his arms and looping his wrists around his neck. “I love you so very much. My sweet angel.”

“Keep calling me sweet and we’re going to have problems,” he mock threatened, squeezing his backside.

“But you are sweet. And I never call you sweet so anyone can hear.”

“Fine, but only in private,” he allowed, knowing he was getting worse. There was very little he denied Charles now he was getting so very round.

“Hey, have you seen this?” Tabitha asked as she appeared from the hallway, bag in one hand, newspaper in the other. “Oh. Oops. Sorry. Am I interrupting?”

“No, you’re not,” Charles said, patting Bailey on the head as she brought him the mail. “Good girl, that’s my good girl. Have you got everything for school?”

“Yeah, I’m good to go. Cereal for breakfast?”

“We’ve got some fruit to go with it,” Erik said, looking in the fridge. “We need a grocery shop.”
“I’d do it on my walk,” Charles said, pouring Tabitha and himself bowls of cornflakes. “Did you say something about seeing, darling? As you came in?”

“Yeah, I did,” she said, unfolding the newspaper. “Isn’t he your old doctor?”

Erik took it and looked at the front page headline. It was a clear picture of Sebastian Shaw being led away in handcuffs.

**PROMINENT CITY DOCTOR CHARGED WITH POSSESSION OF CHILD PORNOGRAPHY.**

“Well,” Charles said. “I didn’t see that coming.”

[But he definitely deserves everything coming to him.] Charles said, passing Tabitha the milk.

[I hope he rots.]

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all your wonderful feedback. It made me all gooey inside.

As always, there’s a little heart just down there that lets me know you care, and I always love comments, they let me know what you liked and what you didn't. Long or short, doesn't matter, I love them all.
Thank you for all your feedback, it means so much to me that you like the story so much.

A lot of you have asked about Raven and her attitude toward Charles, and I really hope this chapter answers that for you.

Charles giggled at the picture Yuriko gave him.

“Oh, it’s lovely!” he said, hauling her onto his lap. It was quite a squeeze, he was fast running out of lap for her to use.

Yuriko was the last of the children to be picked up that Saturday, and her mother had already called to say she was in traffic and on her way. He didn’t mind a few extra minutes, it was nice to sit and rest. 29 weeks pregnant, he rather enjoyed sitting down. Soon he wouldn’t be able to run around with the children, and he was rather sad about it, so he was enjoying it while he could.

He didn’t enjoy the constant need to pee, the heartburn, the indigestion, the need to pee, the increasingly creative ways he had to use pillows to get comfortable at night, the craving of every sweet thing mixed with hot sauce (which made the heartburn worse), and the constant need to pee. He kept telling himself that it would all be worth it in the end.

He was officially in his third trimester, and Bruce was very happy with his progress. The baby’s heartbeat was now so strong Erik could hear it if he placed his ear to Charles’ bump, which he did every evening. Bruce had told him that Little Bean would actually double in size between now and when they were born, which Charles found incredible.

They had finalised the plans for Charles’ labour and birth as much as Bruce felt they could. There was a lot of space for changes and last minute decisions dependant on how Charles felt come the big day.

His Little Bean had a nursery, complete with a mural by Tabitha. It was beautiful, a farmyard with sheep, cows and chickens, even a dog. Fluffy white clouds in a pale blue sky, wide green fields and a pond with ducks. The other walls were a pale yellow, keeping it light and airy. He and Erik had
bought white nursery furniture, keeping it tranquil and plain, somewhere a baby could get a good night’s sleep.

They hadn’t bought much, instead they had registered at several places and were off to Bubbe’s for the holidays. The family were throwing a baby shower at the same time as the holiday gathering, so the whole family could celebrate the impending arrival. They’d go in just over three weeks, when Tabitha had broken up from school for the Winter Break. Once they’d had the shower they could go shopping themselves. They didn’t want to end up with two of everything, and everyone had been so insistent that they have a shower.

Erik had insisted on buying the car seat himself, opting for one that he’d finally decided on. The base was secured into the car and the seat was clipped in with a cover over it. Erik practiced putting it on and off the base almost every day, and Charles found it adorably sweet, every single time.

Edie and Bubbe had taught him everything they thought he’d need to know at this point. How to tell if a baby was overtired, or hungry, or needing a change. What to do for diaper rash and colic. How to dress a baby, bathe one, change one. Every time he went near either of them, they gave him a Gomel blessing, which was a prayer for a safe delivery.

“Is this me?” he asked, pointing at the circle with arms, legs and a head.

“Yes.”

“And this one? Is this Erik?”

The stick figure had swirls around it, which he assumed were paperclips.

“Uh huh, and this one’s Tabby,” she declared, pointing at the one with a wild pink scribble for hair and a wiggly extra limb. “See. She gots a tail.”

“I see. And who’s this little one hiding in my tummy?”

“The baby. I don’t know what it looks like yet, so it’s just a baby. I draw a better one when it comes out.”
“It’s a very good drawing. Come on, we’ll go put it up in my office.”

She toddled along with him and grinned as he pinned it up above his desk. He retrieved his latest scan pictures and led her back to the chair so he could show her.

She was still in awe five minutes later when her mother arrived, and he happily gave her one of the copies to take home.

He was just locking up when he sensed a familiar mind behind him.

“Peter! How wonderful to see you!”

“Hello, Charles,” he said, giving him a hug and stroking his bump. “Well, you’re getting close to the finish line huh? Not long to go?”

“About eleven weeks, give or take,” he said happily.

“Ah, I remember when my wife was seven months. I hope Erik is giving plenty of back rubs.”

“He is, he takes wonderful care of me. Peter…not that I’m not thrilled to see you, because I am, truly. But why are you here? Is something wrong with Mother?”

Peter sighed and motioned to a bench.

“No, nothing to do with Sharon. I’m here to warn you,” he said carefully after they’d taken a seat. “About Raven.”

“Raven? Why on earth would you need to warn me about Raven?”

“Charles, you’re going to be served on Monday with a legal summons to go before a judge,” Peter said sadly and Charles was stunned.
“What the fuck for!”

“Raven is trying to allege that a circumcision under religious grounds is child cruelty and endangerment. She’s alleging that you’re misguided in doing it because you aren’t Jewish.”

Charles sat stunned for a moment and then heaved himself to his feet with surprising agility considering his current physical condition.

“You’ll help me fight this?” he demanded.

“Absolutely. I’m already petitioning to get the case thrown out, and to get us in front of a judge as soon as possible.”

“Good. Thank you, Peter. I need to go now. Good evening,” he said and walked off before Peter replied.

[I’m almost afraid to ask,] Erik said. [Ziskeit, please, calm down. Your blood pressure.]

[I can’t, I can’t calm down,] he snarled, pushing the reason for his anger to him, and then being matched in it.

[I’m going to kill her,] Erik roared. [I’m going to eviscerate her. How dare she! How fucking dare she!]

[I’m on the way to Tony.]

[I’ll meet you there.]

Apparently, Peter had called Tony before he’d gone to Charles. Charles had actually forgotten that Tony was down in his paperwork as a backup. It was a legal clause for all psionics, to have someone notified of major legal challenges. It was some convoluted idea of some misguided politician trying to keep the world safe from those pesky telepaths, but Charles was thankful for it.
“I’m already on it, Charlie,” Tony promised. “I’ve called my lawyers, they’re going to crucify her.”

“Tony, what the hell is she playing at!” Charles seethed, pacing angrily. Little Bean was kicking and it just made him angrier.

“I have no clue. This is ridiculous. It’s a religious ceremony that’s been performed for thousands of years, she has no right to interfere.”

“I haven’t spoken to her since the wedding, seven months, Tony! She hasn’t been there for any of my pregnancy! She’s never even seen a fucking scan picture!”

“What does she want out of this?” Erik asked from the door, his voice the dangerous kind of low he used just before he made someone regret just how stupid they’d just been.

Tabitha and Bailey hurried in, the girl going straight to Charles to hug him and murmur to his bump, trying to calm things.

“To stop a bris,” Tony said, looking at the paperwork on his screen. “She’s citing an ‘ethical and religious objection to the mutilation of her nephew’.”

“Why? What does she want out of this? It can’t just be to stop it,” Erik said. “She wants something, so what is it? Money? To be in charge of something completely unrelated to her? Or maybe she thinks she can take Little Bean, take our baby from us. Because of she thinks that, if she even for one second thinks I will physically let her near my child she’s out of her damn mind.”

“She wouldn’t,” Charles said, stunned out of his fury. He covered his bump with his hands, feeling Little Bean kick. “No, she can’t. No court in the world would do that, not because she objects to something.”

“She can try,” Tony said warily. “It’s a possibility. We’ll find out on Monday when the writ is served.”
Charles received the notice to restrain him from having a bris for his child if it was a boy on Monday morning. It was delivered by hand to him in the store as Erik was refusing to let Charles out of his sight, and even the clerk delivering it looked stunned.

Within an hour they were sitting in Peter Rasputin’s office with Tony and Tony’s army of lawyers. They arranged to meet with Raven and her legal team the next week.

They had a home visit from two court appointed social workers, who kept assuring them that it was simply a formality for legal proceedings concerning a child. They’d asked questions, taken a look around, and Charles had managed to smile when he showed them the nursery. They were impressed by Tabitha and her room, and they had said as they were leaving that they would recommend to the judge that this case be dismissed. They saw no reason for anyone to consider Charles anything other than absolutely competent when it came to his baby.

Bruce was not happy at Charles’ 30 week scan. His blood pressure was high and the baby was agitated. He got in touch with Tony and told him he’d help deal with Raven as the medical personnel in charge of Charles’ care.

Thursday came around far too slowly for everyone involved, and then Charles walked into the conference room and saw Raven, and all he wanted to do was cry.

[Hey, baby, come on, it’s okay,] Erik soothed as they sat down, pulling Charles close, pressing their foreheads together. [It’s going to be fine, I won’t let it not be fine. Just say the word and I’ll kill her, I swear.]

“How can she do this?” he whimpered as his tears spilled over.

Peter looked over and Erik motioned for them to begin. Maybe it would help if Raven could see what she was putting her brother through. Charles tried to stop himself crying, but he had far too many hormonal changes happening, and his body was under far too much stress, for stopping to be possible.

“How performing that unnecessary surgery on a newborn is unconscionable,” Raven said when she was asked to present her case. “Charles, this isn’t you. You’d never do this to a baby! It’s evil.”

“Evil? You know what’s evil?” Charles sobbed. “My own sister claiming to know anything about
my baby when she hasn’t even spoken to me in over seven months. What’s evil is you doing this to me!"

“I’m doing this for you!”

“No, you’re doing this for yourself!”

“The fact remains that Charles Xavier is not Jewish,” her lawyer said, cutting him off and giving him a look of pity, as if he were a child being denied sweets, and Charles realised he knew her.

Irene Adler, Raven’s ‘roommate’.

“I fail to see how that has bearing here,” Peter argued.

“Charles, by legal definition, is the mother in this case, and as the mother it is unethical, nay, unconscionable for him to subject a child to an unneeded medical procedure. Science has proven that circumcision is unnecessary and medically dangerous, Your Honour,” she said, handing a sheaf of papers to the judge presiding over the proceedings.

“The court recognises the submission of document 357b,” the judge said, the clerk noting it down.

“This procedure would only be performed to satisfy the needs of Mr. Xavier’s spouse, which is not reason enough to subject a child to pain and suffering. In fact, there is no reason for any child to suffer at the hands of their mother. This religious ceremony is nothing more than a smoke screen to indoctrinate a child into a cult.”

“Circumcision is performed every day in hospitals up and down the country,” Peter said. “It is considered the choice of the parents what procedures are performed upon their child. In the case of Charles and Erik, it is also of enormous religious significance. Every male in the Lehnsherr family has had a bris, has been circumcised. The importance of this ceremony cannot be put into words, Your Honour. Furthermore, I move to dismiss this case completely owing to the extreme stress put upon my client through Ms. Darkholme’s actions. Her actions have caused massive amounts of stress and distress to my client who, as it is plain to see, is in the later stages of his pregnancy. Through these actions she has put the baby’s health at risk. I present, Your Honour, medical testimony from Dr Robert Bruce Banner, Charles’ obstetrician. You’ll see in the document that he has noticed a massive decline in health of both Charles and the baby since these allegations were put forward. I also bring to your attention the assessment by your own appointed social workers,
who found no possible reason for this case to continue. I put forward, Your Honour, that this is not a case of, as she claims, being concerned for the health of this baby. I suggest that this is nothing more than her own petty need to control her brother.”

“That is not true!” Raven snapped.

“Counsellor, please, control your client,” the judge said. “We may not be in a courtroom, but I do expect this to be conducted in a civilised manner.”

“Yes, Your Honour,” Irene said.

“Professor Xavier,” the judge said. He was a kind looking grandfather type man with a southern accent. “I understand that this is very trying for you. I hope we can resolve this quickly to relieve the stress. Do you need to take a break?” Charles shook his head. “Allowing Ms. Adler’s point, are you in fact Jewish?”

“No, Your Honour,” he said. “But my husband and my daughter are.”

“Do you practice any form of religion?”

“No, I don’t.”

“You don’t wish to convert to Judaism?”

“I don’t have enough conviction in faith of any God for a conversion; I think it would be hypocritical of me to do that.”

“In light of that, can I ask why you want a circumcision for a baby boy?”

“I want this child, and any future children, to be raised in the faith, to be one of the People. Erik was raised with wonderful values and traditions, and the Lehnsherr family have such strong ties to each other. I want that for my children. I want faith for them, to believe in something. I was raised without faith, and I don’t want that for my child.”
“If this baby is a girl, will you be raising her with the same basis of Judaism?”

“Yes, Your Honour. Any child I have, I want them to have that faith.”

“And if the child decided later to not practice, or to believe in a different faith?”

“Then that will be a decision for him or her to make, not me, but at least they will have that base to build on. Your Honour, this isn’t about the circumcision, it’s about what it represents. I want the best for my children, and for me that means doing this. I don’t want my child to be in pain, of course I don’t, but it’s important for the Chosen People that this welcome to God happen.”

“You’ve said yourself you don’t have faith, but you want that for your child. Do you have a plan for instilling faith?”

“Erik believes, and Tabitha, our daughter. She’s quite orthodox really. And Erik’s mother and grandmother, his aunts, uncles, cousins, his siblings. There are so many of them, all with faith. This baby will spend an awful lot of time with all of them, they’re wonderful. They’ve all promised to help me raise the baby in the faith.”

“Your relationship with your mother-in-law is very favourable I take it?”

“Oh yes. She’s my mum, she loves me very much,” he said with a smile. He loved Edie, she meant the world to him. “Hugs and kisses, and she’s always calling and popping by. She made the move to a bigger apartment so smooth. And she’s taught me so much, getting ready for the baby. We’re very close. I call her Mamen.”

“It means mother in Yiddish,” Erik added.

“I wish my mother-in-law had liked me so much, maybe my marriage wouldn’t have been so strained. Thank you, Professor. Let the testimony be entered into the record. Mr Rasputin, as we’ve heard from opposing counsel as to the reasons Ms. Darkholme objects to this, I think we should have your opinions on the matter. I see here that you’ve known Charles and Raven their whole lives, you knew their father, Brian Xavier. Can you please enlighten me to your position here?”
“It is my opinion that Ms. Darkholme is harbouring the illusion that her brother is incapable of making a decision by himself, that he is somehow incompetent in making major decisions. I present, Your Honour, written evidence of Ms. Darkholme dismissing her brother’s ability to make decisions,” Peter said, handing the judge a folder two inches thick. “Contained in that folder are testimonies from over two dozen eye witnesses. There has been repeated and sustained verbal abuse from Ms. Darkholme towards my client since childhood. She has consistently belittled his thoughts and opinions and talked of his mutation gifts in a derogatory manner.”

“I didn’t!” Raven whispered to Irene. “I have never done that!”

“Allow me to read from the text,” Peter said. “On the occasion of his purchase of property for the use of mutant youth, Ms. Darkholme said, and I quote, ‘Charles is always so idealistic, he’s never going to live in the real world’. She frequently told Charles that she was his only friend. I quote, ‘Charles, stay out of my head. It’s creepy’ was said on multiple occasions. Not once has Ms. Darkholme expressed any objection to the suppression of my client’s psionic abilities through forced medication. Not once did she express a willingness to intervene when Charles has been verbally or physically attacked, of which there have been many incidences in her presence.”

“This is ridiculous,” Raven whispered.

“The strongest evidence, Your Honour, comes from the testimonies of several eye witnesses present the morning of Charles’ wedding to Erik Lehnsherr,” Peter continued, and Charles felt the defeat from Irene. “Raven was actually caught on camera.”

The screen at the end of the room flared to life and the video of Raven telling Charles he couldn’t get married started. It had obviously been the wedding videographer testing their equipment before the main event, but every word had been caught in terrible high definition.

“Your Honour, please, I beg you to end this ridiculous discussion. Charles and Erik would do nothing to harm their child, and Charles is more than capable of making his own decisions. Ms. Darkholme has made outrageous claims against him, causing unnecessary pain and suffering not only to Charles, but to his unborn child. I implore Your Honour to restore some peace of mind to my client,” Peter said.

The judge looked over the thick folder and then looked at all the people gathered around the massive table.

“What the hell are you people doing?” he said, tired and exasperated. “You want me to…what? Stop parents from sharing their traditions and beliefs with their child? This country has religious
freedom, it’s right there in the constitution. Ms. Adler, if your client honestly expects me to side with her over her rather than Professor Xavier, then she needs psychiatric help, something I can’t provide.”

“Your Honour…” Irene began but he cut her off with a raised hand.

“Nope. I’ve had enough of this case. I’ve heard enough, seen enough evidence. I’m dismissing this case. It’s completely ridiculous and without merit. And Mr. Rasputin? This restraining order you’d like filed? I’m granting it. Ms. Darkholme, you are not allowed within 100 feet of Professor Xavier, his spouse, his children, or his residence. You are to have no telephone or electronic correspondence with Professor Xavier. You may not ask others to talk to him on your behalf or carry notes to him. In short, Ms. Darkholme, if you go anywhere near your brother or his children, I will not hesitate to put you in jail. Hearing adjourned.”

He snapped his folders closed, and swept from the room, leaving his clerk to pack them up and file them away. The lawyers started to disperse and Erik pushed Charles at Tony who held him close and guided him to the door.

“Raven.”

“Erik,” she said coolly. “I hope you’re pleased with yourself.”

“You listen to me, you little bitch,” he snarled. “You ever come near my husband again, and I swear, I will destroy you. You think you’ll be allowed to work with mutant youth if I tell your bosses what you tried to do today? Forget it, your career will be over. You ever come near Charles again, and I will destroy you. And don’t even think about coming near our children, EVER. Do you understand me?”

“He’s my brother!”

“Not anymore. Stay away, or you’ll regret the day you stumbled into that kitchen.”

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Erik sighed and poured himself another scotch. Charles had finally given in to sleep after crying himself sick.
Tony had come home with them and Tabitha had made all of Charles’ favourite foods, but he was still heartbroken.

“He’ll be okay,” Tony promised. “Charlie is tougher than anyone gives him credit. He just needs a few days to calm down.”

“I’ve arranged with the school to take Tabs out early. I’m taking him to Bubbe’s tomorrow. It’s quiet there, full of people that love him.”

“Good, that’s good. Take him away from all this, take a breath. Get him excited about Little Bean again.”

“What the hell is her problem?” Erik asked. “Goes on and on about him being her brother, about how much she cares, but belittles him at every opportunity. Claims to care and then drags him through that farce.”

“You’ve hit the nail on the head,” Tony said darkly. “I’ll let you into a secret. I don’t let Charlie in my head. Not because I don’t trust him, that’s not it. I don’t let him because I’m afraid of what he’d find. My head is dark, real dark, and I can’t bear the thought of him having to suffer my thoughts. It’s bad enough I do.”

“That’s kind of you, protecting him from it.”

“He doesn’t like it,” he said. “But he respects my choice. Now, Raven, she’s never let him in. Ever. He’s tried, but she freaked out every time. She even put suppressors in his food once. Raven hates the very notion of anyone in her head.”

“Why?”

“She doesn’t trust he won’t do anything once he’s in there.”

“That’s completely ridiculous!”
“Agreed. But it’s how she feels. And because of that lack of trust, she doesn’t trust that Charles can make a decision by himself. She’s misguidedly convinced herself that all those thoughts he hears every day cloud him, that he doesn’t have thoughts of his own, just other peoples.”

“And that’s her justification for treating him like a toddler?”

“That’s it. I know, I know, it’s shit reasoning, and it’s completely unfair to Charlie. Erik, I promise, my lawyers are all stonewalling her. By the time they’re finished she’ll never be allowed near anyone having anything to do with Charles, she won’t even be able to shop in the same stores.”

“I want her gone,” Erik said darkly. “I want her out of this city, Tony.”

“Leave it to me. By the time we’re finished, Raven won’t even be able to buy a stick of gum in this city.”

Edie was ready and waiting as Erik pulled up.

David helped Charles out of the car and then he toddled over to her, throwing himself into her arms. She held him close and stroked his hair, murmuring in Hebrew, Yiddish and English, trying to soothe him. She led him inside and took his coat and shoes before guiding him to Bubbe.

Bubbe cuddled him up with her on the sofa, covering him with a blanket and stroking his head where it rested on her lap. She sang soft songs in Polish and told him stories of the family history as she knitted, working on a baby hat. Bailey curled up on the floor beside him, watching over her human.

By the time Erik had unpacked and come back down, Charles was asleep, Bubbe still happily knitting and singing. Tabitha had disappeared with Anya and David was puttering about in the kitchen.

“Poor boy,” Edie sighed. “My poor boy. To do such a thing to someone as gentle…I can’t believe the depravity of some people.”
“Tony’s dealing with it,” he said, letting her take him to the kitchen.

“I hope he crucifies her,” David said, pouring coffee.

“Too kind,” Erik said.

“Stop it, both of you,” Edie ordered. “No more talk of this silly little girl. She’s not important. What’s important is Charles and the baby. I’ve called the family, they’ll give us a few days to settle him down before they come for the shower. There will be no stress, no hassles, no worries. He will eat and sleep and lounge about. The weather looks to be fairly pleasant for the next week or so, some nice walks will be good for him. We’ll get his blood pressure and stress levels down.”

“Bruce is coming on Friday evening, to do a heartrate test, see if the baby’s calmed down,” Erik said. “He wants Charles to take it easy, so he’s doing a house call.”

“Good. The easier the better. I’ll make up a room for him, he can bring his family,” Edie said, draining her cup. “Now, Charles needs feeding.”

The boys helped Edie with dinner and then Erik gently woke Charles. He managed to stay awake long enough to eat and plod his way up the stairs.

He was asleep before Erik even finished tucking him in.

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“So what are you doing?” Bruce asked.

“I’m back to taking my walks, Erik and I have been tending Mamen’s gardens, and Bubbe is trying to teach me to knit.”

“Very nice, all good things. How about food? Has your appetite returned?”

“Yes,” Charles said, wriggling a little as Bruce moved the probe. “Lots of cookies and stews and lots of bread. I feel a little like a beached whale.”

“I know it feels that way but you’re actually a few weeks smaller than you should be,” Bruce said, wiping at his skin. “I’m not too worried, so long as you keep this up. No more stress, Charles. Just normal pregnancy worries. Names and fingers and which diapers to use. Nothing more, you hear me?”

“I hear you. I’ll be good, I promise,” Charles assured.

Bruce finished up his notes and then the family were allowed to begin proceedings on the baby shower.

The living room was soon filled with Lehnsherr’s, little ones running about, food being passed around, Charles and Erik’s friends all smiling and laughing. Bruce and Betty were conversing with Darwin and David, Anya and Tabitha giggling with Kurt and Scott and some of the cousins. Tony and Steve had arrived, as had Moira and some of the kids from the Centre with their parents. Baby Minka was crawling about with fuzzy blue Hank, the two of them babbling while the St. Bernard watched over them. Bailey was happy to stay by Charles; the three-legged dog had become very protective of him in the last few weeks.

Charles was the centre of attention, everyone happy to see him and giving his bump gentle pats, delighted when Little Bean kicked at them.

“My sweet little telepath,” Erik crooned, joining him on his sofa and cuddling close. “Many more people and Little Bean might decide to meet them in person.”
“Oh, I hope not!” he giggled. He looked down at his bump and patted it. “You stay put for the time being. You’re not done baking yet.”

Erik kissed him, fingers tangling in his hair. “I want to make sure you know how much I love you,” he said. “I know everything is all about Little Bean right now, everyone’s focussing on the baby and not really on the person carrying said baby. So I want to make sure you know how much I love and adore you, Bean or no Bean. You’re enough for me, more than enough. You’re my husband and I will never stop loving you.”

“Oh, Erik,” he hummed, pressing their foreheads together. “I will never doubt how much you love me. I know it, through everything else. I love you too, very much. I don’t know how I would have gotten through everything without you.”

“Never happening. I’m right here, always.”

“You two done being mushy?” Anya asked. “Because you have some serious baby swag to open.”

“Alright,” Erik chuckled. “Bring it on.”

“Wait, I have to pee again.”

Erik and Charles got everything they had registered for and then some.

The bassinet they’d wanted, the stroller, playpen, travel cot. The baby swing, the play mat, the picture books. Steriliser, bottles, tins of formula, packs of diapers. Lotions and powders and shampoos and baby bath. Blankets and snuggles and pacifiers. Enough clothes to last the baby for the next six months. Plates and bowls and cups, teething rings, a silver brush and comb. A sling to strap the baby to Charles or Erik’s chest, bars of dangling toys, yet more plush toys.

Charles loved everything, but if he had to pick a favourite, it was the blanket from Bubbe. It was so soft he couldn’t stop running it over his cheeks. He took to covering his bump with it, getting it ready to comfort his Little Bean.
Erik liked the stroller. He kept picturing Charles walking along with Bean, all proud and content as he showed the baby the sights of the city. Their Little Bean, all snuggled up with their blankets, watching the world go by from the security of the little nest.

Tabitha loved the outfits. Little onesies and socks and vests. Little hats with animal ears, tiny pairs of dungarees, pyjamas, itty bitty playsuits. There were no dresses, nothing declaring the baby to be a boy or a girl, but there was lots of greens and yellows.

They all liked the mobile for over the crib. Plush little figures that went round and round to the tune of Hey Diddle Diddle. A cat playing a violin, a cow, a dog, and a dish and spoon. The middle of it was painted to look like a moon.

The family had all pitched in with the food. Every dish Charles liked had been made, and a few he’d not tried before but ended up loving. Elijah joked that the baby would come out as a cookie with all the sweet things Charles craved.

“More stars?” Charles asked hopefully as Erik stood up.

“I’ll see if there are any left,” he said, pecking him on the nose.

Erik stood at the kitchen sink and took a deep breath. It felt like the first one he’d taken in weeks. His knees wobbled before they went completely and he sank to the floor, a sprawled pile of limbs. All those tiny little socks would soon cover toes, toes that he and Charles had made. There would be a whole human being needing them to feed it and change it and love it unconditionally. He had a sudden flash of papercuts and bee stings and playground bullies. Illnesses he couldn’t defend against, scraped knees he couldn’t prevent, tumbles and falls that were bound to happen. It all seemed suddenly insurmountable, this enormous task he felt wholly, woefully, laughably ill-equipped to handle.

“Erik, Charles is asking…oh!”

He didn’t know how long it was between his Uncle Samuel finding him and his mother’s hands on his shoulders.

“Come on, up we get. Good boy. There we go, nice good breaths. What’s got you worked up, hmmm?”
“Baby…a baby…mom, it’s…Bean…”

“Ahh. It’s all suddenly very real that in a few short weeks, there’s going to be a tiny little person. It’s alright, Erik. You’re allowed to feel overwhelmed. This is a very big thing.”

“I can’t remember how to hold a baby!” he panicked.

“We can fix that. You can hold Minka or Hank. It’ll all come back to you, I promise.”

“Oy gevalt,” he moaned, and Edie pushed him down, head between his knees.

He was still trying to pull himself together ten minutes later when Charles waddled in to see what the holdup was with his cookies.

“Oh, darling,” he said, clumsily going to his knees in front of him. “I was beginning to wonder when it would actually hit you that this little one is coming.”

“It’s…Charles.”

“I’m right there with you. Or, at least I was, a few months ago when this happened to me.”

“What if I fuck this up?”

“I won’t let you.”

Erik smiled and kissed him. “That’s good. You’ll save me, you’ll make it right.”

“I will do my very best.”
“Baby’s got hiccups.”

Erik grinned and kneed his way across the bed to feel. Every now and then there was a little rise and fall in the bump.

“Poor baby,” he moaned, kissing the soft t-shirt over the stretched skin of his bump.

Erik smiled at Charles and kissed him, snaking his tongue inside. Charles moaned, kissing back, tangling his fingers in Erik’s hair. They laid down on their sides, happily making out, chasing the others tongue back and forth. Erik nibbled on his bottom lip and cupped his backside and Charles reached down, encasing Erik’s hot hard length in his fist.

“You don’t have to,” Erik whispered.

“I know I don’t,” he promised, stroking him. “I want to.” He circled the wet head and Erik shuddered.

Slow and steady, Charles worked his husband over, making him moan and gasp, begging for release. It had been a while since Charles had been feeling anything remotely sexual, and even longer since he’d actually had the erection to do anything. Too many hormones and too many body changes in too short a time had played havoc with his libido. Erik had been amazing about it, so understanding, but Charles knew his showers were getting longer and longer.

He rubbed the thick vein on the underside, cupped his balls and tugged, pressed the space behind them, before he returned to the shaft, squeezing and stroking. He loved the feel of the skin moving over muscle, the tightening of his sac, he breathless way he was chanting his name.

He knocked the underside with his nail and that was it, Erik convulsed against him, pressing his lips against a high cheekbone, gripping at his hip.

Charles happily lapped up what had splattered his hand and wiped up the rest with tissues. He tucked Erik back into his boxers and set about propping himself up in various places with the extra pillows Edie had given him.
“That was incredible,” Erik said eventually.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. I am sorry, Erik. It can’t have been easy for you, us not having sex for a while now.”

“Hey, no, that’s not even a problem. Charles, your body is working really hard right now, I understand that sex is the last thing it wants right now,” he promised, smoothing his hair. “It’s not a hardship.”

“I know, but I still feel badly. Making love used to be something we enjoyed, and now I can’t even get it up.”

“It’s just the pressure from Little Bean. It’ll go.”

“I even have to sit down to pee now,” Charles complained. “I’m starting to worry that it’s shrivelled up completely.”

Erik laughed. “It hasn’t. Would you like me to look at it so you can see it in my head?”

“No. Just promise me it’s still there.”

“It’s still there.”

“Oh, that was a little unnecessary,” he hissed, rubbing his bump.

“Take it easy in there,” Erik said to his navel, which had become very prominent. “I know space is getting tight but your daddy needs those organs when you’re done.”

“Hmmmm. I like the sound of that. Daddy.”

“Is that what you want to be then? Daddy? Because there are lots of options. Daddy, papa, in Yiddish it’s tatte.”
“No, I like daddy.”

“Daddy it is. I like vati. It’s German. Mamen used to call Poppa by vati.”

“Oh, that’s lovely,” he hummed, sleepy all of a sudden. “Another tradition.”


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They only got two hours before Charles was shaking Erik awake.

“Mmmm, what do you need?” he groaned. He was very used to Charles needing some craving or other right that moment.

“I think I’m contracting.”

“I’m awake, I’m up, I’m getting Bruce,” he said, wide awake and out the door before he’d finished his sentence.

Charles tried to relax as he waited for them. It was too early for labour, much too early. The baby couldn’t come now, it just couldn’t.

“Hey, Charles,” Bruce said, looking rumpled but alert. Betty was hot on his heels.

“It’s a party,” Charles said, hissing as another tightening happened. Bruce pushed up his t-shirt and felt his bump as it tightened. “Gone now.”

“Okay, it’s okay,” Bruce soothed. “We’re going to sit for a bit, see what’s happening. I need to see a few of these to tell you what’s going on.”
They waited for about half an hour before Bruce smiled gently and shook his head.

“It’s not labour. The contractions are too irregular and varied to be labour. Charles, what’s happening to you is called Braxton Hicks. They are real contractions, but it’s not real labour,” he explained. “It’s like a practice run, like the muscles warming up for the main event. It’s perfectly normal in the third trimester for this to happen every now and then.”

“So the baby isn’t coming?” Charles asked as his belly tightened again.

It wasn’t a bad pain, it wasn’t even really pain. Just uncomfortable tightness that stole his breath for half a second.

“No, not yet.”

“Oh, good.”

“Let’s have a little listen to Bean for a moment,” he said. Betty handed him the foetal monitor and he squirted a little jelly onto the end before pressing it to the taut skin.

The whoosh-whoosh-whoosh was comforting, as was the way Little Bean wriggled. Bruce listened for a few minutes before giving a gentle smile.

“Everything is fine,” he promised. “The baby is doing fine, and the pains are irregular, so I don’t see a need for any other medical intervention.” He removed the monitor and wiped up the leftover gel. “Just relax, and try to get some more sleep. Come and wake me again if the pains get stronger or more regular. Otherwise, just let them pass.”

“Thank you, Bruce,” he said and Bruce patted him on the knee before heading to the door. Betty smiled at him and left too, and then it was just Charles and Erik.

“How are you doing?” Erik asked as he slid back into bed.
“I’m fine,” he said, wobbly.

“Faker,” he joked. “I’m shaken. Oy gevalt, Charles, I thought it was battle stations.”

“Oh, so did I,” he admitted, gripping at him as he hugged Charles close. “I kept thinking, that it’s too soon, that Little Bean isn’t ready yet.”

“It’s okay, baby, it’s all okay,” he urged.

Erik nuzzled him, rubbing their noses together, holding him close. Their hands tangled and moved down to rest over their Little Bean.

Just a little longer.

The holidays and the New Year came and went.

Charles was sure he’d eaten his own weight in food and he was feeling very tubby indeed.

Edie had commandeered baby Minka, who was a very willing and giggly test subject for him to practice diapering. Whenever she needed a change, she was given to Charles. His first efforts were a little wonky, and there were a couple of leaks, but he did fairly well. By the time Joseph and his wife left with Minka, he was confident and comfortable changing the little girl.

Then Bruce handed him Hank, who found it hilarious that his Uncle Charles was changing him, kicking his legs and chortling to himself. Changing a boy was different to changing a girl, but the same basic principle. Betty enlightened him to the wipe trick, placing a wipe over the penis so you didn’t get peed on. True, furry buttocks weren’t the norm, but Charles managed. He changed Hank a few times before he felt totally sure he was ready.

They returned to the penthouse in the 9th of January, just in time for his 34 week scan. Bruce was very impressed. Little Bean had reached his target size, despite the setback he’d had, and was right on course for the end of February.
During that visit, Bruce took a closer look at the rest of him. He hadn’t put on too much weight, just a few pounds, which Bruce was pleased with. His blood pressure was back to normal, and he was generally doing well. There was no sign of a birth canal, but Bruce reassured him that it might still develop, it might even appear once he started labour.

What wasn’t going to appear was a means to feed Little Bean. There was no development in his breast tissue, no enlargement of the glands, no swelling in preparation. Little Bean would have to be formula fed, and Bruce noted it down so the staff would all be aware of it.

The time seemed to be speeding past them, hurtling them ever closer to the finish line, to meeting their Little Bean.

Sebastian Shaw was sentenced to life imprisonment for sexual coercion and abuse of no less than fifteen children. Erik had been contacted by the prosecution but he had declined. His experiences were minor, and hadn’t included any actual physical contact, so he didn’t see a need to bring it up again.

Sharon Marko was sentenced to ten years for attempted inheritance fraud. Charles declined going to see the sentencing hearing on the grounds that he didn’t need the stress. Peter filled him in on what had gone on, and that he had an open visitation order, should he want to see his mother.

He didn’t, and he couldn’t imagine it changing. He had a Mamen, and Sharon wasn’t it.

Kurt and Tabitha, now they were in the same school for nine hours a day, had their first major fight of the year as Valentine’s day approached. While Erik was lavishing Charles with flowers and chocolates, and Charles was gifting his own teddy bears and hand jobs, the teens were exchanging insults. It got so bad that Tabitha even missed going to the Centre that Saturday.

The day before Valentine’s, Charles managed to get Tabitha to talk. She told him about Kurt flirting with another girl. Except he hadn’t been, Tabitha had simply gotten the wrong end of the stick. But now she was too embarrassed to fix it.

In the end, Erik locked them together in a closet and let them out when they were all fluffy and romantic again.

“How about Ringo?” Tabitha suggested as she added sugar.
“Definitely not!” Charles giggled as he cut baking paper to fit her baking trays.

“It’s very cool.”

“It is not going to be my baby’s name. Next suggestion.”


“David should never have introduced to the Beetles,” he said. “And no, none of them. You can keep guessing, you’re never going to figure it out.”

“But I’m the baby’s big sister! I should know its name!”

“Less complaining, more cookies,” he commanded and she sighed.

“Come on. Just a hint.”

“No. Erik and I are keeping it to ourselves until the naming ceremony.”

“Fine,” she grumbled and returned to her baking.

Soon enough, the chocolate chip cookies had baked until golden brown and Charles was nibbling away.

“You feeling okay?” she asked, pouring chocolate soy milk.

“Yes, why? Don’t I look it?”
“You look fine,” she assured. “It’s just that usually a batch of cookies don’t make it to milk. Usually you’ve demolished over half of them by now.”

“Oh. I suppose I’m just not as hungry as I thought. I think Little Bean has shifted, pressing on my stomach.”

“Naughty Bean. Don’t worry. Soon enough you’ll be able to eat as much as you want.”

“I can’t wait. I’d love some sushi,” he lamented. “And a real grown up drink.”

“You really that desperate to not be pregnant anymore?”

“I can’t wait to see my feet, and stand up to pee, and to sleep more than an hour before I need to pee. My organs won’t be squeeze toys anymore, and I’ll finally be able to lay on my back again,” he said. “And the best thing? I’ll actually get to meet this little one.”

“Yeah, that’s the exciting part,” she said. “I think I’d like to be married before babies.”

“Sounds sensible.”

“Yeah. Maybe a career and a place of my own. All those grown up things. It seems too hard on your own.”

“Well, yes, it does seem rather difficult.”

“There’s a girl in my math class. She’s just had a baby,” she said.

“Goodness. That’s rather young.”

“Yeah. And the dad doesn’t do anything, like nothing. He won’t even talk to her now. And she’s always tired, and she’s failing pretty much everything. Her mom works, and her dad isn’t around, so she’s got to do everything,” she said, breaking a cookie into pieces. “I think it’s easier if you’re older. Once you’ve got yourself sorted and stuff.”
“I certainly can’t imagine trying to do this without Erik,” he said. “And you and all the other Lehnsherr’s. I can’t imagine what the poor girl is going through.”

“I think waiting is better.”

Charles smiled at her, feeling incredibly proud of her. She was such a sensible girl, she put such thought into things. She’d already decided on art school for after her high school graduation. She wasn’t completely clear on what she wanted to focus on, but she knew it would be something in the field.

Charles could envision Kurt one day asking Tabitha to marry him, the two of them finding their way together. Perhaps having children together.

Kurt was planning on becoming an accountant like Mike, maybe setting up his own firm. It was a good solid career, in a field he had shown an aptitude for, that he enjoyed.

Charles and Erik planned to give Tabitha their old apartment as a graduation gift. It would be perfect for her to use while at university, and a perfect starter home for Tabitha, whether that was with Kurt or someone else.

They were very calm about Tabitha, sure she would make the right choices and come to them if and when she needed help.

Until then, she was their sweet girl, Charles’ little star.

“The name for a boy begins with an M,” he revealed. “And for a girl, it starts with an L.”

“Really?”

“Yes. M and L. Let’s see what you come up with now.”
Chapter End Notes

I really hope you liked this chapter. It's a little shorter than the last, but I had to stop it there, because next chapter in the big one, the much awaited arrival of Little Bean.

Please, leave me a comment letting me know what your thoughts are, and predictions for the birth and Little Bean.
Charles had fallen asleep after dinner.

That in itself wasn’t unusual, he drifted off most evenings. Pregnancy was hard work, and being so close to the finish line made him even more tired.

What was unusual was that Charles had barely touched his food. He’d poked at it, but he really hadn’t been hungry. Erik, while concerned, let it be. If Charles wasn’t hungry, then he wasn’t hungry. No use in forcing him to eat and there was always leftovers later.

He woke up an hour later and called for Erik.

“Hey, ziskeit,” he crooned, stroking his hair. “How was your nap?”

“Light. Erik, I’m in pain.”

“Your back again?”

“Yes, and my tummy. It keeps getting tight. Here, feel,” he said, placing Erik’s hand on his bump.

The muscles tightened under his palm and Erik waited until it passed to try talking to Charles. His little husband had slowly breathed through it.

“Okay, okay, it’s okay,” he soothed as Charles caught his breath, pressing a kiss to his forehead. “How long do you think this might have been going on?”

“I’m not sure,” he admitted as Erik helped him sit up. “I was twinging all through dinner, and uncomfortable this afternoon. But I’m almost always uncomfortable these days, so I didn’t think it was anything to worry about.”
“Good point. I think we should wait a little while, see how often this comes, and take it from there. If it’s just false labour again, and there’s nothing to be done, we’ll wait it out.”

“And if not?”

“Then we call Bruce and take it from there.”

An hour later Erik called Bruce while Charles leaned against the kitchen counter, Tabitha holding a cool cloth to the back of his neck.

“Hello?” said a woman.

“Oh. Sorry, I think I dialled the wrong number,” Erik said, glancing at his screen.

“No, this is Bruce Banner’s phone,” she said with a giggle. “His hands are full.”

“Ah, right. Hi, Betty. Can you tell him it’s Erik Lehnsherr, calling for Charles Xavier?”

He could hear her moving and a door opening, and in the background there was splashing, and then Bruce was on the line.

“Erik, hi, sorry. I was doing bath time tonight. What’s up?” Bruce asked, a giggle in the background.

“Charles is having pains.”

“Ah. How long?”

“Uncomfortable this afternoon, twinges since about four ish, and pains every nine to ten minutes
for the last hour. They last about 20 seconds, maybe 30.”

“Okay, is it just abdo pain or is it in his back as well?”

“Both. His lower back, like usual,” he said, poking his head into the kitchen as Charles let out a little squeak. Tabitha shook her head, waving him off.

“Any other pain, anything sharp, stabbing?”

“Hey, Charles, baby, do you have any sharp pains, like a stabbing pain?” he asked, leaning on the counter so he could speak low.

“No, but I’m achy, all over.”

“I heard that,” Bruce said. “Any nausea?”

Erik put the phone on speaker and let Bruce talk to Charles directly.

“No, I don’t feel sick,” Charles said. “Just heavy. Bruce, I feel so heavy.”

“I know, that’s pretty normal at this point. Do you think Little Bean has dropped any?”

“I think so. My bump seems lower.” He hummed suddenly, focussing on his bump. “Bruce, it’s time. I can feel it, the baby, it’s ready.”

“Alright, Charles, I want you to head to the hospital,” Bruce said firmly. “I’ll call ahead, so if you get there before me they’ll get you all settled. Any sharp pains, call me back immediately.”

He hung up once he had their assurance they were on the way, and then Erik moved to collect the bags. One for Charles, one for him, and one for Little Bean, just like the baby books said.
“Charles, you got everything in here you want?”

“I think so. Did I put in the inhibitor?”

“Yeah, right here.”

“Then I think it’s ready. Oh!”

Erik rubbed his back as he breathed through another pain, and then he just refused to move. He said he was comfortable, and nothing Erik said or did was getting him to move. Erik, unsure of what to do, took the opportunity to take the bags to the car and call David to stay with Tabitha. He sent out messages to Tony, Edie and Moira at the Centre to let them know things were moving along, before he steeled himself and returned to the apartment.

“Come on, Charles, we need to walk now,” he urged, easing him up to lean on Erik rather than the counter.

“No, I don’t want to,” Charles moaned, wrapping his arms around his neck and hanging on. “Too hard.”

“I know, I know, you’re working very hard. Just a little walking for me, just down to the car. Come on. One foot then the other, nice and slow.”

He kept up his little encouragements as he walked backwards, leading Charles to the elevator and then out to the car. Tabitha opened the door and he lowered Charles into the seat as David appeared out of a cab.

He said goodbye to Tabitha and promised to call her when they knew something, and then he set off for the ten minute drive. Bruce met them in the parking lot and waited patiently while Charles had a contraction.

“Hi, Charles,” he said as the telepath settled into the wheelchair he’d brought. “How are you doing?”
“I ache. What am I interrupting?” he asked.

“Bath time.”

“Oh dear. Tell Hank I’m sorry.”

“He’ll understand for his favourite Uncle Charles. How’s Little Bean?”

“Quite calm actually,” Charles said, stroking his bump. “Not a fan of the squeezing, but calm.”

“You know, you’re the first telepath I’ve helped deliver,” Bruce said as they entered the elevator. “I’ve had a few telepathic patients, but they’ve all had home births or birthing centres. I haven’t actually delivered one.”

“Oh, I feel special,” he said.

“Very special. Promise me you’ll let us know if Little Bean isn’t doing well.”

“Of course.”

They paused at the nurses station so Bruce could get him checked in, and then he wheeled Charles into the labour suite they had put together for him.

Because Charles was male, and because no one was quite sure what was to come, his labour and delivery were classed as high dependency, and all the relevant people were on standby. The operating room was waiting, along with an anaesthesiologist and people from paediatrics, all ready and waiting, just in case. He was being watched over by specialist nurses and orderlies, and Bruce wouldn’t go far.

It took a few minutes to get Charles from the chair and onto the bed, and then Erik helped him change into the nightshirt and robe they’d bought for the occasion. The nightshirt could be untied to lie completely open if Bruce needed access to his belly or between his legs. He also put on fluffy socks to keep his feet warm. Bruce did basic checks on Charles, mostly his blood pressure, and then they moved on.
“Okay, Charles, let’s have a feel,” Bruce said as he sanitised his hands.

Charles obediently laid on his back, pulling open his nightshirt. Bruce pressed at his bump, manipulating the mass. “Okay, Bean is head down, which is good. Legs up and apart for me Charles.” He pulled on gloves and had a quick look. “I’m not seeing anything to indicate a birth canal. Have you passed any fluids?”

“No.”

“Does it hurt down here?”

“It’s sore.”

“That’s most likely from the pressure of Little Bean. No distortions, no changes, you’re not even red, so I think it’s highly unlikely you’re going to be able to deliver naturally.”

Charles sniffled and Erik stroked his hair, murmuring comfort as Bruce did a minor ultrasound.

“No, there’s no change in the cervix. Charles, nothing is happening there, so the chances of you developing a birth canal are almost non-existent. I know you wanted to do this naturally, but I don’t think it’s an option.”

“But…”

“I know.” He sighed as he wiped away the gel. “How about this. It’s just gone seven now. I’ll give you four hours labour, maximum. If there’s nothing after the four hours, we do a section. Sound fair?”

“Yes, it’s fair,” Charles agreed sadly.

“Good man. Let’s get these monitors hooked up, keep an eye on things. Tony dropped these off just last week,” he said, peeling the paper off the little metal buttons and sticking them to his
bump. “I’ve got a button that connects straight to my pager, so you can get hold of me in an instant.”

“Stark does come in handy occasionally,” Erik said as Charles began to work through the next pain. He covered him over and set to rubbing the bottom of his bump, trying to ease the pain.

“His tech is better than anything else we’ve got. Right, I’ll fill in this. Have you got a name for Little Bean yet?” he asked, sitting down with the paperwork.

“No, not yet,” Erik said. “Well, we do, but a Jewish baby isn’t given a name until the naming ceremony, to keep evil spirits away.”

“Fair enough, we’ll leave this as Little Bean then,” he said, noting it down on the birth records. “Which means no circumcision for a boy.”

“Right.”

“Don’t know why I left that one blank. Brain gap moment. Charles, do you want some pain relief?”

“No, I’m alright,” he said. “I would like to roll over, though.”

“That’s fine. The sensors are wireless, so you can walk around if you want, move, sit, stand,” Bruce said. “Tony wanted you to be able to move as much as you wanted. However you feel comfortable, just try not to get them wet.”

“Erik, help.”

Erik eased Charles over onto his left side and propped himself up behind him, staying close. He hoped the heat of his thigh against Charles’ lower back would help.

“In the event of a section, were you thinking an epidural or a full anaesthetic?” Bruce asked.
“Epidural,” Charles said. “I want to be awake and aware.” He jumped and rubbed his bump. “Please don’t kick me, not right now.”

“That’s fine. Did you bring an inhibitor or do we need to provide one?”

“I have one, in my bag.”

“Good, good. Now, basic birth details. Anyone you don’t want to be allowed in? Is there a specific set of people you want present or do you want to keep people to a minimum?”

“Raven,” Charles said. “She doesn’t get to be a part of this, not at all. Other than that, I’m not fussed. Erik can make the decision on others.”

“No problem. Raven’s already noted as having a restraining order against her, so the security staff won’t let her anywhere near you.” He scrolled down the page. “Are you comfortable with students observing the labour and delivery?”

“No, I don’t want that. Family and needed medical staff only.”

“That’s fine. Okay, for a natural birth. If you manage to defy the odds, how do you feel about episiotomies?”

“I’d rather not,” he said, grimacing. “Oh, another one!”

“Breathe, ziskeit, keep breathing,” Erik urged, cuddling him close, offering his hands to be squeezed.

“Erik,” he whimpered.

“I know, I know. Deep breaths, nice and slow, just like they said in the book.”

It passed and Charles relaxed into the pillow, keeping Erik close.
“Okay to carry on?” Bruce asked and Charles nodded. “Who’s going to cut the cord?”

“I will,” Erik said.

“You understand that this is only possible if the delivery is natural?”

“Yes. And if he has a section, I’m going with him.”

“Noted. Okay, are you happy for the baby to be given a vitamin K shot and eye drops at birth?”

Erik nodded and Bruce nodded back before he noted a few things on the chart. He looked at the readings of the foetal monitor and then nodded to himself. He got them both to sign the chart, giving their consent to what had been agreed.

“Okay, Charles, everything is looking good here. So I’m going to go and work on some paperwork while you do this, leave you and Erik in peace so you can focus. If anything changes, any sharp pains, bleeding, anything, I want you to press this,” he said, handing them the button that connected to his beeper. “If anything changes, any problems, or if you sense the baby isn’t handling this, use it. If you feel yourself wearing out, that you can’t do this, use it. Don’t worry about disturbing me or anything like that. I’m here for you, only you, whatever you need.”

“I’ll remember,” Charles said.

“Good. Any immediate problems, I want you to press my button and the red one on the wall. That one will bring nurses running, their desk is right outside the door. They’ll be keeping an eye on you for the next while, but they’ll try and remain as hands off as possible, to let you do this how you feel you need to. Now, are there any questions before I leave you to it?”

They shook their heads and he smiled before leaving. Charles pressed back against his husband.

“Erik.”
“Yeah.”

“You should call Tony. He wanted to know when I started.”

“I sent a text.”

“Mmmm. Erik?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

He pressed a kiss to Charles forehead. “I love you too, so very much.”

Tony arrived an hour and a half into Bruce’s four hour time limit and immediately sat Charles up so he could play pillow.

“How you doing, Charlie?”

“It’s hard work,” he said, snuggling in as Erik stood and stretched, talking with Steve.

“How’s he doing?” Steve asked quietly.

“Strong, but he’s not getting anywhere,” Erik admitted. “There’s no way out for the baby, Charles hasn’t developed. He really wants to do this as naturally as possible, but that’s looking impossible. Bruce has given him a four hour labour limit, and then it’s straight to the operating room. He’s tiring, I think he might give in soon.”

“Is there anything I can do? Does he need anything? Do you?”
“Uhhh, he needs more ice chips, and my hands need a break. Can you take my place, let him hold your hand and rub his back for him while I get the ice?” He looked at Charles, curling into Tony. “I’m calling my mom, see if she can get through to him.”

“Sure thing,” the blond said, moving to the bed like a man on a mission. He climbed on and cuddled close to Charles, offering his hands as another pain started.

Charles was crying with his pains now, the pressure in his abdomen ratcheting up with everyone. They were now six minutes apart and lasting a strong 30 seconds each. Erik was right, he was tiring, losing his resolve to hold out as long as possible. At this rate, he wouldn’t make it the four hours.

Tony murmured soothing nonsense as Charles buried his head in his chest, just left of the reactor.

“Tony,” he whined, high and scared.

“I know, Charlie. I know it hurts. Come on now, just breathe. Squeeze Steve, he can take it.” Tony stroked his sweaty hair and grabbed the damp cloth from the bedside table, sponging at his face. “That’s it, good boy, nice and easy.”

He slumped against them as it passed and obediently opened his mouth when Erik offered an ice chip.

He was floating on the pain, lost in it, his body one taught line ready to snap. Every time he managed to swim to the top, to regain some sense of himself, the pain returned and he was dragged back under. He’d managed to drift in and out of sleep for the first three quarters of an hour, Erik playing games on his phone, and then the pain had kicked up several notches.

There was someone screaming, sobbing, and he distantly recognised it was him. The baby was turning in circles inside him, performing somersaults, kicking every now and then, not understanding what was happening. The calm was gone, the baby was now worried.

Edie brushed into the room and stroked Charles’ hair.
“Mamen,” he moaned weakly as he realised her presence. “Mamen, it hurts.”

“It does, boychick, it does, but it’s all worth it in the end,” she said, gentle but firm, and he had no choice but to listen and believe. Of all the people in the room, she was the one who knew what he was going through.

“I’m dying,” he wept. She pressed kisses to his forehead.

“No, you’re not. Your body is just working very hard and you’re tired, that is all.” She looked at Erik as he eased another ice chip into Charles. “How much longer until Bruce makes him stop?”

“He said if there was nothing by eleven, we’d head to surgery. There’s about two hours left.”

“No, call him,” she declared. “This can’t go on, he’s exhausted.”

“No,” Charles complained, tugging at her shirt as Erik pressed the button.

“Charles, listen to me. Even if you managed to develop a canal, you’re too worn out to actually push. Let Bruce help you.”

“I heard my name,” Bruce said as he entered. “Wow, it’s a party.”

“He’s exhausted,” Erik said. “He can’t keep this up.”

“Okay, let’s take a look,” he said calmly, looking at the monitors. “Jesus, no wonder you’re worn out, Charles. These peaks are off the chart, the contractions are twice what we usually see. And the baby isn’t handling these contractions. Heart rate is spiking every time. Charles, onto your back, I need to feel.”

Steve and Tony helped him roll and he’d lost the will to care as his nightshirt was opened, displaying everything he had. Bruce was rushed in his exam, and then Charles gripped at him.

“It’s wrong, something is wrong,” he said, scared.
“Something wrong with Little Bean, or something wrong with you?”

“Little Bean, something’s wrong, my Little Bean is panicking.”

“That’s it, no more,” he said, slamming the red button. Within moments there were nurses flooding the room. “Emergency section, page Odinson and the paeds team. Charles, these nice nurses are going to prep you and take you to the OR, I’m going to clean up and I will meet you in there.”

He sped from the room and there was an explosion of activity. Edie, Tony and Steve were ushered out into the hall, a nurse took the inhibitor from Erik, another started an IV and pre-op meds, and another inserted a catheter. In under two minutes, they had him ready and wheeled him out of the room and down the hall.

Charles was alone as they wheeled him into the operating theatre. Erik had been taken off to get into scrubs, and Charles was helped onto the metal bench by the hugest blond man he had ever seen.

“Hello, Charles,” he said softly, sitting on a stool before him. “My name is Thor Odinson, and I am your anaesthesiologist. I’ll be making all that pain go away. I’m going to be working behind you, so you won’t be able to see, but I will talk you through every single thing I do. Is this acceptable?”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

“Very good.” He stood and rounded the bed while Charles ignored the other activity around him. “Now, I will simply cleanse the area to start. It shall be cold, but nothing more.”

He’d lost his nightshirt and robe somewhere back in his room and he’d been put in an open backed hospital gown, so it was nothing for Thor to untie it and expose his skin to the cold air.

“It’s very cold in here,” Charles said. “Oh, wait, wait!”
Thor was good enough to offer his hand as he sweated through another pain, and Little Bean panicked once again.

“I shall move along quickly, see if I can achieve this before the next pain,” Thor declared, pulling on his gloves.

Cold liquid was wiped across his back, and then Thor was pressing at him. “Simply an analgesic to numb the area, so I can perform the epidural. Hold still for me, Charles. Small scratch.”

It took seconds for that patch of skin to go numb. It stung going in, and Charles cried as it burned before working.

“Forgive me, but it is necessary. Just a few moments, Charles, and then I shall administer the epidural. You are right, it is cold in here. Such things are needed to help combat germs. I see in your notes that you shall be wearing an inhibitor. What is your gift?”

“I’m a telepath,” he said as Thor started pressing against him. He couldn’t really feel it, it was more a dull sort of prodding.

“Wonderful,” he said. “And your partner?”

“He’s a metal bender.”

“How clever. Do you have other children?”

“Yes, we’ve got a girl, Tabitha. She’s fifteen. She’s a telekinetic.”

“A very impressive family, and this one will be a welcomed addition. Now, I shall need you to curve your back. I have found some pregnant people find this easier if they are cross legged, looking at the end of the bed.”

Charles spun with some difficulty and let his knees fall open, crossing his ankles, careful of his catheter. He curled forwards as best he could, and they waited for the next contraction to pass before Thor really put the pressure on his spine.
“Now the epidural introducer,” he said. “Ah, very good. Now the tube for analgesia. A little longer, my friend. I shall now remove the introducer. You are doing very well, Charles, very well indeed. I am now giving the start of the epidural…very good. And now I am taping down the tube. I am all done, Charles. You should start to go numb soon. Do you feel anything yet?”

“My toes are tingly.”

“Ah, very good. That tingle shall spread,” Thor said as he helped Charles stretch out his legs before they went numb and he couldn’t move. “And then the tingle shall become a numbness and then you shall be delivered.”

“Glad to hear it,” Erik said as he joined them, looking unfairly stunning in his blue hospital scrubs and hair net. Charles felt sure he looked grotesque with all the sweating and crying he’d done.

“Erik, this is Thor, the nice man with the epidural. Thor, this is my husband, Erik.”

They shook hands and then Charles felt his lower half begin to fade out. He felt the next contraction, but it was more like an echo of the ones before. Bruce came in as it was ending.

“How are we doing?” Bruce asked as Charles was laid back, a pillow beneath his head.

“We’re ready,” a nurse said. She helped Bruce into his gown and gloves.

“Paeds?”

“All set.”

“Thor, how are we doing?”

“We are simply waiting for the last effects to happen,” he said, monitoring his screens. He’d hooked Charles up to monitors for his heartrate and oxygen level. “Charles, I desire you to calm yourself, just a little bit. Your heartrate is a little too fast, my friend.”
Charles nodded and took some deep breaths.

“Okay, Charles, we’re about ready to get going,” Bruce said behind his mask. “I’m going to have Erik put the inhibitor on. Trust me, you don’t want to accidentally peek into one of our heads and see your insides, so we’re going to make sure you can’t.”

“Alright,” he said meekly and Erik kissed his forehead. The sensors were placed against his temples, one on his forehead, and Erik made sure it was tight against him but comfortable.

“Ready?” Erik asked and when Charles nodded, he flicked the switch.

Erik didn’t need a monitor to tell him Charles panicked.

“It’s gone! Erik, Erik, Little Bean is gone, it’s gone!”

“Shhh, shhh, calm down, ziskeit. It’s not gone, you just can’t hear it.”

“I don’t like this, Erik. I can’t hear the baby. Oh,” he moaned. “Erik, I can’t hear you.”

“I know,” he soothed, pressing a kiss to his lips and then the tip of his nose. He ran the tips of his index and middle fingers up and down his nose and between his eyebrows. “It’s just for a little while. Just while you deliver.”

“Promise?”

“Hand on heart.”

He took a few deep breaths and nodded. Erik looked at Bruce and gave a nod and a sheet was pinned up so they couldn’t see anything below the beginning of Charles’ bump.

“Charles, you feel that?” Bruce asked.
“Feel what?”

“How about that?”

“No.”

“Good, nice and numb. Wipe, please. Okay, Charles, we’re cleansing your abdomen and then we’re going to get started. You might feel some tugging, but no pain. Please tell us immediately if you do feel any pain.”

“I will.”

“Site prepared,” said the surgeon assisting Bruce.

“Here we go,” Bruce said. “Scalpel.”

“Hey, hey, look at me,” Erik urged, leaning close. He reached across his chest to take his hand, toying with his fingers. “Almost there, baby. We’re so close. Just hang in there a little longer.”

“What if something is wrong?” Charles whispered.

“No, no, no talking like that. Bruce isn’t worried, so we’re going to carry on as planned. We’re going to talk, just us, and Bruce is going to do his thing. Are you still happy with the choice of names?”

“Retractor,” Bruce said. “Swab here, please. Good. I can see the uterus.”

“Yes. I like them. Still going to be my Little Bean for a while longer though. Oh. The blanket, the one Bubbe made. It’s in the bag.”

“I know. Mom’s in the room with our things. She said she’d stay until you’re all stitched up and
back in your room. Tony and Steve are lingering too, and Tony called David, gave him an update.”

“Hmmm. Can you feel it? The metal of the things they’re using?”

“I can,” he said with a gentle smile as Bruce asked for suction. “They’re shiny and…sort of bland. Machined to have no imperfections. Boring really.” His head tilted to the side. “Some blood, not as much as you’d think.”

“Jesus,” Bruce said. “Charles, you have a double uterus.”

“I have a what?”

“It’s a uterus within a uterus,” he said. “I’ve never seen it before. No wonder your cervix wasn’t doing anything. The cervix is on the outside wall of muscle, but there isn’t one on the inner layer. Basically, the uterus is a sack of muscle that contracts to expel a baby. Both sacks have been contracting at the same time, both causing you pain.”

“No wonder you got so tired so quickly,” Erik said.

“Exactly,” Bruce agreed. “I have a visual, I see the sac. Suction ready. Puncturing. Good, lots of fluid, nice and clear. Wow, lots of fluid. I think your baby might be less than the eight pounds I estimated. Okay, here we go. Charles, any pain?”

“No. I can feel you sort of…doing…something in my belly. It’s very very strange.”

“Kind of like I’m doing the dishes in there?”

“Yes, quite.”

“That’s normal. Oh, Little Bean, no wonder you weren’t happy,” he moaned. “You’ve gotten yourself all tangled. The cord is all wrapped around the baby, Bean’s all wrapped up in it.”

“I can understand why Bean panicked,” Erik said. “I think I’d panic too. My life line all tangled.”
“Oh, poor baby,” Charles said.

“Long cord. Okay, fundal pressure, please. Emerging head first,” Bruce said. “Here it comes. We’ve got a head of hair. It’s dark like yours, Charles. Come on, little one, out you come. Heads out. More pressure, please. Suction. And…one shoulder…two. Little more. And…there we go! Oh, so shocked! I know, it’s quite a change.”

“It’s not crying,” Charles worried. “Erik…”

“Easy,” Erik urged. “I’m sure it’s okay. Right, Bruce?”

“Right,” he agreed, working at something. “Come on, give me a cry. You’re worrying your parents. Come on. I’ll keep rubbing until you cry.”

It stretched out, seeming to be eternal, until there came a wet unhappy cry, growing in strength as the lungs cleared.

Charles and Erik cried themselves, half in delight, half in relief.

“Charles, Erik, you have a little boy. And he’s definitely a mutant,” Bruce said with a chuckle. “Clamps, please…cutting cord. And you are a whole independent person, little guy. Time is…21:10.”

He held the baby up above the screen and Charles thought he might be the most beautiful little person he’d ever seen. He was wet, covered in fluid and blood, and his little fists waved as he shrieked, very unhappy with the current state of things.

“Oh,” he said softly. “He’s perfect. He’s so small. He’s…Erik. He’s green.”

“I see that,” Erik said with a smile. “I also see he has a tail, just like his big sister.”

“Oh, where did he go!”
“Just taking him to get checked over and cleaned up, Charles,” Bruce promised as he handed the tiny boy to a paediatric doctor.

“Erik, go with him,” Charles demanded, smacking the hand he had been holding. “Go, he’s too little to be alone. Go, go, go!”

Erik pressed a kiss to his lips before he wobbled across the room, knees weak at the enormity of what had just happened.

His son (that might be the craziest thing ever) was small and curled up, his arms and legs folded up to his body, his tail waving as he cried. He was, as Charles had said, green. It was a very nice green, pale, sort of a mint colour. He was crying and shivering, his bottom lip pouted and trembling, little fists balled up, upset at having been dislodged from his warm cosy home.

The doctor checked him over, cleaned him up, administered the vitamin k shot and then guided Erik through diapering him. She provided a diaper with a space for his tail and let him know the hospital would provide the specialist diapers until he and Charles could get some.

He wrapped him in a towel and carried him over to Charles. Thor pulled down the neck of the gown and Erik laid their son on his chest, skin to skin. The crying tapered off as the tiny ear pressed against him, hearing his heart.

“Oh,” Charles breathed as the big eyes opened. They were a bright blue match to his own and Erik hoped they stayed that way. “Hello, my Little Green Bean. Oh, aren’t you perfect.”

Erik watched as Charles snuggled Little Bean, and then carefully pulled back the towel and counted fingers and toes. There were ten of each, and the tail, which wrapped around Charles’ wrist.

“That was an adventure, wasn’t it, little man?” Charles whispered, pressing his lips to the tiny crown of his head. “Very exciting.” He looked at Erik. “Look what we did, Erik. Look what we made.”

“I see. He’s…oh Charles, look at him. He’s incredible.” He wiped at his face before kissing him, pressing a kiss to the tiny dark head. “I am so proud of you. You’re amazing.”
“He was a joint effort, darling.”

“No, you grew him, and you delivered him. I am so proud of you.”

“Erik, I can’t stop shaking,” he admitted. “And I’m so tired. I fear I might drop him.”

“Okay, ziskeit, it’s okay.”

“The shaking is normal at this point,” Thor said gently. “This room is cold and your body has just been through a trauma. The shaking is a natural reaction. Would you care for a picture with your little one before Erik takes him to dress?”

Erik handed over his phone and Thor snapped as many pictures as he could before Charles truly couldn’t hold the baby anymore. Erik eased him up and cuddled him for a moment before he took him off to dress.

“Okay, Charles, final stitches now, and then we’ll get you back to your room and a nice heated blanket. Charles?” Bruce said and then looked over the sheet when there was no answer.

Charles had fallen asleep. After the day he’d had, no one blamed him.

Charles and Green Bean slept through the night. They’d had an exciting time of it.

Charles had been stitched up, his epidural removed, and wheeled back up to his room. They’d left the inhibitor in place so he could get some rest and start to heal.

It had taken some figuring out for Erik to get Green Bean dressed. The tail was an issue, and he really hoped Charles didn’t mind the paediatric doctor using scissors to cut little holes in the vest and onesie.
Edie had melted when Erik placed her tiny green grandson in her arms, and Green Bean seemed to like her too, if the tranquillity of him was anything to go by. She was going to alter all the baby clothes they had and stay at their apartment with Tabitha until they came home.

Tony had delighted in the little guy, giggling madly to himself as his tail wrapped around his wrist.

Steve had declined to hold him, afraid of a baby so new. He was afraid of being too strong, of accidentally hurting him, and wanted to wait until he was a little less new. He was happy to stroke his hair as Tony held him.

Then they left for home, leaving Erik with his two boys.

One of the nurses had checked in on Charles several times through the night, and at about midnight, Bruce appeared, just as Little Bean wanted a feeding.

“You look just like I did when Hank was born,” Bruce said with a smile, taking the other chair.

“How do I look?” Erik asked as he fed the baby. It had taken him a few tries to latch on to the nipple, but then he fed like a pro.

“Scared shitless. Don’t worry, we’ve all been there. Charles said you don’t have a relationship with your own father?”

“He left, when I was 15. He just walked out one day. Mom was pregnant with Anya, David was five.”

“Mmmmm. My father killed my mother when I was eight,” Bruce said and Erik blinked up at him. “I know what it’s like to have a bad example for a father.”

“How do you deal with it?”

“I remember one simple thing. Charles was treated like dirt by his mother, his step father, step brother, teachers, colleagues, and now even Raven has deserted him. And he’s amazing. So I figure, I probably won’t screw up too badly.”
“You really think so?”

“I really do. Erik, you’re looking at this little guy like you’d burn down the world for him. He’ll test you, push you, make you question every decision, damn it, every single thought in your head. You’ll have sleepless nights, you’ll worry about him, worry FOR him, and he will never truly appreciate any of it. But I swear to you that the first time he calls you daddy, it will all be totally worth it. The first smile, the first time he reaches for you, the first time he does anything for you, knowing who you are. It makes everything worth it.”

“And I won’t make the same mistakes my father did?” he whispered.

“The fact that you worry so much about making them tells me you won’t,” he assured. He made his way to the bed and pulled back the sheets, making Charles moan in his sleep. “I know, Charles, I’m sorry. Just a quick look, I promise. Almost done.”

He palpated his uterus and checked his incision before he covered him over again and tucked him in.

“He’ll be fine,” he said, heading to the door. “When he’s awake, you can take off the inhibitor, and he should get up and walk around as soon as he can. Walking will help him heal more rapidly and prevent blood clots. He can eat and drink as soon as he likes.”

“Thank you, Bruce. Really. For…”

“I was happy to help,” he said, patting him on the shoulder on the way to the door. “Congratulations, Erik.”

Erik had finished feeding Little Bean, winded him, and then curled into the chair, reclining it back and snuggling the baby in. He was tiny, and perfect, and all theirs. The enormity of responsibility should have terrified him, but he was too high on elation to feel worried. He didn’t really sleep, just zoned out for a while, breathing in the scent of the new baby. They’d rested like that, the three of them, until a little after five when Green Bean began to fuss. Erik had honestly expected him to wake before, wanting a feed or a change, but he really had been tucker out by the birth.

“Easy little guy, take it easy,” Erik croaked, sitting up. He held him to his shoulder, his hand seeming absolutely giant against the curve of Bean’s skull. “Vati’s got you, it’s okay.”
“Erik?”

“Hey, welcome back,” he said, crossing to the bed and pressing a kiss to his hair.

“Little Bean?”

“Here, right here,” he soothed, carefully giving him to Charles, who snuggled him close, kissing his hand. He hurried from the room to tell the nurses that Charles and the baby were awake before he returned to the bedside.

“What a night,” Charles said as he managed to open his eyes. “That was exciting, wasn’t it?”

“A little too fabulous for my tastes,” Erik said wryly. “Do you want to take the inhibitor off, or leave it a bit longer?”

“I want it off.”

Erik combed through his hair to find the thin band and pressed their foreheads together as he flipped the switch. Charles’ mind surged outwards, pushing into Erik’s and sweeping through it with terrifying force until it settled and receded back, back to the constant warmth Erik had in the back of his consciousness all the time.

“All there?” he murmured, one hand on the baby, one stroking the back of Charles’ neck.

“Yes, all there. It’s so strange,” he said softly. “When he was inside, he was just this little echo, a tiny spec in the mental map I have. But now he’s out, now he’s separate from me, he’s so bright, so free, so pure. No influences from the world, no troubles, nothing. Just the pure light of my Little Green Bean.”

“Very groovy,” Erik said as he carefully removed the inhibitor and crossed the room to put it back in its box.
“Good morning,” Darcy said as she entered with a tray of equipment and a bottle of formula. She was Charles’ favourite of all the nurses to take care of him over the last seven months. That might have been because of the brownies she kept baking for him.

“Good morning, Darcy,” Charles said. “I’m a little foggy. Were you here last night?”

“I was, I put in your IV,” she said, putting down the tray. “Don’t worry, you were busy making life. How are you feeling?”

“Sore, and tired, but happy. Have you seen my son?”

She leaned over, looking at the bundle, and smiled. “He’s a heartbreaker.” She checked his IV. She did his observations and made notes on his chart. “Looking good. Any pain?”

“A little.”

“I’ll hook you up with the good stuff. Can I take a look at your incision?”

He groaned but allowed Erik to take Green Bean. She revealed the wide plaster and peeled it back, revealing a line of neat stitches. She carefully pressed around it, and then cleaned it with a wipe and replaced the dressing. She carefully and quickly removed his catheter now he was awake and able to use the bathroom, and the IV, now he could drink fluids himself.

“It all looks good, healing nicely,” she said, stripping her gloves. “General instructions. Try not to move too suddenly, no stairs or heavy lifting for a while, but you should get up and walk as soon as you possibly can. Don’t force it, but try to get moving. It’ll speed your healing, prevent blood clots and get you home sooner. I’m pretty sure Bruce will decide to remove the dressing completely within 24 hours.”

“Good assumption,” Bruce said as he entered, just as Green Bean let out a wail.

“Hungry,” Charles said and Erik smiled at him.

“I’m fairly certain that’s cheating,” he scolded playfully as Darcy shook the warmed bottle. “You
should get to do this. I did the first feed.”

Bruce and Darcy helped Charles sit up and then he nervously took the baby.

“Just relax, you’re fine,” Erik promised as he picked up the bottle.

Erik remembered helping with Anya, and Tabitha, and many other babies over the years. It was just a fact of life that if you were a Lehnsherr, you helped out with the little ones. He knew how to feed and burp and rock to sleep. But Charles often didn’t come into contact with babies until they were old enough to walk and talk. He’d never held one so brand new.

“Hey, talk to me,” Erik urged.

“I don’t know what to do,” Charles admitted in a whisper. Bruce and Darcy had moved off to discuss his care but Erik knew they were probably trying to give some privacy.

“No one does the first time,” he assured. “You think I knew what I was doing the first time mom put David in my arms? No, not a clue. He was this wriggly, squirmy thing that cried. But I learnt. You think Bubbe knew what she was doing when she had my Uncle David? Charles, baby, no one knows what they’re doing. It’s all on the job training. Right now, all you need to know is that he’s hungry, and that this bottle holds what he needs.”

Charles took a deep breath and let it out slowly, looking down at his wriggly son, who looked to be working up to a full blown crying fit.

“You’re right. Yes. This was in the book, I read this bit. I need a bib,” he said firmly. Erik reached out and snagged the one he’d left on the table. “Right. Good.” He tucked it under Green Bean’s chin, not confident enough to move him to fasten it around his neck, and took the bottle. “Oh dear. Erik, I need your wrist,” he said and Erik dutifully held it out, Charles shaking a few drops onto his skin.

“Feels good to me, a little above body temperature.”

“Good, that’s right. Now…”
He rubbed the teat on the round cheek and Green Bean did exactly what he was supposed to. He turned his head, rooting for it, his little mouth opening in a quest for food. He kept missing, his lips sliding across it, so it took him a few minutes to really figure out what he was doing. He finally managed to latch on and his little jaw worked furiously as he suckled, making a little gulping noise as his tail wrapped around Charles’ arm.

“See? The two of you will learn together,” he promised. He leaned in and kissed him, lingering when he was kissed back.

[You’re doing fine, I promise.]

Charles smiled a little, pecking his lips once before he let him pull back.

“How are we doing?” Bruce asked as Darcy left.

“Getting there,” Charles said, letting Bruce take a look. “Bruce, did you get any sleep last night?”

“I have a cot in my office, I got a few hours. He’s doing well, it’s a good sign, no problems with feeding. Once he’s done, I’d like to take a look at you, if that’s okay?”

“That’s fine. How much milk should he take?”

“Oh, a few ounces. He’ll stop when he’s done. You can try burping him and then offer the bottle again, see if that gets a little more in him, but I really wouldn’t worry about it so much. Little and often. Of course, being a telepath, you have an advantage over other mothers. You’ll know when he’s hungry.”

Charles stared at his Little Bean as he fed, completely mesmerised by him. He was terrified, he wasn’t even going to try pretending otherwise, but the slight weight in his arms was perfect, felt more right than anything in his life, even Erik. He knew he’d never get tired of holding his son, and he would never love anyone more than he loved his children.

“When’s Tabby coming?” he asked. He eased the teat from his mouth and looked at Erik for help.
“Sometime this morning, mom or David will bring her to visit,” he said. He took Charles’ hands and guided him to hold Little Bean so he was sitting, supporting his head with one hand while the other rubbed his back. The baby waved his tail and raised his eyebrows. “There you go, you’re getting it.”

Green Bean burped and Charles offered him the bottle again, but he only took a few half-hearted sucks before he became more interested in his own hands. Darcy took him to check him over, now a few hours had passed, and Bruce took a look at Charles, declaring him doing amazingly well.

Once Darcy had declared Green Bean to be doing very well, and administered the promised painkillers, they left the little family alone. Bean drifted off once Erik had relieved him of his wet diaper, and then Erik suggested Charles try getting up.

“I don’t know about this,” Charles said, putting his feet on the cold floor.

“Bruce said it’s fine. Baby, the sooner you get up and move, the sooner they’ll consider letting me take you two home.” He held out his hands. “Come on, up you get. Just a little walk to the bathroom.”

“Little Bean?”

“He’ll be fine, we’ll leave the door open.”

Reluctantly, Charles took his hands and together they got him upright.

“Oh, that feels so strange. Like my legs aren’t really mine. I mean, they are, but they’re not.”

“Probably the epidural still wearing off. How’s your belly?” he asked as they began to shuffle across the room.

“Sore, but not too bad,” he assured. He kept peeking in on Green Bean, who was laying there tugging at his tail. “How did you dress him?”

“Are you going to kill me if I tell you the doctor put holes in the clothes we brought?”
“No. Just so long as he’s dressed. But how are we going to keep his tail warm?”

“Bruce said he’d find a sleeve for us. I’ll be back when you’re done,” Erik promised. He settled Charles on the toilet and left the room.

Charles was a good twenty minutes before he called for Erik, and he spent the time wiggling little toes and holding the tiny green hands. Green Bean seemed to be happy enough to lay there and wiggle, waving his tail about.

Erik and Charles showered together, which made them both feel much more human, and then Erik helped him dress in loose sweatpants and t-shirt.

“You were right, I feel better,” Charles said.

“Knew you would. Breakfast should come soon,” he said, checking his phone. He’d sent out a picture of Green Bean before the shower and he was getting excited replies trickling in as people woke up.

“I want to hold him, but I won’t be able to eat if I do.”

“Get some food in you, and then you can hold him all you want.” He wheeled the bassinet closer to Charles and clicked on the brake. “There. Now you can see him as much as you want.”

“It’ll do. For now.”

The visitors started arriving at nine, and they brought enough flowers to open a florist, and enough chocolates to put a diabetic in a coma.

“He’s beautiful,” Moira cooed. Charles grinned and carefully handed him over to her. She took him with her usual competence, bouncing him while Nick Fury peered at him over her shoulder.
“You done good, boys,” Nick praised. “He’s real fine.”

“Thank you,” Erik said, straightening the room.

“How come she gets to hold my nephew?” Tony demanded as he entered. Erik moved to prop open the door. It might be easier to have a revolving one installed.

“Because SHE got here before you,” Moira crowed. “And besides, this little man has excellent taste.”

“He’s too young to know better.”

“Enough, children,” Charles scolded with a smile. “He has enough cuddles to go around.”

“Does he have a name yet?” Steve asked, handing over the teddy he’d brought.

“They’re being mean and holding it hostage,” Moira complained, reluctantly handing Green Bean to Tony. The tiny mutant happily wrapped his tail around Tony’s wrist, just like the night before. “He didn’t do that for me!”

“And you said he had taste,” Nick muttered.

“Charles?”

“Tabitha! Good morning, darling,” he said happily, holding his arms out for a cuddle. She was gentle with him, careful of where she put her hands.

Edie followed her in, carrying a bag. Tony wasn’t stupid enough to fight her when she reached for Green Bean, and she settled into a chair to cuddle while Charles hugged Tabitha close.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “Because Edie said you had to have a caesarean.”
He urged her down, laying her head on his shoulder, and he held her close.

“I’m fine, my lovely,” he promised. “A bit sore, and feeling quite empty, but nothing that isn’t completely normal at this point.”

Moira and Nick smiled and congratulated them once more before they left for work.

“Would you like to meet your new brother?” Charles asked.

“In a minute,” she said, snuggling closer.

“Oh, I’m fine, sweetheart, I promise. Bruce took very good care of me and Little Bean.”

“I know. I just…just a few minutes.”

“Take all the time you need,” he said, stroking her hair.

David arrived with coffee for Erik and pastry for Charles, and the message that Anya thought it was criminally unfair that she had to go to school.

Darwin and Alex popped by, having a hold and taking photos, and then a steady stream of parents of the Centre kids appeared in and out of his room. There were congratulations, gentle hugs, holds of the baby, who seemed happy enough to be passed from person to person.

A little after twelve, Edie left them to run some errands and promised to return later. Steve and Tony left as well, Bruce popped in to check on them before disappearing again, and then it was just the four of them.

“Would you like to hold him now?” Erik asked, picking up the freshly diapered baby.

Tabitha nodded and finally relinquished her hold on Charles. Erik carefully handed Green Bean
over and she giggled.

“He’s so little!” she said. “And he’s a very pretty green.”

“It is very pretty,” Charles agreed. “I like his tail. He should match his sister.”

“I can teach him to use it,” she said. She stroked the end of his tail with hers and he gave a stretch before he tangled his tail with hers. “Maybe he doesn’t need help with that. But it’s still very cool.”

She looked panicked when he started to fuss and cry.

“He’s just hungry, my darling,” Charles soothed and she chuckled.

“You can feed him, if you want,” Erik offered, holding out the bottle he’d retrieved from the nurse.

“Really? Cool.”

Charles handed her the bib, which Erik helped her put on Bean, and then Charles guided her hand in rubbing the teat against his cheek. He latched on much more quickly this time, and gulped away, blinking up at his sister.

“Can we keep him?” Erik asked with a grin.

She snorted. “Well, we can’t put him back.”

The visitors continued through the day.

Betty came with little Hank, who was very impressed with the little person his mother held. He was less impressed when Green Bean screamed to be changed.
A variety of Lehnsherr’s popped in through the day, all of them offering congratulations and prayers of thanks. Green Bean had his picture taken so many times, he had more close ups than a supermodel.

Kurt, Scott, Kitty, Jean, John and Bobby arrived after school let out, and then an hour after that there was a flood of kids from the Centre. Parents helped them hold Green Bean, each of them excited about him, wondering when he could play with them. Charles promised that he would bring Green Bean with him to the Centre when he returned to work in a few weeks.

One of the last visitors was Bubbe, who was brought by Edie.

Bubbe shuffled in and went straight to Charles.

“I am so proud of you, kochanie,” she murmured, pressing a kiss to his forehead. “You have done so well.”

“Thank you, Bubbe.”

“I bring things,” she said, putting her handbag on the bed. “I bring cookies, and I make you cardigan. You are mother now, have a Lehnsherr baby. You must have Lehnsherr mama cardigan.”

“Oh, Bubbe. It’s beautiful,” he breathed as she laid it out across his lap. It was a beautiful knitted cardigan with big pockets in all different shades of green to match the blanket she’d made for Bean.

“Keep you warm,” she said, helping him put it on. “Me and my daughters and granddaughters, my daughters in law, all have worked on it. To keep you safe and warm.”

“I love it,” he promised, snuggling into it.

She smiled and kissed his cheek before looking to Erik. She had a cardigan for him, only that one had been worked on by all the men in the family.
Finally she looked to Green Bean. She took him in her arms, tucked his blanket around him and kissed his little forehead.

“Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech haolam Shehechyanu, v’kiy’manu v’higianu laz’man hazeh,” she said, soft and gentle once Edie had led her to a seat.

“Another prayer?” Charles asked Erik as he joined him on the bed.

“It’s called Shehecheyanu, the blessing for firsts. She’s blessing his first day on earth. ‘Our praise to You, eternal our God, sovereign of all for giving us life, sustaining it and enabling us to reach this occasion’,” he translated.

“Bubbe, he’s not going to be names Lehnsherr,” Erik pointed out. “Charles is the last Xavier. Green Bean is going to have the name Xavier to carry it on.”

“Of course, of course,” she said, distracted by tiny fingers and a teeny tiny nose. “But is a Lehnsherr by blood. Charles a Lehnsherr by marriage, baby a Lehnsherr by blood. Both a part of the family. Must be treasured. Both very precious.”

Erik smiled and kissed Charles’ temple.

“So very precious.”

Chapter End Notes

I really hope you liked it, please leave me a comment letting me know what you thought.

Not sure when the next chapter will be up, I'm knackered after churning out so many in such a short time. I might take a few days off before I start on the next one, but it hopefully won't be too long.
I love you all, you're all awesome.
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER PLEASE READ

I am not Jewish, I am not a parent. I have never been to a brit milah. I have tried my best with this, tried to make it as good as I can. Charles is not reluctant for the ceremony, he is just reluctant to do anything that might cause his son any kind of pain. He's going to be a wreck for Green Bean's vaccinations.

ANYONE COMMENTING THAT CIRCUMCISION IS EVIL OR CHILD CRUELTY WILL HAVE THEIR COMMENT DELETED. ERIK IS JEWISH, A BRIS COMES WITH THAT.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Green Bean arrived Monday night, Tuesday was spent accepting visitors, and Bruce signed Charles’ discharge papers on Wednesday morning. His incision was healing well, he’d eaten and had bowel movements, and he was on a very low dose of mild painkillers, so Bruce saw no reason to keep him. He’d given Charles a belly binder to keep him feeling secure while he healed, but said it could be taken off if he didn’t feel he needed it, and set him up with some maternity pads, should he pass some blood.

Tabitha, Edie and David had all taken things with them when they had left the night before, so all that was left were essentials for Erik to chuck in the trunk.

All that was left was discharge for Green Bean.

“Knock knock.” Erik looked up from the bag he was packing to find a stocky man about his age in a faded band t-shirt standing in the doorway. His impressive arms were filled with packages and he had a friendly smile.

“Can I help you?” Erik asked.

“Yeah, I think you’re waiting for me. Clint Barton, I’m the Specialist Mutant Paediatrician.” He flashed the badge ID clipped to his hip. “Bruce said you needed a Special Baby discharge done.”

“Oh, right, yes, you’re the one we’re waiting for.”
“Good, nice to know I’ve got the right room,” he said, setting down his packages and looking at the chart attached to the bassinet. “Let’s see here. Ah. I see why Bruce called me. A prehensile tail.”

He was friendly and open, and immediately put Charles at ease. He approached and looked at the baby in Charles’ arms.

“Well, he’s unusual,” Clint said. “But he looks very happy to me. How’s he feeding? Any problems there?”

“No, but I was a little concerned,” Charles said.

“The nutritional merits of formula,” Erik said. “Charles wanted to breastfeed, but he can’t.”

“Let me guess, the sanctomommies,” Clint said. “Trust me when I say the best thing you can do is avoid the mommy blogs and message boards. No matter what you do they’ll find fault. If you breastfeed, you’re wrong, if you bottle, you’re wrong. I see somewhere in the region of two hundred babies a week, and there are all sorts of ways to feed a baby. Breast, bottle, soy formula, some strange Tibetan vitality formula, you name it. And I’ve found that the only thing that matters is that the baby eats. As long as this little guy eats and is thriving, then you’re doing absolutely fine.”

“So the formula will give him everything he needs?” Charles checked.

“Absolutely. It’s been developed to provide everything, so he’ll be absolutely fine on formula. So we’ve covered eating, what about diapers? Is he wetting regularly?”

“Yes, he’s a champ,” Erik joked.

“And poop? Changed many of those yet?”

“Unfortunately. That first one…”
“Yeah, like tar. It’s all the amniotic fluid in his system flushing out. Regular poop now?”

“Yes, normal baby poop.”

“Any rashes or irritations?”

“No.”

“Okay, all sounds good. Can I get you to strip him off so I can check the alignment of his spine and tail?”

Green Bean was not a fan of being stripped, and Clint chuckled as he was handed a crying naked baby.

“Oh, little guy, don’t worry. I’ll be quick,” he promised. He weighed the baby in his hands. “He’s what, about six pounds?”

“Six pounds two,” Erik said.

“Very nice. That might drop over the next few days, but it’ll come back up, so don’t be too concerned.” He expertly held the baby in one hand, palm to belly, and ran the fingers of his other hand over the line of his spine, working his way down to the tip of his tail. “Very nice, nice and straight. Have you seen much movement of the tail?”

“He likes to wrap it around people’s wrists when he’s held,” Charles said with a gooey smile. Clint laid him on the bed, checking his hips and straightening the tail to see its length. “And he’s a fan of his sister’s tail. It’s like they’re holding hands in their own very unique way.”

“Ah, so you know the care of a tail already.” Clint took the diaper Erik handed him and began to redress Bean. “All the things to watch out for. I’ll give you the booklet, just to follow procedure, but I don’t think you’ll have any problems.”

He held Bean still on the bed with one hand and grabbed one of the packages he’d brought with him. Inside were about two dozen fuzzy fabric snakes in a rainbow of colours with little belts
“Tail covers,” he said, pulling out the smallest one, which was white. “Fairly simple, but necessary until he can regulate his own body temperature. Goes on over the diaper but under the clothes, to help keep it on. Works like this. You gather it up like a sock and slide it up the tail, smooth it against the base, and fasten the belly belt. See? It has Velcro, so it’ll grow with him. Don’t worry so much about the length of the cover, more about the width. It needs to be wide enough so it doesn’t affect blood flow.”

“How tight should the belt be on him?” Charles asked as Erik redressed Bean, who was very unimpressed.

“About the same as a diaper, two fingers should be able to fit comfortably between the belt and the diaper. His clothes will do the majority of the work in holding the cover in place, the belt is just security. I wouldn’t worry about him wearing it when you’re inside or to sleep at night. Think of it like a coat or scarf, something for when he goes out. We’ve provided a range of sizes, so you should be good for a few months at least.”

Erik handed Little Bean back to Charles, where he cried for a moment and then snuggled in, tail wrapping around Charles’ wrist.

“Very nice movement. Can I just…” He felt along the wrapped part and tested the grip. “That’s a good grip, nice flex of the joints and flexibility of the muscles.”

Clint took a seat and looked through his notes.

“Okay, we’ve covered feeding, diapers, tail care. His skin…I wouldn’t worry,” he said. “Treat him like any other pale baby. Keep him out of the sun as much as possible, and remember sun cream and canopies. Not so much a concern in this weather, but it’s worth keeping in mind. Just general baby skincare. I think that’s about it. Is there anything you want to ask?”

“I was a little worried,” Charles said. “No, not worried. Concerned maybe. I thought all babies liked to be swaddled, but maybe I’m doing it wrong, because he hates it. Screams blue murder every time I try.”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Clint assured. He held out his hands and Charles handed Bean over. He tried swaddling the little guy, very well practiced in the art. He hadn’t even finished the first fold of the
blanket before Bean began to fuss. “Nope.” He handed him back to Charles.

“See. Is that…should I worry?”

“No, not at all. Truth be told, some babies like it, some babies don’t. The majority of babies with extra limbs don’t like it, but some do. He’ll let you know the things he likes,” Clint promised. “He’s brand spanking new, he’s got all these things to try. Some he’ll like, some he won’t. The most important thing to remember is that every baby is different. My oldest, for example. He loved being bathed, absolutely loved it. My youngest hates it, screams the building down.”

“How many do you have?” Erik asked.

“Three. Cooper, Lila and Nathaniel. You could actually use my kids as an example of the range of feeding methods,” he said. “Cooper was breastfed, Lilah was a combo of breast and formula, and Nathaniel has been exclusively formula. And they’re all fine. It’s about what works.”

“I just worry,” Charles admitted.

“I would be more concerned if you didn’t. Every new parent has these worries. From your notes, am I right in assuming you didn’t carry your daughter? You’re young, too young to have a teen.”

“No, we adopted,” Charles said. “He’s our first pregnancy.”

“Then this is all new,” Clint said. “You and him will learn together, he’ll let you know when something isn’t right. You’ll work out the best way for you. Don’t listen to anyone who tells you that you’re doing it wrong if he’s happy and healthy. It’s fine for people to offer advice, to offer a way that worked for them, but at the bottom of it he’s your son and you know best. And right now, he looks pretty happy to me.”

Little Bean had fallen asleep, cuddled into Charles’ arms, tail wrapped around his wrist. His little hands were fisted on his chest, his legs drawn up to make him a contented little lump of cuteness.

“You’re right,” Charles said, eyes only for his son. “We’re his parents, we’ll decide.”
“Good man. Now, anymore questions?”

“I’ve seen articles advocating co-sleeping,” Charles said. “Is that something we should do?”

“Honestly, I would say no, purely for the tail. If he gets an arm or leg caught under you, they’re fairly sturdy, and you’ll feel it. But a tail is more delicate, and it’s much thinner than an arm or leg, so there’s a higher chance of damage,” he said. “On a personal note, I’d say avoid it like the plague. Lila was six before we managed to get her in her own bed.”

“So a bassinet is best?” Erik asked.

“It’d be better for him to be in a bassinet. Any other concerns?”

They shook their heads and Clint grinned.

“Okay. I think we’re done. Here’s my card, you can call my office and book him in to be on the patient register, so you have a paediatrician for him,” he said, holding out a card. “And this lot is for you. All your free baby swag.”

He moved to the table of stuff he’d brought in and began listing.

“We’ve got lotion, wipes, prehensile tail diapers, and a list of places that stock them. Very nice diaper bag, a roll of bags for used diapers, a few pacifiers. We’ve included a few days’ worth of the ready-made bottles, so you can get settled at home with him before you have to worry about making them up. A couple blankets, towels, a few t-shirts for him. It can help to dry out the umbilical stump to have him in just a diaper and t-shirt, get some air to it. Keep the room warm and he’ll be fine. And for you we’ve got the obligatory big gulp mommy cup. Trust me, my wife loves this thing. We’ve got three at home, and she’s always trying to get me to bring her more.”

Erik took each thing as it was offered and packed it away, getting ready to take Charles and Green Bean home.

“A couple bottles of talc, some maternity pads, a booklet of useful contacts. Oh, a timeline, of when he needs his jabs, and a poster of things to watch out for, real medical emergency stuff like rashes and such. I think that’s it,” he said. “You know, if you wanted it, you could take the blanket.”
Charles grinned at the blanket he was snuggled under and Erik dutifully began folding it.

“I think that’s it,” Clint said. He picked up the clipboard and signed it in a few places. “That’s it, you’re all discharged. You can go home whenever you’re ready. Don’t hesitate to call me or Bruce if you have any concerns or questions. And congratulations.”

He shook Erik’s hand and patted Charles on the shoulder before he left the room.

Erik finished up packing as Charles settled Green Bean into his snowsuit. The snow had started again, he could see it drifting prettily outside the window. Green Bean didn’t like being manoeuvred, and scrunched up his face to complain, but Charles was anticipating it and quickly opened one of the sterile packages of pacifiers, easing one between his lips. It cut him off before he started.

He knew there was a great debate over whether or not to use pacifiers. Some parents said not to because they caused nipple confusion. Other parents said to use them because they provided comfort and preserved parent sanity. Charles and Erik had decided to try it if they thought it might make life easier, and it seemed to be working.

He wrapped Green Bean into his snowsuit and placed the mittens and hat to the side. He didn’t want to overheat him while they were still inside. He laid him in the car seat and strapped him in, adding his blanket to the woollen pile.

Charles still couldn’t see his feet very well, but he was more steady on them as he pushed them into his boots. The two men got coats on, gloves and hats in hand, Erik picked up the bag and Charles the car seat.

The nurses were all happy to wave him off, and were good enough to respect his wishes not to use a wheelchair to leave. He was a grown man perfectly capable of walking, thank you.

They paused in the lobby to put on hats and gloves and make sure Green Bean was tucked in. The car seat clipped into the base on the first try and Erik looked impressed with himself. Charles sat in the back and Erik drove them home. He was slower than he’d ever been, but the back of his car held precious cargo.

The doorman and security guards were happy to see them and cooed over the baby. They were
happy to help Erik cart their bags up to the apartment while Charles unwrapped Green Bean and chattered with the doorman.

The penthouse was filled with the most incredible smell of stew, and Edie waiting for them.

“There they are!” she crowed. “My lovely boys.”

Charles happily handed the carrier off to her and she took Green Bean off to the kitchen while Erik helped him get his coat and boots off.

“I’ve made tea, and lunch will be ready soon,” Edie said, carefully stripping off the snowsuit. “And I’ve made a whole load of dinners for the freezer, all you have to do is heat them up.” She laid Green Bean in the waiting seat and headed to the kettle once he was strapped in. He was awake and looking around, his little hands tugging at each other.

“You didn’t have to do that, Mamen,” Charles said. “You’ve done so much for us already.”

“And I’m happy to do it. Tabitha said she’d be home straight after school, and David said he’d mind the store until you’re ready,” she said.

“I don’t know when that’ll be,” Erik said.

“I’ll be alright, darling,” Charles assured.

“I know you will, that’s not even a question,” he promised with a kiss. “I’m just not ready to leave him yet.”

Charles smiled at him and Edie dished up lunch, and then they relocated to the main lounge. Charles settled himself carefully on the sofa, cuddling Green Bean close, and Bailey finally emerged from her bed to investigate.

“I’ve got her;” Erik assured, holding her between his legs as he squatted before Charles.
“Hey, Bailey,” Charles crooned and her tail started up. “Hey, my good girl. Come on, come and meet Green Bean.” He carefully positioned the baby so she could sniff at him.

Bailey carefully snuffled all over him, top of his head to the tip of his tail, giving a tiny lick here and there. She raised her lone front paw and tapped his little foot, to which he kicked. She looked up at Erik and then at Charles before she wriggled free, circled a few times and laid down at Charles’ feet.

“Good girl,” Erik praised, scratching behind her ears. “That’s a good girl.”

“Don’t worry,” Edie said. “Nine times out of ten, dogs do just fine with babies. If she isn’t happy, she’ll wander off. She’s never shown any aggression or hostility, nothing like that, so he’ll be fine with her.”

“You hear such terrible things,” Charles said. “And I know she’s such a good girl, but it just plays on your mind.”

“I know, but it should be fine,” she soothed. He cuddled Green Bean close. “Now, I’ve arranged the brit milah for next Tuesday, at my house. All the catering is sorted, and I’m meeting the Mohel this afternoon.”

“Oh, I completely forgot about the bris,” he said as Erik started looking through the mail.

“It’s all taken care of,” she assured. “Everything will be fine.”

“Good, because I have no idea about any of it. And I want it for him. Not the pain, obviously, but the importance of it. I was reading, and I found out that it ties in to four thousand years of history. I want that for him, to be part of something that special.”

“No one wants the pain for their baby boy, but it’s over in moments, I promise,” she said, stroking his hair. “Erik screamed the house down. He was so mad, I’ve never seen a baby so angry! It was as if he was trying to tell us off for disturbing his sleep.”

“I can imagine,” Charles giggled.
“I haven’t changed much,” Erik agreed.

“David had a few cries, but then he was fine. The wine is a big hit with babies.”

“It’s only a little wine…right?” Erik checked. “Because he’ll only be a week old.”

“Just a few drops. Now, I have to get going to meet the Mohel, is there anything you need before I go?”

“No, we’ll be fine,” Charles assured. She kissed him on the cheek, kissed the baby on the head, and hugged Erik before bidding farewell and leaving.

“Ah, damn it,” Erik said. He held up a package. “They sent this to my billing address instead of the store. The client is picking it up this afternoon. Idiots, I only sent it to them to be cleaned.”

“Run it down to David then,” Charles said as Green Bean stretched, his tail going straight and then curling back up. “We’ll be fine. You’ll only be a little bit.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” He lingered, staring at the baby. “It’s just so hard to leave him! He’s so tiny. I…”

“You’ll only be a little while,” Charles promised. “You can’t possibly miss that much in half an hour.”

“You’re right, I know, you’re right.” He took a deep breath and kissed them before he strode to the door, where he paused and looked at them. “Are you sure you’ll be okay? Because I can just call David to come get it.”

“Erik!” he laughed. “Go! It’s only half an hour. The sooner you go, the sooner you come back.”

“Right, right. I’m going. I’ve got my cell.”

He left without another word, determinedly walking out the door and not looking back. It would
only test his resolve.

Charles kissed Green Bean and giggled softly. “Your Vati is a very silly man.”

Charles managed to dredge up his courage to leave the house with Green Bean on Monday morning, to take the baby the ten minute walk to the office of Clint Barton for his first appointment.

Erik was going with him, and it was only a short walk, and Green Bean would be perfectly safe in his pram. It would all be fine. But it was a huge monumental moment. His Little Bean going out into the world for the very first time.

He placed pillows in a rectangle on their bed and laid Little Bean in the middle so he could pick out an outfit. First off, he knew there had to be a tail cover. He picked the blue one; it went exceptionally well with the green of his skin. Then a vest that fastened between the legs. It was plain white. Little white socks to protect tiny toes. A pair of dungarees, because they were so incredibly cute.

Charles picked up two cardigans, one yellow and one white, trying to decide which one would be better. Erik found him half a minute later, crying over the knitwear.

“Oh, baby,” Erik moaned, emerging from the bathroom, carefully cuddling him from behind as he stared down at the baby. “It’s okay. Come on, calm down.”

“I’m sorry,” he sniffled. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Nothing,” he assured, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “Nothing at all. It’s just hormones. Bruce said this might happen. Can you try to tell me what set you off?”

“I was looking at them,” he said, holding out the cardigans. “And they’re just so small. Oh, Erik, he’s so very small, and helpless and…and mine! Erik, promise me, you have to promise. He can’t ever be treated like I was. He can’t, he just can’t.”
“No, ziskeit, never. No one will ever treat him like you were treated.”

“He will never ever be pushed away or left alone or forced to be something he’s not,” he demanded, scooping up the baby and cuddling him close. “He’s not a nuisance, never. We will always have time for him. And we’ll be there to kiss his scraped knees and look at his drawings. We have to, Erik.”

“Hey, Charles, take a breath,” he urged. “I promise you, no one is ever going to treat him that way. He will never have to wonder if he’s loved or wanted.” He cupped his cheeks, wiping away tears. “Charles, our family, Mamen and Tabitha, David and Anya, Bubbe, all my uncles and aunts and cousins. He’s loved absolutely, there isn’t a limit on it.”

Charles nodded, pressing kisses to the tiny head of dark hair. It took a few minutes for him to calm down, and then he handed the baby to Erik to dress so he could go clean himself up.

“You, my beautiful boy, are so very precious,” he said.

Green Bean was awake, blinking up at him as Erik laid him down on the bed and began to dress him. They’d figured out that if they talked to him while they dressed him, he wouldn’t scream at them. Well, most of the time. Erik liked to sing him nursery rhymes his mother had sung to him and his siblings.

By the time he’d dressed him, Charles had emerged from the bathroom. They packed the baby bag, which was as good as Clint had promised. It took them much longer to get out of the door than it ever had before, but they were eventually on their way.

The weather was pretty pleasant, despite the lingering snow on the ground. The sun was high and bright, the air fresh, and Charles found it felt good to be walking. He’d worn his belly binder under his clothes, so he was pretty comfortable. Bruce had made a house call to him a few days before and checked him over, declaring him to be healing very well.

The office of Clint Barton was on the seventh floor of a building of doctors’ offices, all mutant friendly. Bruce had said he and Clint worked closely together for the care of mutant mothers and babies, but Clint didn’t usually go to the hospital to see a patient except in special cases. Apparently Green Bean was special enough.

They checked in and were asked to take a seat. Erik handled the clipboard of forms while Charles
got Green Bean out of his snowsuit. He’d just got him settled back in his pram when he excused himself. Erik assumed he was going to the bathroom, but that wasn’t it at all.

“What are you doing here?” Charles asked Raven outside the waiting room.

“I just wanted to see you,” she said.

She looked awful, as if she hadn’t slept in weeks, nor eaten properly. There were dark circles under her eyes and she was much thinner than she had been the last time he’d seen her.

“So you followed us. Now you have seen us, so you can go and never come near me again.”

“Charles, I just wanted to see you.”

He could see it, something on the tip of her tongue. “You want to see my baby,” he said bluntly.
““You want to see the baby you tried to take from me.”

“I wasn’t trying to take it!” she argued. “I just want you to not disfigure an infant. It’s barbaric.”

“Barbaric? Raven, the baby and I could have died because of you,” he snarled. “Development of my baby stopped because of the stress you put me under. My blood pressure was sky high, I could have had a stroke, I could have lost the baby.”

“I never meant…”

“No, you never do. Every time, you never mean to, but somehow you always do. Your petty bullshit put my child at risk. It was one thing for you to put things in my food and to put me down all the time, I’m a grown man, I can handle it, but you put my baby, MY SON, at risk.”

“A boy? You had a boy?”

“Yes, Erik and I had a boy, and he’s perfect, and he’s mine, do you hear me? He is mine! And whether you like it or not, he’s having his brit milah tomorrow and there is nothing you can do to
“Stop it? You think I could even try? I’ve lost everything, Charles,” she argued. “Stark’s lawyers are stonewalling me. My job, that’s gone. I’m being sued for child endangerment because I was trying to help you! I was trying to protect you, and your baby, and now my career is in tatters! No one in this state will even look at my resume! Almost all of my friends have turned their backs on me, I can’t even shop in stores I’ve used for years! I’ve got nothing!”

“And we’re supposed to be sorry for that, are we?” Erik asked quietly from the door. “You started this, you brought this upon yourself, and now you’re violating a restraining order.”

“No, Erik, it’s fine,” Charles soothed. “She gets this, this one chance to say goodbye.” He turned to Raven. “Because if you ever come near me or my children, I swear, Raven, the police won’t have time to arrest you. You think me in your head is scary? Think you can’t trust me in there? Come near me and mine again and I will show you something to be afraid of. Now leave, and don’t ever come back.”

Her mouth worked silently for a moment before she hardened. She turned on her heel and stormed away, and Charles knew it would be the last time he ever saw her. He kissed Erik to reassure him.

“I’m fine, darling. I promise. I just needed to…I don’t know what I needed to do. All I know is that I did it, and now I want to go in there and have Dr. Barton tell us how perfect our son is.”

“You get why I’m unimpressed with this, right?” Erik prompted as Charles reached for the door. “Charles, she had no right to come here. And you going off on your own to deal with her is not okay with me.”

“I would rather have you protecting our son while I dealt with her,” he said calmly. “It’s no longer just we two, Erik. He needs us, big time needs us. He is the priority, his safety is more important than mine. I left you with him because I know you would die for him.”

Erik could feel the smile creeping across his face. “You’re a marshmallow, do you know that?”

“I’m your marshmallow.”

Darcy was happily holding Green Bean when they re-entered the waiting room. She worked for a
medical company that meant she worked both at the hospital and in Barton’s office. They retrieved Green Bean when they were called and followed the nurse into the office of Clint Barton.

“No, sweetie, you can’t,” he said into the phone, holding up a hand to them to signal he’d just be a minute. “What’s the rule when daddy is at work? Uh huh. That’s right, mommy is in charge, totally in charge. And what did mommy say about the cookies? Exactly. So be a good girl and do as mommy says. I know. Okay. I love you, baby. Go on, I have to get back to work. I’ll see you later.” He hung up and smiled at them. “Lila, arguing about cookies.”

“Sounds like fun,” Erik said.

“Yeah, tons. So! How’s the first week been?”

“A learning curve,” Charles admitted. “But we’re getting there.”

“Always good to hear. Let’s get his weight and stuff out of the way and then we can talk about how it’s been and any questions you might have.”

Charles handed the baby over and Clint warned them he was going to scream. Which he did as he was stripped and laid on the scale. Clint checked him over, noting things down, and then efficiently dressed him again, handing him back to Charles. He cried for a little longer until he realised who was holding him. He wrapped his tail around Charles’ wrist and accepted the pacifier.

“We were wondering about the stump,” Erik said, handing over the baggie that contained the remains of the umbilical stump. “It fell off on Saturday, which all the books say is too soon.”

“I see no problems, he’s not red or irritated, he’s not in pain, there’s no discharge,” Clint assured. “That is a normal little belly button. He’s just ahead of the curve. Treat the books as a guide, not hard and fast rules. With kids it pays to be flexible.”

Charles and Erik smiled at each other.

“He’s doing absolutely fine,” Clint said, taking a seat. “His weight has come up again, six pounds four, so he’s gaining weight. It’s very good. Is he on a feeding schedule?”
“It’s roughly about every four hours,” Erik said. “Sometimes he goes a little longer, but generally it’s four.”

“How much is he taking each feed?”

“He’s averaging about six ounces, but his first bottle of the day is always seven, and his last one of the night is only about four.”

“Sounds about right,” he praised, noting it down. “Winding all okay?” They nodded. “Good. Do you get much spit up?”

“Not much,” Charles said. “Only about a mouthful or so, and it’s not every bottle.”

“Pretty normal. Don’t be worried if he does bring up more, most newborns take time to get feeding down. He seems like a pro though. How are you finding nights?”

“Not as hellish as we’d been told they would be,” Charles said with a smile as Bean managed to get hold of his tail, tiny fingers plucking at the cover. “He has his last bottle at ten, then a small feed at two and a change, and then awake at six.”

“Wow, you guys have got that routine down!”

“Mamen told us it would be easier if we started a routine the moment he was born.”

“What’s his routine?”

“Up at six, and his first bottle is in bed with us,” Charles said. “Then cuddles until about half seven, eight. Then we have breakfast with Tabitha. Well, the ones on solids do, he sits in his chair. Then wash and dress, and into the home office by around about nine. He’s got a bouncy chair in there. Tabitha comes home at about four, and she takes him for an hour or two, and then dinner at six. He has a bath and jammies at eight, quiet time until about ten, then his last bottle and bed.”

“Very orderly,” Clint said, amused by how regimented it all was. “How rigid is it?”
“Not all that rigid,” Erik assured. “We just try to stick to that timetable.”

“It’s probably why he’s a generally happy baby,” Clint offered. “His needs are all being met, the same people around him. I see so many parents who are too quick to pass him off to this person or that person. Truth be told, newborn babies need a fair amount of time with their primary caregiver to feel secure.”

“So far it’s just the three of us,” Erik said. “More Charles really. I’m going back to work soon, so he’ll be with Charles most of the day.”

“We thought it best to get him used to mostly me,” Charles said. “But Tabitha is so good with him. Two peas in a pod.”

“Glad to hear it. Sometimes siblings don’t take kindly to a new baby. Good to hear things are going well in that department,” he mused, smiling at the baby staring at him. He was too far to be anything other than a vaguely human shaped blur to the baby. “Is he awake much during the day?”

“Generally,” Charles said. “He’s usually awake and having a nose about. He’ll usually sleep after a bottle, but it’s only for an hour or two and then he’s awake again. Is that normal?”

“For him it seems to be.”

“I keep forgetting that he sets the rules,” he admitted. “All the books and blogs…it’s easy to forget.”

“I know, but it really is important to remember. If he’s awake, then it’s because he should be. You say he’s just lying there having a look about, not crying. So he’s fine. Okay, any problems with baths?”

“He hates them,” Erik laughed. “You’d think we were murdering him.”

“Of course.”
“And changing his clothes, he hates that too. He just about tolerates diaper changes.”

“Anything he doesn’t hate?” Clint chuckled.

“Cuddles. Being fed. Tabitha talking to him. He likes lotion being rubbed into his skin,” Erik said. “And skin to skin snuggles, he loves that.”

“Sounds pretty normal to me. Any problems with diapers? Constipation?”

“No, but I’ve heard that can happen with formula,” Charles said. “What do we do if it does?”

“You can gently massage his tummy, try and get things moving. A proven remedy is a bottle of cooled sterilised water, flush his system through. If you really need to, you can get some over the counter medicine, but the water usually does the trick. Any other problems? Diaper rash?”

“No, we use a diaper cream every time we change him, just a little, as a precaution.”

“Good. So, it sounds very much like the two of you have everything under control. Do you have a support network?” They nodded. “I’d say everything’s going fine.”

He filled in more of the paperwork and had another cuddle with Green Bean while they chatted about the support Charles and Erik had at their disposal and places they could go to for help if they needed.

“I think that about covers everything,” Clint said. “Any last questions?”

“I do have one,” Charles said. “See, tomorrow is his brit milah, and I’m on board with it, all ready for it. But afterwards is worrying me.”

“I’m sorry, I’m lost,” Clint admitted. “What’s a brit milah?”

“His bris,” Erik said.
“Oh! See, now I’m with you. He’s getting circumcised, right?”

“Yes.”

“Right, all with you now. So what would you like to know?”

“I don’t know how to care for a circumcision,” Charles admitted. “I’m not circumcised, and I’m worried about the healing part sticking to his diaper.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I can fix that.”

Clint handed Green Bean back to Charles and rummaged through a couple of drawers.

“Sterile gauze,” he said, presenting the package. “This is a pack of four hundred individually wrapped gauzes, which should be more than enough. Then a tube of petroleum jelly, and a tube of antibacterial lotion. It’s simple, I did this with my eldest.”

He opened the pack and took one of the slim packages within. “You open it carefully, don’t touch the side that will be against him,” he said, demonstrating. He held just the edge of the white square. “Then the jelly, just a little, and a little of the lotion. Then take the gauze, and make a little tent. This goes over his penis, and will stop anything sticking to healing parts. He’ll take about a week to ten days to heal, and then he’ll be back to regular diaper changes.”

“Will he be in much pain afterwards?” Charles worried.

“Mine wasn’t, but I’ve heard of other babies that have been,” he admitted. “Each baby takes to it differently, but the majority of times, in my experience, there are no lasting ill effects.”

“You’ve only had your eldest done?” Erik asked, packing the new supplies away.

“My youngest was premature, he was too weak for it, and now we just haven’t gotten around to it.” He handed him a few booklets. “Everything you need to know about a circumcision. Basic rules:
They finished up the visit and stopped by Darcy on their way out to get set up for the vaccination schedule the clinic offered. They would send out a reminder the day before the appointment, which the system would automatically book for them. There was no chance of it being forgotten, no jabs would be missed, and each one would be done by Clint or Darcy only.

They rounded off the morning with lunch in their favourite diner. The waitresses all fell in love with the baby as soon as Charles freed him from his coat, and he seemed happy to be cooed over.

After lunch, Charles returned home with the baby and Erik went off to the store to do some work for the afternoon. Charles fed and changed Green Bean before he settled them both down for an afternoon nap. One of the perks of being a telepathic parent was that he could set his ability to monitor Green Bean, so if he was needed, he would know.

Charles woke at two to Tony entering with a bottle. He wasn’t surprised to see Tony there. There wasn’t a lock that could keep him out, and he was on the list of accepted visitors they’d given to security.

“Jeez, I was trying not to wake you,” Tony said, setting it down and picking up the baby, holding him like fragile glass as he sat down. “His timeline thingy on the fridge says he’s due a bottle at two. I heated one in a jug of hot water.”

“Perfect,” Charles murmured.

“Hey, his butt is squishy.”

“He’s wet, needs a new diaper.”

“I can do that! I see the diapers, I can change him,” he said excitedly. He plucked a diaper from the holder by the couch and set to unwrapping the baby. “Oh, he’s scrunching! Not happy!”

“Talk to him, it distracts him. Sometimes works to keep him calm.”
“Hey, Little Bean. I know, I know, exposing your junk to the world is cruel and harsh,” he babbled and Green Bean watched him, little arms waving. Tony unfastened his little dungarees and vest. Somewhere along the way, the tail cover fell off. Tony looked at it and paused in his monologue on the merits of Taco Bell over Subway as sustenance. “Is this important?”

“No, it’s to keep his tail warm when we’re out. He’s fine without it while at home.” He slowly sat up, curled up in a ball. He was a little tender, he must have slept strangely. “I’d put a wipe over him,” he warned when Tony reached for the tabs of the diaper. “He’ll pee on you.”

“Baby pee, not the worst thing I’ve been covered in,” he said. He bravely opened the diaper and tented a wipe over him. “There we go! There we go! No peeing on Uncle Tony! You know, if this was poop, daddy would be taking over!”

“Coward.”

“Not a coward,” Tony said to the baby, who seemed to like it if his kicking and arm waving was anything to go by. “Just not looking to wipe a dirty tushy. See? Uncle Tony’s got this.” He balled up the old diaper and put the new one on. “There! See! I can do this. Jeez, how fragile is this tail?”

“Fairly robust, but there is a tab at the back of the diaper.”

Tony peered at it and pulled open the third tab. It opened up the back of the diaper so it could just be slid up Bean’s back and fastened around his extra limb. He slid it on, fastened it up and dressed the baby again.

“See! Uncle Tony is a superstar! Yeah! Come on, little guy,” he cooed, cuddling him close, careful of the reactor. He snagged the bottle and shook a few drops onto his wrist. “Feels good to me. Come on, baby. Time for num nums.”

“Tony, you are completely smushy on the inside,” Charles said as Bean began to suckle. His little fingers found the end of his tail and he held it the way other babies would hold a comfort blanket.

“Keep it a secret, or my stockholders will lynch me,” he said. “I did plan on coming by to ask if there was anything I could do for tomorrow. But then I got here and you were sleeping and he was awake and I figured feeding him is a pretty easy one.”
“Thank you, Tony. No, there’s not really anything that needs doing. Mamen and the other Lehnsherr’s have got it all covered. The Mohel is booked, the food is being prepared as we speak, the cushion for the ceremony has been dry cleaned.”

“Cushion?”

“Yes, family heirloom. He lays on it when…the exciting part happens.”

Tony winced. “Yeah, I don’t want to talk about that part. I was circumcised, and I don’t remember it, and I’m happy with it that way.”

“Yes, I’m not particularly looking forward to that part of it, but it’s important, so I’ll grit my teeth. I’ve been told that it goes milah, which is the actual cutting, then the naming of him, and then the seudat mitzvah, which is the celebratory meal. Anya tells me it’s a day long party, which should be fun.”

“Can’t you just give me a little hint about his name?” he whined. “Just a little one?”

“No, not until he’s been through the milah.”

“Fine. Why’s that again?”

“As I understand it, the milah is a covenant with God, a sacrifice to forge the bond between the baby and God. Once that sacrifice is made, then he’s safe from evil spirits. Then it’s safe to announce his name. I think.”

“Wow, you’ve done your homework. Oh, he’s not taking anymore.”

“Needs winding,” Charles said and sniggered at Tony’s expression. “Take the bottle from his mouth, chuck a cloth over your shoulder, put him against that shoulder, and rub his back to bring up the wind.”

Tony did as he was told and rubbed the little back so gently it was never going to get anything up.
“A little firmer. You can pat his back too. That’s it. Little harder than that. There we go. Keep it up and he’ll burp for you. Then he might take some more of his bottle.”

Tony continued until Green Bean burped and then tried the bottle again. He took a few more ounces and then became very interested in having a stretch.

“Anything I should bring?” Tony asked.

He laid the baby on the couch so he had room and watched as he wiggled like a little worm.

“Just yourself,” Charles assured. “A gift if you want to, but it’s not required. This is one of those things where your attendance is the gift.”

“Tony Stark is a gift anytime.”

The family stayed at Bubbe’s the night before, and then it was the big day.

Erik and Charles had worn smart slacks and shirts, their hair combed. Tabitha had chosen the dress Erik had given her for her birthday, and replicated the twisty thing she’d done with her hair.

And for Green Bean, he’d had a busy morning. A full bath with special oils Edie added to the water, and special lotions rubbed into his skin, and then Charles had dressed him in a little white romper and hat. He’d made sure to choose one that opened at the bottom, so the baby didn’t have to be stripped any more than necessary. The romper had a line of soft blue ribbon ringing the cuffs and around his round little tummy.

“Drink this,” Erik ordered, pushing a whiskey at Charles.

“Erik, it’s eleven in the morning!”
“Our son is about to be circumcised, trust me, you need a drink.”

Charles couldn’t argue with that logic and tipped it into his coffee.

“We breaking out the Irish coffee?” David asked, amused. “You’re lagging. When Pete was done, Coraline and Abe weren’t even out of bed before they had it.”

“I fear this is not a good thing,” Charles worried as Tabitha picked up Green Bean.

“It’s just one, to fortify you for what’s coming,” David assured.

“Is everything set up?” Erik asked. “Who’s holding him, the sandek?”

“Elijah.”

“And carrying him in?”

“I get that honour,” David said proudly.

“Tabs is all set to be his kwaterin.”

“Which one is that again?” Charles worried.

“It’s like a godmother,” David said. “She carries him from you to me, then I carry him to Elijah. And then the big event.”

“You must be the proud parents,” said a surprisingly young man. Charles had thought he would be older. “I’m Doctor Mazlin, and I will be performing the milah.”

“Good to meet you. I’m Erik and this is Charles, and this is our son,” Erik said, shaking his hand, Charles accepting the baby from Tabitha.
“He’s beautiful. We’re just finishing up the setting and then we’ll get this started. Any questions?”

“Will you be quick?” Charles pressed.

“As quick as I can,” he promised with an understanding smile. “I take it you’re the one who carried?” Charles nodded. “Mothers ask me that almost every time. I’ve been doing this for over a decade now, and I’m down to under three minutes. From the moment he’s on Elijah’s lap to the moment I fasten his diaper, I will be under three minutes.”

“Have you done this with a baby who has a tail?” Erik asked.

“Yes, I have, and I’m prepared for the strange diapers. I’m ready.”

“Then I think we’re good. Charles?”

“Get it done, before I pass out.”

Erik kissed him and then went off to where he was supposed to be, and David, and the only thing keeping him from panicking was the warm weight of Tony at his shoulder. Tabitha took the baby from him, pressing kisses to his cheek as she carried him to David, who had the white cushion.

The whole service was in Hebrew, so neither Tony or Charles understood. Steve looked lost too, but respectful.

David laid the baby across Elijah’s lap and the Mohel began praying as he efficiently stripped the baby’s lower half. He encased his legs in a blanket tucked under him and had Elijah held him steady. It was at that point that Green Bean began to cry at being held. He didn’t like being exposed at the best of times, and now he wasn’t allowed to kick.

“He’s fine, Charlie, he’s fine, I promise.”

“He’s frustrated,” Charles said. “He wants to wiggle.”
“Soon.”

Charles zoned out, focusing on Tony pressed one side and Steve the other, and then he jumped at the shock of pain through his son as the milah was actually performed. As Edie had promised, the baby only cried until he was all wrapped up again, and then he actually fell asleep in Elijah’s arms.

He was carried back to Charles as soon as he could be, and then Erik said his own prayers. And then everyone was waiting expectantly. Tabitha was given a glass of wine by the Mohel and she took a sip.

“His name is Magnus Anthony Xavier,” she said. “Baby Max for short.”

There were loud cheers and calls of “Mazel tov!” Then the party began, food being passed out, drinks poured, conversation flowing, and Charles was quick to slip away to Bubbe’s living room to cuddle his baby.

“I’m sorry, I know that hurt,” he murmured, Max snuffling in his sleep. “But it’s all done now. All done. And you’re all named and welcomed.”

He laid Max on his chest and pressed kisses to his dark head. Tiny little fingers, tiny little tail. His pale green skin, all the noises he made. The gulping when he ate, the snuffle in his sleep. His pissed off shriek when he was changed or bathed, his demanding mewl when his bottle was a little too long. The way he tugged at his tail the way another baby would a stuffed animal, the way he was fixated by Tabitha talking to him. Charles was transfixed by everything his son did.

“Are you okay?” Edie asked from the doorway.

“Yes, I am,” he assured. “It was just difficult. But it’s done and he’s welcomed and named, so it’s all good things. I dread to think what I’ll be like at his vaccinations.”

“You’ll get through it, we all do,” she promised, sitting with him and stroking his hair. “I’m sorry about Raven and your mother.”

“She’s not my mother,” he said. “She may have given birth to me and made sure I survived
childhood, but you’ve done more for me than she ever has. You love me, and care about me. She never has. As far as I’m concerned, you’re my Mamen.”

“My sweet boy.”

Tony finally got Charles on his own as he was heating up a bottle in the kitchen.

“You named him after me?”

“Oh, Tony,” Charles said with a smile. “Of course I did. You are my very dearest friend, my family. And you’re a good man. Why wouldn’t I name my son after you?”

The day after the bris, Charles and Erik went and registered Max, and Charles carefully placed his birth certificate in the home office safe.

Erik returned to work, and employed Steve to help him. David had been offered a job as an ASL interpreter, and Tabitha had gone back to school. Erik simply couldn’t manage by himself, and Steve needed something to do, so it was perfect for both of them. Charles returned to his writing, with little Max happy to sit in his office bouncy chair. He was perfectly content so long as Charles talked to him.

When Max was three weeks old, Charles decided to take him to the Centre for the day.

“You sure you feel up to this?” Erik asked. “You’re still healing.”

“I feel fine. Not quite up to running about, but I feel up to reading stories and helping with homework. And Tabitha will be there, so I’ll be perfectly alright.”

“If you’re sure, then I’ll see you at lunch,” he said. He kissed Charles and picked up his briefcase
before kissing Max goodbye and leaving.

Charles dressed Max in a little onesie with a lion on it and settled him into his pram with his blanket before packing the diaper bag. Tabitha was happy to push Max along, and he seemed highly impressed by her talking to him.

“It’s remarkable how much he loves you,” Charles said, digging out his keys. “Just goes to show all that talk about newborns being blank slates is nonsense. He knows exactly who you are.”

“He’s a good Little Bean,” she cooed, rubbing his tummy. “Aren’t you? Yes. Good Little Bean.”

“He’s never living that nickname down, is he?”

“Not until he looks less like a bean when he curls up. Here, let me.” She took the keys from him and began unlocking the building, pushing up the shutters.

They’d barely gotten out of their coats when the first kids started to arrive, and they were all absolutely ecstatic to see Charles. Yuriko pushed her chair as close to his as possible and cuddled in.

Tabitha took Max off to the quiet corner and settled him in one of the beanbags. He kicked and waved his arms as she began to read her homework assignments to him. Soon enough, Kurt arrived, and Jean, Bobby, Kitty, and they all joined her. Max loved all the attention.

Scott was the last of that crowd to arrive, and Alex was happy to see Charles.

“Hey, we’ve missed you around here,” he said, carefully hugging Charles. “Not the same without you.”

“I’ve missed it too, but my little man needed me more,” he said, nodding towards Tabitha, who was helping Scott hold Max.

“He’s beautiful, Charles. What’s his name?”
“Max. Magnus Anthony Xavier.”

“That’s cute. Do you need anything? Babysitter maybe?”

“No, we’re fine, really. Feel free to go for a cuddle if you like. Or when you come to pick up Scott.”

“When I come to get him I will. We need a grocery shop and the market is always packed on Saturdays. Charles, can I get you to work with Scotty today? He’s got his final exams soon, and I just want to make sure he’s not behind on anything. I want him to graduate high school, it’s important.”

“Absolutely, my friend. I’ll give him a while with his friends and then lure him away to study,” he promised. “Go on, get your shopping done.”

Charles happily let the group get underway, and smiled as Max let out a wail. He heated a bottle and let Yuriko carry it and a bib over to Tabitha, who was more than able to feed him. The teens seemed to have grown bored of a baby that didn’t really do anything yet. Maybe in a few months when he was more active, more interesting, then they would while away the hours. But he wasn’t as interesting as playing basketball outside.

Kurt was happy to linger, working on his homework with Tabitha and Jean to bounce ideas off. They were usually in the quiet corner, the three teens, bouncing around ideas and working through their schoolwork. Max was just a cute little mascot for them who wriggled when they read aloud to him.

Erik arrived for lunch, and the little ones were happy to see him. He played jungle gym for about an hour before he had to return to work.

Once Max had had his two o’clock feed, Charles took Scott over to the homework table and went through the work, making sure he felt happy with the exams coming. He was strong in English and science, but a little shaky when it came to maths and Spanish, and history stumped him completely. Charles taught him a few tricks to remember dates and names, little rhymes and acronyms to make it easier for him.

While Charles was happily whiling away the day, Erik was neck deep in orders.
Steve really was an angel. He manned the counter, made coffee, swept, restocked materials, filed papers, made trips to the post office. Anything Erik needed doing, he’d do. A piece needed polishing? No problem. Call a customer? Sure! He even bought more diapers on his way back from lunch.

“Hi, welcome to Lehnsherr Designs,” Steve said cheerfully to the new customer. Erik grinned to himself. “Is there something I can help you with today?”

“Actually, I was looking for Erik.”

Erik poured the molten silver into the mould he’d made, put the cup in its holder, and then turned around, only to freeze.

“Hello, Erik.”

“Jacob,” he whispered.

“I would have thought father would be more appropriate.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all liked this, I tried to do my very best with it. But I will admit that this chapter gave me problems.

Please leave me a comment and let me know what you thought and anything you'd like to see.
Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry this took so long. I had to go in for minor surgery to remove a lump on my nose and then wait for the results of what it was. Thankfully, it was completely harmless, but that wait was a tough one.

I hope you like the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Erik cleared his throat and looked at Steve.

“Hey, maybe you should clock out, go on home to Tony,” he suggested.

“Are you sure? Because I still have that pile of invoices to file for you,” he offered, giving Erik the chance to avoid talking.

“Yeah, maybe…maybe you should…do that.”

“Okay, I’ll do that. I’ll be just out the back if you need me.”

Erik watched Jacob as Steve moved, collecting the invoices, and made a mental note of all the changes 15 years had brought. His pale brown hair was flecked with grey, his face held more lines. He remembered his father being taller, and broader. Maybe he hadn’t been, maybe Erik just remembered it from a child’s perspective.

“This place looks good,” Jacob said, looking around. He ran a hand along the counter. “You’ve obviously made a success of yourself.”

“Yeah, business is good. Is that…Look, I don’t know what I’m supposed to say here,” Erik admitted.

“I know. This is a strange situation. To be honest, I don’t know what to say either. I must have practiced seeing you again millions of times, and still, when the moment comes, I’m lost for
words.”

Erik sighed and moved to his workbench, beginning to pack things away so he could close up.

“I am sorry, Erik,” Jacob said. “For everything.”

“Is that supposed to fix everything?” he asked incredulously. “You walked out on us. Three children who needed you, a wife who loved you, and you walked out. You think sorry is enough?”

“No, it’s not. I thought it might be a good place to start at least.” He sighed and held out a piece of paper. “I would like to know you, and your siblings, but I realise that you might not want the same. This is my contact information. It’s your choice of what to do with it.”

He left it on the counter and nodded before walking out, letting Erik make the choice.

His knee jerk reaction was to burn it, to tear it into a thousand pieces and get Jacob back out of his life. But he realised something when he snatched it up. It was not his decision alone.

David and Anya and Edie all had a say in it, just as much say as he did.

How did he tell his mother about this? How did he sit back and let Anya make this decision when all he wanted to do was keep Jacob away from her? How did he let David make his own choice?

“Erik? Darling?”

Erik jumped and Charles smiled at him.

“You were miles away,” Charles said with a smile. Tabitha was lingering outside, bending over the pram to talk to Max. “We thought we’d go somewhere for dinner, maybe to the Italian place. But if you’re not finished, we can wait for you.” He stroked his cheek. “Erik, are you alright? You seem upset.”

“I’m fine,” he promised. “You three go on without me. I’ve got some things to finish up.”
[I can’t talk about it right now.] Erik said. [Let me get my head around it and then I’ll share. Okay?]

[That’s absolutely fine, darling.] Charles promised with a kiss. [Whenever you’re ready.]

“We’ll see you at home later then. I’ll bring you some carbonara.”

“I love you.”

“Mmmm, I bet.”

Charles left him with a smile and Tabitha gave a wave and Erik pulled out his cell phone. He called his mother and arranged to talk with her immediately, with David and Anya present. He sent Steve home, locked up, and walked to the diner to meet Edie.

The three of them were waiting for him.

“Erik, boychick, what’s wrong?” Edie fussed as he hugged her.

“Yeah, mom almost got a speeding ticket,” Anya said worriedly.

“I’ve seen Jacob,” he said and they fell silent, stunned. “He came into the store.”

“When?” David asked.

“About an hour ago. He gave me this,” he said, laying the paper on the table. He’d made three copies of it, one for each of them. “It’s how we get in contact with him. He said it’s our choice.”

“That’s stupid,” Anya said. “We can’t choose. That’s impossible.”
“He didn’t even bother to call for fifteen years,” David argued. “Not even a postcard, not once. Why should be bother making the effort when he never has?”

“I say yes,” Anya said. “We contact him. We’re just going to talk, no harm in that. And we’re not kids anymore.”

“Mom?” Erik said, holding her hand. “Mom, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just wasn’t expecting this,” she said, and it actually seemed true. “I never thought he’d ever come back.”

“Well, now he has. Mom, what do we do?”

“Oh, Erik. I can’t tell you that. You have to make this decision for yourself.”

“But if you don’t want us to talk to him, you can tell us,” David said.

“No, that’s not what we’re doing,” she said firmly. “This is a choice for you to make. He’s your father, for better or worse. And yes, he has made some very big mistakes. Weigh those two truths up as you see fit and come to your own decisions. I just want each of you to be sure about it if you do contact him. Once that door is open, closing it could be difficult. And be sure of what you want from him before you contact him.”

They ordered and chatted about other things, each of them talking about other things. Max was a favourite topic, and Erik was quick to pull out his phone to show them pictures and videos. Edie was right, this was a decision each of them had to make, in their own time, for their own reasons.

“Erik?” Anya said, quiet and unsure, as Edie and David took care of the cheque.

“Hey, what’s this?” Erik said, hugging her close. “Come on. What’s up?”

“Do you think I should talk to him? Because if you don’t want me to, I won’t.”
“An, no, I’m not doing that. Whatever happens between me and Jacob, that’s completely separate from what happens between you and Jacob. You have as much right to this as I do, and I would never take that right away from you.”

“So if I did want to talk to him…would you be okay with that?”

“Absolutely. An, you know I love you, no matter what. You’re my sister, you couldn’t annoy me so much if you weren’t. And nothing will ever change that.”

She squeezed him and climbed into the car, waiting for Edie.

“Erik, there’s no wrong choice here,” Edie promised. “Whatever you decide, it’ll be the right thing.”

“I know. I just don’t know what to decide.”

“Promise me you’ll talk this over with Charles? Let him help you?”

“I promise. Mom…why did he leave? I know I’ve always said I don’t want to talk about it…but I want to know.”

“Erik, I honestly don’t know why he left. It’s something only he can give you.”

He let her hug him again and then she left. David wandered off home, and Erik found himself wandering through the streets of New York, letting his mind wander.

He remembered being very small, probably no more than four or five. The memory was faded but he still remembered. His father had taken him to the playground, pushing him on the swings. He remembered moving back and forth, seeing his toes touch the sky above him, and knowing that he would be caught if he fell.

He remembered the day Jacob left. Erik had collected David from school, and they’d walked home, David chattering away about the tadpoles they had in class. The apartment had been so quiet, so still. And his mother’s eyes had been so red. He hadn’t understood, when she said it.
What did she mean dad wasn’t coming back? But then it sank in, made sense, and he realised what it meant. David had cried himself to sleep that night, Edie had been heartbroken, and Erik vowed never to forgive Jacob as long as he lived.

“Erik?” Charles murmured in the dark of their bedroom.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you,” he said, glancing at the clock. It was gone midnight.

“It’s alright,” he assured, sitting up. “Is he okay?”

Erik looked up from his watching of Max. “He’s fine. I just needed to look at him for a bit.”

“Erik, what’s happened?”

Erik sighed and crossed to him, sitting on the bed and taking his hand. “My father came into the store. He wants to talk.”

“Oh. Well. Oh.”

“Yeah. I called mom, and David and Anya. We talked. Mom says it’s our decision, that each of us gets the choice. Charles, I don’t know what to do.”

“You don’t have to do anything.” He hugged him, laying his chin on Erik’s shoulder. “Just think about it for a little while. Let it sink in.”

“What would you do?”

“If it were me?” Erik nodded. “I don’t know. I suppose…I think I’d want to at least have that conversation, so I could say I’d done my part.”

“Sound logic. What do I even say to him?”
“Whatever you want to,” Charles assured, starting to help him out of his clothes. “Scream and shout at him if it’ll help. Sit in silence for an hour. Demand to know why he left. Anything at all, darling.”

“I love you,” he vowed. “I love you so much. And I would never, ever leave you and the kids. Charles, I swear—”

“Hush,” he soothed, kissing him. “I know you wouldn’t. You would never do that to us, I know that. So you don’t need to assure me of it. There’s no need. What is needed is some sleep. Come on, love, come get some sleep. It’ll all seem much more clear in the morning.”

Erik let him finish stripping him down to his boxers, and tuck him in and cuddle him close.

When Max woke for his 2am feed, Erik got up to him, and spent the whole time tracing his tiny green features. His son was so perfect, so utterly indescribable. If Jacob had felt the same intense burning fierce need to protect his children that Erik felt for Max and Tabitha, then why had he left? What was so terrible he had to abandon three children?

Tabitha found Charles stretched out on the floor with Max beside him on his tummy. Charles was telling him the story of Goldilocks.

“Hey, Charles?”


“Try Rapunzel, works for me.”

“Thank you,” he said. He sat up and picked up Max, handing him to Tabitha. The baby wiggled and waved his jerky little arms, their tails entwining. “Was there something on your mind?”

“I was talking to Frankie online,” she said, efficiently disentangling her hair from a green fist. “His
school breaks up for Spring Break next week, same as mine. I was wondering if he could come stay for a few days.”

“I don’t see a problem with it, but what do his parents think?”

“He hasn’t told them,” she admitted. “He’s 18 now, so he doesn’t need their permission to go.”

“But I assume it will be their credit cards that pay for the flight.”

“He got in to Julliard,” she said. “On a full scholarship. His parents haven’t spoken to him since he told them.”

“Oh dear,” he tutted. “It’s a very good school, he must be terribly talented to get in. They should be proud of him.”

“I know, I agree completely. See, here’s the thing. When we were talking about this at the vineyard, I told him you’d help him if he really wanted to go. And then this little guy happened and it got pushed to the back of my mind. He wants to come and talk to you about it all.”

“Ah, I see. You’ve found me another mutant teen to help,” he said with a smile.

She followed him to the kitchen, Max gumming at her hair.

“That can’t taste good, Maxie,” she said, tugging it from his fist. She gave him one of his rubbery rings of beads for teething and he set to gumming those instead. He was too young to be teething, but he put absolutely everything he could get his little hands on straight into his mouth.

“How’s he going to live while he’s going to school here in New York?” Charles asked, pulling out the cookies.

“First years live in the campus housing.”

“And his living expenses?”
“See, that’s where the problems happen. You’re all mature and experienced. We were hoping you could help him out with figuring it all out.”

Charles thought it over as he nibbled at a few cookies. Max watched interestedly as Tabitha nibbled on her own, tugging at her tail with his and chomping on his ring of beads.

“I suppose it wouldn’t be a bad thing, having him visit. I’ll book him a ticket if you get me his dates. He can stay for five days, give him plenty of time to get here and back for school. He can have one of the guest rooms. And I’m sure his gift can take care of that disaster we have for a garden.”

“Thanks, Charles. You rock,” she said, smiling hugely.

“Oh! I know! I’ll call Juilliard, see if we can’t get a tour or something.”

“Charles, you are the most awesome dude on the planet.”

It was a neutral place, the diner, but Erik wished he was once again meeting Sam.

He was waiting for Jacob.

Steve was perfectly capable running the store for an hour or so, and Charles was happily working away on some new avenue of research on his book, and Max was perfectly content by Charles’ side. Tabitha was at school, Anya was at school, David was at work, Edie was with Bubbe.

Erik was a grown ass man with a husband and children and a thriving business. He didn’t need anyone to hold his hand. But he was still nervous as hell when Jacob actually arrived.

[Easy, my love.] Charles soothed. [Just give him the chance to talk. Just talking, nothing more.]
“Erik,” Jacob said, hovering by the table Erik had chosen. He waited until Erik motioned to the chair before he sat down. “Thank you for calling.”

“Yeah. I figured we should talk.”

“Of course. Was there something specific you wanted to talk about? I read in the papers that you got married, and that you have two children. I never expected grandchildren.”

“They’re not your grandchildren,” he said firmly. “No. I won’t let you into their lives, not when I can’t be sure you won’t disappoint them.”

“I understand.”

“Look, I just want one thing,” he said, and then stopped as the waitress joined them

“No baby today?” she asked, disappointed.

“No, not today.”

“Oh well, maybe tomorrow. What can I get you fellas?”

“Just a coffee,” Erik said.

“The same,” Jacob said.

She nodded and smiled before she moved away. Erik and Jacob waited to talk until she had set the drinks down and left them to it.

“I can probably guess at what you want,” Jacob said. “I’ve said I’m sorry. I’m not sure anything I
say will satisfy you any more than that.”

“You think I want apologies? No. That’s not what I want. I want to know why you left us,” Erik demanded. “I was fifteen, David was five and Anya wasn’t even born yet. Mom loved you so much, you broke her heart when you left. You destroyed her, tore our family apart. I want to know why.”

“Erik, it’s…complicated.”

“Complicated? No, it’s really not. My high school graduation, you missed it. My first boyfriend. I taught David to shave, because you weren’t there. I was the one who got all choked up on Anya’s first day of school. David is going to graduate from college a whole year early, with honours, did you know that? Poppa died, did you know that? How about my son’s name, or my daughter’s, or my husband. Anya manipulates ink, David manipulates glass. You weren’t there. Birthdays and holidays and family gatherings. Bar mitzvah’s and bat mitzvah’s and my son’s bris. Why the hell weren’t you there for any of it? Fifteen years, I deserve to know why you walked out on us, it’s the very least I deserve from you.”

Jacob stared at him, open mouthed, as he processed all that had been said. The space between them was filled with all the pain Jacob had caused, all the things he’d missed, all the responsibilities Erik had taken on.

Jacob took a deep breath. “I’m an alcoholic,” he mumbled. “I’m an alcoholic and an addict. I left because I wasn’t any good for any of you.”

Erik rocked back in his seat, staring at him.

“How long have you been an addict?” he asked eventually.

“Twenty years.”

“And an alcoholic? When did that start?”

“You were five.”
“The whole time…” he breathed. “Did mom know?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Erik took a deep breath. “Did you bring it home?”

“What?”

“The drugs, whatever it was you were taking. Did you ever bring it home where David could have found it? Did you bring that shit into our home?”

“Yes,” he whispered. “Erik, I’m not proud of myself.”

“Good. You put him at risk, you should be so far from proud. Damn it, what if he had gotten into that! If he’d gotten hold of whatever shit it was, he could have been killed! How could you be so stupid!”

“I know all this. But I’m clean now. I can be there for you now.”

Erik bypassed that part, not ready to acknowledge it had even been said. “How long have you been completely clean and sober?”

“About five years. I had to work up to contacting you. It’s been a long road here. Part of my recovery is apologising to everyone I hurt.”

“And we’re on the shortlist.”

“No, actually you’re at the end of a very long list. Because I know that there aren’t people in the world I hurt more than the four of you. I disappointed you, I let you down, and I am so sorry for that.”

“Shut up,” Erik demanded. “Just…shut up.”
[Charles!]

[Erik, I’m here. Take a deep breath, come on, nice and deep. That’s it.] Charles rumbled through, finding what Jacob had told him. [Oh my. Speaking as someone who loves you all very much, I’m rather glad he didn’t stay. You all didn’t have to deal with his addictions.]

[That’s a good point. But, on the other hand, he brought that shit into our home! David was five when he left, which means there were plenty of chances for my brother to get his hands on it.]

[That is a bad point, this is true.]

[All I want to do right now is hit him.]

[No, don’t do that. Just calm down.]

Charles pushed the current image of Max into his head. The green baby was laying on a blanket on the office floor, wriggling and kicking and generally having a whale of a time, his jerky arms waving as he tried to grab the toys suspended from the baby gym above him.

[Wow, he’s getting a workout.]

[Quite. Feel better?] Charles asked. Erik watched as Charles’ hand stroked the rounded little tummy and Max automatically clung onto it with his tail.

[Loads. I’m calmer now. Talk in a bit.]

Charles pulled back from his mind, taking Max with him, leaving Erik sitting in the diner.

“I sat up that night as my brother and my mother cried themselves to sleep,” Erik said. “I can’t forgive you, it’s not possible. But I guess I can try. I’m not calling you dad, there will be no hugs, and you will go nowhere near my children or husband until I’m ready. The second you touch drink or drugs, I walk away and you never get another chance. This is it, this is all you get.”
Jacob looked so relieved.

“Thank you, Erik. Really. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

Erik grabbed his coat and stood, throwing a few dollars on the table.

“I have some idea. Don’t fuck this up.”

Frankie arrived in New York late Friday night, was picked up by Erik, and passed out in the guest room he was directed to. He was woken by Tabitha knocking in the morning.


She had a green baby in her arms and was already dressed. The ugliest bulldog he’d ever seen followed her unevenly on three legs.

“Good morning,” she said, climbing onto the bed and laying the baby on the duvet, the dog sitting and waiting patiently on the rug.

“Hey. What time’s it?” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

“A little past eight. We thought you might like to come to the Centre with us,” she said, wiggling tiny toes.

“Hi, little guy,” he said, and Max turned at the sound of his voice. “He’s adorable.”

“This is Max.”
“Hello, Max. Sure, I’ll come to the Centre.”

She left him to wash and dress and met him at the front door with a breakfast sandwich. He ate as they walked and he found himself pulled into the backyard of the Centre by Bobby and Scott. The dog, who was called Bailey, went with them and happily played fetch with the boys.

Tabitha’s world was amazing. No one discouraged her dreams, not one person said she had no hope of a successful future. No one looked disappointedly at her. Her friends were cool, and her boyfriend. The penthouse was beautiful, baby Max was awesome. Even the tripod dog was amazing.

Could Charles and Erik adopt him too?

“Oh!” Charles squeaked as Frankie accepted a turkey sandwich from him. “Oh, dear.”

“What? What’s wrong?” Frankie asked.

“Oh, Frankie, my dear boy. I think you’re a little too old for us to adopt.”

“Crap, you heard that!?”

“I promise you, I didn’t mean to,” he assured, going pink.

“It’s fine, really. You’re a telepath, it’s normal for you. I just…didn’t think you’d hear that. And I know 18 is too old to be adopted. It was just a stray thought.”

Charles nodded and beckoned him to follow. He led Frankie into his office and motioned to the spare chair.

“Tabitha has told me some of it,” Charles said. “That your parents don’t approve of dancing as a career. She says you would like some advice on how to proceed, yes?”

“Yeah, if that’s okay,” he said, picking at his sandwich. “I’ve got a full scholarship, which is
awesome. But New York…it’s a big city, expensive. I don’t know how I’m going to live here. Hey, maybe Erik could give me a job?”

“Yes, that is an option,” he said. “He’s always in need of extra help in the store. If you feel that it would be the best option for you. Also, there is the possibility of student loans and grants. We can collect the paperwork for them when we visit Juilliard on Tuesday, fill them out, see if you’re entitled to any of them. As another option, I could also fund you until you’re working, and you pay me back.”

“Seriously? You’d loan me the money?”

“Yes. We’d draw up an agreement and all that grown up stuff of course, just to make sure we keep track of it all. But I don’t see why I couldn’t fund you for a while. I have the funds, it might as well go to someone who deserves a helping hand.”

“I thought Tabs was bullshitting me when she said you’d offer that,” he said. “But you really are that cool.”

“Goodness! I don’t think I’ve ever been called cool in my life,” he giggled.

“You are very cool,” Tabitha said from the doorway. Max was in her arms. “He’s fussy and grizzly. I think he wants you.”

He took Max from her and cuddled him close. He wriggled in his arms and pressed his ear to Charles’ chest. Once he heard his heartbeat, he settled, little fingers gripping at his sweater.

Tabitha smiled at them before she retreated, leaving them to talk.

“I just don’t get why my parents are so against this,” Frankie sighed. “Okay, so it’s not what they’d pick, but I’m good at it, and I enjoy it. Why isn’t that enough for them to support me?”

“I think they’re probably a little worried about your future. Perhaps they would like more security for you than a career in the arts. It can be a rather uncertain business.”
“But a career is possible.”

“Oh, yes, entirely. I just think they’re cautious. It’s not a bad thing. We all only want the best for our children.”

“I guess. I just wish they’d listen.”

“Give them time. When they see this is something that means so very much to you, they’ll probably come around. Until then, we’ll take care of things.”

“Charles, why does Aunt Simone think you’re the anti-Christ?” he asked. “She talks about you like you’re the devil. Mom’s not your biggest fan either.”

“Well, I’m not particularly fond of Simone either,” he said diplomatically. “I reserve judgement on Arielle. But Simone and I…I suspect we shall never get along.”

“She said something really offensive?”

“She thinks she should have custody of Tabitha. We had a disagreement on the subject.”

“Oh. Now I get it. She hates being argued with. It’s a thing. You disagree and automatically shoot to the top of her sh- stuff list.”

“Nice save,” Charles praised with a grin, managing to eat his lunch onehandedly. “My opinion of it is this. Tabitha is my daughter, and until she herself tells me she would rather live with someone else, I shall continue on in exactly the same way I have been.”

“See! Reasonable thinking! Maybe my parents could take lessons.”

“It’s a very useful skill.”
Sunday and Monday were amazing, in Frankie’s opinion.

Sunday was spent at Bubbe’s house, and it was the most at home Frankie had felt in his life. Even at home he didn’t feel so surrounded by affection.

Charles was now fairly convinced there was some sort of mutation going on to pull people in and smother them with love. Maybe it was something to do with Bubbe’s mutation. She was an empath, able to sense emotions. Maybe she could project them too. She wanted people to feel safe and loved, so they did.

Monday, Frankie went with Erik to the store, helping out and having the time of his life. Tabitha made dinner that night, and he decided to never tell his mother that her fried chicken was dry as a bone compared to Tabitha’s. The girl had some serious kitchen skills and would be an awesome grandma one day.

Tuesday saw Charles leaving Max with Erik for the day, Tabitha off to an art workshop she’d signed up to months before, and Frankie following the professor into a cab.

The Juilliard School was the premiere educational institution in the world for dance, music and drama. The facilities and teaching were second to none, and the fact that Frankie had a full scholarship for his years at Juilliard spoke highly of his talent.

The campus was bright and modern, clean lines, large windows and new brick. Green lawns softened it some, along with water features and modern art sculptures.

They were met by a blond boy called Jason, who was about to graduate the Juilliard Dance Division. He led them around, showing them the dance studios and performance spaces of the actual school, and then he led them to the residence halls. These could only be accessed by a single bridge from the campus, and required an ID card to get you through the turnstiles. The elevator then took them up to the eleventh floor, where there was another security point, and then elevators to the individual floors.

Each suite was shared by seven students. Five bedrooms, two singles and three doubles, and Frankie expressed a desire for a single, which Jason noted down. There were three bathrooms per suite, and a lounge with possible the very best views in the city.
The building had several lounges available to all students, equipped with pool and ping pong tables. A full gym took up a floor, health services were on site, and a cafeteria. The front desks were staffed every day from nine AM to midnight to answer any questions.

It really was perfect for an eighteen year old living away from home for the first time.

After the tour, they went to see Peter Rasputin and one of his fellow lawyers to set up the financial agreement between Charles and Frankie.

That evening, after dinner, once Tabitha and Frankie had settled themselves in the movie room and Erik was happily playing with Max, Charles called Arielle and let her know what had happened during the trip. No matter their differences, they both wanted the best for Frankie.

“Charles, I want my son to be happy,” she said. “But this can’t possibly be a good career for him.”

“The people at the school seem to think so. They have a proven track record of getting their dancers employment after they graduate,” he promised.

“What if he’s one of the few who doesn’t make it?”

“Then that will be his issue to deal with. Arielle, my dear, he is almost all grown. He has decided this is what he wants and he’s talented and determined enough to earn it. You have to give him the chance.”

“No, Charles, I can’t support this. He’s making a huge mistake.”

“But it is his mistake to make,” Charles argued. “Arielle, if you keep on like this, you will alienate your son. He is dead set on this, and he will do what he has to to get it.”

“Oh, Charles! I just want to keep him safe!”

“I promise, he will be perfectly safe here,” he assured. “We’ll keep an eye on him, Erik and I. And he’s grown awfully close to Tabitha, and her friends. The student accommodations really are top notch, very comfortable, very secure. And once his first year is over, he could move in with us. Or,
if he would prefer, we do have the old apartment. He could live there.”

She sighed and his heart went out to her. He couldn’t imagine his darling girl moving across a continent away from him. Or his tiny little Max going off to do grown up things, too big for cuddles from daddy and vati.

“They grow so fast,” he said gently. “I’m sure soon enough it shall be me having all these worries for Tabitha. Or, God help me, my little bean. But Frankie…I know it seems far too soon for him to be going off to college. But he is ready for it. He’s all grown, ready to make his way in the world. And if you keep trying to stop it, he will only resent you for it.”

“I still don’t think dancing will provide a stable enough future for him,” she grumbled. “But I suppose, if he really has to move all the way to New York…I mean, why New York! It’s one of the most dangerous cities in the world. All those cars and angry people. Muggings, and assaults and…”

“We will keep him as safe as we are possibly able.”

“He’s my little boy,” she whispered.

“Yes, he is, and he shall forever be. But he is ready for this.”

“You’ll keep him safe, Charles? Really and truly?”

“As safe as I can.”

“Oh, all right!” she moaned. “He can go. But no drinking! No drugs! No sleepovers with girls! He will eat healthily and have good night’s sleep and take care of himself. He will not get a tattoo or piercing on any part of his body, and especially not places he can’t show in polite company.”

“I’m noting it all down, I’ll make the rules clear.”

“He calls me at least once a week,” she babbled, and Charles knew this conversation would happen between her and Frankie at least two dozen times before he actually left for college. “And he’ll call
you at least once a day. And if he’s going to do this then he will pass. He will get top marks, to the best of his abilities. And if he doesn’t get a job at the end of this, he will go to business school and not complain once.”

“Alright, I’ll be sure to pass all that on.”

“Good. Right. Good night, Charles.”

“Good night, my dear.”

He hung up and chuckled to himself. If she didn’t try to move to New York with Frankie, Charles would eat his doctorate. One of them anyway.

Charles watched from the French doors of his suite as Frankie poked at their sorry excuse for a garden.

It was a fair size, and had probably once been a wonderful garden. There were roses and flowers and a few bushes. There was a tree right in the middle, and someone had obviously cared enough to have the pathways laid and the raised beds built.

But the roses were all dead, the branches brown and brittle. The bushes were all overgrown and the flowers had been choked to death by weeds. The tree was overgrown and straggly. The paths were dirty and Erik had already needed to repair the metal corners of the raised beds.

Charles watched as Frankie cleared a space at the base of the tree, just big enough for his hands to sink into the soil. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly, and brought the tree to life. Green surged up the trunk, leaving a trail of living bark as it went. The dead leaves fell off, fresh green ones shooting out, and the trailing overgrown branches and twigs fell off, leaving a healthy happy tree.

He shook out his hands and moved on, doing each bush in turn, until there was a collection of Pokemon in foliage. Charles would have preferred real animals but he wasn’t the gardener. The weeds died off under Frankie’s power, and the flowers bloomed anew, bright green and colourful buds.
The roses received the same treatment, and then Frankie held out his hands, pushing at the dead plants until they were all swept up in a neat pile. He gathered it into a basket and over to the compost box Erik had bought. Once that was all done, Frankie went over to the new empty planters and sprouted a load of vegetables. They’d grow through the summer, and provide Tabitha with new produce for her recipes.

Come summer it would be glorious. Charles envisioned a patio set, table and chairs for outdoor dining when the weather was nice. Toys for Max as he grew. He was sure they could fit a slide and maybe a little swing set.

“Let him finish it first,” Erik murmured, coming up to watch with Max drifting off in his arms.

“I will. I’m just thinking.”

“He’s a good kid,” Erik said. “Think he’ll handle living in New York?”

“I think he’ll be absolutely fine.”

Frankie went home on the Friday, and Tabitha went back to school on the Monday. Tuesday Erik and Charles went in to meet with the guidance counsellor.

“Are you sure he didn’t say what he wanted?” Erik asked. He picked up Max when he began to fuss and bounced him while Charles dug out the warmed bottle.

“Not a clue. Want me to feed him?” he said, fastening the bib.

“No, I’ve got it. Hey, little guy. Time for lunch. Come on, vati’s got you,” he crooned, cuddling him close and offering the bottle. Max latched on and suckled like he’d never been fed before.

“One of these days, he’s going to choke,” Charles said, chuckling. “Anyone would think we
starved the child.”

“Healthy appetite, healthy boy,” Erik said, grinning.

They were sat in the corridor outside the counsellors office, waiting to go in. They were supposed to be in there a hour before, but the counsellor was behind schedule.

“You know what this reminds me of?” Charles asked.

“No, what?” Erik said, detaching Max so he could burp him.

“Being sent to the principal’s office when I punched Grayson Tomkins in my senior year.”

“Oh yeah? Why’d you punch him?”

“He was being a peeping Tom in the girls locker room, so I reported him. He confronted me by my locker, insinuated some choice phrases, and I took offence.”

“Sounds like he deserved it, if you ask me.”

“Yes, quite.”

The door opened and out came a sullen looking teenage boy, followed by a scowling African American man.

“I swear, Jack, you do anything like this again and I will not hesitate to expel you,” the man said and Jack shrugged. “Get out of here, back to class.”

The boy sloped off, shuffling in that way teenage boys have. The man sighed before he looked at Charles and Erik and smiled.
“Professor Xavier, Mr Lehnsherr, I am so sorry to keep you waiting.”

His office was crammed with papers and files, paperwork covering every surface and a laptop open on the desk. The smell of coffee lingered in the air and the chairs were worn and comfortable. Charles and Erik settled in the waiting seats and smiled to themselves as the counsellor sorted through the stacks, looking for Tabitha’s papers.

“Ah, here we go,” he said. “Okay, down into it. Nice to meet you both. I’m Sam Wilson, one of the guidance counsellors here at the school.”

“I’m Charles, this is Erik, and this is Max,” he said, shaking his hand.

“Sorry to interrupt lunch.”

“Not a problem, he’s portable,” Erik joked. “I thought you were the guidance counsellor for the middle school.”

“I am. There are two of us and we alternate weeks. I’m here one week while he’s there, and then we switch, and repeat. If one of us is sick, or needs some time off, there’s the other to cover the slack. We find it helps with transition too, to be in both schools. When the kids transfer here, there’s already one face they know.”

“Forgive me, but we’re not entirely sure why we’re here,” Charles said.

“Sorry, I thought I put that in my message. I wanted to talk to you both about Tabitha, about her academic performance. We’re noticing some things I think you need to be aware of. She’s not in any trouble, I just thought there should be a conversation.”

They looked at each other and then back at Sam.

“Okay. Hit us with it,” Erik said.

“Well, Tabitha is very bright, she’s popular, she’s transitioned so well. She’s got friends, she’s liked by her teachers. All good things. However, we’re noticing a problem with her test scores.”
He handed over a maths test to Charles.

“I don’t understand. This says she got 100%. That’s good, isn’t it?”

He handed four more. History, English, Biology, Algebra. All of them had 100% written at the top in bright red pen.

“She’s achieved complete top marks for every test she’s taken since September. We noticed it in middle school, but it’s not so uncommon. These things usually level out, there’s more to challenge them in high school. But she’s not being challenged.”

“You’re saying this is all too easy,” Erik said. “She’s top of every class? Every one?”

“Every single one save gym. And even then, the coach is worried about her. She’s too flexible, it’s making it difficult for her to participate in lessons. But she is participating, so it’s not too big a concern.”

“Right, let’s slow this down,” Charles said. “One thing at a time. First things first, the test scores. If the classes are too easy, then what is the solution to this…issue?”

“I would like to skip Tabitha a grade. Ordinarily, she would be moving into her Sophomore year in September. I feel it would benefit her to move straight into her Junior year, then onto her Senior and graduate a year early.”

“But that would take her away from the friends she’s made,” Erik said.

“Actually, she spends the most social time with the teens in the year above her. Katherine Pryde, Scott Summers, Kurt Wagner, Jean Grey. She’d be in their classes and graduate with them.”

“Would the lessons challenge her?” Charles asked.

“I think so,” Sam said. “Nothing is guaranteed, not with teenagers. But I think this would give her
the best chance of succeeding.”

“What about college?” Erik asked. “She’s already one of the youngest in her year. If she skips, she won’t be eighteen until the end of her first year of college. She’s talking about art school.”

“And she can still have that,” Sam promised. “We will help her with applications, tuition, student housing, whatever. Tabitha is a very special girl, I just want her to reach her full potential.”

Erik and Charles preened under the praise, sharing a smile.

“Ah, see, I thought that would get you smiling. She is an incredible young woman. She’s popular, bright, dedicated, and very talented. Her art is very striking. Mr Guerin, our art teacher, is very impressed. He doesn’t think there will be any trouble with her securing a place at any school of her choosing.”

“That’s all good and well,” Charles said. “But I feel that there is more. Something not so good.”

“I take it you’re the telepath,” he said with a smile before he sobered. “You’re right, there are some things giving me cause for concern. Tabitha is very humble, beyond humble really. She never takes credit for anything, never acknowledges her own successes. She always pins it on luck or having a good day.”

“Yes, we are aware.”

“I feel she could benefit from maybe taking to someone, working on some of the self-esteem issues she has.”

“We’ve offered,” Erik said. “But she doesn’t want to.” He sighed and handed Max to Charles. “Look, can we be honest here? I mean, is this confidential?”

“Absolutely.”

“The truth is Richard fucked her up,” he said bluntly. “He had sole custody of her for almost five years, and in those years he destroyed any confidence she had. Anything she did was not good
enough for him. We know she’s got some issues, some problems. And we’re working on them. She’s already a lot better than she was.”

“Erik, I’m not judging. I think the two of you are amazing parents to a very special girl. I just wanted to check in, make sure you were aware, try to help and make things easier. If you feel you don’t need help, that’s fine. I just wanted to make sure you knew the offer was there.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I guess I’m protective.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with that,” Charles assured. He was holding the eight week old on his knee, fingers spread to support his head, and Max was happily gumming on the end of his tail, watching Sam with fascination. Someone new, someone not his parents. Absolutely fascinating.

“No, nothing wrong with it,” Sam promised. “In fact, I wish a few more parents were a little more interested in their children. Trust me, this is the kind of meeting I like.”

“I can imagine,” Charles said. “So apart from the academic issues, she’s doing alright?”

“Absolutely.”

“How do we skip her a grade?”

“You take this form, fill it out, sign it, and return it to me. Tabitha needs to sign it too. Then I handle it from there.”

They chatted for a little while on how Tabitha was doing, and then Sam cracked and asked if he could hold Max. The baby was ecstatic to be held by him and wriggled like a worm, tail swishing.

Sam melted, becoming a vaguely human shaped pile of goo. It never failed to amuse Charles how grown men, who claimed to be tough as they come, would melt when faced with a baby.

Tabitha joined them when her class ended and they all agreed on the skip, filling in the form there and then.
Tabitha was a special girl, and the two men would do whatever they needed to, to make sure she got everything she deserved.

Erik returned home late after dinner with Jacob.

It was Anya who wanted to have dinner with him, but she didn’t want to go alone, and their mother didn’t want her alone either. Erik, being the eldest, went with her. Plus, David was still adamant about not having any contact, and they all respected that.

“How was it?” Charles asked.

Erik sank down onto the bed and pulled off his shoes.

“Food was good, Anya was mature, conversation was tougher than your last attempt at a steak.”

“Funny,” Charles said with a grin. “Any clue when you’ll next see him?”

“No. We left it all open ended.”

Charles crawled across the mattress and draped himself across Erik’s back, nuzzling his neck. Erik moaned and tilted his head back, sighing as Charles began to unbutton his shirt.

“Should I be getting my hopes up here? Because it feels like I should, maybe, be thinking this is something.”

“I should hope so, after nine weeks. Not to mention how long it was before he was born,” Charles said. He took an earlobe between his teeth and tugged, pulling the shirt out of his trousers and down his arms. “I got an erection this morning,” he whispered.
“Holy shit. Really?”

“Yes. I put Maxie down for his nap and went for a shower and it just…came up.” He stroked his hands down his chest, tickling gentle fingertips over Erik’s nipples.

Erik bit his lip and flipped around, capturing Charles’ mouth in a bruising kiss, forcing his tongue inside. Charles moaned and wrapped his arms around his shoulders, surrendering with a smile.

[So long,] Erik said, licking at his neck as he pushed up Charles’ t-shirt. He had to detach to pull it off him completely, but he was straight back in, lips around a nipple, which made Charles squeak.

[Too long,] Charles agreed, his hands finding Erik’s belt and making short work of it.

They rolled so Charles could remove Erik’s pants and his own before he reached into the nightstand for the lube and condoms.

“Did I get the right ones?” he asked, holding out the box. “I confess, it’s been a while since I’ve bought them for myself.”

“Yeah, they’re right,” he promised, ripping open the cardboard and taking a foil square. “Sure about this? Because we don’t have to. We can do other things. We’ll still get off.”

“No, I want this,” he purred, stroking Erik’s erection, “inside me.”

Erik half moaned half laughed before arching up to kiss him, flipping them again so he was on top. He kissed down the flesh beneath him, licking and nipping. He suckled nipples, and nuzzled his belly, and then licked a stripe across his caesarean scar, kissing it.

“Erik, please, not tonight,” Charles begged. “Not your mouth on me, I can’t take it. Please?”

Erik pressed a kiss to his hip and surged forwards, covering the smaller man and kissing him hard. He popped open the lube and prepped Charles. He worked fast but carefully, desperate to be inside him but mindful of the fact that it had been months since he had last breached the tight ring.
“Erik, please,” he begged, breathless, gripping at his hair and giving desperate kisses. “Please. Please.”

“Shhh, I’ve got you,” he promised, rolling on the condom. “Quiet. Don’t wake Max.”

[I promise. Just fuck me. Please.]

Erik sealed their mouths together, slicked himself and eased into the tight heat. He had to stop when he was fully seated as the pure sensation slammed through him.

[Charles…]

[I know. Take your time, darling.]

Charles stroked his shoulders, drawing patterns on the skin of his back. Eventually Erik was ready to move and began to rock into him, his thighs squeezing his waist.

[Erik…]

[I know.] he said, thrusting harder, panting into Charles’ shoulder.

It was incredible, the pleasure coursing through him, the feel of Charles beneath him. Charles gripped his hair and clawed at his back, his teeth sinking into the meat of his shoulder.

Charles thrust back to meet him, shifting to get the sensation he so desperately wanted. He jerked when Erik hit his prostate, pure pleasure shooting up his spine. He gasped, his mind a chant of begging.

Erik regretted that he wouldn’t last, because the pleasure was sensational, but he just couldn’t hold on, couldn’t stretch it out. It had been too long.
[It’s okay. I’m almost there. Just touch me, darling.] Charles said.

Erik worked a hand between them, his hips thrusting on their own without his conscious thought. He worked Charles hard and fast, using the leftover lube to smooth the way, until Charles shuddered under him, a high almost panicked whine coming from him as he spilled.

Erik gasped as the pressure around him kicked up, and buried his mouth against Charles’ skin so he didn’t scream. He felt himself collapse, listing to the side.

They were tangled, legs entwined, arms still around each other, a sweaty content mess, and neither of them would ever have it any other way.

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Chapter End Notes

What did you think?

Kudos and comments feed the author. Flames will be used to roast marshmallows.
Time passed, and soon enough they were in June and the day of David’s graduation. He was given two tickets to the ceremony, which went to Erik and Edie. Charles and Tabitha took Erik’s car to the house and set up for the party, with little Max happy to sit and cuddle Bubbe. He was the happiest baby Erik and Charles had ever come across, even Clint Barton said he was the happiest little guy. He rarely fussed, ate like a champ and was sleeping through the night completely.

“That looks wonderful, darling,” Charles praised as he set down a tray of drinks. People were starting to arrive, milling around, and Erik had texted to say they were almost there.

“Thank you. Do you think he’ll like it?” Tabitha worried, adjusting the cake she’d made.

Eight tiers of vanilla cake with chocolate buttercream filling, a blue fondant coating, piped frequency diagrams around the sides, and topped with a graduation cap made of chocolate.

“If he doesn’t, he can’t hold Max.”

She was still giggling five minutes later when the man of the hour arrived and the party started.

“Wow,” David said, looking at the cake. “Must have cost a fortune. How long ago did you have to order this?”

“Tabs made it,” Erik said, and David’s eyebrows shot up, looking across the room at the pink haired girl.

“Seriously? Holy shit. She should charge.”

Erik blinked. “I hadn’t thought of that. Summer job. She could bake stuff and we could sell them in the store.”
“No,” he said, joining them with Max gumming on his ring of teething beads. “Something on your mind?”

“David suggested Tabitha charge for her baking. What do you think? She could sell them in the store.”

“It’s a thought. But I thought it might be better to enable her to make prints of her artwork and sell those.” He scanned the crowd. “Tabitha! Darling!”

She smiled as she joined them and cuddled into Erik’s side.

“This cake is a thing of beauty,” David said and she blushed. “I’m serious, it’s a work of art.”

“Which gave us an idea,” Erik said. “David suggested selling some of your baked goods, but Charles thinks prints of your art would be better. So I thought we could try it over the summer, maybe with some of your smaller pieces, some prints.”

“Sell them? Where? And how do I go about making prints?” she asked, twining her tail with Max’s and making him squeal.

“I’m sure we could find a print shop that could help. Or Stark could figure something out. As for selling them, we could offer them in the store. We could have a display of them, just a few to start out with. How would you feel about that?”

“Can I think about it?”

“Of course, darling,” Charles assured. “It was just a thought we had. We don’t have to if you’d rather not.”

“What if they don’t sell?”
“Then we’ll know for sure if this is a path that won’t work,” Erik said. “The prints is only one way to sell your art. If this doesn’t work, we can try another way.”

She smiled and accepted Max when he reached for her. “Okay. We’ll give it a shot.”

They first took a look through Tabitha’s artwork. Charles set to the canvasses, large poster-size pieces and pieces in her sketchbooks, picking out his favourites.

It didn’t slim it down any.

Charles loved looking through them all, seeing her very early work and how far she’d come. Even in her earlier pieces, he could see the raw talent. With the progression of her art, he could see where she’d learnt new things and refined her techniques. There was just so much art, so many different styles, tweaking of techniques, practice of the same thing over and over until it was exactly how she wanted it. Studies of pen, pencil, paints, chalk pastels, inks. Printouts of a few digital pieces but not very many. Years of experimentation and practice.

The years had probably come with Richard isolating her, but Charles didn’t want to dwell on that. Tabitha was his daughter now, and he would never let her be treated that way again.

Erik going through them didn’t help either. They simply couldn’t decide which ones would work best. In the end, Kurt was the one to pick. He chose three canvasses, three poster-size, and three sketchbook pictures.

The canvasses were landscapes. The first was the New York skyline at sunset, the second Bubbe’s house in the snow with the St. Bernard standing at the door, and the third the vineyard, wide open vistas of blue sky. They were all oils, done in high realism. They had each taken her weeks to complete.

The poster-size were more surreal. The first was a study of hands, the hands of the people in her life, all reaching in from the edge of the canvas to hold a double helix made of glass, covered in a spider-web of cracks. The second was a menorah with different coloured flames, each flame holding a shadow of a person within it, the background showing smoke and barbed wire. The third was Max, but not in detail. He was a vague outline, as if seen through smeared glasses, held within
an anatomically correct heart. These were acrylic and watercolour with some fine pen work for detail.

The three from the sketchbooks were all cartoons, done in alcohol marker and coloured pencil. The first was a dog version of Erik and a cat version of Charles, curled around each other. Cat-Charles was a fluffy little kitty curled up on a cardigan, with Dog-Erik standing tall and proud with a pair of pliers in his teeth. The second was a pair of milkshakes dancing together with cute little faces and little stick legs. The third was Max, chewing on one of Charles’ genetics textbooks, his tail wound around a bottle of milk. His bright blue eyes were huge and Charles kept cooing at it.

All but the cartoon pieces were done in a specific style, with very soft outlines but strong colour work, which gave them a somewhat dreamlike quality.

They took them to Tony, who had high quality scanners designed for scanning blueprints and other technical specs. He scanned them all in high resolution and stored them on JARVIS’ main server before giving them a memory stick with them on. He decided to make over the website for the store, and disappeared for a day and a half before emerging to show them.

The new website was clean and sharp, clear images of products, prices, a section on Erik’s professional biography and a history of the store, and a section for Tabitha’s art, with a small bio of her, so people knew what they were buying. The whole site was streamlined and easy to use, which would make it far better. There was also now an option to buy certain things online, things that Erik or some other family member had made that were lying in storage. The store carried a lot of standard pieces that could be bought off the shelf, things that were created in bulk, and some that could be customised very easily. A gem here, and engraving there. One of a kind pieces made in a flash. It was a nice addition to the website to be able to offer customisation.

It was decided that they would use the same printers that Erik used for his business fliers and posters. They had 50 of each piece printed. 20 as large prints of 16 by 23 inches, 20 as a smaller print of 9 by 12 inches, and 10 as standard size greetings cards. It took a half a day of testing different print settings before they placed their order, and made sure to specify that they may need another print run.

They had a few final things printed. Nine display prints for the walls, to show people what was on offer, a chart of the sizes offered and the price, and a poster showing the artist and her links, so people could look her up to find her other pieces.

Tabitha had set up an account on Redbubble, a website that would print anything she uploaded a file of, onto anything people wanted. T-shirts, notebooks, home décor, anything. It was completely free to upload her stuff, and they would send her the profits of what they sold. It had a larger selection of her art, so people could order what they liked.
She also had a new Instagram and YouTube, to connect with people who might want to buy her work. JARVIS was editing her videos until she got the hang of it. She sent him the footage and he created time-lapse videos of her art being created. She didn’t believe it would be worth it but she did it anyway at Charles’ urging. Tabitha didn’t think she’d sell anything and Erik had to squash down the urge to catch a flight so he could beat the hell out of Richard.

“A little higher on the left, you’re skew-whiff,” Charles directed, bouncing Max.

“How’s that?” Erik asked.

“Perfect.”

Tabitha chewed at her thumbnail.

Charles cuddled her with his free arm. “It looks good, doesn’t it?” He motioned to the display prints, the stock ready to go, the packaging for it.

“It’s a lot,” she said. “I mean, like, a lot.”

“Actually, it’s not,” Steve said. “It’s a really limited run, as far as art prints go.”

“But it’s…”

“Stop,” Erik demanded, climbing down from his stepladder. “If I didn’t want to spend the money on this, then I wouldn’t have. I wanted to do this. Tabby, you have a lot of talent. And you’ve made a lot of art. Why not do something with it?”

“What if no one buys anything?” she whispered. “What if no one wants it?”

“Seriously?” Tony asked. “Have you seen some of the crap people hang on their walls?”
“Tony!” Charles said.

“What! I’m just saying, there’s a market for everything. And these. Hell, I’ve got these on my walls.”

“What?”

“I figured you wouldn’t mind,” he said. “JARVIS likes them. We put them up in my workshop and the gym.”

“I’ve got the landscapes in my art room,” Steve offered. “I was kind of wondering if you take requests.”

“Requests?” she asked, stunned.

“Yeah, like commissions? I’d pay you.”

“Pay me? For what?”

“A painting of Brooklyn. Maybe the skyline or a street or something. I grew up in Brooklyn, and I’d like something of it. And I like your style. The soft lines with the bold colours, the way you do a sky. It’s peaceful.”

“Steve, how much would an original like that sell for?” Erik asked. “This whole art business is a new thing on me.”

“Depending on the size? Anything between a few hundred to a thousand, maybe. Something sort of this size?” He motioned to the large display prints. “$1500 around about, maybe $2000. Maybe more. Depends on the materials. Oils sell for more than watercolours because they last longer, more lightfast. Time spent on it can drive up the price too.”

“I think I just found a new job for you,” Erik said with a smile.
“It’d make more room,” Tabitha agreed tentatively. “They’re just sitting there, not doing anything.”

“If we sort out some of her originals, could you price them? We can sell them here, alongside the prints. If we sell the prints that is. No point in hauling dozens of canvasses all the way here if we can’t sell them.”

“Sure,” Steve said. “I’d be happy to.”

“Consider that the payment for the painting,” Tabitha said, blushing.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t do that!”

“Really. I’d rather do that.”

“If you’re sure…”

“I am. Now. Tell me about what you want in this painting.”

Tabitha broke up from school for the summer on the 2nd of July, and they boarded a plane the morning of the 3rd. The journey was much as they remembered from the year before, with two exceptions. Kurt was travelling with them to start off with instead of the possibility of transatlantic teleporting, and Max was a major part of the family.

Max was now almost five months old and the happiest baby around. He giggled and squealed all the time, reaching for things and shoving everything in his mouth. Charles had tried him on a few pureed fruits and vegetables and he loved apples, but he didn’t like peas. He still hated bath time, and he still loved to be cuddled.

He was fairly tolerant of the plane, only crying during take-off and landing when the pressure hurt his ears. He ate and slept and chortled along to the cartoons his vati found him on the screen of daddy’s pod. The flight attendants were happy to fill his water bottle and heat his formula. He
loved the security men and they couldn’t help but laugh at him when he gurgled at them.

The car journey was as long as last time, but the weather was still pleasant so that was a plus. Max fell asleep for a few hours, tuckered out by the excitement of the plane.

Sam met them at the door of the vineyard and handed Erik and Charles a glass of wine each.

“Welcome back,” he said, accepting the hug from Tabitha and one from Kurt, pulling bottles of soda from his pockets for them.

“It’s good to be back,” Erik said. “And flying with a baby, not as hellish as everyone said it would be.”

“Yeah, it’s not so bad if you’re calm.” He smiled. “Oh, guys, he is amazing!”

“Yes, isn’t he?” Charles said, grinning from ear to ear as Max swished his tail and gummed at the collar of Charles’ t-shirt. “Sam, this is Max. Max, this is Uncle Sammy.”

Sam happily took the baby, who squealed and kicked, his tail wrapping around Sam’s wrist.

“Hi, baby,” Sam said, bouncing him. “Hello. Aren’t you beautiful! He’s so happy!”

“Always,” Erik said, he and Kurt getting suitcases from the car. “Wakes up with a smile, always giggling.”

“Except bath time,” Tabitha said.

“Yes, except then,” Charles agreed. “Hates it, you’d think we were murdering the boy. Oh, hello, little miss!” He bent down and scooped little Miriam up, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“Charles!” she crowed. “Charles here!”
“Yes, I’m here.”

“Tabafa here! Erik here! Kurt here! Oh! Baby!”

“Yeah,” Sam said, turning so his daughter could see Max properly. “This is Max.”

“Hi, Max!” she said, waving, which Max found absolutely hilarious and fell against Sam’s shoulder, laughing too hard to hold his head up.

They made their way inside and up to their rooms. A crib had been set up in Charles and Erik’s room and Kurt would be in with some of the male cousins again. Then, once they’d unpacked and freshened up and changed clothes and all that good stuff, they headed to the garden.

They were all warmly welcomed, hugged and kissed. Carrie avoided Tabitha this time around and they all felt it was a safe development. Frankie was quick to latch himself to Tabitha and Charles, and it made Arielle look at Charles with daggers.

“What have I done now?” Charles wondered aloud.

“Aunt Simone has been whispering in mom’s ear,” Frankie said. “Things might get ugly. And mom has changed her mind again about Juilliard. She says I can’t go.”

“It’s not her decision to make,” Erik countered. “You’re over eighteen, legally an adult. She can’t stop you.”

“She can try.”

“Frankie, trust me when I tell you she can’t say or do anything to me that hasn’t already been said by people far bigger and scarier than her,” Charles assured. “Answer me this: do you truly want Juilliard?”

“Yes.”
“Then that is that,” he said determinedly. “She can say what she likes, it will not change anything between you and I. We have come to arrangements and we shall stick to them.”

Frankie smiled and let little Vianne tug him away to play a game.

“Think we should worry?” Erik asked.

“I do now,” Charles replied, looking across the garden at the back door.

Adult Vianne had arrived, with Maurice.

Dinner was strained, and then everyone decided an early night would be best. Vianne said it was because most of them had been travelling all day, but they knew it was to let everyone take stock of the situation and decide on the best courses of action.

Max woke up at midnight for a feed and Charles reluctantly left Erik’s warm arms.

[Come on, Little Bean,] he soothed through a yawn. [Let’s get you a bottle.]

He got back a unhappy cry and the impression of hunger. He peeked in on Tabitha before he carried Max down to the kitchen. Sam had helped them set up a section of counter for Max’s formula and assorted jars of baby mush.

Charles made his way over and set the kettle to boiling. He turned around to put Max in the car seat on the table so he could measure out the powder and jumped.

“Oh! Maurice, I didn’t see you,” Charles said.

“I did not mean to startle,” he said apologetically. “I came for tea and was just thinking of all the years in this house.”
“Big thoughts, that’s a lot of years,” Charles agreed. “This little one needs a feed.”

“May I?”

He held out his hands and Charles happily handed Max over, soothing him with a mental nudge that his bottle was coming. Maurice handled him as a grandfather would; mind-bogglingly competent.

“He is beautiful,” Maurice cooed. “Yes, yes you are, ma petit. Such a beautiful green. And unusual!”

“Yes, it was quite the surprise. And the tail, but he’s happy and healthy, so they’re good things.”

“Oh, yes, nothing wrong with him at all,” he agreed. “Tabitha is very good with him.”

“She’s my angel,” Charles said, pouring hot water into the bottle. “Truly. I can’t imagine being without her. And Maxie absolutely adores her.”

“And I should not have implied you should be without her,” Maurice said sadly. “I am so very sorry for what I said. I did not think.”

“Maurice, I do understand, truly I do.”

“I should not have said what I did. She was right. I do not know her, not truly. I do not know her favourite food or colour, what she likes to do as a hobby, I do not even know if she has a boyfriend.”

“She does,” he said gently as he retrieved Max. He settled in a chair and Max happily latched on, wrapping his tail around his wrist and gripping Charles’ fingers with his little hands. “The blue boy you met at dinner, Kurt? That’s her boyfriend.”

“Oh. Well, he seems a very…polite boy.”
“He’s a good lad. Very respectful. I’ve known him many years, since he was about ten, I think. He’s a good boy. As for Tabitha, you can learn all those things, you can get to know her. Just talk to her, that’s all it’ll take.” He paused to sit Max up to cough, putting the bottle down so he could pat his back. “See? We keep telling you to slow down. Come on, that’s a lad. Good boy. All better? Good, good. Here you go,” he said as he returned to feeding him. “Honestly, you’d think we never fed him. Now, where were we? Yes, Tabitha. Well, her favourite food is mashed potatoes with peas, and she doesn’t have a favourite colour. She likes rainbow things, and bright bold colours, cartoon type colours. And hobbies. She’s an artist. We’ve begun looking into art schools for her, and selling some of her work in the family store.”

He nodded at the sketchbook on the table.

“Do have a look, she won’t mind. She keeps two. That one is the one she lets people see, the other is more a diary, that she keeps private. I think at the moment she’s experimenting with form, focussing on different parts of the human form. I think she’s trying a few different mediums right now, but watercolour seems to be the one of the moment.”

As Maurice opened it and flipped through the pages, he saw that Charles was right. There were pages of different figures in different poses, some focus on facial profiles, some eyes, lots of hands, Kurt’s in particular. There were a few different mediums, chalk, pencil, charcoal, but the most recent studies were done in watercolour.

“These are beautiful.”

“Yes, she’s got such talent. We brought some prints of her work with us, so she could sell them at the festival. I’m sure she’d give you one if you asked.”

“I don’t know if she would want to.”

“Don’t be silly. You’re still her grandfather, no matter what was said. You had a falling out, it doesn’t mean she loves you any the less.”

He was silent for a while, long enough for Max to finish his bottle and decide that stupid o’clock in the morning was playtime. Charles didn’t give in to the persuasive gurgles and giggles, no matter how much he was tempted to. He simply cuddled him close and rocked side to side. Eventually he began to yawn and snuggle into his daddy.
“I really must get him to bed,” Charles said, standing. “Maurice, she’s not angry at you, not anymore. She was at the time but she’s calmed since then. Just talk to her.”

“And if I say the wrong thing again?”

“Believe me, she’ll let you know.”

Maurice found his granddaughter by the stream, painting with watercolours.

“May I join you?”

“Of course,” she said, setting down her brush.

“Oh, do not stop because of me.”

“No, I’m not. I reached a good stopping place. I kind of want to let all of this dry before maybe adding more paint, and then I’ll finish with pencils or maybe markers or something,” she said, propping her painting up on a rock.

It was beautiful. Soft colours, greens and blues, the bubble of the slow flowing water, the dark shadows of the trees. Tiny slices and pinpricks of sky through the lush full canopy. And there, in the hidden hollows and secret shadows were tiny little faces, lacy gossamer wings.

“Your mother, she always believed fairies lived here,” he said.

“She used to talk about them, when I was little. She’d tell me stories, of how they lived in the forest. She’d tell me about the king and queen and the fairy court. I had a dolls house, but it wasn’t a house. It was a castle made of twigs and acorns and stuff. She told me it was the fairy palace,” she said, leaning back against a tree and smiling softly.
“My father built that for your mother when she was just a little thing. She used to bring it out here and play.”

“I know you miss her,” she said. “I do too. But I’m not her. You can’t use me to replace the daughter you lost.”

“I know. I have always known. I handled everything so badly. I wasn’t trying to replace her with you, truly,” he promised. “I wanted…I wanted to keep you close to me. You’re all that is left of her. Thinking of losing you again…”

“Then stop thinking you will,” she said shortly. “Stop acting like I’m going to vanish again. No one is taking me away. I’m here because I want to be. You and Grandmère and Sam and everyone, you are all my family. Charles and Erik and Maxie, they’re my family too. I’m here because I chose it, because I want it. I just want all of you to stop treating me like brittle glass.”

“I’m sure no one thinks of you as brittle glass.”

“Really? Because your children still seem to think I can’t make a single decision myself. They think I’m with Charles and Erik because I have to be.”

“What?”

“They keep insinuating that Charles isn’t really my family, that he’s some add-on or something.”

“But this is not true. Charles is your parent, he means so much to you. I spoke to him last night. He seems a wonderful man, who obviously loves you very much. He’s very proud of you.”

“I know. But they took the argument we had and went with it. They assume you’re okay with them treating Charles like crap.”

He got to his feet and curled her close, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

“Do not worry. I will fix this.”
Erik excused himself from the table to answer his phone.

“Hey, David, what’s up?” he said, stepping into the front drive.

“Dude, you are never going to believe this.”

“Believe what?”

“We sold out!” David crowed gleefully. “All of it, every print, it all sold.”

“Wait, whoa, slow down. Are you kidding? You sold every single piece?”

“Every single one. Dude, seriously, people were just walking in off the street, said they saw the display prints. We sold everything, they even wanted to buy the display prints. In the end we had to take them down until we can get more. Steve’s heading to the printers to organise a second print run, and I am sitting here reading reviews on the website. Get Tabs to look at them. They love her work.”

Erik finished up the call before heading in to grab his tablet. He owned a business. Even going across the Atlantic didn’t take away his responsibilities. No matter where he went he had to be connected. Luckily the vineyard had a pretty decent internet connection.

Before he could boot it up and find what David was talking about, he heard angry voices coming from the garden.

Maurice was stood at the head of the table, staring down his children, clearly laying down the law.

“I have never heard anything so disgusting in my life,” he spat. “Charles is a part of this family. For you to treat him so shamefully is absolutely disgraceful. I raised you better!”
“Papa…” Simone began.

“No. No more. Enough of your sniping and evil comments. Charles and Erik are Tabitha’s parents and they will be treated as such. They are members of this family. And, further to that, Frankie will be going to the school he chooses. He earned his place there, and he is 18 years old. Who are you to dictate his entire life?”

“I’m his damn mother!” Arielle snarled.

“Exactly, his mother, not his jailer,” Vianne said. “What has happened to this family that my children, who I raised to have respect for all people, treat people in our own family this way? That they raise their children to treat people this way?” She looked pointedly at Carrie, who looked ashamed of herself.

“Mama, stop,” Sam begged. “Don’t do this to yourself. We’ve made a few mistakes, but it doesn’t mean you’re a bad mom.”


The three mutants were quick to follow him up to Charles and Erik’s bedroom where he started up his Surface.

“That was a little tense,” he said as he waited for it to load.

“Yes, quite,” Charles agreed, cuddling a babbling Max.

“He said he’d deal with it,” Tabitha said. “I told him what they were doing, he said he’d fix it.”

“He’s dealing with it,” Erik agreed. “Ah. Here. Wow, David wasn’t kidding. Look at these.”

Tabitha took the tablet as it was held out to her and angled it so Kurt and Charles could read over her shoulders. All the reviews of her work were positive, many people commenting on how young she was to be so talented. One little old lady had bought one of each piece as a card to decorate her retirement home room. One man had bought two poster size prints as gifts for his son and
daughter-in-law for their new apartment. There were reviews of things on Redbubble too, people raving about how much they loved the designs and couldn’t wait for their orders to arrive. Some people had already had theirs arrive, and raved about the vibrancy of the colours and the imaginative designs.

“See?” Kurt said, hugging her. “We told you that you are awesome. Now the internet is full of people who also see the awesome. Now, will you please stop doubting your mad skills?”

“They really like them,” she murmured, scrolling.

“Of course they do, darling,” Charles promised. “As we told you they would. You are tremendously talented. I truly wish that you could see yourself as we do.”

“I know. I know you want that. And I try, I really do. It’s just…”

“Baby, we know,” Erik soothed, taking Max and bouncing him. “We know what that asshole put you through. But that makes him trash, not you. His problem with mutants is not your problem. His problems and issues in general are not your problems and issues.”

He handed Max to Kurt and the blue mutant nodded in immediate understanding. Tabitha having a talk like this didn’t need either him or the green baby as a witness.

“Come on, little buddy,” he cooed, wiggling his tail with his own and making Max chortle. “Let’s go see what we can see in the vines.”

Tabitha curled up on their bed and waited. Richard had always lectured her on how she had to do better, be better, better than she was doing.

“Do you think we would ever be disappointed in you?” Erik asked, cuddling her close. Charles took her other side and stroked her hair. “Tabitha, we are so proud of you, so incredibly proud.”

“My darling girl, there is nothing that could possibly make me love you any less,” Charles promised, taking a chunk of her pink hair and beginning to braid. “You could fail every single class you’re in and I wouldn’t care so long as you did your best. That’s all I want of you, is to try your best.”
“Tabs, I know we talked about this before, and you said no, but maybe it would help to talk to someone,” Erik said gently.

“No, I can’t,” she said immediately.

“Why not?” Charles asked. “You’ve said no, and I respect that, but I do wonder why the answer is no.”

She squirmed and picked at Erik’s shirt.

“It’s weak.”

“Oh, no, darling. It’s not weakness to ask for help, which is all this is. It’s simply talking to someone who has more experience with…certain situations than we do.”

She sighed and was silent for a while, thinking things through.

“I could…maybe…think about it,” she finally said. “Maybe.”

“That’s all we ask, baby,” Erik assured. “Just think about it for a while. Now. What do we do about your sudden popularity with New Yorkers?”

“A second print run, maybe bigger this time. And maybe a few more options. JARVIS has scans of a load more of my drawings and stuff, so David could just pick some of those.”

“And the originals? Weren’t there some of those you wanted to part with?” Charles asked, crafting an email to David as they chatted.

“Yeah, I put them in the second living room, the one that’s going to be a playroom. They’re all stacked against the wall. JARVIS already scanned them, so they’re good to go.”
Charles made a note for David that Tony had a key to the apartment, and to get Steve to price them as they had discussed and sent it off.

There was a knock at the door just as he put the Surface into hibernate.

“Oh. It’s Simone,” Charles said with a small smile. “I think Maurice got through to them.”

“Are they all coming to apologise?” Erik grinned as he extricated himself from Tabitha’s hold.

“Yes. Do try not to make them suffer too much, darling.”

Steve let himself into the penthouse and picked up the mail. He arranged it into a neat pile on the side table and then followed his nose.

Tony was right behind him, and he had full permission to be in Erik and Charles’ apartment, but he still felt weird about being there without them.

He followed the scent of paint and thinner to what he assumed was the second living room, but found himself in Tabitha’s bedroom.

“Oh.”

He’d always had a fascination with other artists’ studios, always found it endlessly intriguing as to how they worked. JARVIS had introduced him to YouTube, and he had spent countless hours watching other artists tour their studios and workspaces while he himself painted. It was endlessly captivating to him.

Were they messy? Neat? Did they keep supplies organised by colour or medium? What was their favourite medium and did that show in their workspace? How did they reference for pieces? Did they work on several pieces at once or just one?
Tabitha was a neat artist, almost overwhelmingly neat. It took Steve a moment to remember where she’d come from, and then he understood. Richard was obviously not a fan of mess.

She had two desks, one clearly for schoolwork that held her computer and study books, the other a drafting table for art that had a work in progress on it, the easel stood beside it. One wall of her studio, which he assumed had been intended as a seating area, was all open cubby storage. She had different types of brushes in different glass jars, and bottles of solvents and oils in tidy rows. Tubes and bottles and palettes of paints, bottles of inks. Boxes of markers and pastels, a whole huge mason jar of erasers. One cubby had nothing but sketch books and pads of paper, and another held books of other people’s art for inspiration.

One cubby had nothing but coloured pencils, all meticulously arranged in a rainbow.

“I think you’re lost.”

Steve jumped and looked at Tony, who was leaning in the doorway smiling amusedly.

“I think so,” he agreed. “I followed the smell of the paint.”

“Ah. Well, welcome to Tabitha-land.” He wandered in and ran his fingertips over the stack of canvasses leaning against the wall, arranged by size. “Stop blushing, she wouldn’t mind you in here.”

“It’s her bedroom,” he hissed.

“No, that’s her bedroom,” he corrected, pointing to the screen separating the space from the second room. It was hand painted with butterflies, and Steve realised Tabitha had painted it herself. “This room is open to visitors. Has to be, she spends so much time in here. See?”

He motioned behind where Steve was standing and he turned to find a squashy armchair and a baby bouncer. The teen obviously brought her brother in with her, and presumably other people too. Steve smiled at the mini fridge, glass door showing the drinks and snacks inside.

“She pretty much never closes this door, open to visitors. Oh, hey, this must be for you.”
Steve followed him over to the drafting table and took a closer look.

There was a board covered in pictures of Brooklyn, the skyline, the tallest buildings, the sunset over the river and Brooklyn Bridge. There were about a half dozen sketches, refinement of the ideas, swatches of colour. Some patches of ink work, testing out different types of ink and line weights to see what worked best.

There was a canvas already on the easel, primed and filled with the underpainting, which was done in a warm brown colour. She’d mapped out basic shapes and values, setting out the basis of what she wanted to include.

“She spends so long on things,” Tony said. “Look at all this.”

“I like it,” Steve said. “I thought it was just me, you know, that did that same thing over and over.”

“Hey. You okay?”

Steve smiled as Tony wrapped his arms around him, resting his chin on his chest to look up at him.

“Yeah. Just makes me think, you know. When I was a kid…I think my ma would have killed to be able to get me a fraction of this stuff. I had to make do with pencil and paper. I got a box of broken charcoals for my birthday when I was nine. Felt really special. And now…there’s so much I can have. Paints and brushes and canvasses. So much. It’s so nice to see she has all this. That she can have it. Just…feels good. That she can, that art is so readily available.”

“Things are different now,” Tony said quietly. “The world has changed from when you were a kid. Sometimes I forget that. And I shouldn’t.”

“I don’t blame you for it. Not many people look this good in their nineties.”

Tony leaned up and caught his lips, kissing him gently, taking comfort in the solidity of his body against his. Steve was real and warm and whole in his arms. Steve’s fingers crept into his hair and his nails scratched against his scalp. He pulled back and pressed their foreheads together, sighing.
“We can’t do this here, not in Charlie’s apartment. And David is expecting us back.”

Steve sniggered. “I think this might be the first time you’ve ever been the voice of reason.”

Tony rolled his eyes and he led him out of the room, down the hallway and into the second living room. It was freshly painted with a mural of nursery rhymes in bright colours. Large boxes were piled in the room, labels proclaiming the contents to be toy storage and larger pieces of play equipment, a ball pool, a small plastic slide, a toddler sized swing.

Leaning against one wall was a stack of canvases, which they piled one on top of the other and took and end each, carrying them down and out to the car. They took them to the Tower and laid them out, four at a time, so JARVIS could scan them in high resolution. He saved a copy to his servers and sent one to the print shop. David messaged them a few minutes later to confirm the print run.

1000 of each piece, spread over the three agreed upon sizes, including the nine they’d already started selling. Plus display prints for all the new pieces and a print of each piece for Tabitha to keep a record of all her work. Her portfolio for her college applications was going to be very impressive indeed.

David and Steve spent the afternoon hanging new prints and originals on the walls. They’d separated the mass of canvasses into several separate groups and would display them a group at a time. There were over 50 canvasses, they simply didn’t have the space to display them all at once.

Once they were happy with how it all looked, they video called Erik.

“Wow,” Erik said as David switched the camera to show him the walls. “Go left a bit? Oh, that looks good.”

“Yeah? You don’t want another water one there?” David asked.

“No, I like the raindrops. It’s a good pick. Hey, Charles, come look.”

Some rustling on the line and then Charles’ pleased hum. “Oh, it looks wonderful! Oh, Erik, I really do like that one.”
“Which one?”

“The one with the leaves. Are there prints of that one?”

“There’s prints of all of them,” Steve assured. He moved to the painting on the wall of sunlight dappled through the leaves of a huge oak tree. “This one?”

“Yes, that’s the one. Save me a print of that one?”


“Yes. I think it will look very nice above my desk.”

“You can have the original if you want,” Tabitha said in the background and Charles gasped, as if she’d suggested he murder Max.

“Oh, no! I can’t do that! No, a print will do splendidly.”

“Little fruitcake,” Erik muttered.

Erik gasped as Charles moved above him, fluid arching, plump lips parted in absolute bliss. His hips rolled as Erik thrust, the two of them moving in perfect sync to climb higher. Charles’ fingers were buried in his hair, holding him close, and his own hands gripped at any part of his husband he could get hold of.

[No, not now!]

“What?” Erik gasped. “What not now?”
“Oh, not now,” he moaned as Charles squeezed around him.

Just a little more, just a little longer, Erik was so very close, and he could feel Charles’ release a breath away.

They came in a rush of heat and relief, draping over each other, catching their breath as Max let out a sleepy coo.

[Marvellous timing, my boy,] Charles said. [Just a moment, sweetheart. Just give Daddy and Vati a moment.]

“Does he actually understand what you’re saying to him when you do that?” Erik murmured, his lips against sweat-soaked skin.

“Yes, he does. Oh.”

Erik raised his head enough to look around, spotting several floating things and chuckling.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “On the plus side, I didn’t break anything.”

“Erik, the bear is not made of metal.”

He stared at the teddy bear slowly floating across the room towards the crib, and then it dropped into it, followed by a happy gurgle.

“No, that wasn’t me,” he agreed. “Has he done this before?”

“Not to my knowledge. What do we think? Telekinesis?” he questioned as he eased off Erik, the metal bender hissing as he slipped from the tight passage. “Sorry, darling. It might be. Tabby is.
And you move metal. Could be telekinesis,” he theorised as he pulled on his pyjama bottoms.

Erik wiped himself off as Charles reached into the crib and scooped the baby up. He was happy to be brought into bed with them, once he’d been changed of his wet diaper. Erik used the time Charles was changing him to dispose of the condom and clean up.

“Max,” he called, plucking the teddy up and wiggling it at the boy. “Maxie! Hi, little guy. Want your bear? Yeah? Come on. Show Vati.”

Max whined and reached for it, and then they watched as it floated up, towards the ceiling. It didn’t move anywhere, just hovered there, a little way above Erik’s hands, until a breeze from the open window caught it and it floated across to Max.

“He’s a graviton,” Charles said, kissing his dark hair. His hair was wonderfully curly, what there was of it, and Charles knew he’d need a haircut at some point, it would bother him if it fell in his eyes, but Charles really was not looking forward to it. Max snagged the bear and twiddled its ear with his little fingers, his tail stroking over its fur, completely oblivious of the fuss he’d caused.

A graviton was a mutant that affected the pull of gravity, making things float or sink as they wanted. When he was a little more able to control his gift, he could potentially stick someone to the floor or make something fly properly instead of hovering. He’d possibly be able to make his bear move with different gravitational fields before his first birthday.

“It’ll make things interesting,” Erik offered and Charles laughed so hard he had tears rolling down his cheeks.

“Interesting? Erik, darling, they already are interesting. How much more interesting do you imagine them to be?”

“He’ll be the only pre-schooler who can literally make the cow jump over the moon.”

“Oh dear.”

“Relax. He won’t do that. Fully mature gravitons can’t do that.”
“But both his parents are off the scale.”

“Fair point. But we’ll teach him what is and isn’t acceptable use of his gift,” he soothed. “It’ll be fine. Tabs is fine.”

“Yes, she is. I’m sure you’re right. It’s just…”

Erik waited patiently for Charles to tell him his worries. The little telepath had taken to parenthood like a duck to water. He always knew exactly what Max needed or wanted, he was firm when it came to sleeping instead of the preferred playtime during night feeds. He had so much love to give that it wasn’t a big surprise when he picked up diapers and feedings and baths like he’d been doing it all his life.

But, however his parenting skills might impress, he was still a first-time ‘mother’, and still had worries about his baby.

“He’s awfully young to present,” Charles worried.

Max was cuddled close, his blue eyes alert as he plucked at his tail, bear abandoned.

“Okay, he’s young, but he’s surrounded by people who can teach him how to use it. He’ll be fine.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. Nothing we can do either way, not until it happens.”

“Exactly. It’s no different than any other parents, we wait and see what happens.” He leaned in and kissed Charles, licking into his mouth just enough to make him shiver, and then pulled back, pressing a kiss to Max’s forehead. “I’ll get his bottle, you cuddle.”

Charles smiled softly as he left and then looked down at their son. He spent a few minutes tracing his little nose with a fingertip, and Max explored his hand as if he hadn’t done so a hundred times already.

“My clever boy,” he murmured and Max tilted his head to look up at him, falling into a gummy smile when their eyes locked. “I suppose it was always going to be an early presentation for you,
wasn’t it? I was presented at birth, so I suppose five months is rather lagging in comparison.” Max hummed happily and he chuckled. “Yes, you’re rather slacking, sweetheart. But Uncle Tony will be so proud when we tell him! And the rest of the family. Oh, just think of the games you and your sister can come up with! Won’t that be fun!”

Max wriggled in delight when Charles took his foot and jiggled it, and he made his teddy float again.

“That’s marvellously clever! Well done!”

“Wow, Bear is getting very aerodynamic,” Erik said as he returned, closing the door carefully. “Me or you?”

“I’m happy whatever.”

“Come here, Little Bean,” Erik cooed as he settled back against the headboard. Charles happily handed him over and plucked the bear out of the air, setting it against his belly where Max had been sitting.

Erik settled him in, tucking him against his chest, cradled in one arm, and eased the teat to his lips. Max let out a squeal and latched on, suckling away happily, and Charles began to sing gentle lullabies to soothe him back to sleep. He managed about half the bottle before his eyes began to droop, and continued all the way to the end, even after his dreams returned.

Erik carefully set the bottle aside and set Max to his shoulder, getting up smoothly and wandering around their bed again and again as he patted his back. Max eventually burped and Erik cradled his head as he kissed it, before he laid him in his crib once more.

Predictably, his tail curled up and went straight into his mouth, the way other babies would suck their thumbs. They were so used to his ease with his fifth limb that they rarely noticed it as an extra anymore. It was just there, just a part of him, perfect as the rest of him was.

Erik returned to the bed and smirked as Charles attached himself at the lips. He surrendered to the kiss, letting his mouth fall open so Charles’ tongue could surge forward, and he was thoroughly claimed by his husband.
“It is incredibly sexy watching you with him,” Charles admitted when he let Erik up for air. “Something about the way you love him, the confidence you have when holding him…it’s incredibly alluring.” He propped his head on Erik’s chest, eyes locked.

“I really hope you realise I feel exactly the same when I watch you with him.”

“Mmmm, I do.”

“Good. I’d hate for you to be doing something sexy and not realise. You should have full awareness of your own sexy self.”

“You do tend to project whenever I do something you find appealing.”

“I do?”

“Yes, rather loudly in fact. Very hard to ignore.”

“Oh no. I’ll have to do my best to stop then, if I’m distracting you,” he said with a half-smile, and Charles surged up, claiming his mouth again.

[Don’t even think about it. I like knowing you find me attractive, especially when I was still trying to shift the baby weight.]

“Hey,” he said, separating their mouths. “How many times am I going to have to tell you that there was nothing wrong with that extra padding? Baby, even if you hadn’t wanted it off, I’d still find you just as sexy. I love you, no matter your size.”

“I know that, darling, there’s no doubt that you couldn’t have given two figs for those few pounds. But I did. I didn’t like having them.”

“Then that’s okay. As long as you lost the weight because you wanted to, then that’s fine.”

“You are so very sweet, my darling. So very fierce and protective.”
“Over you? Always.”

They were sitting in the garden, eating the last of breakfast, when Erik cleared his throat.

“Max presented last night,” he announced and there was a round of applause and congratulations.

“What’s his gift?” Frankie asked.

“I’m not sure he’ll do it on command,” Charles warned.

Max was sleepy, his nap time fast approaching. He only took two naps, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, which they were assured was far less than other babies. He just didn’t seem to need sleep as much as other babies. Most of the time he was happy to sit there and watch the world go by. He was a very contented baby.

Erik held out the bear as he had the night before and Max smiled at him.

“Hi! There’s my little guy. Want the bear? Come on, Maxie, come on. Show Vati.”

He blew little spit bubbles as he reached out for his toy and then a grumble as he realised he couldn’t reach it. His blue eyes looked up at his Daddy, as if to tell him to fix the problem.

“It’s alright, Little Bean,” Charles soothed. “Go on, you can do it. Make Mr. Bear fly.”

He huffed for a moment before the bear did begin to rise, ending up somewhere around Charles’ eye line, and floating there until Tabitha took over. She reached out with her gift and pushed it forwards towards her brother, until it was hovering in just the right place and Max dropped it into his Daddy’s waiting hands.
“I don’t think I’ve ever come across a graviton,” Sam said. “They’re rare. And he’s really early to present. I didn’t think you were?”

“No, I wasn’t,” Erik agreed. “But Charles was.”

“I was, so I’ve been told, presented at birth,” Charles explained. “It’s a trait for the men in my line to be telepaths, though I was the earliest presentation as far as I can find out. Max is possibly the very first Xavier male to have a different ability. Though it’s not surprising. Erik and the rest of the Lehnsherr line have shown a trait of manipulation mutations, things that manipulate a physical thing, such as telekinesis or metal bending.”

“I don’t think we have a trait in our line,” Maurice mused. “I haven’t noticed one.”

“I think the trait might be altering the perception of things,” Charles said. “Frankie does make things grow, but it isn’t that he springs it from nothing. He simply speeds up what is already there so there is a perceptible difference to the plant. Carrie alters visual perception of her physical form. I would have to do some more research and fact checking, but I feel fairly comfortable theorising it.”

They settled into discussing different mutations and the joys, and pains, of being a mutant, and Charles slipped into the house to put Max down for his nap.

It didn’t seem to be taxing him too much to use his gift so young, and he seemed happy enough, so Charles wasn’t too worried. He would take Max to Clint Barton once they returned home just to be sure, but Max seemed fine, so he let it be.

He stood and watched Max sleep for a little while, taking in the pure perfection of his son. He had made this little person, this perfect little boy. Those tiny fingers, that snuffly nose. He and Erik had combined in a way completely beyond his control or understanding and made something completely wonderful.

Tabitha’s birthday went far more smoothly this year around.

The first improvement was the nature of her gifts. They were all art related. Books on artists and
techniques, sets of charcoal, paint brushes that cost an arm and a leg. A travel easel, a small mountain of new sketchbooks. Much better now the LeStrange’s actually knew her a little.

As with the previous year, Kurt gave her jewellery, this time a bracelet with a heart set with rubies that Erik had made to his design. If he kept it up, she would have a very impressive collection some day.

Erik had gotten her another dress and shoes, this time in a soft pink. His art gift was an entire metal case of all available colours of Copic markers. She kept running her fingers over them, smiling at the little taps as they brushed against each other. He could practically see the wheels in her head turning as she imagined all the pieces she could do with them.

Charles had gone for two technology gifts. His first was back in New York; a high end graphics tablet, an upgrade from the year before. She’d shown an enjoyment of digital art, and a talent in it, so he’d gone for the more expensive touchscreen model. Tony had installed it in her studio already, and set it up for her, so it was ready to go.

His second was a digital camera, so she could capture her own reference pictures.

He’d relied heavily on Tony to get the right things. Tech wasn’t his area of expertise. But, despite his worries, she was ecstatic.

The day was spent as all others were when they were at the Vineyard, spending time with the family, integrating them into Tabitha’s life and her into theirs. As Maurice had so bluntly put it, they were all family now. Best to get along as much as possible.

Unlike the year before, their made their way down to the festival early, so Tabitha could set up her booth. Kurt and Frankie ran it with her, the three of them laughing and joking and generally enjoying the atmosphere. Frankie watched over things when Kurt spirited her away for a dance or something to eat, Kurt when the cousins wanted to see something or try something, and Tabitha when the boys were attracted by something or other.

Max absolutely loved the festival, and everyone he met couldn’t help but smile at him. He looked this way and that, cooing and waving at everything that took his fancy. He was passed from this person to that, happy to be moved. Charles kept a link on him and knew exactly where he was at all times, but it meant he could go off with Erik for a dance and a drink and still feel secure of his baby’s safety.
The booth was a complete success. She’d sold most of what she’s brought, and the remainder she gave to the family. Maurice teared up as she gave him a whole collection of prints.

All in all, the trip had been far more successful than the year before, and Charles began to relax into this new section of his family. It wasn’t like other families. Most families didn’t have three bloodlines in one, nor did they have vineyards in France for summer vacations. But they were none of them conventional people. His children were happy and healthy, and his husband completely wonderful.

As far as life choices went, he could do worse.

Chapter End Notes

So, what did you all think?

Please, leave me a comment letting me know. Did you love it? Hate it? Throw up from all the fluff?
Chapter Twenty One

Chapter Notes

Sorry it’s taken so long but

HAPPY VALENTINES DAY!

Have some angst lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At six months, Max was the happiest little chubby ball of cuddles. He loved hugs and kisses, giggled at most things, and absolutely adored meeting new people. He was sitting up on his own, and liked to stand supported by his Daddy or Vati. His favourite game was peek-a-boo, and his favourite toy was a plush penguin Tony had given him. He hated baths still, but it was more a whimper and sad babbles than outright crying. He had a healthy appetite and was sleeping through the night completely, which was very welcomed by his parents.

Charles had hated taking him for his vaccinations, but he’d gotten through it. He’d kept muttering to himself that it was worth it, that it would protect Max. But that scream when the needle pierced his chubby thigh was enough to make Charles cry. Max had a very effective skill of pouting out his lower lip when he cried, and it never failed to turn Charles to mush.

As Charles had envisioned, there was a little slide and a baby swing set in their garden, and Max adored being in the swing. He would happily sit there for hours, watching the clouds and the topiary, and every now and then, Tabitha would give him a gentle push with her powers to keep him swinging. All the bedrooms had French doors that opened onto the garden, and Tabitha’s were never closed now it was summer. She liked to play music and paint while watching Max swing.

Erik was enjoying a rare day off. David and Steve were running the store, Charles was off at the library and then to a meeting with some geneticists, Tabitha was off with Kurt, whiling away the hours in the art store. He had nothing pressing and nowhere to be.

He had strapped Max to his chest and talked away to him while he pottered around the apartment. He set the little robot vacuum doing its thing, stripped and made beds, started loads of laundry. He collected dishes that they’d all left in random rooms, made Max’s bottles, dusted surfaces. He opened an extra window in Tabitha’s room to let out the fumes from the new glaze she was trying out. She wasn’t a fan of it, said it was too gloopy.

“Now, this is a very important task, baby boy,” Erik narrated as Max kicked and squealed. “I
know! It’s exciting. Now, we sign it.” He smiled at the delivery boy. “Thanks.”

“No problem. See you next week,” he said, accepting his tip and waving at Max, who giggled and flapped his arms.

Erik made his way to the kitchen and began emptying the grocery bags. Max liked the light in the refrigerator, which is why Erik didn’t just leave the door open, he closed it after every item.

“Oh, look, Daddy ordered some plums. We can try you on these. And some peaches. There’s the soy milk for your sister. And look! Apples!”

“Glubuh!”

“Exactly!” He gasped exaggeratedly. “You are so smart. I bet you’ll be giving Daddy a run for his money very soon.”

Erik finished putting the groceries away and made his way to the living room. Once there, he took Max out of the carrier and laid him on the rug. He relieved himself of the buckles and straps and then did press-ups over his son. Every time he went down he pretended to munch at the baby’s rounded tummy, and he got the most amazing giggles from it.

Eventually, Erik’s arms got tired and he laid down on his stomach, close enough to kiss tiny hands and toes.

“I love you very much, baby boy,” he murmured as Max yawned. “And Daddy loves you. And your sister. You are so loved, and so precious, so very precious.”

He picked Max up as his eyes drooped and slipped him into his padded seat so he could nap. Charles had a thing about Max sleeping on the floor, and Erik knew he’d be found out if he did it. He’d just settled him down when the door opened and he heard Tabitha and Kurt arrive home.

“Hey, Erik, you are never going to guess what happened,” Kurt said, setting down the bags he carried.
“She spent too much and had a guilt trip in the cab home?”

“Well, yeah, obviously, happens like every time.”

“It does not,” she argued.

“Baby, I love you, but it really does,” Kurt argued back, kissing her cheek. “Anyway. There we were in the art store, she was off in the paint aisle, I was lingering by the Manga, and this woman comes in, starts begging Wanda, you know, the girl with the red light thing?”

Erik nodded.

“Right. Starts begging Wanda to please help her find where the hell the artist is. Pulls out a postcard, and wouldn’t you know, it’s the raindrops.”

“Didn’t we completely sell out of that one?”

“Yup, you did. So, Wanda is looking absolutely lost, you know her English isn’t that great, so I step in. Pull Tabs out of the paints and this woman is practically sobbing in relief. Her name is Daisy Johnson and she’s an assistant to Melinda May, who owns the Sanctuary Art Gallery.”

“Apparently, she saw my stuff a few years ago and tried to get Richard to let me do a show at the gallery but he practically threw her out the door,” she said, kicking off her shoes and flexing her toes.

“I feel like I should be surprised by this, but I’m not,” Erik said. “So Melinda May is still interested?”

“Apparently she got the postcard yesterday at close of business and spent all morning trying to track me down,” Tabitha said. “Poor Steve. I can just imagine what he did with a crying frantic woman.”

Erik pulled out his phone and dialled the store, only to have Tony pick up and laughingly reassure him that Steve was fine.
Tabitha obviously didn’t want to talk about her encounter, so Erik left her and Kurt to their own devices and settled in to do some paperwork. Once Max woke up, he fed him a lunch of apple and pear mush, and then strapped him into his stroller.

Charles, for all his failings in the kitchen, made all of Max’s food himself. It wasn’t hard. He peeled and chopped fruit and vegetables, steamed or roasted them until they were mushy, and then put them through a sieve. Maybe by the time Max was ready for solids he might be able to make something a little more impressive.

Max loved the stroller, watching the world go by. He went all quiet and watchful when he was pushed in it, happily gumming at his toys. He had one that clamped on the front that looked like a car dashboard, and a few books on springs.

The Sanctuary Gallery was very well respected in the art community. Warren did a lot of business with them, and they were known for hunting out the unknown artist. Erik felt he should have known Tabitha would be headhunted sooner or later.

The building was white, as so many galleries were, and the security guard was not overjoyed to see a baby in the building. Erik tamped down his smirk and asked to be directed to Melinda May’s office.

Melinda May was a beautiful slim Asian woman who seemed timeless. Her hair was a thick glossy black, her face lineless, but her dark eyes betrayed years of living. She was elegant, delicate, but held an inner strength Erik approved of. She gave off an aura of cool calm confidence, and a zero tolerance for bullshit and timewasters.

“Good afternoon,” she said as he entered. “I’m Melinda May. I hear you have something I might be interested in, Mr…?”

“Lehnsherr.”

“Ah, I see. Daisy did say she’d tracked down Miss Lehnsherr. I assume you’re here to discuss her potentially showing here?”

“Actually, it’s a little more complicated than that,” he said, taking the seat she motioned to. Max was happy to stay in his stroller and pluck at his toys and tail, so Erik left him to it. “My partner
and I adopted Tabitha a few years ago, and since then we’re slowly learning all the ways Richard screwed with her life. This is the latest. You assistant mentioned that you spoke to Richard a few years ago?”

“Yes, I did, and he practically accused me of exploiting a child,” she said frostily.

“I see. Actually, not the worst thing he’s ever accused someone of. But I’m here for Tabitha. Your assistant seemed very interested in her work.”

“Yes. She has such talent. I’ve seen your website, her portfolio. It’s very impressive. When I saw her work last, there were a lot of flaws in it, a lot of technical skills that were lacking. I was hoping to maybe show her in a few years’ time, when she had matured and honed her skills. But now…the technical accuracy in her pieces is very impressive. I particularly like the bold colour work and the soft outlining on her landscapes.”

“I see. Well, we sell prints in the store and other things online, bags and mousepads and such. What were you thinking?”

“I’d like to show Tabitha here at the gallery for a small party of private buyers. Does she have a body of work completed?”

“How big of a body?”

“Ideally somewhere between 15 and 35 completed pieces, roughly the same size and showing a consistent thread between them that indicates that they’re all hers.”

“Well, we have about 70 canvasses in storage in the store and another 30 on the walls. Come by anytime to take a look.”

“So she’s prolific?”

“Very. She’s always creating something. At the moment she’s experimenting with watercolours, and some work with alcohol markers.”
“That’s very encouraging. A lot of times, we find that a very young artist, like your daughter, gets distracted with other things, and the talent goes to waste. For want of a better phrase, they grow out of it. But if she’s as productive as you say, it’s very encouraging.”

She took out a notebook and started writing things down, moving to her computer to type things, and Erik took the chance to pick up Max, who was reaching for him.

“I think the next step is for me to actually meet Tabitha, talk to her in person,” May said. She blinked at the floating stapler. “Interesting.”

“Sorry, he’s new with it.”

“Telekinetic?”

“Graviton.”

“Ah. Well, nothing is particularly breakable in here, so it should be fine. So, the meeting with Tabitha.”

“I can talk to her this evening and me or my partner can call you and set that up.”

“Good,” she said with a smile, and it was evidently the end of the meeting because she stood up and rounded the desk. “Now I’m done being professional, may I hold him?”

He grinned and handed the baby over, who was happy to meet a new person. She bounced him and murmured to him about art, telling him he could be an artist too.

“You’re good with him,” Erik complimented as he accepted him back and slipped him into his stroller.

“Easier than art critics.”

He said goodbye and took Max for a walk through the park before picking up pizza and heading
home, where Kurt had left and Charles had returned.

They listened to Charles babble about his research and gripe about the people he met with. Apparently they hadn’t liked his miniscule leave to create life and he’d had to make them feel as small as they were acting. Erik looked forward to viewing the memory of Charles taking them down a peg or two.

They gave Max his own food, setting the suction bowl on his tray and leaving him to it. He immediately discarded his plastic spoon and stuck his hands in his vegetable mush.

“So I went to see Melinda May,” Erik said and Tabitha froze, pizza slice halfway to her mouth.

“Who’s Melinda May?” Charles asked and Erik pushed the memories at him. “Ah. I see.”

“Why did you go and see her?” Tabitha asked.

“Because she’s incredibly interested in your work. She wants to meet you.”

“Is she truly interested?” Charles posed as he gave Max some cold hardened pizza crust to gnaw on. He was teething and he liked something to chew on. “It would be pointless for Tabitha to meet her if she isn’t truly wanting to put the work on show.”

“No, she’s interested. She’s really excited about your work,” he said to their daughter. “Her desk was covered in prints of your work.”

“What would I have to do for a show?” she asked, picking apart a mozzarella stick.

“I don’t think you’d have to do too much. She wants between 15 and 35 pieces for a show, so you’re already covered.”

“It doesn’t matter right now,” she said. “We can’t meet with her before Monday anyway. Frankie arrives tomorrow, and it’s MAP this weekend.”
“Gracious, already?” Charles asked, checking the calendar on his phone. “I completely lost track of it.”

The Mutant Acceptance Parade was the mutant equivalent of Gay Pride, and was held all over the world every year on the last Saturday and Sunday of August. Mutants and baselines alike all filled the streets in a two-day long celebration of tolerance and acceptance. There were stalls and special menus in the diners, parties spilling out of every bar, seminars and workshops. All of it was designed to foster tolerance and understanding amongst the citizens of the places it was held.

Erik had taken Tabitha to her very first MAP when she was two. She and Anya had sat in a double stroller and clapped at the pretty colours, ice cream smeared over their faces.

Charles had gone every year since he was five. He and Tony had gone together every year with Tony’s bodyguard of the week chaperoning them. It was something they had shared. Then when Tony took over Stark Industries, he’d started missing them. He hadn’t wanted to, but it was hard to make it to New York when sitting in a shareholders meeting in Tokyo.

Last year, Charles had just found out he was pregnant, and had to miss MAP due to rampant morning sickness. Erik had stayed home with him, getting him crackers and rubbing his back as he heaved, and Tabitha had gone with Kurt and friends. She’d brought them back goodie bags of free stuff she’d gotten.

This year was Max’s first year, and they couldn’t wait to see how he would take all the people and colours.

“Alright, Erik, you pick up Frankie tomorrow, and then Saturday we go to MAP. So…I’ll call Ms May on Monday,” Charles said, looking at his phone and typing things in.

Saturday dawned bright and early, and the family were happy and excited. The weather was gloriously sunny and hot, and the whole of New York was awash with buzzing energy.

They started with showers and suncream before heading for their favourite diner. Edie and David would meet them with Anya and assorted other Lehnsherr’s, Tony and Steve, and all of the kids from the Centre with their parents and siblings.
Breakfast was fairly loud, owing to the growing number of them, but the waitresses were happy enough to keep serving and passing Max around between them. He was so happy to be passed around, giggling away and accepting mouthfuls of food from pretty much everyone he was given to.

Frankie was pulled in without question. No one treated him any differently. He was family, simple as that.

By the time everyone had eaten, the little ones had been cleaned up, and Max had had his diaper changed, the streets were full of people singing and dancing and generally having a good time. There was music loud enough to reverberate in their chests, and the mutant ‘X’ symbol was everywhere.

The kids from the Centre had matching t-shirts, as they had when they went to Build-A-Bear. They weren’t the only ones. There were all sorts of groups of kids, all in their own t-shirts proclaiming what group or school they were from.

Kurt and Tabitha were, by far, the most obviously mutated attendees of MAP, and they garnered a lot of attention, not all of it positive.

About halfway through the morning, they were accosted by a group of youths in their early twenties, calling out insults and making disgusting hand gestures.

Tabitha took it in her stride, simply turning her back and ignoring it. Kurt was a little more unsettled by it, but he followed his girlfriends lead and tried to ignore it. Frankie obviously wanted to strangle them with vines until Tabitha shook her head and looped an arm around his waist.

They ignored the idiots.

Until they started heckling Max.

“Look at the mutie baby!”

“Little freak!”
“Should drown it! Little rat!”

“Human Power! Human Power!”

The screams as a bucket of ice water suddenly upended over them were quite pleasant after the things they’d been saying. Police officers arrived on the scene to try and diffuse the situation, quite a few of them trying their damnedest not to laugh.

“Erik, really,” Charles scolded as he picked Max up out of his stroller, Steve and Tony closing ranks around them.

“Hey, for once, not me,” the man defended, stroking the baby’s dark curls. “Not that I wasn’t going to, but I didn’t.”

“Oh, Tabby,” he sighed. “It’s very nice of you to want to protect your brother, it is, truly,” Charles said. “But I don’t think that was really the way to do it.”

“I didn’t,” she said. “Charles, I swear, I didn’t.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

Erik took a deep breath.

“Jacob. I… I didn’t know you’d be here,” he said, ignoring the great big elephant between them. Erik hadn’t known his father was a mutant.

“It’s been a while since I last did come to a MAP. Seemed like a nice day out. Oh. Uh, Erik, this is Monique.”

She was pretty, blonde and blue eyed, rounded like a Reubens, smiling and obviously happy to meet them.

“Hi,” she said in an accent Erik couldn’t place. “It is so wonderful to meet you.”
He nodded, not wanting to seem rude but unable to say anything.

“Hello,” Charles said, shifting Max to his hip so he could shake her hand. “I’m Charles.”

“Yes, I know!” she said, delighted. “I’ve read your work!”

“Oh, lovely. Did you enjoy it?”

“I did!”

He smiled and shook Jacob’s hand.

“Hello. I’m Charles, Erik’s husband.”

“I’m Jacob. I’m…well.”

“Yes, I know,” he said gently. “This is Max, our son. And this lovely one is Tabitha, our daughter.”

She waved with a small smile before taking Max, who was reaching for her. He squealed and proceeded to blow raspberries at her, his tiny hands tangling in her hair. She and Kurt headed over to Kitty and Bobby, Frankie wandering off to talk to Edie, the two of them moving off to look at a stall selling t-shirts.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Erik said. “The humans. Doing that wasn’t that right thing. They’re just idiots, and it’s just words. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“They were verbally abusive to your son,” Jacob said, bewildered.

“And he doesn’t need teaching that his powers will solve everything. Tabitha doesn’t need to be taught that everyone who singles her out is fair game. Where do you think a road like that ends?”
“With them being safe. With them able to protect themselves.”

“Which they can do without using an extra ability,” Erik said. “If they start with that, start with their powers, and it escalates, then where does it end? Most likely with someone in the hospital or dead, and that’s not the lesson I want my children to learn.”

“I’m sorry,” Jacob said quietly. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have interfered.”

“No, you didn’t,” Charles assured. “And you weren’t to know. Let’s just chalk this one up to different belief systems.”

[Always the peacemaker,] Erik said.

[He feels bad enough, I don’t need to add to that.]

Erik opened his mouth to change the topic of conversation, when Charles jerked beside him, colour draining from his face.

“Oh no,” he whispered, looking around frantically. “No, no, no.”

“Charles? What is it?”

“Charlie,” Tony ordered, grabbing his biceps. “What did you hear?”

“My children. Where are they?!” Charles begged. “I have to find them!”

He pushed away from Tony, scrambling through the crowd. Steve reached out to try and steady him but he slipped through his reach.

Erik followed him, calling his name, and then the whole world exploded as the Parade was bombed.
Kurt coughed at the dust in his throat and carefully swept away the grit from his eyes. His ears were ringing with the pure wall of sound that had hit him. Eventually he managed to look around, seeing the destruction he was laying in the middle of.

The diner they’d eaten breakfast in was in flames, and there were bodies on the ground. A few people seemed to be alive and laying there to try and understand what had happened, but he was pretty sure most were dead.

He’d never seen someone die before.

His hearing slowly returned and with it his ability to sit up without puking. There were screams filling the air, people calling out to loved ones they couldn’t find, wails of those who had lost. He rolled to his knees and began to crawl in the direction he had last seen Tabitha. She had moved away to talk to Anya.

She’d been holding Max.

His heart pounded in his throat as he searched for a flash of pink, or maybe the green of her shirt, or the green of Max.

He heard Max before he saw him, and headed towards the terrified baby screams. He dug through the rubble until he found the little psionic bubble Tabitha had protected him with, the teen holding it strong as Max cried. She appeared to be unharmed, but he couldn’t be sure.

“Tabs!” he picked up the baby and cuddled him close. There wasn’t even a speck of dust on him, Tabitha had protected him that well. “Tabby, baby, wake up. Please? Please wake up?”

“Max?” she whispered, reaching out.

“I got him. He’s okay.”
It was testament to how long he’d been laying there stunned to hell, or maybe to the preparedness of New Yorker’s to deal with this kind of crap, that there were people pouring out of their houses and businesses. They had blankets and bottles of water and first aid kits. One little old lady rushed up to him.

“Thank you,” he said as she handed him a bottle of water. His throat was a lot more usable after a couple of swigs, and Tabitha could finally open her eyes after he poured the rest over her face.

She carefully sat up and took Max, who was still crying. He cuddled close, gripping handfuls of her hair.

“What the fuck happened?” she asked, looking around. “Are you okay?”

“A bomb, and I think I’m fine. Are you?”

“I think I did something to my shoulder,” she said, shrugging her left one up. Kurt brushed aside her hair and winced at the blood.

“You might need stitches. How’s your head?”

“Headache from the noise but nothing else. I covered my head and protected him.” She stroked Max’s curls as she looked around worriedly. “Do you see my parents? Or Anya? Or anyone?”

“No, just you. I figure if we stay still they’ll find us, right? Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do? My mom said to stay still if I got lost at the supermarket as a kid, so she could find me.”

“Hey,” she soothed, stroking his hair. “You’re right. We’ll just stay put and wait.”

Loud, so loud.

The sheer wall of physical sound of the explosion hit Charles first, knocking him back and then
burying him under rubble.

Then came the other noise. Panicked voices gaining strength echoed through his head, bouncing around the inside of his skull. Pain, panic, terror. An ocean of voices screaming out for help, for answers, for loved ones.

[CHARLES!]

[I’m here. I don’t know where here is, but I am.]

He couldn’t move, there was too much pain. He couldn’t even attempt to open his eyes, it just wasn’t an option. He wanted to stretch out his mind, find his children, but there was just too much noise. It was like trying to wade through drying concrete.

Erik tracked the metal of Charles’ ring to where he was half buried under a hot dog cart and a metal sign from a store. He didn’t remember covering him with them to protect him, nor did he care where they landed as he threw them off his husband.

“Hey, it’s okay, you’re okay,” Erik soothed, stroking his hair and pressing kisses to his forehead. He winced at the spill over from Charles. “I know, baby, I know. It’s okay. We’ll get you a nice inhibitor or some nice pills, quiet things down for you.”

He knew first responders carried both, but with the streets being filled with mutants, there was no telling how many psionics there were in need.

He stroked his hair, picking out rubble as he stretched out his senses. Pools of blood on the streets, pipes, signs, pieces of building and food carts. Limbs coated in blood. And there. Finally.

“I found them,” he sighed in relief. “Charles, I found the kids.”

“Are they okay?” he rasped.

“Hang on.”
He focussed on Tabitha’s locket, the one Vianne had given her, and concentrated until he could
feel her pulse through it. The vibration of noise around his daughter was deafening, but he
eventually was able to pick out Max’s unhappy grizzle.

“They’re alive,” he said finally. “I think they’re sort of that way.” He motioned somewhere due
north of where they were, closer to the blast.

“I’ll find them,” Steve said, kissing Tony once before heading off.

Tony stared at Charles for a moment, a look of horror on his face, before he too left.

“Paramedic,” Charles said. “He’s gone to find one. Oh. Frankie. I don’t know where he went. I
have to find him.”

“Easy,” Erik urged as he tried to move. “Take it easy. We’ll find him, I promise. Can we focus on
you for a moment? You can’t help or find anyone if you’re in no condition to move. I know it’s
loud right now but what else hurts?”

Charles took a moment to take stock.

“My hand doesn’t seem to want to work,” he said.

Erik pushed away the parasol from the hot dog cart covering his hand and grimaced at all the blood
and the angles of his fingers and wrist. He was pretty sure at least his wrist was broken, if not
every bone.

“Anything else?”

“It’s bad, isn’t it?”

“It’s…I’m not a doctor.”
“Coward,” he teased.

Tony returned with an ambulance man in tow.

“Hi, I’m Sam. Tony tells me your name is Charles? And you’re a telepath?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, good, off to a good start. Now, I’m not comfortable giving you any meds, because you might have hit your head, but I have one last inhibitor. That sound good?”

“Yes, please.”

Sam carefully set it on his head and flipped the switch. Charles felt himself zone out at the sudden silence, the feeling of a limb being severed. It took him a few minutes to focus again, and when he did, he had a blood pressure cuff around his good arm and Sam doing something to his damaged arm.

He was young, younger than Charles had assumed. Now he could see him, he estimated Sam was maybe mid-thirties. He had lovely skin. The colour of the chocolate truffles Erik brought him when he was feeling amorous, smooth and soft-looking, with a nice healthy glow about him.


“Thank you,” Sam chuckled. “But you’re wearing a ring, so Imma stop you there.”

“I was only looking. Very nice smile.”

“I know, baby,” Erik said indulgently. “Looking at the menu is fine.”

“No, I got lucky. Mostly scratched and bruised, nothing major.”

“I’m going to get you checked over anyway, once I’ve set Charles here into the ambulance.”

“Oh, no. Must I?” Charles complained. “Really. It’s just a headache. I get them all the time.”

“The arm, Charlie,” Tony prompted.

“Oh. Well, I suppose I must then. I assume a Band Aid won’t cut it?”

“Not even close.”

Charles was good after that and let Sam tend to him, focussing on Erik’s worried frown and Tony’s fretting, gnawing at his thumbnail. He wanted to tug the digit from Tony’s mouth but his arms were busy. One didn’t want to work, and the other was being strangled periodically.

He focussed on what he could see and not the sick terror of where his babies were. What if they were hurt? Erik said they were alive, but they could be terribly, terribly hurt. And so very scared. He needed to find them, comfort them. Take them home and wrap them in blankets and bar the door.

Frankie. He had promised the boy’s mother he would take care of him and how he’d been in a bombing. And he was so sweet and gentle, Charles really should have taken better care of him, kept him closer, and then he’d know exactly where he was. And then there were the kids from the Centre. Was someone looking over them? Were any of them hurt?

And Mamen, and David, and Anya, and…and…and…

Everyone Charles cared about had been at the Parade. Well, almost. Bubbe hadn’t joined them, and Elijah had stayed home to keep her company. She had a cold and he was so suddenly thankful for it. Even if she was miserable she wasn’t in a bombing. And Bailey was with her, so at least his dog was safe. They were lucky the pooch didn’t like crowds.

He heard Max before he saw him, and then he saw Tabitha’s bright hair. They were okay. Steve
was on one side of her and Kurt the other and Max didn’t even have any dust on him. She handed the baby to Erik, who attempted to soothe him and then settled for just holding him.

“Charles?” Tabitha said, her voice tiny and scared.

“He’s going to be okay,” Sam assured. “I know it looks bad right now, but I’m almost certain it’s just the arm that’s a problem. He’s not showing any signs of head trauma, or crush injuries, which would be the major concern at the moment. I’m just waiting for a bus to become available to take him to the ER to be sure. Has someone looked you guys over?”

“Max is fine,” Kurt assured. “She bubbled him. She’s okay apart from her shoulder, I think. And she’s exhausted.”

“I’m fine,” she protested and Sam held up a hand.

“I’d feel better if I took a look. For my peace of mind. Please?”

“Okay,” she mumbled and let Steve guide her to sit by him, her hand reaching for Charles, fingers tangling in his t-shirt.

“What did you do?” Erik asked, nodding down at Max, who took that moment to let out a scream and reach frantically for Charles. Erik sighed and admitted defeat.

He carefully laid Max on Charles’ chest so they were belly to belly, the baby pressing his ear to his heart and silencing almost instantly. Erik tried not to take it personally. Tony held Max steady as Erik took the opportunity to round Charles’ prone form and hold Tabitha close. Her grip on his shirt literally ripped the collar.

“I know, I know. You’re okay,” he murmured into her dust filled hair. “It’s all okay now, fehgeleh.”

“Not,” she argued, and then she really began to shake, shock setting in.

“No, but you and Max are alive and unhurt. Charles will be fine. Hey. What did Kurt mean when
he said you bubbled Max?” he asked, trying to distract her.

“I put him in a bubble of my ability,” she whispered as Sam draped a blanket around her. Despite the heat of the day, she was shivering and her hands were like ice.

“Wow. Colour me impressed.”

“It’s pretty cool,” Kurt agreed, sitting by Charles’ feet and rubbing his ankles; half for comfort, half for something to do.

His tail was bleeding sluggishly.

Erik watched as several emergency workers approached and began to load Charles onto a stretcher. Tony took Max, who began to cry and babble again, and Erik kept hold of Tabitha, who couldn’t get up. Her knees wouldn’t work, so he just scooped her up and settled her into one of the padded chairs in the ambulance, fastening her seatbelt.

Steve herded Tony and Max towards Erik’s car, the metal bender handing him the keys without question. Kurt trailed after them and Erik climbed into the ambulance with his husband and daughter.

Max lay quietly in Charles’ arms, the room silent but for slow even breathing.

Over a hundred mutants and allies had died in the blast, and countless more were injured. Erik didn’t have the full numbers yet, but he knew at least two of the Centre kids were in the hospital. He’d seen them as Charles was wheeled in.

The bomb had, allegedly (no one had official information yet) been detonated by a group called Humans First, who believed mutants were the beginning of the downfall of humanity. They wanted to eradicate every mutant and destroy mutant rights completely.

They were the reason a growing number of mutants believed in separatism. These mutants didn’t
want to give into fear, but they did fear for their and their loved ones lives and freedoms. There was safety in numbers.

Tabitha was in a room down the hall, and Erik had been wandering between Charles and Tabitha most of the afternoon and into the night. He’d heard from his mom and thankfully there were no fatalities in the family. Bruises, blood, broken bones, but no deaths. Frankie, incredibly, had sprouted a mass of vines to protect himself and Edie. It had taken rescue workers almost an hour to calm him down enough to be able to cut through them. Anya had been saved from harm by ducking down to tie her shoe behind a stall selling cookies. Edie had taken them both home with her and was handling things.

Erik loved his mother without reservation.

Charles was drifting, floating on a nice cushion of painkillers and mental silence. His arm was pinned and casted. He had fourteen breaks between his elbow and his fingertips, multiple lacerations, and it was going to be spectacular when the bruising came up. The doctors had sedated him and set the bones, drilling pins in to hold things in place while he healed. They’d done it in a treatment room as there were no theatres available.

Erik could feel the metal, warmed by Charles. The doctors didn’t know if they would have to leave the pins in place permanently or if they were just to hold things temporarily, but they had done their best to keep Erik as informed as they could.

Max was happy to lay there, suckling at a pacifier, his tail wrapped around daddy’s cast. Poor little guy was so nervous and clingy. They could only hope that he would calm as time passed.

Erik took a trip down the hall and poked his head around Tabitha’s door. She was still sleeping, courtesy of the sedation they had given her.

Poor thing was traumatised. Erik thought they might actually have a chance of getting her into therapy now.

Her friend Marissa from school had been killed, her body laying a mere arms reach from her.

He settled the blanket a little more closely over her and swept her hair back, pressing a kiss to her forehead before he left her to sleep.
The hospital beds weren’t really big enough for Erik to join them, but he kicked off his shoes and climbed in, he and Charles bracketing Max with their bodies.

“Is she okay?” Charles mumbled sleepily.

“Sleeping. Still sleeping.”

Charles let out a sleepy hum and settled a little more firmly into his blankets, his splinted fingers resting on Max’s tummy.

Erik finally managed to calm enough to rest with his hand on Charles’ hip, Max curled against their chests, Tabitha safe and close.

It wasn’t until 2am that Kurt was finally left alone.

First it was doctors, then nurses, then his parents. Then doctors again and again the nurses on their rounds. Police came and asked him about what he remembered, and then more doctors.

All the medical staff seemed highly strung, but he couldn’t blame them. They were superheroes saving lives. They could be as stressed as they needed to be.

Once his mom and Mike had left to get some sleep and the nurses did their checking thing again (seriously, he hadn’t hit his head that hard, it was just a little lump, and okay it hurt to touch, so would they stop doing that please?), Kurt took a moment to completely lose his shit. He locked himself in the bathroom and knelt before the toilet calmly, and then threw up. He kept heaving long after he was empty. Tears poured down his face and his lungs felt like they had a rubber band around them.

The cold tile was nice under his hot skin, the scrape of it under his trembling limbs was kind of soothing. It was nice and solid, completely real under him.

He couldn’t get his brain to accept what had happened.
His mom had thought he was asleep when she told Mike about Azazel. He’d been distracted and got a flying piece of metal through the torso. Janos was in intensive care with a broken neck. He’d be paralysed from the neck down, and that was the best case scenario. If he woke up.

If.

Kurt wasn’t sure how to feel about it all. It wasn’t sinking in. He and Azazel hadn’t managed to get any further in their ‘relationship’. The last time he’d spoken to him, he told him he didn’t care what happened to him as long as he stayed away.

He wished he’d said something else.

Eventually, Kurt managed to heave himself up and shuffle to the sink to scrub his mouth with the crap toothbrush and paste the nurses had given him. At least he was in a pair of pyjamas and not an open backed gown, because that would have really sucked.

He didn’t bother with the slippers they’d given. They went between the toe and he couldn’t wear them. He did put on the socks, and he did grab the box from his pocket. Then he shuffled down the hall, toting his IV pole with him. The stitches in his tail itched.

“You need to be in bed, hun,” said the nurse as he passed.

“I know, I should. But…I just need to check on her.”

She smiled kindly and looked up and down the hall.

“Okay, but if you get caught by Nurse Lydia, I know nothing.”

“You’re my favourite, Marcie.”

She waved him off and returned to her crossword as he made his way to Tabitha’s room.
He’d expected her to be asleep, to just watch over her for a while. But she was awake, sitting up in bed with her arms wrapped around her knees, rocking back and forth.

“Hey.”

“You were gone,” she said quietly, her voice shaking. “They brought us here and you were gone.”

He climbed on and held her close, feeling her grip at him and tremble.

“I’m here. I’m right here. They put me in my own room, and there were doctors and my parents and all that. They told me you were sleeping.”

“I was. They gave me something.” She sniffled and wriggled. “My shoulder itches.”

“Yeah, that’ll be the stitches. I got forty two in my tail.”

“Eighty one. They said I should see a plastic surgeon, something about a scar. I don’t care.”

“Eh, a scar’s the least you can have from today. Yesterday. Whatever.”

She slowly relaxed against him, curling more firmly into his hold, and he stroked her hair, murmuring stupid nursery rhymes he barely remembered. It seemed to help, the sound of his voice. Eventually he took to reciting everything he knew about baseball.

They ended up laying cuddled together, their IV lines getting tangled as her head lay on his chest.

“Nurse Lydia is not going to be happy if she finds you here,” Tabitha said after a while.

“So, you met her too. She’s so very pleasant.”

She giggled. “She tried to take my locket off. I shoved her away. I don’t think she likes me very
“She doesn’t like mutants,” he said. “Kept giving my tail the evil eye when they were stitching me up. Heard her talking to some other nurse, saying some shit about how the doctors were wasting time on something that shouldn’t even be there to begin with. Mike did a number on her.”

“Good. Mutantphobic bitch.”

“That’s my girl.” He pressed a kiss to her hair and sighed. “You know, this is not how I saw the Parade ending.”

“And how did you see it ending?” she asked, carefully smoothing the bandage on his tail.

“I wanted to take you to the light garden.”

It was something the mutants did every year, to bring the Parade to a close. The mutants with abilities that worked best at night or looked better after dark headed to one part of Central Park, where the trees grew in strange shapes and moss grew in abundance. The City had been persuaded to leave it alone so it looked extra magical for the Parade.

Every year, after the sun had gone down, people made their way to the light garden to watch mutants make sparkling lights dance in the branches, like fairies alighting on the leaves and climbing flowers. It was magical.

Those with abilities to fly and climb, change their shape, take other forms, all of it was displayed. It was a chance to let loose, have fun, enjoy what they’d been born with rather than just fear it or hide it away.

It was Tabitha’s favourite part of MAP, and Kurt adored watching her face light up in awe, the peace that came over her when she watched it. Last year, she had been particularly taken with an illusionist that had made actual fairies appear in little houses.

“We missed it,” she lamented.
“Next year. Or maybe they’ll do it another night. We’ll see the lights, I promise,” he soothed. “I wanted to take you there for a reason though.”

“Yeah?” She toyed with the pocket of his pyjama top. “Why?”

“I wanted to give you this.”

He held out the little box that had somehow survived the day and she sat up to take it. He chewed at his lip and winced as he made himself bleed with a fang.

“Kurt? Is this…I mean…”

“It’s not,” he promised. “It’s not an engagement ring. It’s a promise ring.”

“A promise ring.”

“Yes. I promise that one day I will ask you to marry me. One day, I will. But right now I’m making a different promise. Tabitha Vianne Lehnsherr. I promise to love you with all I can, and to show you every moment I can. I promise to be faithful, and honest, and supportive. I promise to be there, no matter what. I promise that one day, when we’re ready, I will make love with you. One day, I will be your husband. But for now, I’ll just be yours.”

She smiled and leaned in to kiss him, holding him close.

“I promise too,” she whispered. “For now, I’ll be yours too.”

No matter what would come, they had for now, and that was enough.

Chapter End Notes

So, what did you think?

Comments are red,
Kudos are blue,
I gave you a chapter,
So leave a review!
Chapter Twenty Two

Tabitha was painting.

It wasn’t so unusual an event. She was always making some kind of art. Charles liked to settle in her room and watch her create when he hit a wall in his research or needed a break. She’d chatter away to him as she worked, or sometimes he’d sit silently and watch as the art appeared across her canvass.

These paintings were different.

There was no happy atmosphere, no music, no chatter. The colours were dark and bold, great slashes of navy and burgundy and grey across the canvass. She was almost manic in it, almost violent.

At first, Erik thought she was just spreading the paint. He’d seen it before, when a kid didn’t have the words for what had happened. David had done it when Jacob left. Hell, Erik had done it when Jacob left. He couldn’t find the words inside to express what he felt so he ended up covered in finger-paints with the walls absolutely dripping with it. His mother hadn’t scolded him for it, just directed him to clean up when he was done.

Finger-paints were surprisingly easy to get off walls.

It wasn’t until hours later, when the acrylic had dried on the canvas, when she picked up a black permanent marker, that he understood what he was seeing.

She picked out shapes, areas of light in the dark, and created things there, written words curled into figures. He watched things emerge under her nib. A fire truck. A little old lady with a blanket. A crying child. A corpse.

It was a reflection of what had happened, and it was as terrible as it was beautiful.

“Hey, Tabby,” he said gently and she went stiff as a board, her rolling cart of art supplies shooting across the room. It was metal, so he managed to catch it before it slammed into the armchair. “Time to go, baby.”
She nodded, toying with the pen she held, her tail curling around her leg.

He left her to it and went to check on Charles. His little husband was settled in the living room with Max and Tony and Steve. The TV was on in the background, just to give something other than deafening silence.

“She ready?” Charles asked as Tony finished fastening Max’s diaper. Charles couldn’t do it with his cast and pins.

“Just about. I figure we’ll be about two hours maybe. Travel there, hour in, travel home. We need anything?”

“More diapers and formula. Oh, and wipes,” he said, handing over a new vest. “Something for dinner? She’s not been up for cooking, and we need a grocery run besides.”

“I can take her to the store if she’s up to it,” he said, checking his wallet and moving to unplug his phone from the charger. “We’ll do a shop.”

“And if she’s not?” Steve asked.

“Then we’ll pick up something on the way back, and I’ll online order groceries this evening. You guys want in on dinner?”

“Sounds good,” Tony said, sitting up the baby who immediately reached for Charles.

Tabitha appeared in the doorway and Charles gave her a reassuring smile.

“It’ll be alright, darling. You’re just meeting him today. Just talking, and then you come home,” he reassured and she nodded, moving forwards to kiss his cheek and then Max’s forehead.

He tugged gently at her hair and then booped her on the nose.
“My sweet little artist,” he cooed and he could feel how much it meant to her that she was so important to him. “I’ll see you soon.”

She rubbed their noses together before heading to the door. Erik swooped in for a quick kiss before he followed, and moments later they heard the front door close.

“What has she actually said anything since it happened?” Steve asked, offering Max a teething ring.

“Kurt says she spoke to him that night, but nothing since the hospital. Tony, I really can’t thank you enough.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it,” he said, lounging back, checking his phone. “He owed me a favour.”

“How big a favour?”

“Really big, which is why she got in to see him in less than a week. Frankie settling into his dorm?”

“Yes, but if I have to calm his mother down one more time, I’m going to change the number. Honestly, I do understand that her son was in a terrorist attack. And I understand how worried she is, I do, really. But how many times can he or I or Erik reassure her?” Charles complained.

Charles and Erik had returned home with their children the day after the bombing, which had been declared a terrorist attack by the mayor and the White House.

The political climate, always tense in an election year, had been ramped up to an eleven by the attack. There were statements given by what seemed to be every politician in New York. The police had released a statement placing blame squarely on a group called the Watchdogs. They were an elite human supremacist group that wanted to blow mutants off the face of the earth, along with anyone else enhanced in some way.

Steve had always dismissed the hate mail he got from them. He now forwarded everything even remotely negative to Agent Coulson, who made sure it ended up in the right place.
The week since the attack had been a blur of funerals and doctors, with family dotted throughout. Calls from family in France, others in Canada, Lehnsherr’s in all parts of the country, all of them desperate for information and reassurance.

Charles had tried to soothe Arielle as best he could, and he had managed fairly well. He’d gotten her to calm down slightly, enough that she stopped yelling at airline staff who couldn’t get her on a flight to New York. And then Frankie had gotten on the phone and the yelling had been enough for the neighbours to wonder if they were quite alright. Charles had stalled them by sending Erik to make nice.

Arielle called a few times a day to check on her son but he had refused to delay moving into the dorms. He’d threatened to never speak to her again if she actually did turn up in person to check on him.

Max had settled a little, soothed by the constant presence of his Daddy and Papa, with his other favourite people appearing throughout the day. They kept the apartment quiet and calm and it seemed to help. After a few days, he was mostly back to himself. A little more clingy perhaps, but that was to be expected.

Tabitha was the real worry. She wouldn’t speak a word to anyone. She’d open her mouth and try but the words wouldn’t come, like water trapped behind a dam. Charles kept himself only to the surface of her mind. He read her emotions, her immediate needs, but went no deeper. It wasn’t his place, and all it would take to damage her would be to push something he shouldn’t. For all his skill as a telepath it was still her mind, still something few truly understood.

So Charles had done what he always had when he didn’t know what to do. He’d called Tony. The genius had made a few calls and cashed in a few favours to get Tabitha an emergency appointment with Doctor Andrew Gardner. Dr Gardner was one of the best trauma therapists in the city, and he’d agreed to take Tabitha for an initial consultation.

They could only hope it helped.

Erik missed Tabitha’s humming. It would sometimes annoy him, when he didn’t realise she was home and could hear it but not find it. But mostly he used it to gauge how she was doing. She’d hum lullabies when she missed her mother, or to soothe Max. She’d hum pop songs or Disney when she was happy. She’d hum Motown when she was thinking hard.
She had stopped the second that bomb went off. And then she stopped talking altogether.

“Hey, you feel up to doing a grocery run after this?” he asked as they waited. She shrugged and he gritted his teeth. He knew she wasn’t doing it on purpose, that she was trying. But it was so frustrating. “Fridge is pretty bare. But it’s okay if you’re not up for it.”

He glanced up as a man appeared in the door they were waiting on. He was younger than Erik had assumed he’d be, about forty or so, with dark skin and kind eyes.

“Tabitha Lehnsherr?”

She moved forwards, arms wrapped around herself, and Erik followed, introducing them both.

“It’s good to meet you both,” he said, ushering them in and taking a seat. “I’m Andrew. I hear you’ve had some troubles.”

She shrugged and Erik waited for him to say something about it but he didn’t. Just carried on as if she had spoken.

“Well, that’s what you’re here for. How about we start off small today, I just talk over some things with you and Erik, get a picture of what’s been happening. No point in trying to understand things if I’m coming in at the end of the movie, right?”

That actually got a small half smile out of her.

“Are you comfortable with me asking Erik to fill me in?”

She nodded.

“Okay then. Erik. Let’s start with her full name and date of birth, get the housekeeping out of the way.”
The hour was up and Erik was hoarse.

He’d covered everything, from Tabitha’s parents to her manifesting to the bombing. He covered he and Charles, Max, Kurt. He touched on her academic record and her art.

Andrew had prompted him a few times, getting him to elaborate on a few things and skim over others.

“I think we’re just about out of time here,” Andrew said. He pressed a button to call his nurse in. “Tabitha, can you go with Gloria here and be weighed and have your height taken, for my files? Erik can stay and we’ll deal with the insurance papers and contact details. Would that be okay?”

She nodded and followed Gloria out. It was right then that Erik linked Charles in.

[You ready?] Erik asked.

[Here we go. I’m listening.]

“I’m not making a diagnosis today,” Andrew said firmly. “This is too new for me to say anything with certainty. I have my theories, and I’m fairly certain of what I’m seeing, but I’ll need a few sessions with her to be absolute.”

“What theories do you have? If you have an idea, can you forewarn me of what we might be looking at?”

“I think she’s got Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder,” he said carefully. “Looking at the history, the loss of her mother, the behaviour of her father, the upheaval of being adopted and such an extreme mutation popping up…I think she’s been suffering for a while. The bombing just highlighted it, sent her into overdrive. With her good grades and artistic talent, and you say her behaviour has always been good. It’s not surprising she’s managed to go unchecked for this long.”

[It makes sense.] Charles mused. [She’s not been lashing out at anyone, she’s a good girl, so why
would anyone think there was something wrong? Erik, if it is what he thinks, is there help for her?

“If it is what you think, what’s the next step? What’s any step?” Erik asked, leaning forward. “Is there a way to help her?”

“Absolutely,” he reassured. “Let me reassure you, there are many things we can do, both here in the office and at home, to make things better for her. Not necessarily medication, I’m reluctant to prescribe unless I have to, but talking therapies, some meditations, other things. There are many ways we can help her. Even if it turns out that I’m wrong and there’s something else, some other name for what’s happening here, there are many things that can be put in place to help her navigate the world.”

Erik sighed in relief and he could feel Charles’ relief through their link.

“What do we do? What’s the first step here?”

“First thing, we get her on the books, set up a regular appointment here,” he said, opening his date-book. “Let’s see here…I think…ah. Here. I’ve got a slot open on Wednesdays, in the evening.”

“What time?”

“Six. Would that work?”

“Sure.” [Got that?]

[Writing it down, darling. Well, Steve is. The man has beautiful penmanship!]

Erik grinned to himself and Andrew smiled.

“Just how long has he been listening in?”

“Since she left the room.”
“That sounds pretty handy.”

“You have no idea. What about until the appointment? She’s not speaking. Is there anything we can do to make things easier for her?”

“Try not to push,” he advised. “Give her time and space, but be clear that she can come to you, that you’re there. Basically, keep doing what you’re doing.”

Erik sighed and rubbed at his face, distractedly using his power to use the metal pen he carried to fill in the paperwork.

“Wow. Can…can you move anything metal?” Andrew asked with a half-smile.

“Anything. Move it, shape it, trans mutate it. A real alchemist. Actually, there’s a theory that the originator of that legend was a metallokinetic mutant.”

“And…what can she do? You mentioned telekinesis, as well as the physical.”

“She’s a Mover, so she puts pressure on objects until they move. She does a whole lot, but she’s still emerging, so we don’t know her limits yet. When it’s settled, which I’m assured by her doctor that it will eventually, he’ll put her through her MAT’s. Until then it’s a guessing game.”

“And the baby is a…” He glanced at his notes. “A graviton. Interesting. I bet they play some pretty unique games.”

“They will when he’s a little older. For now, they just make things float mostly.”

Tabitha returned and they spent a few minutes tying up some more lose ends before he ushered them to the door.

“I look forward to seeing you again, Tabitha. Maybe you could teach me to draw something next time.”
She shrugged and Erik let her cuddle into his side.

“I’ll have to come by the store sometime, get myself a print of something. I like the light through
the forest leaves. Been meaning to get that one.”

“Wait, how did you…” Erik prompted.

“Oh, so Tony didn’t tell you what favour he cashed in?” he said with a grin as the door to the
stairwell opened. Melinda May was approaching, smiling softly.

“Hey,” she said, reaching out to embrace Andrew. “You done?”

“Just about. Erik, I think you’ve met my wife?”

“I have,” he said, shaking he hand. “We were going to call…”

“I understand,” she said, forestalling his reasoning. “It’s been a hell of a week.” She smiled at
Tabitha. “And this is the artist. I’m a big fan of your work. It’s not the time now, but when you’re
ready, I’d really like to show your work at the gallery.”

She nodded and ducked her head, and Erik was expecting Melinda to be offended or at least
confused, but she didn’t react at all.

“We should get going,” Erik said. “We’ll see you Wednesday.” He led Tabitha to the door and
paused. “So…what was it Tony did? What did you owe him for?”

Andrew chuckled, holding Melinda to his side. “Stark introduced us.”

Tabitha zipped up her backpack and swung it onto her shoulder, letting her hair hang so it hid her
face. She’d met with Andrew twice, and gone back to school, but she still couldn’t talk.

Kurt was waiting for her outside the classroom. He caught sight of her and flashed her a huge smile, leaning in to press a gentle kiss to her cheek.

“Good class?” he asked and she tilted her head. “Yeah, mine was meh too. But, day is over, we are free, and I have a surprise for you.”

She took his hand and they stopped by her locker so she could collect what she needed to before he lead her outside.

Logan was waiting.

“Hey. Ready?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” Kurt said. He pulled Tabitha into his arms and waited for Logan to put a hand on his shoulder before he teleported them.

He kissed Tabitha before he popped out again.

“Don’t panic, Chuck knows you’re with me. I figured Kurt getting us here was faster. Come on, follow me.”

She obediently followed the gruff man. Logan might be a little rough around the edges, but she had seen him weave a daisy chain for his daughter and get down on his hands and knees to have a tea party with her, including wearing a tiara. He was a good man, a man she could trust.

They were in some woods, fairly pretty. She followed him to a clearing where there was a sculpture.

It was an angel with its hands outstretched, as if to welcome those visiting, and hanging from it, from the wings and fingers and around her neck, were pieces of glass shaped like drops of water.
“I carved this a long time ago. I come every now and then to clean it up and to add another drop. Each one is for someone I’ve outlived,” he said, adjusting the one around the angel’s neck. “I was born in 1832. I’ve lived more than my share of life, and lost more than anyone should lose. Because of my mutation, because of what I am, what I can’t change, I have to watch them die.”

He carefully put his hands on her biceps, making her look at him.

“I get it,” he said softly. “Your friends went to the Parade because of you. They were there because you said they should go, that they’d have a good time. And your mutation saved you and Max but not them. You survived because of your mutation and they died.”

She looked away from him, eyes filling with tears.

“This guilt you feel, this blame you’re putting on yourself…it’s normal to feel it. It’s called survivors guilt, and it hurts like a bitch.”

He held her close as she finally began to cry. She sank to the floor and he let her burrow into him, holding her as she screamed out her pain. It echoed back at them from the trees and he remembered all the times he’d been the one screaming.

“I’m tired of losing people,” she whispered eventually.

She was curled on the ground, head on his thigh, her otherworldly hands gripping his as she blinked at the daisies.

“I know. And I’m not going to bullshit you and say it gets easier. It doesn’t. It never gets easier to lose someone you care about. But the time you have with them, the love you feel for them and them for you…it’s worth the pain. Getting to have any time with them and then let them go is better than never having them at all.”

“It hurts,” she sobbed.

“That’s it, kid. Let it out,” he soothed, stroking her hair. “Let it go. You don’t need it. Let it go, kid.”
Eventually he was ready to take her back to her parents, she was ready to get back up and start again.

It had taken all this time but he finally understood what it was he was doing.

He kept checking her Facebook, and Erik’s and Charles’. He kept looking through her friends’ Instagram’s and Twitter’s, and he knew he was doing it. He knew it wasn’t right, nor was it normal, but cyber stalking his daughter was as close as he could get to Tabitha.

Richard set down his coffee and logged on to his laptop, clicking the little icon on his desktop for YouTube and waiting for it to load.

Another marriage over, and another life down the tubes. At least this one hadn’t taken most of his money with her when she kicked him out. The hotel was nice. He had a nice view of the beach.

He’d have to go back to the states. He wasn’t eligible to stay in Australia without Marsha and her family sponsoring him. He didn’t even have a job anymore. Once they’d found out about his family history, his very human bosses had dismissed him. Of course, they’d worded it as him just not being a good fit within the company, they couldn’t outright admit that they were mutantphobic.

There was a new video on Tabitha’s YouTube, and he was almost embarrassed by how much he scrambled in his haste to click it.

She’d announced on Twitter that she was unharmed from the bombing in New York and that her family was relatively unharmed, which had been surprisingly reassuring to hear.

He was used to her videos; he’d watched and rewatched enough times to know the format by now. The camera focussed on the art. Sometimes there would be a glimpse of her face, a lot of shots of her hands holding a brush or pencil.

This video was completely different. Tabitha was sat in an armchair in her room, face on to the camera.
“Oh,” he breathed. She was stunning. When Erik had told him she was a mutant, that there were some physical changes, he had assumed it was something small, maybe her eyes or something like that. He hadn’t even imagined it would be something so extreme.

The picture of her on the Lehnsherr Designs website didn’t do her justice.

“Hey, guys,” she said, giving a little wave to the camera. “If you’re a regular, welcome back. For anyone new here, welcome! My name is Tabitha and I make art, and I release a new art video every Friday. But, this is not going to be my usual video. Oh no, not today! Today is a whole new thing! I receive so many questions and comments every day from all of you amazing people that watch my vids and go on my Instagram and Twitter and other social media, and I thought I would take the time to answer some of them. I’m going to try and cover as much of these as I can without making this too long but I won’t be able to answer everything, so feel free to ask more in the comments and I can do another one of these. Okay! Here we go. First question. Where am I in the world?”

She outlined her life, her family, her hobbies, likes and dislikes, religion. He learnt more about his daughter in ten minutes than he had in her first fourteen years.

“Okay, guys, last few questions. This one is one I get pretty often. My mutation. People ask what my mutation is, is it just the way I look or are there other things? Do I know other mutants? Am I related to other mutants? Simple answer…Yes. My birth parents were both baseline from families of mutants, with varying abilities. I was adopted officially by my cousin Erik a few years ago, and he’s married to Professor Charles Xavier. They had a son, Max. And all four of us are mutants. Erik is metallokinetic, he controls metal, Charles is a telepath, Max is a graviton, which is fairly unusual as gifts go. And me. I’m actually telekinetic, as well as the physical, which you can see. The hair, the eyes, my fingers. My toes are also like this, with the extra bit. Uhhhh. I have a tail, the markings on my skin.”

She paused to take a sip of water.

“Wow this is getting long. Uhhh. So yes, I come from two families of mutants, I live with mutants, I spend time with mutants. I’m dating a mutant,” she said with a giggle. “When you look the way I do, it’s kind of hard to find where you fit. Charles runs a youth centre for kids with abilities, and it’s where I met my first friends in the city when I moved here. I’ve since made more friends, a lot of them human.”

“Okay, last one. I get a lot of questions about my boyfriend. If I have one, if I want one, all that stuff. Yes, I do. His name is Kurt, he’s a teleporter, and he’s blue! He’s blue, has a tail, two fingers and a thumb on each hand, has fangs like mine. He’s sweet and funny and cute and just generally great. Maybe one day he’ll appear in one of these and you can see him but for now, he’s just mine.”
“I think I’ve gone on long enough. If you have more you want to know, leave me a comment down below, maybe I’ll do another one of these again. If you liked this video, give it a thumbs up, and click that subscribe button for more videos. Uhhh. What else? Oh yeah! I will leave a link to all my other socials down below, as well as a link to my online store where you can buy my art prints, and my Redbubble, where you can get my art on a whole bunch of stuff like mugs and bags and stuff. And….I think that’s it! This is me, signing off. Until next time, stay safe, and make art.”

There was a final pan over some of her art as her social links popped up on the screen and then it ended.

He decided he was a glutton for punishment. He scrolled down to read through the comments. She’d answered a few of them, most of them people too stupid to read the description for the links they wanted.

He skimmed over the ones calling her a freak.

Hadin’t he said the same, and worse? And to his own mother? Hadn’t he treated every mutant like the enemy, like they didn’t deserve the basic rights he got every day?

He knew he’d have to go back, have to face the music. The last time he’d spoken to any of his family it had been his mother, and he had not been kind. The things he’d said to her…she’d never forgive him, and she certainly wouldn’t forget.

And Tabitha.

He couldn’t even expect her to look at him now. And even as she did, even if by some miracle she would even breathe the same air as him, there was no way in hell that Erik would let him near.

He started the video over again.

It had taken all this time but he finally understood what it was he was doing.

He was mourning the life he’d had, the one he’d destroyed. He was grieving the child he’d had, and lost, and the woman she was now, the one he’d never get to know.
Charles checked into the hospital and immediately called Tony the second he was alone in his room.

“Hi, everything’s fine, no need to worry,” Tony said the moment he picked up.

“Are you sure? Because Erik can come home if you need him,” Charles promised. “It’s no trouble.”

“Charlie, I can take care of your baby for a day,” he said. “Not even a day. A few hours. And come on! He doesn’t even crawl yet! He sits exactly where I put him. Right now, he’s sitting in his garden swing watching the clouds, happy as a clam. I have his schedule all written out on the fridge, all clear and timed and everything. Charlie, you even set out everything for him to eat in the fridge.”

“I know all that,” he hedged. “And I trust you, I do.”

“Good to know. Charles, Tabitha will be home by three, very latest. And Erik is at the end of a phone. Now, just relax and get this done.”

“Fine, fine. I’m sorry. I’m being a neurotic parent, aren’t I?”

“Little bit, but it’s okay. I get it. This is the first time you’ve left him since the attack. You forget I was there when you waved Tabitha off to school that first day. Charlie, you’re allowed to be worried about your children. I’m pretty sure parents are supposed to be worried about their kids.”

“Yes, they are.”

“So you’re doing the good parent thing.”

Charles glanced up as Erik entered, and surprisingly Logan was with him. Yuriko was riding on
Erik’s shoulders, grinning widely and looking very pleased with herself.

“Tony?” Erik asked as he set down his coffee.

“Tony, I have to go. If there’s any problems, anything, Erik’s cell is on. Please, just call?”

“Absolutely. We’ll be fine. Just relax and get this done. Bye bye, Charlie.”

The phone went dead and Charles smiled as Yuriko climbed down from Erik’s shoulders to jump on his hospital bed.

“Hello, little miss,” he said, hugging her with his good arm. “Have you come to see me?”

“Got a sucker!” she said, holding up the red lollypop like a trophy.

“She had a check up with the paediatrician,” Logan said, setting in one of the waiting chairs. “Routine kid thing, height and all that shi- stuff.”

“Almost,” she said and he smiled indulgently at his daughter.

“Almost. So don’t tell mommy.”

“Okay.”

“Good girl. Yeah, we were heading out and saw Erik in the parking lot. Wanted to talk to you anyway.”

“Mr Charles?”

“Yes, darling?”
“These are metal?” she asked, gently tapping one of the screws in his arm.

“Yes, they’re metal. They’re just to hold things in place while they heal. But now I’ve healed enough that I don’t need these anymore, so I’m here for the doctors to take them out.”

“Why didn’t Mr Erik do it? He does metal.”

“I might screw it up,” Erik said. “It’s better to have a doctor do it, because they know how.”

“Oh. Okay.”

[I still think you could have done it.]

[Charles, I might shatter bone, and I can’t fix those. Let the doctor do it.]

“Logan, my friend, you wanted to talk to me?”

“Yeah. I had an idea for the kids at the Centre. They’re all off since the bombing, and I think I know how to make them feel better about it all.”

“You have a way to make them feel more secure?” Erik asked.

“I might have a way to make them feel comfortable with being mutants again. That count?”

“How on earth…if you truly have a way, I would absolutely entertain the idea,” Charles assured. “What’s your idea?”

“I have some friends, they can help. But it’d have to be a field trip kind of deal, which is why I’m talking to you.”
“I don’t see why not,” Charles said. “Mass email. I can send it out now.”

[On it.] Erik said, already logging into Charles’ email account and going for the contact list of parents.

“Right, then we should be going,” Logan said, scooping up Yuriko and holding her upside down, the little girl letting out the most infectious giggle. “See you Saturday.”

Yuriko waved as he carried her out and then Charles was alone with his husband.

“Erik,” he murmured.

“Hey, it’s okay. You can feel Max, right?” he soothed, settling with him on the bed.

“Yes, I can. He’s fine. It’s not Max. Erik, can’t they do this with me awake?”

“Charles…”

“Please? Please? I don’t want to go to sleep. Please, Erik.”

“I’ll see what I can do, okay?”

Erik let him snuggle in, pressing kisses to his hair. He was just debating whether it would be worth laying down with him when there was a knock at the door and it was showtime.

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Erik slowly wandered around the apartment, settling their home down for the night.

He checked the locks, made sure things that should be turned off were, closed the windows. He set off the little robot vacuum to take care of the living room, which had suffered during Max’s snack
time of popcorn.

Tabitha was curled up in her armchair with her sketchbook on her lap, a pencil in her lax grip. He set her things on the closest table and closed her window before he scooped her up.

“Time for bed, baby,” he murmured, soothing her as she made a sleepy questioning sound.

It took moments to settle her back down into sleep. He pressed her bunny into her arms and she immediately cuddled it close, mumbling something before she gave a sigh and settled.

He took a moment to watch her sleep, making sure she really was asleep, before he turned off her lights and turned on her nightlight. It made him chuckle fondly. A senior in highschool, looking into colleges, and she still needed it. It made him wonder if she truly was still afraid of the dark or if it was simply habit now.

She was talking freely again, and still meeting with Andrew once a week. It seemed to help her, meeting with him. She was calmer than they’d ever seen her. Erik knew Charles could peek into her head to find out what was being said, but he didn’t. He said it was private, and Erik respected that. She sometimes came home with activities to complete and Erik never hesitated in helping her do them.

Max, when he ducked into the nursery, made him laugh so hard he had to duck back out into the hallway. His son had rolled over and was fast asleep with his diaper-round butt in the air, his teddy trapped under his chest and arms straight out to the sides.

When he’d managed to get himself under control, and snapped a few pictures with his phone, he hummed a lullaby while he eased the baby down onto his belly, where he sighed in his sleep and wriggled onto his back, arms thrown up over his head and teddy playing pillow. Carefully, Erik eased the toy out from under him and set it on the dresser.

Finally, he made his way to his own room, where Charles was waiting.

“Nice shower?” he asked as he set the baby monitor on the nightstand.

“Much easier with two hands,” Charles agreed, wiggling his newly freed fingers.
The pins had come out while Charles was awake. A few shots of numbing and a pair of pliers and it was done. If Erik had known, he would have done it himself.

“I’ll bet,” he husked, crawling up the bed and pinning Charles under him. “Guess what.”

“I can’t possibly guess.”

[Really.]

“Well, I suppose I could, but I won’t,” he said with a smile, shifting so Erik’s hips were held in the cradle of his thighs.

“Both kids are fast asleep, and Max is definitely your son.”

“Holding his feet again?”

“Butt in the air.”

Charles dissolved into breathless giggles and Erik joined him before the prospect of kissing him breathless was too enticing to miss. Charles arched under him, mouth opening so his tongue could gain entry, his arms winding around his neck in a much-missed way.

[Missed holding you like this.] Charles whispered.

[Missed it too. Hold on, let me go a sec.]

Charles pouted as Erik left the bed and returned a moment later with a small velvet pouch.

“Oh, did you fix them?” he breathed as Erik tugged the strings.
“Good as new,” he promised, tipping the two rings into his palm.

When Charles had reached the hospital, and they had actually assessed the damage to his left arm and hand, there wasn’t a chance to save the rings. They had to come off of Charles’ rapidly swelling fingers, and no one had had the chance to even consider Erik could get them off himself.

Charles had been devastated, even after Erik had gently reminded him that he could fix them. It had really upset him that there was a slightest damage to the precious bands. He always took care to take them off if he cleaned things, or cooked for Max, and he regularly had Erik clean them for him using the equipment in the store.

Erik picked them up and carefully slipped them back onto his finger, first the engagement, meticulous with the points of the star and the way they were facing, and then his wedding ring. Once they were in place and slowly being warmed by Charles’ skin, Erik bent his head and kissed them, letting his senses reach out and lock onto them.

“Much better,” he said softly. “I feel you better now.”

Erik moaned as Charles forced their mouths together, his tongue surging forwards to claim territory while his fingers tangled in his hair. He shivered as Charles stroked the short hair at the back of his neck, his thigh hiking up over his hip so they were that much closer.

“Erik,” he breathed, arching beneath him, hips thrusting to meet Erik’s. “Please.”

He caught his breath as Erik stripped him and then stood to strip himself. Charles unashamedly stared as pale skin was bared for him, long lean torso, narrow hips, growing hardness.

[Love your shoulders,] Charles said as Erik rejoined him.

[Shoulders, huh?]

[Yes. They’re…those are good shoulders.] He reached out and greedily swept his fingers over said shoulders. [Oh yes, very good.]
Erik chuckled through his kisses to Charles’ own shoulder before he slid down to suck a nipple, making Charles arch and gasp. Pleasure zipped through the connection between them and Erik felt it shiver down his own spine.

Charles took the momentary distraction as an opportunity to flip them over, straddling Erik’s hips and pinning him to the mattress by the shoulders.

“Okay, you win,” Erik laughed. “You’re the wrestling champion.”

“Good you think so.”

“So what does the winner want?”

Charles groaned and swooped down to kiss him, hips rolling as their tongues chased back and forth. Erik gripped his hips hard enough to bruise before he reached out with his ability and pulled over the little metal basket they had on their nightstand.

Condoms and lube, so much easier to keep track of when Erik could use his ability to pull them over when the time came.

[To have my wicked way with you, of course. Be a love and get your fingers working.]

Erik panted as the words took their toll on him, his whole groin aching at the seductive tone. He wanted nothing more than to sink into tight heat and thrust until he totally lost his mind.

But these things had an order than had to be followed, so he dutifully flipped Charles onto his back and slicked up his fingers, pressing them into him as efficiently as he could.

[Someone’s impatient tonight.]

“Can you blame me?” Erik countered, stroking the tight passage as he worked another finger in. “We haven’t done this since the attack.”
“Fair point. Oh!”

“Got it.”

“You always do. It’s like you have radar to find it. Come on, love.” He arched up and kissed him, lips slipping down to his ear where he whispered, “fuck me.”

Erik groaned against his skin as Charles snagged the condom, tearing it open and carefully rolling it on him with practiced ease. He was able to ease himself into the tight welcoming heat as soon as he could catch his breath, and he delighted in the way Charles accepted him, the way his breath hitched just a little, the way he trapped his plump bottom lip between his teeth as Erik bottomed out inside him.

Once Erik was able to thrust, once Charles body had accepted him, it really didn’t last that long. They both lost themselves, giving over to the loop of pleasure they had between them, letting it sweep through every nerve and cell until they couldn’t find anything but each other and the bubble they had made.

Erik let out a cry of surprised pleasure as Charles flipped them back over and just *ground* down on him. It was nothing but heat and pressure around him, nothing but Charles, and Erik’s eyes rolled back in his head as he came violently. He reached out unconsciously and wrapped his arms around his lover, holding him close.

Charles shook against him, teeth and nails driving into his skin, drawing blood, and hot sticky wetness spread between them as the little telepath gave himself over to the pleasure.

Eventually, Charles raised his head and blinked at him, face sweaty and flushed.

“I think I just died.”

“Me too,” Erik agreed, finally managing to move his arms and stroke over his slick spine. “You need to move, your knees are going to kill if you don’t.”

Charles whined and burrowed back into his chest and he chuckled. With many grumbles, Charles did flop over onto the free area of the bed, Erik rolling with him so their legs were still tangled.
“In a minute,” the metal bender dismissed, pulling him in for more kisses. He wasn’t quite ready to stop touching his husband just yet.

After all, Charles had just had his cast removed. And pins. There were doctors involved. He needed a lot of loving to make up for it.

Erik chuckled at his crazy husband, who was twisted in his seat to natter away with Tabitha. She had her tablet out and was showing him adorable babies doing adorable things in adorable ways.

“Why not just put up videos of the adorable baby we have?” Erik asked as he turned left into the driveway.

“We’re idea gathering!” Charles giggled.

“We can do all these cute things with him when he’s a little older!” Tabitha added, and Max giggled at her.

“I give up,” he said, pulling in behind his mom’s car. “Huh. Wonder who got a new car.”

“Hmmm? Oh. Well, it’s a rather practical car, so it’s not David,” Charles offered as he spotted the new vehicle in the garage.

“The day he buys something practical is the day I dye my hair purple.”

Charles took Bailey the dog for a little trip to relieve herself over the bushes while Erik relieved Max from his carseat and Tabitha gathered the diaper bag.
“Maybe one week we should hold a dinner,” she said, shaking out Max’s blanket and folding it. It had been cloudy when they’d left, but the weather had cleared up wonderfully. “You know, have the family over, I’ll cook.”

“You really want to take on my mom for the family dinner?”

“Why not? She might enjoy the break.”

“I’m wondering if maybe I slept with Miriam at some point, about seventeen years ago,” he said with a smirk. “Because you are becoming way too much like me for you to not be my child.”

“What a thing to say!” Charles said as he returned. “Of course she’s your child! Blood is piffle!”

“Relax, baby,” he soothed, pressing a kiss to his temple as he pushed the start of the conversation through to him.

“Oh. Well. I might have overreacted to that just a tad.”

“We love you for it,” she said as she took the leash and walked backwards to the door. “You wouldn’t be you without your protective runway.”

“Protective runway?” he laughed.

“It’s for sure too big to be a streak.”

“She has a point,” Erik said.

“I daren’t argue with her.”

“In a mindset like this one? Nope. A whole world of nope.”
They entered the house and Erik set Max on his butt on the floor while they removed their shoes. He wanted to crawl, and he was ready to do it, he just couldn’t seem to get going. They took every opportunity they could to try and spur him into action.

As expected, Max began to babble, reaching out grabby hands for them.

“Come on, little man,” Charles cooed, squatting down and reaching out to him, beckoning him closer. “I know you can do it, I know you’re ready. You just need to get going. Come on, baby. Just a little bit? You’ll like it once you get started.”


He leaned down and took the tiny hands in his own, levering Max up so he could toddle drunkenly along.

“Maybe he’ll just skip crawling,” Erik mused as Charles picked him up and pressed kisses to his chubby cheek. Tabitha fished out a pacifier from the bag and Max was quick to accept it.

“Someone’s ready for his nap,” Charles said as Max snuggled into his neck. “There we go, sweetheart.”

Erik smiled at his mom as she appeared from the living room, but she didn’t smile back.

“You’re phone is off,” she said. “Oh, Erik, I’ve been calling and calling, but your phone is off.”

“I turn it off to drive, and Charles’ died like, ten minutes down the road. Tabs, where’s yours?”

“I left it at home. It’s family day. My friends can wait until tonight,” she said as Erik fished his out.

“Oh!” Charles gasped. “Mamen, I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have, I know, you’re just so worried!”

She stroked his hair.
“I know, I know. You’ve done nothing wrong, Boychick,” she soothed. “But you know now.”

“Yes. Ah. Mamen, if you would,” he urged and she took Max from him, cuddling him close. He whimpered sleepily until he realised who was holding him and then he got back to falling asleep.

“Mom, what’s going on?” Erik asked, seeing his forty missed calls from her.

“Erik, I swear, I didn’t know this was coming,” she said, rocking softly. “Sarah just turned up with him. If I had known, I would have at least warned you.”

“Is it Jacob?”

“Erik,” Charles said carefully. “It’s Richard. He’s in the living room. He wants to see her.”

Erik was perfectly still for exactly 98 seconds, before he exploded.
Charles didn’t sleep that night. He sat in Tabitha’s room and waited for her to come home.

He’d used his abilities to stop Erik, though he wasn’t proud of himself for it. He’d never wanted to use his gift against Erik. Ever. But his husband had been determined to kill Richard, and that simply wouldn’t do.

Murdering your relatives was frowned upon, from a legal standpoint.

Personally, Charles had dreamt up several hundred rather painful and, frankly, creative treatments for the man that had destroyed his girl’s self-esteem. Some of them he was sure could be considered downright artistic. But it wouldn’t help Tabitha if he went to jail for murder. Plus, there were no Max-cuddles in prison.

Sarah had removed Richard rather quickly at that point, but Erik still wouldn’t be calmed, so Charles had been forced to take him and their son home.

Charles looked up from his study of Tabitha’s latest sketch as the door opened and the girl herself appeared.

Sometime in the craziness of trying to stop Erik, Charles had lost sight of Tabitha and when they returned to the entryway, Edie told them that she had called Kurt to come and get her.

“Thank you for the text, darling,” he said as she settled on her bed, curled up.

“Didn’t want you to worry,” she said. “Is he…did he…”

“I don’t know what he wants, we didn’t get that far. Erik rather lost his head, you saw the start of that, and then we had to leave.”

“Oh.”
“Tabitha…you know that you are my daughter, don’t you? Mine and Erik’s. Richard cannot take you back, not now. It’s been too long for him to do anything. With you at the age you are, a judge wouldn’t even give him visitation if you didn’t want to.”

“You swear?” she whispered and he was across the room in a shot, gathering her close.

“I swear on my life. I’ve already called Peter, checked all of it. Richard doesn’t have a legal leg to stand on.” He pressed kisses to her bright hair. “You’re mine, not his. I’m never going to let him have you. Never ever. Oh, my beautiful little artist. Come now, don’t fret. It’ll all work out, I swear.”

She sagged against him, relief sweeping through every muscle. He held her close, rocking her in exactly the same way he would Max. He might not have carried Tabitha, he didn’t give her life, but she was his. He could feel it in every particle of himself, and he would never stop fighting for her.

“I don’t want to see him,” she said eventually.

“You don’t have to. Not even a glimpse if you don’t want. Whatever you want, my darling.”

“I’m tired, Charles,” she mumbled.

“Come on, poppet. Bed for you.”

He fluttered around the room, turning on her nightlight and pulling back her sheets as she did what she had to in the bathroom, and then he tucked her in and sat with her until she’d drifted off. Bailey hopped up and curled up in the space behind Tabitha’s bent knees and Charles gave her a good scratch behind the ear in thanks. She would watch over his girl through the night.

Then he checked on Max, settled his blanket, and made his way to bed.

“I’m not mad,” Erik murmured into the dark as Charles joined him in bed. “What you did, when you stopped me. I’m not mad.”

“No?”
“I really can’t kill him. For one, my aunt would never speak to me again.”

“I really do feel badly for having to.”

“I know. But it’s okay.”

Charles let himself relax against him, to sink into his arms, and Erik pulled him as close as he could.

[Could he take her from us?] he whispered, as if saying it too loudly or aloud would make it real, would give Richard that power.

“No, absolutely not. I called Peter. We have sole custody, Richard has nothing. And with her being as old as she is, no judge would ever force her to go near him, which she doesn’t want at all.”

“She came home?” he breathed.

“Yes. I put her to bed. She’s alright, my love, I promise.”

Erik kissed him hard, pouring everything into it, and Charles didn’t resist. He took a step back, let Erik do what he needed.

Eventually, Erik pulled back and held Charles close, and eventually they both drifted off.

But not for long.

It was barely an hour later that Erik woke, and for a moment he blinked around the room, trying to figure out what had woken him. His first instinct was Max, but the baby monitor was quiet.

Erik was alone.
He found Charles in their office, sat on the floor, surrounded by paperwork. He was frantic, almost manic, and jabbering away into the phone pressed to his ear.

“No, I need it now!” he hissed. “It can’t wait.”

“Charles?”

“I’ve got to go.” He hung up and looked up at Erik. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Erik crept closer and looked around at the papers before settling on the floor with him.

“I guess I don’t really need to ask why you have all Tabby’s custody papers,” he said gently, stroking Charles’ hair. “Baby, why didn’t you wake me?”

“Because it wasn’t important,” he said. “I just needed to check. Just to be sure, you know? That she’s mine. Ours! I mean ours.”

“She is yours, Charles. She’s your daughter, yours and mine.”

He pulled Charles in and pressed a long kiss to the top of his head.

[You should have woken me,] he said gently as Charles tangled their legs together. [I’m your husband, I want to help you when things like this happen.]

[I didn’t want to pile more on you,] he said timidly. [This is…I just thought I could check this myself.]

He pulled back and kissed his little husband hard, forcing his tongue past his lips, kissing until Charles was pliant against him, the tension draining out of him.

“You are NOT a burden,” he said firmly, when he was sure Charles was sufficiently distracted.
“Never. Not to me. And you’re allowed to be upset about this whole shit storm. And yes, I want you to pile it on me. I would think that by now you would understand how much I want to take care of you.”

“I’ve had a mad moment again, haven’t I?”

“Little bit. But it’s okay. It’s part of your charm.” Another long kiss. “Baby, listen to me when I say that the way they treated you growing up…it wasn’t right. You shouldn’t have ever been treated that way. You should never have been made to feel that you weren’t worth anyone’s attention. Now, I know I’ve said this before, many times. But I’ll say it again. You are worth my attention. You are worth my everything.”

[I’m sorry,] he whispered as he leaned in, kissing an apology. [I do try not to think that way.]

[I know. And it’s okay. I’ll keep reminding you. I’ll keep on until you believe me, and even after that.]

A usual trip for the Centre was one where the parents dropped off the kids and let Charles take charge of them for the day. He usually got a few volunteers, but for the most part the parents took a step back.

The trip Logan had arranged was viewed by many parents as an exercise in foolishness.

The thought of their children going somewhere mutant related without them didn’t sit well with them. It took weeks for Charles and Moira to assuage their concerns, and even then he had almost all of them volunteer to chaperone.

Eventually, he managed to get them to a point where they were comfortable enough to allow the trip to happen, and they all gathered the bright Saturday morning after Halloween. The weather had started to turn colder, not cold enough for heavy coats quite yet, but enough to turn every nose and cheek a bright red.

Where Logan was taking them wasn’t far enough to warrant a mode of transport, they could walk it, and their more visibly mutated members gathered attention as they moved through the city.
Like the kids, Bailey the dog idolised Logan, and happily trotted along in her lopsided way, looking up at him in nothing short of adoration.

Tabitha squealed in delight as Frankie crept up behind her and scooped her up, spinning her around.

“I swear, you’re a toddler!” she giggled.

“Good morning to you too, dear cousin.” He motioned to the black man with him. “This is Sketchy. He’s my mentor and an excellent wingman. Sketchy, my cousin Tabitha and her boyfriend Kurt.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

“I didn’t know you were coming today,” she said as he took her hand and spun her, looping her under one arm and carrying her like a football, her braid dangling towards the floor.

“Erik called to check in on me and told me about it,” he said, hoisting her up to ride piggyback. “Feels good to be out, thinking about something other than pirouettes and Grand Jeté. I love it, don’t get me wrong. It’s just a lot to keep up with.”

“You doing okay?” she asked, ducking her head to rest on his shoulder.

“You too, huh?” he asked with a grin up at her. “Your parents, mine, and now you?”

“I love you, I’m allowed to worry about you.”

“Yes, you are. And I’m doing okay, I swear. Just working hard and needed a break.”

“Good.”
“You need to talk about shit?”

“No, I really don’t,” she said and he nodded.

“Not a problem. I’m here if you do though.”

“I know. You’re always there, I know that,” she promised. “I do have a favour to ask, if I can be so bold.”

“Will I regret this favour?”

“I hope not.”

“Then ask.”

“I need to do some studies from life for my portfolio for my college applications. Everyone does walking or standing, things like that. I wanted to do some dancers. So I was thinking, you’re a dancer, in a school of dancers.”

“What are we talking here, you taking pictures?”

“No, just sitting there drawing while you dance. I’d have to film myself drawing, so they know it’s me. But you wouldn’t have to do anything more than just dance.”

He thought it over for a moment and Sketchy nodded.

“We’re in the practice studio six days a week. I’m game when you are.”

She smiled and almost strangled him with her hug around the neck, pressing a long kiss to his cheek.
“I know. I’m awesome.”

“Thank you!”

“Yeah, thank me with cheese fries.”

Soon enough Logan was leading them to a building on the docks and hugging a shorter, younger man.

“Come in, come in!” he said happily, walking backwards and leading them into the wide open space inside. “Welcome to Barnum’s Circus!”

“Are you kidding?” Scott said, voice dripping with disgust. “You brought us to a circus? Is that all we are? A bunch of freaks for people to point at?”

“Scott,” Charles warned, unwrapping Max.

“I brought you here to meet some friends of mine, but the Centre isn’t big enough for them and all of you,” Logan said dryly. “If I wanted someone to laugh at you, I can do that myself.”

There was a scattering of laughter and Scott blushed.

“Everyone, this is Phillip Carlyle. He and I started this place way back when as a haven for those that are different.”

“For mutants?” Ororo asked.

“Not just mutants,” Phillip said. “Way back when, there used to be a lot of people in this city who couldn’t find their place, who didn’t fit anywhere. So we opened our doors to them, made this a safe place for all who needed it. Over the years, we became known as a curiosity, a lot of people have called us a freakshow.” He grinned. “Always nice to hide in plain sight.”
He smiled and walked backwards, spreading his arms wide, and as he reached the centre of the ring, people started to emerge behind him.

“It’s important to find where you fit in the world,” he said as a little girl with pink hair jumped onto his back. He grinned up at her as she giggled, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“And sometimes,” Logan said, “you need to make a place where fitting is the whole world.”

“You’re all welcome here,” Phillip said. “Please, come in and meet us.”

Kurt laughed as the little girl with pink hair flew above him, swinging on the trapeze.

“My great granddaughter,” Phillip said. “Cassie.”

“Dude, how old are you?” John asked, catching the ball of flames the fire-eater threw at him.

“More to me than meets the eye.”

“Gramps is older than TV!” Cassie proclaimed, landing on Phillip’s shoulders. Truly she was getting too big to sit on his shoulders but he couldn’t bring himself to stop her.

“He’s a phoenix,” Logan said as he walked past with an armful of thick ropes. “Every fifty years or so he dies and comes back, young and fresh.”

“Sounds kind of gross if you ask me,” Erik said, helping a couple of the acrobats by levitating the metal pieces they needed to mount high above.

“It is, incredibly gross,” Phillip said. “Best done in a bathtub or a great big bucket.”
The teens shuddered and Kurt stuck out his tongue in disgust.

Phillip was still laughing ten minutes later when he made his way up the ladder to the crows nest. His late wife, who he had married before he knew what he was, had liked to perch up in the crows and watch the performers as she rested. A trapeze artist, Anne had defied the laws of gravity.

His daughter and son had both been part of the circus, as had three of his grandsons. His other grandchildren had been, and were, baseline. Of his great grandchildren, Cassie was the only mutant, and her mother and father had decided that being with Phillip was best for her. She had inherited Anne’s gift of levitation, and she loved being up so high. Most days it didn’t even occur to her to feel hurt that none of them came to see her.

Even his descendants could be afraid of mutants, despite where they came from. Anne would be so disappointed if she were still around.

“These are good,” he said. “Logan was right, you are the right choice.”

“I was thinking of using the original banners and posters for colour inspiration,” Tabitha said. “Make them bright and saturated so they really pop, catch people’s attention.”

“Sounds great.”

Phillip was careful not to sit on her tail as he sat down. He took her sketchbook as she offered it and flicked through the drawings she’d done. The circus needed new artwork done and Logan had said Tabitha would be a good fit for it. Her more cartoon pieces were closer to the style they used to have, when an actual artist had created their first advertising.

When art went digital and every advertising company used a computer to make the images, they weren’t as bright, weren’t as clean.

He loved the drawing she’d done of Cassie swinging on the trapeze, the lines fluid and light, a real sense of movement on the page. She’d added a few splashes of colour, the red and white of her practice clothes, the pink of her hair.

“So how do you do it? Do you paint them huge or what?”
“I paint them smaller, regular size, and then JARVIS takes a digital scan of it. He’s really good, his sensors are really precise, so he captures so much detail. Once he’s done that, we can print banners and posters and all sorts of things in any size you need.”

“And how do we price something like that?”

“Not a clue,” she giggled. “I don’t price my work. Steve at the store does it. He knows the art world and all that, so he handles that side of things.”

“I guess I talk to Steve then. Can I ask you…Logan said you were having some trouble. You know. Out there.” He motioned to the windows, indicating the outside world. “He thinks maybe this might be a place for you.”

“No,” she said firmly. “I appreciate the offer, I do, really. And this place…it’s amazing. To have somewhere that’s totally free? That we don’t have to hide or look over our shoulders? That’s incredible. But I’m not a separatist. I don’t blame anyone that is, I think you have to find what works for you. But for me…”

“Not for you?” he said gently. “I understand. But if you ever need us, we’re here.”

“Maybe I’ll visit.”

“I think Cassie would like that. She’s never met someone with pink hair before.”

Erik groaned and blindly reached for his phone.

He blinked at the screen and then swore, creatively and at length in several languages.

“Erik?” Charles murmured in the dark. “What’s wrong?”
“The store, break-in alarm.”

“Should we call the police?”

“No, I’ll go down, see what’s what. Probably those damn mutantphobic assholes from last month breaking windows again.”

He hopped into his jeans and leaned in to kiss Charles before he left.

[I’ll be fine,] he assured as he stepped into his shoes, yawning and pulling on his shirt. [I think there’s enough metal in the store, don’t you?]

[Yes, but I still worry. I am allowed, am I not? I’m sure it was in the marriage vows.]

[Absolutely. Now don’t wait up. I’ll be back soon. Love you.]

[Mmmm, love you,] he mumbled sleepily, halfway back to dreams.

Erik speed walked the short distance to the store and swore once more as he caught sight of the broken door lock.

“Fuck,” he muttered, looking closer. It was a simple fix he could do himself, and the broken shutters, but he did have to call the police, and take a look at what might be missing.

“I didn’t take anything.”

Erik shoved his way past the broken entryway and growled.

“You know, Aunt Sarah is a woman I love very much, so I won’t call you a son of a bitch,” he snarled at Richard.
His cousin was sat on the floor, surrounded by glass, a half empty bottle of whiskey in his hand and two empties beside him.

“I tried to call you,” he slurred. “You wouldn’t answer the phone. And I.” Hiccup. “I have to talk to you. I have to. But the phone.”

“For fucks sake,” he mumbled, crossing to the alarm. He punched in the code and returned to the door, getting to work fixing things.

“How many of those are broken on my floor?” Erik spat as he realigned the inner tumblers. He made a mental note to apply some graphite.

“Two?”

“Is that a guess or an answer?”

“Don’t know.”

“Guess then.”

“I never told her.”

“What?”

“Tabfa,” he garbled. “Never said…should have told.”

It took everything Erik had not to hit him.

“MY DAUGHTER is nothing to do with you anymore. And if you come near her, we will put you down.”
“See? See? I fucked it up, all of it! Fucked my life and hers and my fault.”

“Yes, your fault!” he half yelled. “She’s in therapy because of you! She’s got issues upon issues upon issues, and it’s all YOUR FAULT!”

“I know,” he said, hanging his head. “Erik, I know what I’ve done. And I know I can’t fix it. I can’t fix any of it, not a fucking thing.” He snorted at himself. “I don’t even know why I broke in, why I needed to talk to you so much. I just did.”

Erik wanted to kill him. At the least, he wanted to put him in the hospital for a very very long time with a lot of pain and mortifying physical exams of his intimate areas.

David answered on the first ring and Erik was thankful for it. He might be a decade older than his brother, but his brother could always be counted on when he was in trouble.

“Erik? Dude, you know what time it is? What’s wrong?”

“I need you to come to the store, fix some glass,” he said, using his ability to move some metal things back into place.


“Can you call Aunt Sarah on your way?”

“Yeah, sure. Why?”

“To come get her son, who broke my store.”

“Oh shit. Don’t worry, on it. Deep breaths, man, deep breaths.”

“Hurry.”
Erik stowed his phone and looked at the drunk man on his floor.

“Get up.”

“Huh?”

“Get. Up,” he snapped, taking him by the elbow and hauling him to his feet. “Listen to me. I’m not going to talk to you, not like this. You’re drunk and any conversation will be pointless. Go home, Richard. Sleep it off. I’ll…I’ll think about it, okay? I’ll think about talking to you.”

“And Tabitha?”

“Don’t fucking push it,” he growled. “The only reason that I’m not putting you in a body bag, and I do mean the ONLY reason, is because I love Aunt Sarah and she would be upset. Now get out.”

Erik watched him stumble out and settle on the kerb. It was close enough for now, and Erik happily ignored him as he dug out his graphite for the lock.

“Hey,” David said as he arrived, stepping through the broken door. “Sarah’s on her way.”

“Thanks.”

David set to the broken glass, floating it back to where it was supposed to be and fusing it into place. Sarah arrived just before they finished putting the store to rights.

“I’m so sorry,” she said after she’d settled Richard into her car. “Erik, please. I know he’s making it worse. But I don’t know what to do. I’m trying to keep him from you and Tabitha and Charles and everyone else. But he keeps doing this! Getting drunk, making bad choices. He’s my son. I want to help him. I just don’t know how.”

He pulled her into a hug.

“It’s okay, it’s not your fault. Just…he needs to give us time,” he said, David locking the store. “He
can’t turn up and expect us to just say everything is okay. He needs to back off, let us breathe.”

“I’ll do what I can with him.”

He nodded and sighed, scrubbing his hands through his hair. “Sarah.”

“Yes?”

“If he comes near Tabs, if he pushes her…I’ll push back.”

Erik tamped down his smile as Charles projected his own self-satisfaction.

It was the first, and he did mean first, thing Charles had ever managed to cook successfully. A simple batch of cookies, for anyone else it wouldn’t be an occasion to celebrate.

But for Charles it was a huge milestone. He’d made them all himself, no help, not even from Tabitha. He’d found the recipe, bought the ingredients, and spent a whole afternoon in the kitchen baking.

Already Erik had eaten more than his share. Charles could dip into his head to find out how they tasted, and he had. Frequently.

They were the good kind of chewy, the chocolate chips a smooth little secret within the pale yellow crisp.

It was Charles’ offering for the Lehnsherr family gathering, and he was so proud of himself for them.

Tabitha had done her usual and then some. Cakes and cookies, breads, rich stews and delicate vegetables.
She was stressed, and had cooked to distract herself.

Come January, the gallery would host Tabitha’s first show, and she’d spent the past few weeks communicating with Melinda May on which piece would work best where and which ones should be set into more secluded spots to give others more light to shine. It was Melinda’s belief that they would sell most if not all of them, and the prints would do well for those who didn’t quite have the budget for an original or wanted one that had sold already.

Tabitha had gained quite the following, and all the tickets had sold. Instead of champagne, there would be cocktails in a rainbow of colours. Rather than cheeses and fancy canapes, there would be cookies and macarons. It was completely Tabitha, through and through.

Add to the show that she was now in her final few months of High School, applying to and touring art schools, and still creating new art pieces, and it all amounted to one stressed teenager.

They pulled up and Tabitha was quick to spirit Max inside out of the snow, leaving Erik and Charles to make trips back and forth to bring in their bags and food inside, Bailey making use of the shrubs before kicking up her heels and heading inside.

“So…how are we handling this again?” Charles asked as they piled different Tuppaware up.

“Taking our cue from Tabitha and pretending he doesn’t exist,” Erik said, looping bags around his wrists. “Look, I know this isn’t what any of us wants, except him of course, and maybe Sarah. But it’s the holidays and he is technically family. So we’re pretending he isn’t even there. I’ve squared it with Sarah. None of us have to talk to him or even acknowledge he’s in the room.”

“And if he pushes at her? Tries to make her talk to him?”

“Than Sarah knows I’m going to push back. Come on, I’m freezing and your nose is the most perfect Rudolph red.”

They hauled their goodies inside to Edie and then wandered off to find other family members.

Charles was immediately ambushed by all the little cousins, all of whom wanted to play with him
and show off their newly improved abilities.

[You’re not funny.] Charles sent as Erik began yet another mental rendition of Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.

[I’ll stop when your nose goes back to it’s usual colour. Until then, deal with it.]

Charles mentally stuck his tongue out and Erik laughed as he set Pete back on his feet and moved to the door. [Check on Tabby?]

[On it.]

Erik checked into the kitchen, where as expected his mother and aunts were now gathered. He let them coo over him, accepting hugs and kisses, pinched cheeks, before he could escape their clutches.

Anya was in Bubbe’s living room, as he had expected. He loved the holidays. Everything was so blissfully calm and warm, nothing to stress him, or his husband or daughter. Just love and warmth and the loving arms of their family to pull them in.

“I’m afraid to ask,” he said as he approached his sister.

“Fell off the pyramid,” she said, holding out a marker so he could sign the cast on her wrist.

“Pyramid.”

“Yeah. Oh! Cheerleading. I was the top of the pyramid and we lost our balance and I broke my wrist when I landed.”

“Yikes.” He dutifully signed where there was a space and drew a little sprig of holly.

“Erik.”
“Yeah? Oh, hey. What’s up?” he said, snuggling her under his arm.

“Richard shouldn’t be here,” she said softly. “He hurt her. He shouldn’t be here.”

“I know, and I agree. But Sarah…he is her son, and she wants him here. We’ve never turned away a Lehnsherr before and we’re not going to start now. The first sign of trouble and I swear, he’s out of here, no matter what. But we’re going to give him the chance.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I’m not asking you to. I’m just asking you to play nice.”

“Fine,” she grumbled before pressing a kiss to his cheek and heading off in the direction of the kitchen.

Erik took a deep breath before he looked around. Tabitha was sitting with Bubbe, Max on her lap and happily babbling away at his great grandmother. Bubbe was smiling widely, nodding to him and adding in a word here and there to make him smile back.

“I know no one is happy,” Sarah said from behind him, making him jump.

“Damn straight. Sarah, I love you, you know that. And I get that he’s your son. But this…this might be asking too much of us.”

“What would you have me do?” she snapped, suddenly angry. “Turn him away? Shove him out? He’s my son.”

“He’s destroyed my daughter,” he snarled back, guiding them out into the hall so Tabitha wouldn’t hear. “You don’t see it. The way she’s constantly afraid of criticism, the way she shoves off all praise. She thinks she’s worth nothing, not a fucking thing, and it’s his fucking fault!”

“I know what he’s done!”
“And you still expect us to forgive him!”

“I expect you to give him a seat at the table!”

“Erik,” Edie said, placing a hand on his chest. “Calm down, boychick. Your anger helps nothing.”

“Mamen…”

“I know. But he is here now, so we will welcome him. It is our way to welcome, you know this. Just…enjoy the meal, enjoy the holiday. Forget he’s here.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Yet I have complete faith you can. Come on, come set the table with your brother. Keep you both out of mischief.”

Soon enough they were all sitting down to eat, and Erik determinedly ignored the chair Richard was sitting in. He, Charles and Tabitha focussed on Max and each other.

[How’s she doing?] Erik pressed as he cut up Max’s dinner into tiny pieces, small enough for him to eat without trouble, but not so small that they’d choke him. It had taken a while to get the knack of it, but he was a dab hand now. As expected, Max abandoned all ideas of cutlery and dove in with his hands, tail waving in delight.

[Fairly well, all things considered. She’s more worried about the show than him, to be honest.]

“Max! Maxie!” Tabitha called, holding out a chunk of challah to the baby, who took it with a happy babble and tried to stuff the whole thing in his mouth.

“Boy has good belly,” Bubbe said approvingly. “Grow big and strong.”
“He’s a very good eater,” Charles agreed.

“Takes after his Vati,” Elijah said.

“I wasn’t that bad,” Erik said with a smile, pouring himself a glass of wine.

“You were a little butterball,” Edie smiled. “Puppy-fat, you grew out of it. But you were such a round little one. I missed it when it melted away. Your cuddles were so squishy.”

“Is he crawling yet?” Rebekah asked.

“Not yet,” Charles admitted. “He wants to, I can see it. He wants to move. He just can’t quite get to it.”

“Maybe he’ll just walk,” Anya said.

“You did,” Erik added. “Skipped crawling, straight on your feet.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Tabby here, she was the crawler. Fast little rugrat too. Couldn’t take your eyes off for a moment, straight across the room.”

“Have you thought about having more?” Richard asked, voice low and submissive. “Maybe a sister for them.”

“I think it’s a little soon for that kind of thought,” Charles said diplomatically, though it wasn’t lost on him that Richard had said ‘them’, making it clear that Tabitha belonged with Charles.

“Max still needs so much,” Erik agreed. “And Tabs is looking into colleges and her show is coming up. It’s not the right time to think of another baby.”
“Perhaps one day though,” Charles said with a small smile. “Another year or two. Hmmm? How would that be, darling?”

“Sounds good,” Tabitha said. “Maybe me and Kurt will make you a grandpa first.”

“Don’t even joke,” Erik growled at her mischievous smile. “No babies from you, miss. Kurt will be a perfect gentleman.”

“Of course he will,” she said. “We’re not stupid.”

“No one said that, darling,” Charles soothed.

“He’s a teenage boy,” David said. “Not exactly known for their restraint.”

“Their? Don’t you mean your?” Jane said with a wicked grin. “How many have you…dated this year?”

He flicked a piece of bread at her and they all chuckled.

A while later, as they were nibbling at the last of the sweet treats, Charles cuddled Max close as he made various things around the table float, and they heard the clatter of Tony and Steve arriving.

“You’re late,” Charles called.

“Blame the good Captain,” Tony grouched. “Drives like the senior citizen he is.”

“It’s the speed limit!” Steve argued.

“It’s snail speed. Oh, hey, doughnuts!”

“Sufganiyot,” Tabitha supplied.
Max was having a tough night. Erik was sure he was cutting another tooth, and he was absolutely miserable. Grizzling and drooling and whining in a way he never normally did.

They’d checked with Edie and she’d assured them he wasn’t ill, just teething, and there was nothing for it but to persevere through.

Charles had taken Max for most of the day, so Erik was taking over for the night so Charles could get some sleep.

“Come on, baby boy,” he soothed, pacing around the living room, Max over his shoulder, patting rhythmically on his back.

“I know I’m a terrible father.”

Erik turned to find Richard standing in the doorway, his eyes fixed on the exhausted baby.

“I know I screwed up, I really do. I should have given her to Maurice,” he admitted.

“Sit down,” Erik said. “I promise I won’t attack you. And I have him in my arms so I can’t yell. Kind of goes against the grain of trying to get him to calm down.” Richard took a seat and scrubbed at his face. “Why? I’m trying to understand, so I can help her understand. Why did you treat her the way you did?”

“I’m a weak man, Erik. I’m weak and I’m selfish. Miriam is…was. She was an amazing woman. An incredible mother. And then she was gone. She was mine for a little while and then she was gone. And I had this beautiful little girl looking to me, expecting that I’d know what to do. And I just didn’t. I was afraid,” he said, giving a humourless snort. “I was afraid of losing her, of sharing her. I was afraid that if I shared her, she’d see what a fraud her dad was and she’d hate me. Fuck it, she hates me anyway.”
“She doesn’t,” Erik said, swaying on the spot as Max snorted into his shoulder. “Hell if I know why, but she doesn’t.”

“She should. You all should. I deserve it.” He gulped back tears. “Miriam would hate me. She loved Tabitha so much and I fucked it all up. I let her down so hard. You know, she made me promise that Tabitha would be okay. When she was dying, when we knew there wasn’t anything more they could do. She only had a few days left and she made me swear that Tabitha would be okay.”

“Explain it to me. Explain the way you dismissed her every achievement. Explain why you put her down.”

“That’s not what I meant to do!” he cried, not defending himself but seemingly genuinely distraught at himself. “I meant to push her, to get her to aim for more. She was capable of so much, I just wanted to make her see that.”

“You went too far.”

“I know that! Now. I didn’t realise, didn’t understand. It’s not like I had an instruction manual. She was so young, and I was all she had.”

“No. She had us all, you both did. You could have called one of us, any of us!” He took a deep breath to bring himself back down as Max managed to scratch at his scalp, trying to get at his hair to pull on. At least it was too short for that. “You shut us all out. You were too arrogant to ask for help and she paid for that.”

“Again, I say that I know. I know! How many times do I have to say it? I know what I’ve done. I just don’t know how to come back from it. I’m not expecting her to even like me! I just want her not to be afraid of being in the same room as me.”

Erik didn’t know how to do that. Every time Tabitha looked at Richard or his name was mentioned, she tensed up, her eyes widening just that little bit. He didn’t know if she truly was afraid of Richard or if she was so used to being abused by him she just expected it now.

“Tell me something,” Erik said, barely above a whisper as Max began to breathe deeply, a sure sign that he was finally, finally giving in to his exhaustion. “Do you really hate mutants? Or are
you afraid of us?"

“Neither. I’m jealous of you,” he said, ashamed. “I grew up in this family, always seeing these incredible things you could all do, and being told by everyone that one day I would be special to. And then…”

“You weren’t. Richard…shit. You’re baseline in a family of mutants. You don’t even realise how incredible that is. Hell, if you gave Charles half a second with your DNA, he’d probably implode. This thing, this…gift you’ve always wanted but never got? It can be explained why it’s there in me, and Tabs and pretty much every other member of this family. But you? They can’t explain it and they’re dying to. Genetically speaking, you’re a scientist’s wet dream!”

“It’s never felt like that. And it sure doesn’t feel like that now.”

“Maybe you should stop expecting it to.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?” He craned to look at Max who was, blessedly, asleep. “Thank fuck.” He sank down into a seat and found it funny that it was the same two seats he and Richard had taken when Tabitha manifested.

“She got pregnant,” he said, staring into the fire. “Marsha. I had a great job and we were engaged and then she was pregnant. And then she wasn’t.”

“She miscarried?”

“She had an abortion.” He laughed humourlessly. “Hell of a fight. I came home from work and she was curled up on the sofa. I thought…well, a few days later, I said we could try again. The way she looked at me… she said, and I quote, ‘why take the risk? You’re tainted.’ Tainted. She wouldn’t have a child with me because Tabitha was a mutant. Because I produced a mutant. And I heard what she was saying and it hit me that I’d done exactly the same. I’d said the same shit to Tabitha and you and even my own mother. My mother.”

“Your mother might actually qualify for sainthood at this point,” Erik chuckled.
“She’s all I’ve got left. I sold my house and bought one out there, which I’m now trying to sell because I can’t stay there without a sponsor. And my sponsor won’t have me there because of where I come from. Marsha…another failed relationship. At least I’m not paying alimony to this one. My daughter hates me, and she has every right. She’s not even my daughter anymore because I was so stupid that I made the absolute worst decision when she needed me. I’m broke, jobless, homeless and crashing in my mom’s spare room. I actually don’t think I have any lower to go.”

“Oh, such a poor martyr,” Erik scoffed.

“I’m not asking for sympathy, I don’t deserve it. I’m just taking inventory.”

“You’re in advertising, you’ll find a job. And once you find one, an apartment comes. You’ll figure it all out, you’ll get back up.”

“And if I can’t?”

“Not an option.”

“Never thought you’d be giving me a pep talk.”

“And I’m not,” he said. “I’m not helping you, you really don’t deserve it. You dug into this hole, you dig out of it. But…you are family, whether I like it or not. And I can’t let family suffer when I can do something. My mother raised me better than that. So…I’ll talk to Melinda May. Get you on the list for the art show. It’s all I’m doing for you, I mean it. That’s it. You want to build bridges with Tabs? Go to the show. Her art is the quickest way to learn about her.”

“I’ll be there.”

Erik got to his feet carefully, holding Max steady. The boy was deep enough under that he felt confident enough to put him in his crib.

It had held every Lehnsherr baby that had slept in the house, and there was something about it that meant a baby slept deeply. Erik had wanted to take it back to their apartment for Max when he was old enough to move to his crib but Charles had stopped him. Charles pointed out that it wouldn’t be
the same if it wasn’t in Bubbe’s house.

“Look. Me and you…we’re never going to be okay. I’m never going to be okay with everything you’ve said and done. But we’re grown men. We’ll behave that way.”

“Agreed.”

“Rich, this is your last shot,” he warned. “Don’t blow it.”

Charles was happily helping Cain put together a toy garage that Pietro had received as one of his gifts.

As the year Charles had first come to the Lehnsherr house, the room was filled with people opening gifts and enjoying time together. There wasn’t an abundance of gifts, like some families did, but what gifts had been given were thoughtful and wanted.

It made a very nice change to the rampant commercialism that seemed unending at the time of year. There was meaning to it, not just money thrown around.

Tony, bless his soul, had made a whole army of little mini robots. There were dogs and cats and dinosaurs, little people and miniatures of Dum-E. They were all small enough to fit in a pocket or a small pair of hands, and Tony had designed them cleverly. Each robot came with it’s own storage box which would also charge it, and they were all connected via Wi-Fi to JARVIS, so there would be no problems that couldn’t be fixed.

Each family member had picked one and then Tony had told Charles to take the rest to France with them in the summer to give to the LeStrange kids.

“You’ve come on so far!” Elijah said delightedly and Charles looked up.

Tabitha was levitating blocks and robots for the amusement of baby Minka and Max and some of the other younger cousins. She was careful to keep them slightly away from being above their
heads just in case she lost her ‘grip’ but she was smiling as she made them spin and swirl in the air.

“So far that Darwin thinks she’s ready for MAT’s,” Erik said.

“Really? That’s so good!” Anya said.

The conversation settled into comparisons of different MAT’s and testing methods, good and bad experiences and funny stories of accidents with powers. Charles couldn’t help but notice that the baseline members of the family were included, their own accidents being included, like the time Cain dropped an entire jar of pickled cucumbers and the cat rolled in it, or the time Jane used a glitter bath bomb and their cat, who was a jet black fluffy thing, had rolled in the empty tub and become absolutely fabulous.

[I don’t understand how he couldn’t see his place,] Charles said. [How could he not see how much he’s loved?]

[I think it all got distorted in his head,] Erik offered, lounging back and nibbling on some cheesey mini crackers. He’d given up fighting his family and embraced his cousin painting his toenails. Cassandra was having a wonderful time, even if her fine motor skills were less than accurate. [If he’d talked to someone, maybe shared how he felt, we could have helped him understand.]

[Well, yes.]

[Can he understand? Can we get through to him?]

[I think so. But it’s not our job, Erik. Ours is to help Tabitha, not the idiot who fucked her up.]

[Agreed. Baby, I’m right there with you,] he said, chuckling as Tabitha managed to levitate one of his crackers out of his hand and straight across the room and into her mouth.

“Should I just surrender them now?” he asked her, holding out the tub he’d been dipping into.

“Maybe,” she said, flying another one across.
“Can I have one?” Wanda asked.

“Sure. Open mouth!”

The eight year old giggled as she waited with her mouth open as Tabitha floated one across and straight beyond her teeth.

There followed a general mass of flying snacks as Tabitha really showed off, still floating the toys.

Max was happy in Tony’s lap with Steve playing with him, teasing him with a bear and making him giggle.

Until he saw the cracker on the coffee table that had been dropped.

Suddenly, he didn’t want the bear, he didn’t want Tony, he didn’t want Steve. He wanted nothing but the cracker.

But no one was going to give it to him. Vati was busy with Cassandra, Daddy was busy building something he wanted to chew on, and Tabitha was playing with the blocks.

Max batted Tony’s hands away and tipped himself forwards onto the carpet.

“Charlie!” Tony hissed. “He’s on the move!”

Erik shot up, scrabbling for his phone to take pictures, and Charles scrambled across the room so he could see better.

Steve gripped at the bear to stop himself from trying to help the baby.

Max kneeled on the carpet, his little fingers gripping it and his tail waving as he figured out what he was doing. He looked up at Daddy and reached for the cracker, whining.
“Go on then,” Charles encouraged. “Come on, Max! You can do it, sweetheart!”

Max screeched again and hit the floor but Charles was adamant that, this time, he would not intervene.

Max was ready to crawl, Charles could see it in him, feel it. He was ready, good to go. What he lacked was the incentive. The cracker seemed to be enough to get him to at least kneel. Yes, he was frustrated, enough so that he made it float above the table and pointed at it again, looking at Charles.

“No, I’m not getting it for you,” he said firmly. “If you want it, you can get it. Come on, baby. I know you can do this. Just a little bit. Come on, Max. Go get it!”

Max babbled sadly, looking at Vati, who had the phone out, and then at Tabitha, who was smiling and nodding.

He screeched for a few more moments before he pouted and looked at the floor under him. Then he finally reached forwards with one hand, scooted a knee forward, and that was it. He was crawling. He didn’t topple, didn’t wobble.

He was a natural, just like Charles knew he would be. Firm and confident in his movements, he slowly crawled to the table, where he reached up and pulled himself up so he was standing.

It was almost too easy for him to grab the cracker out of the air and chomp down.

The room erupted into cheers and celebrations, happy tears and Max waving his hard-earned snack at Daddy as he finally picked him up.

Max looked at him and Charles got a clear mental image, which he shared with Erik.

[Daddy, you couldn’t have just picked me up to begin with?]
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