A Place to Fall
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A Place to Fall
by ikeracity

Summary

While being tasked to protect Charles Xavier, the annoyingly charming CEO of Xavier Pharmaceuticals, SHIELD agent Erik receives further orders to use Charles as a source of information to find and capture Professor X, the elusive leader of the renegade band of mutants called the X-Men. Of course, that's a rather difficult proposition, given that the man he's hunting is the same as the one he's trying to protect. And the fact that Erik's starting to find Charles more than a little attractive complicates everything.

Notes

Sunryder's amazing artwork can be found here.

Thank you to everyone for cheering me on through this, especially when it completely spiraled out of my control and took way longer to write than I thought it would. Thanks especially to Wall and Jeri, who beat me until I wrote. Thanks to Syn for being awesomely supportive and helping with title/beta/etc. Thank you to everyone who word-warred with me anytime in the last...two months? And thanks to Pan for being my A+ beta. ;)

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understanding about everything and for being so amazingly encouraging throughout this process. I really hope you like this :)
Chapter 1

Charles Xavier was popularly described in the following ways: CEO of Xavier Pharmaceuticals, billionaire and one of the richest men in America (Forbes), endlessly polite and ridiculously charming (testaments of various women and the occasional man in half a dozen gossip rags), holder of three PhDs (one from Harvard, two from Oxford), heralded genius (The New York Times), most eligible bachelor of 2013 (People) and possessor of a dazzling smile that ranked third on a Top Ten list (also People).

Erik Lehnsherr described him in the following way: the most maddening, arrogant, ignorant asshole Erik had ever had the displeasure of knowing.

Said maddening, arrogant, ignorant asshole was, at the moment, using a strip of beef jerky to tempt a kitten out from under the carriage of a blindingly neon-yellow Volkswagen. Charles was lying on his stomach on the sidewalk, his arm thrust underneath the car as he cooed softly at the kitten. Erik stood in bored irritation behind him, wishing he would just get up and stop making a scene. Already, three people had stopped to ask if they could help, turning away only when Erik glared hard at them. And now two young girls were starting to drift curiously toward them from across the street. Erik glared at them, too, knowing that if they got anywhere near, Charles would attempt to flirt with them, even lying on the ground, even with half his body stuck under a car. Charles flirting, Erik had learned within the first day of tailing his charge around, was nothing short of an exercise in secondhand embarrassment and exasperation, and was to be studiously avoided if at all possible.

“Come here,” Charles said soothingly as he wiggled further underneath the car, his voice a full pitch higher than it usually was. He used this voice often on strays. He’d tried using it once on Erik, who had favored him such a glower that they had never mentioned it again. “Come here, I won’t hurt you. Look, I’ve even got food. Shh, it’s all right. You’re safe. Come on now, come out from under there.”

“Charles,” Erik said, letting the annoyance bleed into his voice. “We’re going to be late.”

“Oh, hush,” Charles replied without looking up. “I’m the CEO. They can’t start without me.”

Spoiled brat, Erik thought, making the thought sharp and pointed enough that any average telepath could have picked it up. But Charles was a weak telepath, not good for much more than reading base emotions and general moods, so Erik wasn’t afraid of him noticing any unspoken words. It gave Erik free-rein with his mind at least; he’d have never taken the job if it had put his mental privacy in jeopardy, even if Fury had threatened to cut off his access to SHIELD resources.

After another couple of minutes, Charles succeeded in coaxing the kitten out to where he could reach it. With a triumphant cry, he slowly pulled the animal out by the scruff of its neck and sat up, clutching it to his chest and cooing wordlessly.

“Oh, look at you, poor thing,” Charles murmured, petting its tiny head with one finger. “You’re shaking. How long have you been under there? And you’re filthy, too.”

The kitten let out a tiny squeak, and Charles grinned delightedly, his eyes wide and bright. Erik was starting to realize that Charles got excited over the smallest things. In this case, literally.

“Where’s your mama, hmm? Are you hungry?”

Erik watched as Charles waved the piece of beef jerky in front of the kitten’s nose. “Already late,”
he said, glancing impatiently at his watch. “And that thing is going to choke.”

Charles frowned. “You’re right. This kitten’s probably too young for solid food. Milk, do you think?”

Erik tapped his watch pointedly. “Late.”

“We can spare a minute to get some milk somewhere,” Charles said dismissively, climbing to his feet. The kitten squirmed in his arms, and he hushed it with soothing rubs pats along its narrow back. “A lot of good you were, by the way. You could’ve lifted that car to help.”

“I’m a SHIELD consultant assigned to protect you,” Erik growled. “Not to help you play animal control.”

Charles snorted. “SHIELD consultant. You just like saying that.”

Erik, in fact, did not. He’d have much preferred to deny any and all affiliation with both SHIELD and any other government agency. He’d worked alone for years before Fury had found him, and if it were up to him, he’d still be working alone now. At least then he wouldn’t have to take orders from Fury, that snide, one-eyed bastard. But hunting Sebastian Shaw was more than a one-man operation. SHIELD had resources he needed, and that was the only reason why he was here now, babysitting a billionaire with a bleeding heart.

At least he wasn’t babysitting Stark, he told himself, which was a mercy in and of itself. He would rather terminate his entire alliance with SHIELD, effective immediately, and eat several bullets than be required to keep Stark company for longer than fifteen minutes. And that was putting it mildly.

That was one good thing about Charles, he figured. He wasn’t prone to flying off at a moment’s notice, determined to kill himself in that tin can Stark called his Iron Man suit.

He was, however, prone to a) nursing an ego that rivaled Stark’s, b) launching into interminable science lectures using terminology that made Erik’s eyes go blank, and c) forever getting distracted by one novelty or another, all of which pissed Erik off. And he was careless, too, which Erik loathed to no end. He himself was fastidious with his appearance, his actions, his time. People who didn’t dress neatly and were piss-poor at time management drove him insane. Charles Xavier was guilty of both.

Good things, he thought to himself as Charles headed at last for the car. Just think of the good things.

He’d taken to making a list of Charles’ redeemable qualities to calm himself down before he seriously considered socking the telepath in the face. Thus far, he had come up with the following:

One: Charles Xavier was a mutant. Caveat: He had only a weak mutation, and his involvement in Xavier Pharmaceuticals meant, in Erik’s humble opinion, that his status as part of the mutant community should be permanently revoked.

Two: Charles Xavier was polite and, by all accounts, actually very friendly. Caveat: Erik was sure it was a result of his wealthy upbringing and likely served as a mask for his vices, a sort of defense mechanism so people wouldn’t look closely enough to see the haughty snob within.

Three: Charles Xavier had blue eyes that were like looking into a very calm, very deep ocean. Caveat: They were too fucking blue and too fucking distracting.

When the caveats outweighed the main points, Erik would consider Charles a lost cause. For now, those three redeemable qualities seemed to be holding their own.
He mentally added another one: Charles Xavier looked absurdly adorable holding kittens. Caveat: Well. He’d figure that one out later.

They climbed into the car, Charles in the passenger seat, Erik driving as always. Charles had tried to fight him for the keys once when they had first met, a struggle that had ended with him securely tied up in the backseat with the seatbelts. Erik was, at heart, an impatient man; he didn’t have time to take anyone’s shit, and certainly not a spoiled billionaire’s. Charles had complained about the treatment the entire drive, but at least he hadn’t asked for the keys again after that, though he occasionally looked vaguely displeased whenever Erik pushed him toward the passenger door. The looks he shot Erik—disgruntled, slightly hurt—made Erik feel the tiniest bit guilty over insisting to drive. But Charles didn’t understand Erik’s inherent fear of cars—ironic, really, given his mutation. And he would never understand anyway, because it was no one’s business but Erik’s, and he hadn’t told anyone since he’d been sixteen, on that early May morning in bed when Magda had asked him where he had gotten his scars.

Charles glanced over at him, and Erik shut away those thoughts with practiced ease. He focused instead on the green digits on the car’s dashboard clock. “You’re seventeen minutes late already.”

“They’ll have milk in the lounge, won’t they?” Charles asked absently, petting the kitten’s spine, from the base of its neck to the end of its tail. “For coffee and the like.”

Erik resisted the urge to snap at him. He was just so frivolous all the time—so concerned now over a fucking kitten when the world was filled with problems so much bigger—that it was difficult not to punch him in an effort to knock some sense into his silly head. Erik gritted his teeth and said, “Give the thing to your secretary and tell her to take it to the pound.”

“The pound?” Charles sounded appalled. “No, no. We’ll take him to the vet, get him checked out.”

“And then?”

“And then…”

He trailed off. When Erik looked over, Charles was gazing silently down at the ball of fur in his hands. The kitten was currently leaving tiny, dirty paw prints all over Charles’ white dress shirt, but Charles was grinning, his smile soft in a way that, somehow, inexplicably, made Erik’s irritation subside the smallest bit.

No. He was not allowed to find Charles attractive. He refused to even think anything remotely flattering about a man who was continuing his father’s work in helping to oppress mutantkind, one dose of suppressant at a time. That thought chased away any burgeoning seeds of goodwill in Erik’s mind and reaffixed the scowl on his face, which remained for the duration of the drive.

When they arrived at the headquarters of the New York branch of Xavier Pharmaceuticals, Charles ignored the curious stares and stepped into the first empty elevator in the lobby. Erik got in after him and eyed the kitten, which was now gnawing on the tip of Charles’ index finger.

“Would you do me a favor and hurry the elevator up a little?” Charles asked, flashing Erik an engaging smile as he hit the button for the thirty-first floor. “Seeing as how I’m—” He checked his watch. “—thirty-six minutes late now.”

Erik crossed his arms. If he were a dog, he might have bared his teeth in annoyance. Last he checked, he wasn’t a dog, but he curled up his lip, baring his teeth anyway. “You got yourself into this, Mr. Xavier,” he said evenly. “You can deal with the consequences of your actions just like
everybody else.”

Charles huffed. “‘Mr. Xavier.’ Always with the Mr. Xavier. You do love trying to get a rise out of me, don’t you? For one thing, it’s Dr. Xavier, thank you. For another, I’ve told you a thousand times to call me Charles, or else I’ll call up Director Fury and tell him that if he must assign me a bodyguard, let it at least be someone who will consent to drop the formalities.”

“I’m not a bodyguard,” Erik said stiffly. “I’m here to ensure your personal safety.”

Charles grinned cheerily. “Sounds like a bodyguard to me.”

Erik pointedly decided to ignore him. There were two reliable ways to end an argument with Charles: admit Charles was right or pretend there was no argument at all. The first option was unacceptable, seeing as how the word capitulate had failed to make it into Erik’s vocabulary. The second option, while grating in its own right, was at least something Erik could live with. He glared at the button panel on the wall and tugged ever-so-slightly on the elevator cables, rushing the ride. He wasn’t doing Charles a favor, he told himself. He was cutting short the time he had to spend in a confined space with Charles and that damnable kitten, which was now perched precariously on Charles’ shoulder and giving Erik a wide, yellow-eyed, innocent look. Erik glowered at it until it squeaked and wobbled on ungainly legs safely back down into Charles’ arms. Good. At least someone in this elevator recognized how dangerous Erik could be when tested.

Erik yanked the doors open almost before they reached their floor. Charles stepped out, his pace leisurely even now, when he was forty minutes late. Instead of heading straight for the scheduled conference room, Charles detoured to the nearest lounge, where a small, stout woman was sleepily pouring coffee into a mug by the counter.

“Good morning, Doris,” Charles said pleasantly. “How are you?”

Doris was a middle-aged, weary-eyed woman with a ring on her finger who looked as if she might actually kill whoever interrupted her before she took her first cup of coffee. Still, she blushed noticeably when she spotted Charles standing beside her, and her dully murderous expression eased into something less threatening and more starstruck.

“Dr. X—Xavier,” she stammered, her eyes darting everywhere but his face. “I don’t think we’ve ever—we’ve—”

“Met?” Charles finished, smiling brightly at her. He rummaged around with his free hand in the cabinets overhead, presumably in search of a saucer. “No, I don’t believe we have. But I do try to look over employee records regularly—get to know my own company and all that—and I recognized your name and face. How do you do?”

Doris’s blush deepened and she stuttered her way through a handful of pleasantries while Charles chattered charmingly on, and Erik had to wonder for about the fifty-third time in the last two weeks if Charles was actually Cupid, or some form of some god of love and friendship because the ease with which he dealt with people and the ease with which people fell in love with him was actually maddening, to the degree that Erik was beginning to realize that the only way to stop people from throwing themselves at Charles was to lock him up in a padded room with no windows and no Internet and no goddamn kittens.

(The kitten was squirming in Charles’ hands now. Erik glared at it as it twisted around to look at him. This time, it lifted its lip just slightly, just enough to show one sharp, tiny tooth. All right, so it had backbone. After a moment of consideration, Erik gave it a nod of grudging respect.)
Doris cooed over the kitten. Doris did not look like a woman given to cooing, so Erik noted with exasperation Incident No. 31 in which Charles’ mere presence inspired out-of-character behavior. Incident No. 1 had been Erik’s inexplicable decision to keep on the job, even after meeting Charles and being determined to hate him. Incident No. 16 was memorable in that Charles had somehow convinced Erik to help him ferry a family of ducks safely across a busy New York street. Erik did not help ducks. Carrying small baby animals to safety was out of the purview of a feared, occasionally government-sanctioned assassin and on-and-off SHIELD consultant. And yet he’d done it, and to this moment, he had no idea why.

(That was a lie: he had some idea why. Blue eyes was why.)

Together, Doris and Charles hunted down a small white saucer and half a gallon of two-percent milk in the refrigerator. Charles set the kitten down on the floor, where it stumbled a moment before righting itself. Then he poured a bit of milk in to fill the saucer halfway and placed it carefully in reach of the kitten, who was sniffing the air, its whiskers twitching wildly. It took a couple of staggering steps toward the saucer and then nearly face-planted before steadying itself and cautiously flicking out its tiny pink tongue.

“It’s so adorable,” Doris said, crouching on one side of the saucer as the kitten began to lap up the milk in rapid, sloppy licks.

Kneeling on the other side, Charles beamed happily. “Isn’t he? He doesn’t have any identification either. We’re going to have to call him something.”

“He’s not yours?” Doris asked in surprise.

“Oh no. I found him under a car this morning. Poor thing was all alone.”

Charles ran one finger down the thin line of the kitten’s back. Erik resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He cleared his throat instead and tapped the face of his watch when Charles looked up.

Charles heaved a sigh. “Are you my bodyguard or my nanny? Because you are bordering on nanny territory right now, what with the nagging and the—”

“Excuse us,” Erik said curtly to Doris as he reached down to yank Charles to his feet by his arm. Charles, for all his slender build, was surprisingly heavy and resisted valiantly. Erik hauled him up, valiance aside, and then ignored Charles’ pout, which took an effort because Charles had the sort of pout that no grown man should be able to pull off without looking absurd, except Charles managed to only looked piteous.

“You’re leaving?” Doris said, staring up at them—well, at Charles. She hadn’t taken her eyes off him since he’d said hello. It was that way Charles had of—of being horribly alluring, to the point that it was somehow ridiculously difficult to look away. Erik could sympathize. He was seventy-five percent sure that it was a secondary mutation of Charles’, because nothing else could explain it.

“He has a meeting,” Erik said.

Charles leveled a stern look at him. “Don’t be snippy.”

“I’m not being snippy.”

“He’s jealous,” Charles told Doris. “He always gets like this when I talk to other people, particularly women.”

“I’m not—” Erik felt his cheeks heat. Fuck. What the fuck. He never blushed, and he never got
jealous.

He wondered, very briefly, if he should count this as Incident No. 32, or as 32 and 33, separately.

“You’re late,” he said, moderating his tone and smoothing over his expression. Deep breath. One, two, repeat. Charles, Erik thought, should be regularly thanking the yoga class Erik had been coerced into taking when he’d been seventeen; breathing techniques had thus far been the only thing saving one insufferable billionaire from becoming a very dead insufferable billionaire. “Very late. I don’t want to have to deal with MacTaggert, that’s all.”

Charles laughed. “My big bad SHIELD agent is afraid of my secretary. Come now, Erik, she’s not that bad.”

Erik wasn’t sure which part of that sentence to address first: the fact that he wasn’t Charles’ anything (though some part of him seemed to tingle at the possessive, but he thought that it was more likely that that was the beginnings of a stomachache from the one-day-expired cream cheese he’d had this morning), or the fact that Moira MacTaggert cut letters open like she was cutting throats and was most definitely that bad.

Before he could say anything to either, Charles’ phone began to ring. It was that abominable laffy taffy song again. Erik resisted the urge to crush the phone with a flick of his fingers. If anything was going to break him, he told himself, it wasn’t going to be a fucking ringtone.

_Girl shake that laffy taffy_

_That laffy taffy_

_Shake that laffy taffy_

_That laffy taffy_

All right. So he wasn’t ruling out the ringtone just yet.

Charles patted his pockets. “Left front,” Erik bit out. Charles fished out his phone and flashed Erik a grateful grin that promptly fell off when he saw the name on the screen. Erik leaned over his shoulder and laughed darkly. “The big bad CEO is afraid of his own secretary. Come now, Charles, she’s not that bad.”

“Oh, shut up,” Charles muttered, visibly steeling himself before hitting “accept.” “Hello?”

There was a long pause in which MacTaggert was, Erik assumed, expressing her disappointment in that perfectly even, perfectly calm voice of hers that somehow still painted a vivid picture of her impending wrath. Erik had been subject to that voice only once in the last two weeks. It had made an impression.

Charles winced. “But there was a kitten...” he began, and then it all went downhill from there, more of a downward leap off a cliff than a downward spiral, and when the perfectly-calm yelling was done, Charles hung up shamefacedly and gave Doris a sheepish smile. “I’m so very sorry to dump this on you, Doris, but would you mind terribly watching over Patches here? I’ve got to run.”

She shot him a quizzical look. “Patches?”

“Look, he’s got patches of color all over him. It’s perfect.” He bent over to pet the newly-christened kitten on the head. “Just for a little while, all right? I’ll be by to pick him up at the end of the day at the very latest, I promise. Or I’ll send Erik.”
“I’m not a kitten courier,” Erik growled.

“He’s not a kitten courier,” Charles informed Doris solemnly, “but last week he carried ducklings across the street. Make of that what you will.”

Doris turned that adoring, fellow-animal-lover grin on Erik, who glowered at her until her grin withered and she averted her eyes uncomfortably. “I’ll just take Patches back to my office then...”

Charles smiled blindingly. “Excellent. Very nice to meet you, and I’m very late now. Have a wonderful day, love.”

He took Erik’s elbow and whisked him out of the lounge.

“Have a wonderful day, love,” Erik mocked as they power-walked down the hall.

“You know, I’d stop accusing you of being jealous all the time if you stopped being jealous,” Charles remarked, sounding terribly amused.

“I’m not jealous,” Erik snapped. “It’s hard to get jealous over a man you hate.”

Charles missed a step. Erik kept walking for a handful of seconds before he realized Charles had stopped. When he looked back, Charles was regarding him with something very nearly hurt in his eyes.

“Oh,” he said.

“Fuck,” Erik said, equally eloquent. Charles sounded genuinely wounded. “I mean—”

“I know what you mean,” Charles interrupted. “Come on, I’m late.”

“Charles—”

But Charles brushed past him without pausing again, and Erik followed him into the conference room feeling vaguely guilty. He tallied that as Incident No. 34 because before he’d met Charles Xavier, guilt had been an alien concept to him. But he was feeling guilty now, especially when Charles took his seat and listened to MacTaggert’s hissed scolding without protest, offering such listless excuses that even MacTaggert stopped to ask if he were deathly ill. Charles replied that he was sulking, and fucking hell, Erik had caused him to sulk, and could he go to prison for that because anything that put that injured look in Charles Xavier’s eyes deserved three to five without possibility of parole. Erik wondered if it were possible to arrest yourself.

Before he could follow that line of thought to its conclusion, his phone buzzed in his pocket. Glad for the distraction, he stood up and silently left the room, pointedly ignoring the way Charles was pointedly ignoring him.

One look at the caller ID made him consider dropping his phone down a toilet and pretending he’d broken it. But it was waterproof; all SHIELD-issued tech was, courtesy of Stark, the bastard.

Besides, he reminded himself, the call might come with new orders. He might finally be free from his glorified babysitting duties and on to more important things—namely, hunting Sebastian Shaw off the face of the planet. Resuming his decade-old quest would be the best outcome of this phone call; escaping Charles Xavier before the Incidents began to seriously stack up and before he, God forbid, became some sort of baby animal ferry would be a very welcome bonus.

Once he was out of earshot of the meeting, he hit “accept.” “Fury.”
“Lehnsherr,” came a deep, bored-sounding voice. Fury always sounded heavily ironic and about three seconds away from being done with all this shit. He had a knack for it.

“Tell me you have a new lead for me to follow,” Erik said, pulling a coin out of his pocket and beginning to weave it through the cracks of his outspread fingers. He had first started this habit as a child, with an old shekel coin that his father had given him. He had loved that old coin dearly, had carried it with him everywhere from age four to age eight, when he’d lost it in an old sewer while tussling with another boy from school who had called him a freak. He’d been inconsolable when he’d gotten home and discovered that his coin was no longer in his pocket where it had always been for as long as he could remember. It wasn’t until his mother had soothed him with kisses and handed him a new shekel that he’d calmed down, and then he’d gone on to love that new coin just as fiercely as he’d loved the old one.

The new shekel, which was now dull and smoothed over with age, was currently sitting on his living room mantel, too precious to be taken about and risked. In recent years, he’d taken to floating around any old change he picked up. Today’s coin of choice was a Canadian nickel, chipped at the edges and a bit weathered. He liked this coin, if only because Steve Rogers always looked askance at him whenever he whipped it out, as if confused at the very idea of something not American.

“I have something new for you,” Fury confirmed, “but I seriously doubt you’re going to like it.”

This was how approximately 98% of their conversations began. Erik braced himself. “What is it?”

“The X-Men. You know them.”

“Of course,” said Erik. Who didn’t? The vigilante group had sprung up sometime within the last three or four years, starting with small raids on a handful of privately-owned research laboratories that were conducting illegal mutant experiments. The X-Men had, in quick succession within the first year, shut down eleven such facilities, and the remarkable and baffling thing about each occasion was that there were never any casualties. Local law enforcement was always tipped anonymously after the fact, and when they arrived, all they ever found were human scientists neatly bound with zip ties, unconscious but uninjured, and all evidence of illegal activity displayed in plain view. Any and all imprisoned mutants were always gone from various holding cells and cages, suspected to be taken by the X-Men. There were reports of missing mutants returned to their homes, as well as media interviews with survivors that were almost actively suppressed by human-based newspapers but widely published on the Internet, which was nearly impossible to censor.

The X-Men were vigilantes, to be sure, and condemned by the government, but they had raised awareness by exposing the illegal labs in the first place, something the human government had, some suspected, turned a blind eye to. Erik approved of them for that. They were doing mutantkind good by deconstructing the human regime, one facility at a time. And they were doing it while earning public goodwill, too; even the human public drew the line at experimenting on children, and the last time the polls had gone out, the X-Men had had an approval rating of 54%, mutants and humans both. They were something of Robin Hoods, Erik thought. Nationally-celebrated rogues.

“What about them?” he asked Fury now. SHIELD kept an eye on the X-Men, he was sure of it. Fury liked to keep abreast of every little thing going on in the nation, and the X-Men situation was hardly a little thing. Erik wondered how much Fury knew about them. The X-Men had been notoriously secretive all this time, and even today, years after their first appearance, no one had any photographs or sketches of anything clearer than a blue and yellow blur, which was probably a suit of some sort and probably should have made it ridiculously easy to spot them but—well. Clearly not.

“They,” Fury said, rolling the word along his tongue slowly, “are dangerous. Or at least they’ve been
deemed dangerous.”

Erik watched the nickel circle his ring finger, then his middle finger. “By who?”

“By people whose paychecks are bigger than mine and who regularly play golf with the president,” Fury replied dryly. “Now the X-Men aren’t all bad. Public opinion’s even on their side, for the most part. But they’re dangerous because they don’t answer to anybody, and that makes certain people in our government uneasy, understand?”

Erik suppressed a snort. He’d known since the beginning that the presence of mysterious vigilantes running around the country striking at random would make the government very uncomfortable. To be honest, he was surprised the X-Men had gone this long without being flagged as a serious threat rather than merely a passing curiosity.

“So what are they going to do about it?” Erik asked.

“They want the leader. They want Professor X.”

Erik caught the coin in his hand and straightened minutely. “What? Kill him?”

“No, Lehnsherr,” Fury said, sounding very faintly exasperated. “Not every problem can be solved by slitting its throat.”

“I don’t slit throats,” Erik answered evenly. Too messy. He preferred bullets to the head. Simple, efficient, clean. Although he had made a notable exception with one of Shaw’s old cohorts in Venice in August of last year. Erik remembered that face vividly. It had belonged to the man who had held his mother’s arms back as Shaw had killed her, just by putting one finger to her head and pushing back and back until her neck had snapped. Erik had made sure that man had suffered, just as he would make sure Shaw would suffer, in the end.

“I’m well aware,” Fury said, and he probably was. Erik knew SHIELD had a file on him, just like they had a file on Natasha Romanoff and on any other person of interest who had even the remotest tie to the United States and, occasionally, foreign affairs. He’d snuck in and peeked through his file once, when he’d first started to work with Fury. It had been impressive, the information they’d had on him. Erik had ripped a couple of choice pages out, just to keep them on their toes. To this day, he wasn’t sure of Fury or his cronies had ever noticed, or even cared.

“No,” Fury said again. “They want Professor X found and brought in, peaceably if possible. They want to speak to him. Figure out his intentions. Once they’ve got that, they’ll decide on a further course of action. But we don’t worry about that. We worry about the first part. Or, should I say, you worry.”

Erik bit back an irritated sigh and attempted to moderate his tone. It took an admirable effort. “When I came to work with SHIELD,” he said, “you promised me the use of your resources to hunt Sebastian Shaw. It’s been nearly three months since the last lead, and you haven’t given me any time or information to go after him since. Instead, you’ve been sending me off on your little missions, like I’m one of your obedient pet Avengers. I’m here because I want to be, Fury, because our alliance has benefitted me so far.” He clenched his fist, feeling the grooved edges of the coin digging into his palm. “Let me remind you that as soon as that ceases to be true, I’ll be gone.”

Fury was, as always, unfazed. A bomb going off in his face would’ve elicited the same reaction as listening to someone sneezing three rooms away. Erik had seen it happen. “Obedient pet Avengers,” he repeated, his voice laden with sarcasm. “I don’t know where you got that idea, Lehnsherr.”
“Steve Rogers,” Erik threw in, because really, the man was the human incarnation of a golden retriever, eager to please, always friendly, always bouncing on his toes, anxious to be of some use.

Fury paused. “All right, you have something of a point there. But that’s one. Do I even need to mention Stark?”

No. Stark never needed to be mentioned, ever. Speaking Tony Stark’s name was like invoking a curse; when it was uttered aloud, Tony Stark himself would inevitably follow. Erik knew this from experience. He avoided the T-word or the S-word with every ounce of his determination.

“So,” he said, steering the conversation away from billionaires who dressed themselves up in a bucket of metal and proceeded to fly around harassing people and calling it heroism, “you want me to find Professor X.”

“That’s right. You’re a mutant, and that will, hopefully, give you a tactical advantage. Trusting those similar to you and all that. Furthermore, you’ve cultivated a resource that I want you to use.”

Erik leaned against the wall. He’d fucking carried ducks across the street last week. Unless those ducks were secret agents equipped with some marvelous shrinking and morphing technology, he doubted he’d been cultivating much of anything, except maybe a migraine.

When he said as much, he could almost hear Fury rolling his eyes heavenward. “Charles Xavier. I’m talking about Charles Xavier.”

Erik’s spine automatically straightened. Funny how that happened, he thought, a bit annoyed at how his focus seemed to sharpen at the mere mention of Charles’ name. “What?”

“You know Xavier’s one of our best assets on mutant affairs. He’s a damn good consultant with plenty of ties to the mutant community. I sent you to him to protect him as a SHIELD asset. Now I’m telling you to use him as an asset. He knows mutants. He’s got his fingers in all the pies. Get him to tell you as much as he knows about the X-Men. Start from there.”

“He’s your asset,” Erik pointed out, in a bid to extract himself from Charles’ presence as soon as possible. “You ask him.”

Fury sighed that sigh that said everyone was an idiot and he was getting very tired of having to explain things that should have been obvious but usually weren’t, at least not to anyone who didn’t have an eye-patch and who wasn’t the director of SHIELD. “Xavier is pro-mutant. Obviously. As such, he might be reluctant to tell us humans information that might bring down Professor X, a mutant who’s championing a cause that quite a few mutants seem to be getting behind. I happen to have exactly one mutant asset to play now, and that’s you. Am I making myself clear?”

Erik sighed and resigned himself to more days of digging small animals out from gutters and probably having his hard-won, fearsome reputation torn down around his feet. “Fine,” he bit out. “I’ll talk to him. No promises.”

“Good. Then—”

“In return,” he continued, “when this is over, I want everything you have on Shaw. No more games, Fury. You said I could use all SHIELD resources when I agreed to become your asset, and I intend to collect. Am I making myself clear?”

Fury was silent for a long moment. Erik knew that Nick Fury was a man adept at forcing people to agree with him and, failing that, bulldozing over the dissenters to get what he wanted. Fury was a force of nature that lived up to his name, rock-solid, implacable. One way or another, whether
through cajoling or threatening, Nick Fury achieved his goals. Defeat was unthinkable.

Erik was much the same way. That was the only joy of working with Fury: knowing that at any moment, he could choose to walk away, and there would be nothing Nick Fury could do to stop him. Fury knew it, categorically refused to acknowledge it, and yet avoided pushing Erik beyond the limits of his tolerance all the same. Having that sort of power over a man who prided himself on holding all the keys was immensely satisfying, and God only knew that Erik had had so little satisfaction in his life. He couldn’t be blamed for basking in his autonomy and taking the opportunity to remind Fury of it whenever he saw fit, which was often.

“Fair enough,” Fury said, a thinly-veiled edge of displeasure in his voice. “Bring in Professor X, and we’ll talk.”

“Bring in Professor X, and I get what I want,” Erik corrected. “Access to everything scrap of information you have on Sebastian Shaw and any of his affiliated Brotherhood. All of it.”

There was a pause. Then, because SHIELD needed Erik more than Erik needed SHIELD and because they both knew it very well, Fury acquiesced. “Fine. Sebastian Shaw’s files for Professor X.”

“Pleasure doing business,” Erik said. Without waiting for a reply, he ended the call and slipped the phone back into his pocket, dropping the nickel in beside it.

When he returned to the conference room, the meeting was over. People were packing up, snagging last-minute pastries and coffee from the center of the long table before they headed out on their separate ways. The distinctive feel of Charles’ watch and tie bar was nowhere to be found.

Erik crossed over to Moira MacTaggert, who had a steaming cup of coffee in one hand and a pile of papers in the other. She smiled as he approached, which he regarded warily. Moira MacTaggert was given to smiling, just as Charles was. The problem was, when Charles smiled, it was like a little burst of sunlight, bright and genuine and irritatingly joyful. MacTaggert smiled like she had an agenda.

“Good morning, Mr. Lehnsherr,” she greeted. “Can I help you with something?”

She never called him agent, probably because he wasn’t really an agent, just an independent contractor whose services Fury liked to abuse with abandon. Normally, no one ever made that distinction, even when he routinely introduced himself as Erik Lehnsherr, SHIELD consultant. But MacTaggert did, for some inexplicable reason. He was usually pleased when his affiliation with SHIELD went unmentioned, but with MacTaggert, it always felt as if she were omitting the agent with the very specific purpose of undermining any authority he claimed to have.

Suffice it to say, there was little love lost between the two of them. No love, if Erik were being perfectly frank.

“Where’s Charles?” he asked, glancing past her smile to scan the room again. “He was just here.”

“He went out,” she replied. “Had an errand to run. Probably couldn’t wait for you.”

Her tone made it clear that she thought he was doing a poor job of playing bodyguard. For once, Erik halfway agreed with her. Heading back out of the conference room, he pulled out his phone again and dialed Charles’ personal cell number, which he’d programmed in the day he met Charles, for safety precautions’ sake. He’d only used the number a handful of times, just to coordinate meet-ups in the morning so that Erik could escort Charles from his home to work. The line rang seven times before going to Charles’ pre-recorded message: “You have reached Charles Xavier. I can’t
answer your call right now, so do me a favor and leave a message if it’s urgent so I know why I need to get back to you. Thank you.”

Erik waited until the tone sounded before growling, “You’re not supposed to be out of my sight without giving me advance notice, Charles. That was our arrangement. Call me back when you get this.”

He sent Charles a text for good measure and then went to check the lounge. It was empty, the empty saucer in the sink the only sign that Charles had been there. Then he went to find Doris, who had probably been Charles’ next stop before leaving. Charles had promised, after all, to come by for the kitten later, and from what Erik had seen so far, Charles made it a point of pride to keep to his word.

Finding the office in question turned out to be more frustrating and difficult than Erik ever believed possible. He had once hunted down one man in all the winding streets of Rio de Janeiro with singular ease, but he couldn’t figure out the fucking office system of this building and it pissed him off. By the time he’d located Doris’s office, he was panting, tightly-wound, and maybe a little wild-eyed with impatience because when he yanked the glass door open with nearly enough force to shatter the pane, Doris took one look at him and squeaked, “I don’t know anything!”

He demanded anyway, “Was Char—Dr. Xavier here? Where did he go?”

“Like I said, I don’t know anything!” Her hand inched toward the phone. He was almost certain she was going to try to dial the police if he lingered, so he slammed the door shut again and stalked off down the hall.

When he reached the assigned parking spot labeled C. XAVIER in the parking garage, the car was still there, with no sign of Charles anywhere.

Fuck, Erik thought blackly. He didn’t lose people, and certainly not spoiled, bright-eyed CEOs with more money than sense and an infuriating soft spot for animals. He’d been doing a stellar job of keeping Charles in line so far, too. As far as charges went, Charles was—and Erik hated to associate this word with Charles Xavier, but there was no way around it—excellent. He was polite, listened reasonably well, and kept to a fairly predictable schedule. If only he weren’t insufferably pro-human, Erik might have even liked him. Just the tiniest bit.

But Charles had broken from the schedule now. He was supposed to be in his office working until lunchtime, but Erik had checked the office twice on his horribly convoluted path to Doris’s, and it had been empty. He still wasn’t answering his phone either.

Well, Erik thought sourly, fuck.

He was going to find Charles, and then he was going to kill him.

*$*

Charles was, at the moment, sipping a truly wonderful cup of Earl Grey at a delightful little store two blocks down, *Fifty Shades of Grey* propped up on the table in front of him. He was idly thumbing
through the pages, alternating between amused horror and just horror. His reading choice was
drawing stares from the other patrons. A few of them were very obviously scandalized. A few others
made no attempt to hide their interest, shooting him lascivious glances that barely ruffled him. Their
surface thoughts, however—he had to make an effort not to flush. He hadn’t realized what sort of an
attractive force lay in publicly reading a bestselling erotic romance novel. Perhaps he should have
tried this earlier.

More than one girl stopped by his table to ask if he wanted to share a drink. He declined each one,
telling them he was waiting for someone. And he wasn’t lying; he was watching the hands on his
watch tick by, counting the minutes. He’d slipped away from the office at 10:15. It was now 10:46.
Erik was apparently taking his sweet time catching up. Flipping another page with his free hand,
Charles sipped his tea and wondered what sort of name Anastasia Steele was, and how it was that
Christian Grey managed to have time enough to send presents and take trips and generally not work
when he had a company to run. Charles ran a company, and his sleep patterns were abysmal, the
state of his sex life even more so. It would appear that this Christian Grey had trade secrets. Charles
figured that it would be worth scanning through the rest of the book to find them.

He was in the middle of Ana’s rapturous orgasm, which sounded mostly painful and only a little bit
orgasmic, when the door swung open, and a thundercloud walked in.

Erik’s mind was very distinctive. As per Erik’s request (more a demand, really; Charles had never
heard please spoken so imperiously) and Charles’ own boundaries—which had been firmly set by
the time he had been thirteen years old, young enough to still be figuring his way around his gift but
old enough to understand the need for limits and to create them for himself—Charles had only ever
touched the periphery of Erik’s mind. Someone had taught Erik some techniques to ward off
telepaths; his mind was guarded against psionics. Trying to touch his thoughts was like peering
through a steam-blurred glass: Charles could see vague impressions and make out hazy emotions, but
they were indistinct. If he had wanted to, he could have broken through the haze easily, punctured
Erik’s defenses without an effort. But Erik would know in an instant if Charles did, and since
Charles had unofficially begun to consider their arrangement a friendship, then it was probably not a
good idea to violate Erik’s trust, now or ever, if he could manage it.

Sometimes though, a stray thought or feeling would bubble to the surface, pressing up against the
fogged pane close enough to become discernible. It was in those moments that Charles gleaned his
clearest picture of who Erik Lehnsherr was. And what Erik Lehnsherr was, was a storm: cold and
furious and dark as the midnight sky, and as refreshing as a burst of cool rain on a hot day. His mind
was a mystery, and Charles loved it, loved its edges and its intrigue and the flashes of something
more he could see within, some greater part of Erik’s personality that he kept locked away behind
that stoic, perpetually-annoyed SHIELD agent façade. Secrets like that made Charles curious. He
wanted to break Erik’s mask and see what sort of man came out then, when all the anger and
sarcasm and cynicism was stripped away.

But they’d spent two full weeks together already, nearly 24/7, and he hadn’t even managed to put a
-crack in Erik’s shields. Charles wasn’t easily puzzled, but Erik—Erik presented the most fascinating
challenge Charles had seen in ages. It was all fiercely exciting.

The fiercely exciting thundercloud stopped in the doorway, glowered at the entire room, and then
glowered more intensely when his gaze fell on Charles, who was seated at a two-person table against
the wall. Erik looked like he might blow a gasket (perhaps literally, given his mutation), or maybe
-kill someone, which seemed to be his default expression, but there was real intent behind it now. If
they hadn’t been in public, Charles was fairly certain Erik would be throttling him at the moment.

Charles met his eyes, smiled cheerily, and waved. That horribly perfect jaw of his clenching, Erik
marched stiffly over and stood for a moment behind the chair, his hands clenching angrily at the backrest. Charles watched his fingers flex. Erik had beautiful hands, long and elegant and calloused. It was hellishly unfair: Erik was outrageously attractive, and it had actually been quite some time since Charles had any sort of sex, despite his cultivated reputation of being a flirt, a casual lover, and a subscriber to the no-strings-attached type of business. To be perfectly honest, the most action he’d seen in months was with his hand. And now Erik was here—unbearably sexy, stoic, firm-jawed, broodingly handsome—and Charles’ libido was shooting through the roof. Damn the man for being exactly Charles’ type.

He cleared his throat. “Hello. Can I buy you a coffee?”

“Charles,” Erik gritted out through clenched teeth, sounding as if he were making an audible effort not to sound murderous. He ended up sounding like he had swallowed something unfamiliar and was trying to work out how he felt about it. “You are not supposed to leave my sight at any time without my approval. We agreed to this. You’re a genius, don’t tell me you don’t remember the rules.”

The rules. Erik and his rules. He’d come prepared at the very beginning with a list of them. Charles had scanned them over, deemed them excessive, and crossed out the latter third. Erik had fumed over this for a good long while; he was, Charles had gathered very quickly, a man not used to being contradicted. Eventually, they’d agreed upon three main rules that were not to be broken under any circumstances.

Number 1: Charles was to remain with Erik every minute of every day, unless Erik deemed otherwise. Bathroom breaks were to be taken with Erik’s permission beforehand, which Charles found demeaning, as he was capable of taking himself from his office down the hall to the single-person bathroom without getting lost and/or attacked, thank you very much. But the cohabitating wasn’t bad. In fact, it was excellent, providing endless opportunities for Charles to a) study his bodyguard and try to puzzle out his true intentions, as Erik didn’t strike Charles as a man who simply followed orders, which meant that there were ulterior motives at work here that Charles didn’t and needed to understand; and to b) gawk as surreptitiously as he could manage. He was doing much more of the latter than the former, to his chagrin.

Number 2: Weekend excursions had to be cleared by Erik first, which made it nearly impossible to go anywhere fun because Erik deemed nearly everyplace too risky, too crowded, too unfamiliar. Charles pouted. He pouted very well, and it usually worked like a charm, but Erik had some sort of mutation that inured him to all things fluffy and cute (hence the inexplicable hatred of the ducks and the kitten and generally all small living things that had the potential to be described with the word “adorable” or any synonym of it). Charles had thought more than once about taking Erik to a gay bar the first chance he could manage. See if he could loosen Erik up a bit then, no pun intended. Or perhaps intended—Charles wasn’t quite sure what he wanted from Erik yet, though he had a sneaking suspicion that it involved a bed, maybe a candle, and a blowjob or two.

Rule Number 3 was that Charles was to follow any orders Erik gave him, without question, without hesitation. Charles had argued that this was a blanket rule that covered too much. This blanket rule, Erik had argued back stubbornly, might save his life one day. Charles had eventually acquiesced, if only to get Erik to stop looking as if he were contemplating knocking Charles over the head, stashing him behind some drywall, and leaving him to rot. Charles was relatively good at obeying this rule. He did follow most of the orders Erik gave him. It was the ‘without question’ part that tripped him up from time to time, much to Erik’s annoyance.

He considered. So Number 1 was a lost cause now. But Charles was, by his estimation, fairly skilled at talking his way out of a jam. He turned on the charm.
“Now, Erik,” he began, pitching his voice soothingly.

“Don’t.”

Charles stopped, mystified. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m a fucking *kitten,*” Erik snarled, and oh, Charles hadn’t realized it before, but he supposed his soothing voice *did* sound quite a bit like the voice he’d used to lure Patches out from under the car this morning.

“Sorry. Habit. Sort of.” He gestured to the chair Erik was currently attempting to strangle. “Sit?”

“I don’t take orders from you. You take orders from me,” Erik snapped, but he pulled out the chair and dropped into it anyway. His hands, now unoccupied, clenched and unclenched agitatedly. “Now explain to me why the hell you thought it was okay to run off without informing me, without giving anyone any notice.”

“It’s just a coffee shop down the street,” Charles protested.

“With open streets where you could’ve been ambushed at no fewer than eight points!” Erik retorted, jabbing his finger in Charles’ face. “Don’t test me, I counted.”

Charles sighed and folded his arms across the table. “Erik, listen. ‘For one thing, I find the idea of an attack or an ambush highly unlikely. My father received threats all his career. I received threats before I even took over the company. I received threats before I even took over the company. A tiny escalation—’”

Erik growled at him to interrupt him. *Growled.* Charles found it a bit primitive and also ridiculously hot. “Listen,” Erik said in that rough, accented voice of his, “Director Fury wouldn’t have assigned me to protect you if there hadn’t been reliable intel to suggest that you were in real danger. And an *escalation* doesn’t even begin to cover it. You’ve received threatening phone calls with highly specific threats. You’ve gotten alarmingly violent letters. Three weeks ago, your car’s headlights were smashed. Fury thinks you need someone to watch your back, and so do I.”

So do you? Charles thought, skeptical. He was 95% sure Erik could not possibly care less about what happened to him. He would have been 100% sure had it not been for the fact that Erik had a vested interest in keeping him safe, for the sake of his reputation as a reliable SHIELD operative and probably for the sake of his pride. Charles knew what Erik thought of him. It was what most mutants thought of him, especially the extremists who seemed hell-bent on hating humankind and on elevating mutantkind on some misguided and often frighteningly bigoted concepts of superiority. Xavier Pharmaceuticals had begun as a manufacturer for general medicines, but in the ’80s, when mutants had started expose themselves to the public at large, Brian Xavier had shifted the focus of the company to designing a suppressant for mutant powers. He had been a pioneer in the field and an inspiration to other researchers. Within a handful of years, Inhib-4 had emerged as the leading suppressant brand, created and mass-produced by Xavier Pharm. It had not been approved by the FDA, but after several violent attacks perpetrated by rogue mutants—often unbalanced individuals acting alone, not that anybody cared to make that point—people were in such hysterics about the possibility of a hostile takeover that they had welcomed any offer of safety. Xavier Pharm profits skyrocketed in those early years, bolstered by public fear. The company and its CEO also became Public Enemy Number 1 to nearly every mutant in the country. Popular mutant sentiment reviled suppressants as tools of human oppression. Xavier Pharm had been so constantly flooded with death threats that there had been a separate mail sub-department created to handle the influx, and there had even been an attack on Brian Xavier’s office in 1985, which Charles remembered vividly because he’d been hiding under his father’s desk the entire time, trembling with terror and trying desperately not to drown in the vitriol flooding from the minds of the intruders. His father had given him his first
dose of Inhib-4 that afternoon, after he hadn’t been able to stop crying in fear.

Only Charles knew how strongly his father had been driven to find not a suppressant but a cure, a fix to make his son normal. Brian Xavier hadn’t been evil. Charles had seen his mind, and he knew this to his core. But his father had been afraid of the X-gene and what it meant for Charles. He’d been worried for his family, and for that, Charles forgave him, for the experiments in Westchester’s basement laboratory that had taken up his childhood—painless normally, but uncomfortable and frightening to an eight-year-old boy—and for becoming so thoroughly reviled by the mutant community that Charles had had to be home-schooled for two years because the bullying by other mutants had gotten so bad.

He hadn’t had any friends when he was younger. Maybe that was why he was still alone now, he reflected. He didn’t know how to be any other way.

With an inaudible sigh, he shook away those thoughts. No time to be maudlin now, or ever. He’d made his peace with a lot of things in his life a long time ago. He had more important concerns to deal with now.

Chief concern at hand: Erik Lehnsherr’s determination to remain firmly attached to Charles’ side at all times, rendering it nearly impossible to garner any amount of privacy for a significant amount of time. Peripheral and more pressing concern: Erik Lehnsherr’s anger, which, directed at Charles, was actually somewhat terrifying. There was a look Erik had that said that he was very seriously weighing the pros and cons of your death and finding the pros side to be more heavily stacked. It was a look he was leveling on Charles now, and Charles decided that unless he did his best to appease Erik, he was going to end up sans-bodyguard, if not sans-head.

“I’m sorry,” he said sincerely, letting any trace of humor disappear from his face. “I was just in the mood for a good cup of tea. I didn’t consider the consequences, or how worried you’d be, and for that, I am truly sorry.”

Erik stared at him for a long moment, his mouth half-open as if he’d been intending to yell some more but had forgotten what he wanted to say. The anger flickered on the edges of his mind, smoldering like hot coals. Charles watched it burn, watched as dim impressions of thoughts flitted past the surface of Erik’s mind, there and gone too quickly to make out. Then the anger disappeared, as abruptly as a candle snuffed out. Charles marveled at the control Erik must have over himself, to be able to shut strong emotion away so cleanly like that. The glass surface of his mind smooth and unreadable again, Erik said gruffly, “Is that the first time you’ve apologized in your entire life?”

Charles relaxed. Jokes and jabs. Familiar ground again. “No, of course not. There was this one time when I was eight and I broke my mother’s favorite china plates.”

The corner of Erik’s mouth twitched, almost as if he were fighting back a smile. Charles held his breath. In the two weeks they’d been stuck with each other, Charles had never seen even a hint of amusement creep into Erik’s expression, not even when confronted with a flock of clumsy ducklings, which, to Charles’ mind, was a sign that Erik had misplaced his heart somewhere in the last decade and forgotten to go back to look for it. Or perhaps he’d taken it out and thrown it away purposefully, to rid himself of any weakness. It seemed like an Erik thing to do.

The near-smile flattened out before it could even truly begin to form. Charles was only slightly disappointed.

“You shouldn’t have left without telling me,” Erik muttered, apparently deciding that he was still disgruntled. “It was irresponsible of you.”
“I’m sorry,” Charles said again, making sure his tone was properly apologetic. “Won’t do it again.”

Erik’s displeasure lurked in the fringes of his thoughts, but it was muted. “If it ever happens again, I’ll handcuff you to your desk and let you out of your office only for bathroom breaks.”

“Kinky,” Charles remarked cheerily, grinning when Erik’s eyes narrowed.

“Is everything a joke to you?” Erik demanded. That displeasure began to flare up noticeably. “My job is to protect you from threats. I can’t protect you if you aren’t willing to abide by my rules. Can you get that through your thick skull?”

“Thick?” Charles sniffed. “Some people might find that offensive.”

“It was meant to be,” Erik growled, glaring.

A waitress dropped by. “Can I get you something to drink?” she asked Erik pleasantly, though her smile faltered at Erik’s scowl.

“No,” Erik said.

“Actually, he’d like a coffee, black,” Charles told her. To Erik, he said, “Take it as an apology.”

Erik glared. “A coffee isn’t going to win you any points with me.” But when the coffee arrived, he picked it up and drank it anyway, grimacing as he did.

Charles watched him idly. He liked watching Erik. It had become something of a hobby over the last two weeks, like bird-watching, except more intense and endlessly more fascinating. It was partly watching with his eyes and partly watching with his telepathy, and either way, he discovered very little. Erik was always consciously guarding his expression and his thoughts, which made Charles wonder who had taught him to be so careful, or who or what had made it so necessary that he learn to do it in the first place.

Finally, Erik said, “You need return to the office and get back to work.”

Charles shrugged. “Maybe I’ll take a day off.”

Spoiled and insufferable, Erik thought, his sudden contempt powerful. He hid away that thought as soon as it rose up, but Charles caught it anyway. Weak telepath, Erik reassured himself half a second later, like he did about thirty times a day. He can’t read this deep.

Charles gave no indication that he had heard anything. With a smile, he put down his tea and his book and stood. “Excuse me for just one minute. I’ll go to the bathroom and then we’ll go back.”

He skirted around the tables to the back of the café where a large, hand-painted hanging sign declared RESTROOMS. Erik’s eyes tracked him the whole way, as if watching to make sure Charles didn’t suddenly make a break for it. When he disappeared into the men’s room, he felt Erik’s attention shift away, no doubt considering the best exits and categorizing the café patrons into groups of possible threats and no threats. Erik seemed permanently hard-wired to maintain a constant state of vigilance. That was what made him such a good agent, Charles supposed, as well as a good bodyguard. It also made him frustratingly difficult to slip.

He locked himself in a stall and pulled out his phone. One missed call from Hank. He dialed him back and waited for an answer.

The line had barely rung twice before Hank said, “Hello? Charles?”
“Yeah, it’s me.” Charles ran a hand through his hair, keeping a touch of his telepathy on Erik as a sort of warning system, in case Erik decided to come his way. “I’m afraid you’ll have to go through with tonight without me.”

He could hear Hank’s breath shorten. “Charles…you can’t be serious.”

Charles wished he could pace to release the restless tension coiling up in his body. Instead, he leaned back against the stall wall and crossed his arms. “I can’t get away from Erik. Agent Lehnsherr. I tested him today, slipped away while he wasn’t looking. Took him less than forty-five minutes to catch up with me. He’s not slacking on his job. There’s no way I’ll be able to disappear for the night without him noticing and tailing me.”

“But we’ve never done this without you before!” Hank sucked in a deep, worried breath, and Charles willed him to keep calm, wishing he were at the mansion so he could better soothe Hank’s no-doubt growing panic.

“You can do it,” Charles told him encouragingly. “I’ll coach you through the plan.”

“We can’t follow the plan when we don’t have you. You’re an integral part of it. Without you, how else are we supposed to bypass the guards?”

Charles huffed. He’d spent much of the last two weeks contemplating that very question and attempting to delay this mission for as long as possible. But they could wait no longer; Moira had informed him that it was tonight or never.

“You know my policy on violence…” he began.

“Charles.” Hank sounded shocked. “We’re not…we’re not killing anyone. Even for—even for this, we can’t hurt anyone. It’s against everything we’ve ever—”

Charles interrupted him. “Hank, listen to me. I’m not suggesting that we kill anyone, or even hurt anyone. I’m saying we’re going to have to alter the plan, just a little, and if necessary—only if you need to defend yourselves—then do what you must. You need to be prepared for that possibility. Now before you argue, listen. You’re going to have to be stealthier about this than usual. No strolling through anymore. I need you to gather the others and put me on speakerphone. And get Kitty and Raven.”

“Kitty?” Hank repeated, shocked. “She’s never gone on a run before. She’s barely seventeen. She hasn’t even trained with us for that long.”

“We don’t have a choice,” Charles replied wearily. He’d gone over the options a dozen times in his head, thought out a handful of contingencies. This was the only way they could do this. It was infinitely riskier without him there to guide them personally, but with Charles unable to escape Erik’s constant scrutiny, it was a hurdle they would have to leap. Quitting now was out of the question.

Hank rapidly reached the same conclusion. His mind always worked with astonishing speed, considering and discarding choices in the time it would take most others to even begin to collate their options. “All right,” he said quietly. “Wait a moment.”

When he emerged from the bathroom ten minutes later, Erik was standing directly outside the door, his arms crossed and his shoulders tense.

“That,” he said when Charles stepped out, “took a while.”

Charles grinned charmingly at him. “Bladder problems. Shall we go?”
Erik leveled a dubious look on him but nevertheless followed him out the café in silence. They started back toward Xavier Pharm.

“One hour of work,” Erik said sternly, checking his watch. “Then lunch break. You don’t get to leave your office until then.”

Charles stuck out his tongue. He knew Erik hated it when he acted juvenile, but there was just something about ruffling Erik’s feathers that made it so fun to do. When Charles had been a boy, they had owned a big old hound that had lay there on the floor by the fireplace and given him sulky looks as he tugged on its ears until it finally got fed up and snapped at his hand before settling back down enough for him to resume the pestering. Erik reminded him strongly of that hound. He was just prone to snapping much sooner and never quite settled back down.

“Actually,” Charles started, tucking his hands in his pockets and quickening his pace by a step. By his side, Erik kept up easily. “Actually, I think I’ll go pay Patches a visit. And we should schedule an appointment with a vet. Should you call or shall I?”

Erik glared at him for a moment. Then he lengthened his stride and cut on ahead, his entire figure rigid with irritation. *Shirking his duties, always shirking his duties,* Charles heard. The words were laced through with disdain. *Don’t even know why I fucking tolerate him.* And then, with a sharp burst of annoyance: *Stupid blue eyes.*

Erik was a fogged-up glass. But sometimes, something like that slipped through that made Charles want to wipe the fog away with his hand so he could see underneath into the part of Erik that felt almost fond when it pictured Charles’ eyes. Was it his own projected desire, reflecting onto Erik? Likely. He didn’t know. And he couldn’t afford to care, not with the situation as precarious as it was: Erik an agent of SHIELD, keeping close tabs on Charles and unaware, as of yet, that he was the self-proclaimed leader of a ragtag band of vigilantes who would likely all be thrown in jail if they were to be discovered. He didn’t have time for relationships or even one-night stands, and besides, hooking up with a government agent—even a consultant—was, as Alex might call it, a pretty fucking bad idea.

Still. He felt a burst of warmth in his belly at Erik’s current line of thought—*if only his eyes were fucking mud brown, but they’re blue, it’s just something about that fucking color, I hate it.* But he was sure Erik didn’t hate it, not really. He spent far too much time staring at Charles’ eyes when he thought Charles wasn’t paying attention to truly loathe them. At least that was what Charles hoped.

Being attracted to Erik was dangerous, inadvisable, risky. He wouldn’t follow through with it. But he figured it wouldn’t hurt to allow himself that flurry of pleasure at the idea that Erik might be attracted to him, too. Mutual appreciation had to be fine, so long as they let it pass unexamined and untouched.
That evening, they sat together in Charles’ living room, Erik on the left end of the couch watching the news, Charles curled up on the other end flipping through what looked like progress reports on the latest developments of Inhib-4. Rumors were, Xavier Pharm was working on a new formula, deemed Inhib-5. Erik hadn’t seen any evidence of new product developments in the two weeks he’d been shadowing Charles, but even so, the thought made his skin crawl. He wanted to demand why Charles would do this to his own kind, help create weapons against those who were closest to him. Following his father’s legacy? A weak excuse. He had to know that he was aiding the human regime by handing them the tools they needed to keep mutantkind controlled. And yet he did nothing to stop it. In fact, he promoted it, encouraged his researchers to continue their work, pushed for greater, better iterations of their product, and for that, Erik hated him.

But—and this was the confusing thing; this was what kept throwing Erik off-guard—Charles Xavier the man was imminently difficult to hate. It had been easy to hate the CEO of Xavier Pharmaceuticals whose face was plastered in financial and business magazines, mutant articles, and gossip rags. It was nearly impossible to hate Charles. He was just so frustratingly earnest, and Erik wondered again and again how a man who acted so kind and helpful and friendly could be responsible for the oppression of thousands of mutants across the country.

But he never asked. It wasn’t his job to be curious, and whether he liked Charles or not had no bearing on the quality of his work. Besides, Charles would likely only offer the same base rationalizations he had always publicly offered to his critics. Meaningless justifications that served as poor explanations.

Erik glanced over at Charles out of the corner of his eye, a scowl beginning to form. But it was difficult to scowl when Charles was cooing at the kitten perched on his knee, rubbing its ears and grinning when it arched into his hand.

“It stays in your room,” Erik said, trying to keep his expression from softening as the kitten began a solemn trek up Charles’ arm to his shoulder. “Keep it out of my room, the bathroom, and the kitchen. Especially the kitchen.”

“Your room,” Charles repeated, flashing Erik an amused grin.

“The guest room,” Erik amended.

Charles shook his head. “No, no, I…” His smile turned introspective. Patches licked the tip of his finger when he touched the tip of the kitten’s tiny pink nose. “I’ve lived alone for a long time. It’s nice to have a roommate.”

“I’m not your roommate,” Erik growled.

“No, you’re just my bodyguard,” Charles said agreeably. “But no one said I couldn’t pretend.”

There was really no point in correcting him, so Erik let the bodyguard comment slide. And, if he allowed himself to imagine it, the idea of sharing a living space with Charles wasn’t wholly unpleasant. He’d been doing it for two weeks already, having determined that it would be best to stick to Charles’ side at all times since they had so little solid intel on the threat. An attack could come at any time, and Erik had figured that, that being the case, it would be a tactically sound decision to stay with Charles until either Fury gave him further information or until Charles was deemed safe enough to go without protection. Charles had protested vehemently at first but had
acquiesced when Erik gave him the option between a tracking anklet and Erik-the-living-tracking-anklet. At least Erik could carry on a conversation, Charles had told him ruefully.

Erik had lived alone for all of his adult life. His experiments into cohabitation had begun in his late teenage years and ended in his early twenties with Magda, and as far as roommates went, Charles and Magda were about as far apart as two people could ever be. Magda had been fastidious, careful, and organized, which had made it wonderfully easy to live with her. He had always been able to find his way through the house, and their home had been familiar and comforting in its unchanging structure.

Charles, on the other hand, was chaos. It wasn’t that he was a slovenly person, to be exact; it was more of the fact that he was easily distracted and often absent-minded. He picked things up, put them down somewhere else, and forgot about them. He left papers strewn all across the house, not just in his office, and he left his things in every room, even, occasionally, the guest room. It was obvious that he wasn’t used to having someone else around to get annoyed at his mess and force him to restrict his habit of tossing everything everywhere, though he did seem to be making an effort for Erik’s sake.

Erik was, by nature and perhaps by consequence of living with Magda for three years, a neat person. Charles’ house, then, should have been a nightmare. But it was strangely endearing, the way Charles would wander around the house looking for something he’d misplaced, or the way his face would light up when he found a pen or trinket he’d thought he’d lost.

_Endearing._ Erik shook his head and withdrew into his comfort zone of irritation and general crankiness. No, Charles Xavier was anything but endearing. He was merely tolerable, and some days, not even that.

“Red or blue?” Charles was asking now, and it took a moment for Erik to realize he was addressing the kitten. “Or green? They’ve got a nice shade of purple here, too, if you’d prefer.”

He was holding his phone to the kitten’s nose. Against his better judgment, Erik asked, “What are you doing?”

“Choosing collars,” Charles replied, using his thumb to scroll down a page. “Want to help?”

Against his better judgment again, Erik scooted closer. Charles tilted the screen so that Erik could see the selection: half a dozen collars of different styles and sizes, some of them bejeweled, some of them plain, one with skulls lining the band.

“You’re planning on keeping him then?” Erik said dourly. Charles was already insufferable enough. Charles with a kitten? He was going to push Erik to his limit, and not because watching Charles interact with Patches was anywhere near heartwarming. Not because of that.

Charles nodded. “If no one shows up to claim him, yes. Now what do you think would be a flattering color? Blue? Maybe green? Or—”

His phone rang in his hand, and he jumped, nearly dislodging Patches from his lap. Erik eyed him warily. Charles had been on edge all evening. He had been subtle about it, to be sure; Charles was subtle about nearly everything. If Erik hadn’t been studying him so closely for the last two weeks and gotten a general idea of most of his moods, he might have discounted the tension as lingering stress from work, or he might not have noticed it at all. But Charles was never unruffled about anything, and that made his agitation now all the more glaring.

“What’s wrong?” Erik asked as Charles glanced down at the caller ID on his phone.
“Nothing,” Charles replied quickly, swiping his finger across the screen to deny the call. “It’s nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Erik said, narrowing his eyes. “You’ve been anxious since we left the office.”

“I’m not anxious.”

“Right. And you always fidget like that.”

“I’m not fidg—” He looked down at his free hand, which was restlessly drumming a rapid pattern on his knee. Pressing his lips together, he laid his hand flat against his thigh and said again, “I’m not anxious.”

Erik glared at him. “You are actively insulting my intelligence.”

“I’m—”

For a second, it looked as if Charles would stubbornly continue to deny it, and that made all Erik’s wariness flare to the forefront of his mind. Ever since Shaw, Erik had learned the value of constantly being on-guard. He had learned to protect himself by staying alert and ready, never allowing himself a moment of complete rest. Sometimes, when he was as comfortable as he ever let himself be, he let the caution fade a bit to the background. But he never let it go fully, and now, it leaped up around him like a shield and sword, ready to defend and ready to strike. He held the metal around them close.

Then Charles sighed and said, “I’m sorry, I’m just a little preoccupied over my sister.”

Erik blinked. “Your sister? You have a sister?” He didn’t remember there being any mention in Charles’ file about siblings.

“Adopted,” Charles explained.

“I didn’t know that,” Erik said, puzzled. The Xaviers had been in the public eye ever since Brian Xavier had begun his, then hailed as promising and revolutionary, research into suppressants. The humans had been afraid, and they’d looked to Brian Xavier as a saving light, and, true to form, he’d brought them a whole line of suppressants. Ever since then, everything about him had been heavily scrutinized: his motives, the legitimacy of his research, the instability of his marriage, the effect his only son—known mutant at birth—had on his drive to synthesize what would eventually become Inhib-1. Everything about him had been torn out and examined thoroughly by anti-suppressant groups looking to stop or at least slow his research. Brian Xavier had been an immensely public figure. To think that even one small stone of his life had been left unturned was baffling. And an adopted child was no small stone.

“She’s…” Charles sighed. “She’s not very close to the family. Drifted for a while in her teens. She even ran away when she was sixteen, stayed with a friend for almost three weeks before I could convince her to come back.”

Hence the tension, Erik assumed. “Are you expecting a call from her then?”

Charles nodded. “Yeah. A call. She, ah…” He didn’t seem to notice as his fingers resumed their restless tapping. “She wants to get together. For lunch sometime. It’d be nice to reconnect.”

“How long has it been since you’ve spoken?”

Charles thought for a moment. “Almost three years? Since my mother’s funeral.”
“A while then.”

“Yeah. A while.” Charles shot him a quick smile. “Look, I’d rather not talk about it. Can we just pick out a collar for Patches and watch TV?”

Now that Erik knew for certain Charles was less than settled, he could better detect the signs of strain: the firm press of Charles’ lips, the tightness in his shoulders, the uneasy look in his eyes. He supposed that if he had had an estranged sister who was offering to get back in touch, he might be on edge as well.

He thought, for a moment, about pressing the subject, just to see Charles squirm. Maybe before he had gotten to know Charles, he would have done it, out of sheer hatred for the man and his policies. But again—there was a difference between Charles-the-CEO and Charles-the-man, and the latter was difficult to hate. For some frustratingly inexplicable reason, Erik found it equally difficult to see the latter in any sort of discomfort, so he decided to spare both himself and Charles by changing the subject.

“That one,” he said, pointing at the screen.

Charles followed his finger. “That one? You’re sure?”

“Why not?”

“What do you think?” Charles asked Patches dubiously, turning the screen toward him. The kitten nosed the phone, leaving a wet smear underneath Charles’ finger. Then he curled up in Charles’ lap and closed his eyes. “Is that a yes?” Charles guessed in bemusement.

“That’s as close to a response you’ll ever get out of an animal,” Erik told him dryly, trying very hard not to think of Charles solemnly consulting a kitten as anything close to adorable.

“Okay then. I’ll just…”

He trailed off as his attention snagged on something on the TV screen. Erik followed his gaze and froze.

BREAKING: Attack on warehouse in Irvington, NJ — X-Men involvement suspected — Updates to follow

“Could you turn up the volume?” Charles asked, sitting up straighter.

Erik flicked his fingers, hitting the button on the side of the TV without bothering to reach for the remote. The sound filtered in more audibly, accompanied by news footage of what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse, surrounded by local police squad cars and illuminated by passing helicopter spotlights.

“Earlier this evening, police were called to an old warehouse on the outskirts of Irvington, a building that has been officially unoccupied since 2007. When they arrived, they reportedly found sixteen humans inside locked in the basement. We have also been told that police have recovered evidence inside that indicates that this warehouse might have served as a secret laboratory, though no mutants were found within. The scene strongly suggests the involvement of the X-Men, though this is the first incident in which the humans have been left conscious. Police are hopeful that they’ll be able to produce sketches of the elusive X-Men with the help of these witnesses. Now we have not been told what sort of evidence was recovered inside, or if the sixteen people inside were indeed scientists or workers at the lab. All sixteen of those found inside have been transported by ambulance to local hospitals, where they will await questioning by the police once cleared by doctors. We’ll
Erik turned the volume back down as the channel segued into a segment about a car accident on the highway. It was a sign, he thought. Now was as good a time as any to broach the subject.

“So,” he said carefully, “X-Men.”

Charles glanced back down at his phone. “What about them?”

Better not to ask directly. If he could bring Charles around to talking about what he knew of the X-Men of his own volition, if Erik approached as a curious, neutral third party rather than as a SHIELD asset, then Charles might give him more unbiased, genuine information. He considered for a moment, then settled on, “What do you think of them?” Not too probing, open-ended enough for Charles to take as he wanted.

“What do I think?” Charles repeated slowly. His brow furrowed in that way that said he was either gathering his thoughts or thinking about how to say what he wanted to be said. That made Erik instantly wary. Charles was naturally well-spoken, and when he spoke freely, he never had to think. If he was censoring himself now….

Fury was right, Erik thought. Charles knew more about the X-Men than he was going to let on.

“They’ve done good things,” Charles said. “No one can argue with that.”

“The human government might,” Erik pointed out. In fact, they had. Pro-human senators and representatives had criticized the X-Men for years. Even the president maintained an antagonistic position toward them, though his stance had eased over the last couple of years.

“No, not exactly. Critics of the X-Men take care not to denounce their actions. Do you ever notice that? It’s because their actions are morally defensible.” Charles picked Patches up in one hand and turned so that he was facing Erik. Crossing his legs, he settled the kitten back into his lap, looking for all the world like a kid in that oversized sweater he liked to wear when he was home, legs folded and peering up at Erik like he was a teacher meant to be evaluating Charles’ answer. But when he spoke, he sounded much more like instructor than student.

“Think about it,” he said. “How many people are going to criticize rescuing children from research laboratories, even mutant children? No one. That’s a level of callousness that no one wants to touch. How many people are criticizing the X-Men’s efforts to return kidnapped missing persons to their homes? Not one person. Even if those missing persons are mutants, even adult mutants, it strikes close to home enough for humans to sympathize. You can decry mutantkind all you want, but there’s something visceral about seeing a mother and son, or brother and sister, or husband and wife reunite, mutant or no. There’s power in those images. That’s what the X-Men have done. With the news coverage that follows their exploits and with the testimonials and interviews given by those they’ve helped, they’ve raised awareness and pointed out something very important: mutants are people, too. And no one wants to criticize that, for fear of seeming cold, or heartless.”

Charles Xavier, Erik thought, would have made a fantastic orator in another life. In fact, he was wasting his life now, puttering around his office steadily garnering the hatred of mutantkind as his company pumped out suppressants like trees pumped out oxygen. He could be out there. He could be a real mutant activist, not a hypocrite who recited what people wanted to hear and never once promised to scale back his company or his research. Erik didn’t understand it. Charles Xavier was one contradiction on top of another, and he was twisting Erik up in knots.

“You’ve thought about this,” Erik remarked finally.
Charles huffed a laugh. “Quite a lot, actually. The point is, it’s not what the X-Men are doing that human activists have a problem with. It’s their methods. That’s why the X-Men are finding it so difficult to gain official support, even if what they’re doing is laudable. It’s hard for congressmen or well-known activists to back a group that regularly breaks the law. Damages their credibility, as you can guess.”

There was conviction in his voice, real hard belief. This was not the smiling, charming, naïve CEO who tried and constantly failed to justify himself to the mutant community. Neither was he the cheery, flippant, bleeding-heart young Charles Xavier whom Erik had been getting to know these past two weeks. This was someone else entirely, and it made Erik curious and wary all at once. He wore masks, Erik could see, but why? And which one, of the three, was the real Charles Xavier? He looked innocent and young and harmless sitting there across from Erik, drowning in his frayed sweater and cradling a kitten who kept getting its tiny claws stuck in the soft fabric of his pants. But Charles, from his work with suppressants, was decidedly not innocent, and Erik was beginning to get the feeling that Charles was not quite harmless either. There was too much sharp intelligence behind his eyes for Erik to let down his guard.

SHIELD asset, Fury had said. He had given Erik Charles’ profile when he had assigned him to serve as Charles’ protection, and Erik had read it diligently, even as he’d burned at the indignity of having to cater to this spoiled traitor to his kind while Sebastian Shaw was running free somewhere in the world. In the file, underneath Charles’ biography, there had been a short section detailing his usefulness to SHIELD and why it was imperative that he be protected. Charles Xavier was one of SHIELD’s foremost links to the mutant community. Most mutants despised or at least feared the government in any capacity, and rightfully so, in Erik’s opinion; if not for the promise of SHIELD resources, he would never have agreed to work in tandem with any human organization in the first place. Necessary evils. It was exactly that attitude that made most mutants unreliable informants at best, direct saboteurs at worst. Charles Xavier though—the file had noted his drive to compromise, his understanding that any offered peace would be a two-way street. Foolish ideals, Erik thought, because someday the humans’ desire to give would be surpassed by their natural instinct to take, and then mutantkind would be receiving nothing. But that was what the government liked about him, Erik supposed. With all his idealism, Charles Xavier was an easy target.

As far as Erik could tell, Charles served as a source of information on mutants and mutations. He had more than one PhD in the sciences, one of them in genetics, not to mention the fact that he was a mutant himself. An ideal expert, Fury must have thought. And in return for consulting, SHIELD must have offered payment, or their services when needed. The latter would explain what Erik was doing here, lounging on Charles’ couch at eight o’clock on a Tuesday night, his socked feet propped up on the coffee table, watching TV and listening to Charles spout mutant politics. Two weeks ago, he had hated Charles’ guts on principle. Erik prided himself on being a man of firm, unyielding, and enduring sentiments. And yet here he was, an arm’s length away from Charles and feeling only vaguely antagonistic, and most of that antagonism was because Charles was absently petting Patches and Erik could see fur floating through the air and tickling his nose, threatening to make him sneeze. Bizarre. It was probably time to reevaluate his life decisions, as soon as he had the time.

“You all right?” Charles asked, furrowing his brow.

Erik blinked. “What?”

“You’ve been silent for some time.” He frowned. “Do you disagree? How do you feel about the X-Men then?”

“The X-Men are…” Erik hesitated. There wasn’t any harm in revealing his true beliefs, was there? In
fact, if he managed to draw Charles into an extended discussion, then Charles might let slip important details. He did tend to get awfully enthusiastic about subjects he was passionate about. Not that Erik had noticed.

“The X-Men are a start,” he said finally. “It’s about time someone started doing what this human government can’t or won’t. But they’re wasted potential.”

Charles cocked his head. “What do you mean by that?”

“Look at what they do,” Erik said. “Closing down a few illegal research facilities here and there. Rescuing a handful of mutants from labs. Good things, for sure, but with the base of support they’ve built so far and with the power they’ve demonstrated, they could do so much more.”

“Like what?”

“Mobilizing their supporters, for one,” answered Erik. “They have the popular majority leaning for them, humans included. 54% the last time polls were taken. They have an audience, but they don’t speak to them. They don’t use them. Why not?”

“Perhaps because it’s difficult to reach out when you’re breaking laws?” Charles guessed.

Erik shook his head. “No, that’s not it. People love vigilantes. Robin Hood. Batman. Spiderman. And now the X-Men. They have people who would listen to them. They could sway opinions, if they tried. But they don’t. Until they reach out and take that power and use it, they’re going to be spinning their wheels in a rut.”

Charles gave him an unreadable look for a moment. Then he laughed softly and said, “Are you sure there’s not something I need to know?”

Erik blinked. “What?”

“You sound like you’ve given this a lot of thought yourself. You’re very sure about what needs to be done.” Charles scooted down a bit against the arm of the couch, allowing Patches to climb on wobbly legs up to his chest. Then he peered over at Erik slyly. “You’re not one of the X-Men yourself, are you?”

Erik scoffed. “As if. If I were part of the X-Men, they’d be doing a hell of a lot more than they are now.”

Charles made a thoughtful noise. “So you approve of them.” When Erik gave him a flat look, he amended, “I mean, you approve of the idea of them. You wouldn’t, you know, turn them in if you happened to run across them.”

Erik hesitated. If he’d had no obligation to Fury, his answer would have been emphatic. He wasn’t Charles; he wouldn’t turn against his own kind, not for anything. But circumstances were difficult. Reporting the X-Men’s whereabouts—specifically Professor X’s—to SHIELD was a matter of necessity. If it was a choice between Sebastian Shaw and anything else, Erik would not even pause to think; he’d been hunting the man too long to prioritize anything above that chase now.

But he couldn’t tell Charles as much, not if Charles sided with the X-Men as firmly as he seemed to. The good thing was, Charles’ thoughts on the X-Men redeemed him slightly in Erik’s eyes, even as it only served to confuse Erik further as to why Charles was creating those goddamned suppressants in the first place—Exhibit No. 36 or so that Charles Xavier was a bafflingly good-natured hypocrite. The bad thing was, Charles’ goodwill toward the X-Men made it less likely that he would feed Erik any valuable information that would help him track down Professor X, which meant Erik would be
required to spend longer in Charles’ company, which meant more frustratingly confusing mixed feelings about everything Charles did, which meant distraction from his true purpose of hunting Shaw. He could feel a familiar, restless impatience begin to simmer in his chest, the sort of impatience that struck him when he’d been in one place too long and needed to move—move away, move on. But he couldn’t move on from Charles, not without the information Fury needed. So he boxed away the impatience and carefully aimed his next words to steer the conversation closer to his objective.

“I wouldn’t turn them in, no. But I’d want to talk to Professor X, just once, just to puzzle him out. I’m sure he’d have interesting things to say, and there are things I’d like to tell him, too.”

He watched Charles out of the corner of his eye. Patches had curled up on his chest just below his heart and fallen asleep, and Charles was absently stroking the kitten’s head between its ears, his brow pinched and lips pursed in that way that said he was deep in thought. “What sort of things?” he asked eventually, arching his brows.

Erik shrugged. “Like I told you, the X-Men could be doing more. I’d ask him about that.” He paused, then added, “I’d ask him about you, to be perfectly honest.”

Charles shot him a startled look. “Me?”

“About suppressants,” Erik explained, leaning forward. “I’d ask him why, if he has the manpower to knock out entire facilities of scientists guarded by armed mercenaries, he doesn’t ever attack Xavier Pharmaceuticals, or Marchal, or any other company that relies on suppressants for their revenue base.”

His expression darkening a bit, Charles sighed and rubbed his eyes with the hand that wasn’t currently rubbing Patches’ ears. “Are we finally going to have this conversation?”

Erik blinked. “What conversation?”

“I’m surprised you held off for this long, really. Usually one of the first things people ask me is my stance on suppressants and my motives on allowing the company’s research and manufacturing branches to continue. Everyone’s always so curious about that, even if I’ve already explicitly detailed my position on the company website. Honestly, it’s as if they don’t know how to use the Internet.” He gave Erik a curious look. “Two weeks, and you’ve barely said a word on the subject of suppressants. Is it because you understand why I’m doing what I do, or is it because you’ve already formed your opinion of me and nothing will change what you think?”

Erik snorted. If there were three things in the world he didn’t understand, they were, in order of importance, Sebastian Shaw and how a man of his caliber of cruelty could possibly exist on this earth; Charles Xavier and how a man of his supposed compassion could allow the continuation of his father’s legacy in research that had led to mutant suppression; and the majority of the world in its collective adoration of small, furry, defenseless creatures that made cute noises and writhed around. Also, he didn’t understand the greater part of the list of food items that Americans insisted on attempting to fry, but that was neither here nor there.

Charles sighed ruefully. “From your expression, probably the latter. Have you ever read anything I’ve written?”

Erik shrugged. “I’ve seen news conferences.” He’d also read tabloids, but only for research purposes. He didn’t think it’d be prudent to reveal that tidbit either way—too many avenues for teasing.
“They always edit those to reflect one bias or another. Good thing you have a willing CEO of Xavier Pharm on hand to answer all your questions, uncensored.” Charles grinned at him. “Ask me anything. Really.”

Perfect. Now he had permission to pry. He didn’t even have to grope for questions; there were things he’d been wanting to ask for years, since even before he ever met Charles personally. “Why the company? Why the suppressants? You had the power to shut the whole thing down, but you didn’t. You encouraged the suppression of mutantkind and you’re still encouraging—”

“Let me stop you right there,” Charles interrupted, both eyebrows raised. “Let me set the record straight: I’m not encouraging any sort of oppression, and if I were, I’d put a stop to it immediately.”

“What do you call suppressants then?” Erik asked, trying hard not to sneer. “They mute powers, and at higher doses, they can shut off mutations completely, in some documented cases, even permanently. You’re a mutant yourself. Why would you ever condone any sort of research into improving those techniques, let alone be a part of it?”

“Erik, you must understand, suppressants aren’t about oppression or taking away a mutant’s identity.” Charles sat up, dislodging Patches, who whined until Charles resettled him on the couch by his knee, where he promptly curled up and fell asleep again. Then Charles resettled himself, straight-backed and facing Erik, a serious look blanketing the usual affability of his expression.

“Suppressants are about control. Teaching control, helping control, even enforcing control when necessary.”

Erik’s lip curled. “Human propaganda. ‘Enforcing control.’ Do you know what that sounds like? The early pro-human campaigns, the ones that advocated the roundup of mutants for the safety of humankind. And do you know what those early pro-human campaigns eventually pushed for? Elimination of mutantkind from the equation. Genocide.”

“I’m advocating no such thing,” Charles said, his voice suddenly sharp. Erik had never heard him so much as raise his voice at anyone, not even when interns spilled coffee all over his papers on morning, not even when his secretary misfiled a document and he’d had to go down and hunt for it in the storage basement himself, wasting three solid hours. But he sounded close to annoyed then, or as close as Erik had ever heard him. “Mutants who criticize suppressants can be spectacularly closed-minded. They see only one side of the story and refuse any other. Tell me, do you ever consider the fact that suppressants are, in some cases, beneficial? Even necessary?”

“That’s still hiding who he is,” Erik snapped. “Suppressing himself. There are other ways to teach control.”

“Other ways that might result in injuries.”

“Yes, but they wouldn’t involve teaching him that his power is some sort of illness that he needs to take medication for!”
“Illness?” Charles shook his head, lips pulled into a deep frown. “That’s not the message suppressants are supposed to send at all.”

“Supposed to,” Erik echoed contemptuously. “But you look at children at school lunches, diligently taking their pills. And the other kids, they whisper. They know which ones are the mutants because they have to be dosed, and they sit apart from the others. They’re shunned. Not only because of the X-gene. It’s because they have a condition that they need to be medicated for, and the new kids ask if they’re sick, is that why they take a pill every other hour and—”

He stopped. God. He hadn’t meant to say any of that. He hadn’t known until that moment that he still remembered that old childhood anger.

Charles was silent for a long moment, his eyes wide as he stared at Erik. Then he said softly, “Is that what happened to you?”

Erik glared at the TV. “No.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Erik thought about making as dignified an exit as he could manage, before Charles decided to turn his curiosity on full and probe into things Erik didn’t want anyone to know, let alone a man he hated. Or was determined to hate. Same thing, really.

Finally, Charles said gently, “I’m sorry that happened to you. But there are pros to suppressants, too, just as there are cons. Nothing is ever really one hundred percent evil, you know.”

Erik would beg to differ. He’d known Sebastian Shaw for long enough to know what pure evil looked like. But he only shook his head and said obstinately, “You won’t convince me of that.”

Charles studied him for another long moment. Then he nodded. “Not tonight, I won’t. Come on, we’re both tired. We should probably turn in. I want to get to the office early tomorrow.”

“You never get anywhere early,” Erik griped. His sharp anger was already fading into the low, constant annoyance that was a natural product of remaining too long in the company of anyone as cheerily optimistic as Charles. Incident No. 35, he thought irritably. There was something about Charles that made it impossible to stay angry at him. It was really starting to piss Erik off.

Charles got up. “I’m going to take a shower and then head to bed anyway. Good night.”

“Night,” Erik grunted, flicking the volume back up on the TV. The news had segued into something about the most popular brands of laundry detergent, which was about as exciting as watching a snail cross a sidewalk, but at least it provided the smallest of distractions, took his mind off of memories he wanted to bury. Behind him, he heard Charles go to the bathroom and shut the door. A couple of minutes later, the shower started, and Erik forced his mind away from Charles and watched as the reporter on-screen poured a generous portion of detergent onto an example stained shirt, accidentally spilled an equally generous portion all over her non-example, non-stained blouse, and then proceeded to giggle helplessly in embarrassment.

As the news anchor hurried over to give her a hand, Erik felt a cold nudge on his arm. A glance down revealed the kitten futilely attempting to scale the side of his leg to reach his lap, except its tiny claws kept slipping on the fabric of Erik’s jeans. Eventually it sat down beside his leg and began to pout. Erik had never known an animal could pout up until that moment, but the kitten was most definitely pouting and then it started to meow pitifully. Erik watched it for a handful of seconds before scooping it up and dumping it onto his lap.

“You can sit,” he growled sternly, “but only if you shut up.”
Patches gave him a solemn look before settling down to chew on one of the buttons on his shirt. Erik sighed, decided that this was a battle he was too tired to fight, and listlessly changed the channel.

* 

The next morning in the office was a slow day of business, filled with tedious busywork that took little thought to complete. Charles signed one paper, then another, and then glanced at Erik, who sat in the gray armchair in the corner of the room as usual, playing with his coin. The bodyguard business, as far as Charles could tell, was largely composed of long lapses of inaction, and for a man like Erik, who looked as if he kept fit by chasing trains in his spare time, the constant waiting must have been chafing at him, though his stoic mask was as unreadable as ever. He was, at the moment, watching his coin circle lazily through his fingers, distracted enough not to notice when Charles put down his pen and opened up a file on his computer, filing the screen with molecule diagrams. Clicking idly through the data spreadsheets to give the guise of working, he reached out with his mind and found Moira sitting at her desk outside his office, aimlessly logging schedules and keeping one eye on Charles’ closed door as she reined in her impatience.

Moira.

She started slightly, then settled. Charles!

Fill me in. I assume last night went well?

As well as could be expected without you. From what Hank told me, Kitty got in and unlocked the back doors for them, and they managed to storm the facility before anyone sounded an alarm. They rounded up the scientists and locked them on the lower level before going upstairs to retrieve the mutants.

And no one was hurt?

No one.

Charles breathed a sigh of relief, loudly enough that Erik looked up. He muttered aloud, “Thought I lost some data,” and Erik nodded and returned his attention back to his coin. I heard on the news yesterday that the police are trying for sketches. Did Hank say whether or not any of the humans got a good enough look at any of them to be dangerous?

He wasn’t sure. But I’d recommend laying low, at least until the commotion blows over.

Of course. They’d had close calls before, but Charles had always been present to blur any memories when necessary. He didn’t like it much, using his telepathy as a weapon to subdue others. He hated even more the idea of twisting minds, shaping them to his will. Obscuring memories was a far cry from controlling them entirely, but it wouldn’t take much to push him that far, and it was, to be perfectly honest, frightening. Sometimes his own potential frightened him, to have this power and this temptation, to have the knowledge that if he wanted, he could change people’s minds as easily as breathing. He’d thought about it more than once when he’d been younger. He’d thought about growing up and making people live in peace, making everyone be nice to each other—reckless
childhood dreams. Then he’d grown older and realized how slippery the slope was from where he stood. If he didn’t build himself fences, then there was no telling how far he would go to achieve his aims, or how much he would lose of himself in the process. So he’d made rules. Careful barriers for himself, like suppressants except self-enforced, and he’d held himself so tightly in check that it had felt stifling in his later teenage years until he had learned to bear it.

The X-Men had changed that. Some days it was hard to accept.

You don’t have anything else for us anytime soon, do you? Charles asked as he clicked over to another spreadsheet.

No. But you know new intel could come up at any time. A trickle of wary disapproval curled around her thoughts. You can’t send Hank and the others out without you for much longer. It’s too risky. They’re young. They got lucky last night, and you know it.

Charles watched Erik out of the corner of his eye. The coin, apparently bored of Erik’s fingers, was now drawing intricate patterns in the air. What can I do? Erik’s on me nearly every hour of every day. He’s really very good at his job. Frustratingly so.

A sharp dart of irritation panged through her. I wish SHIELD hadn’t decided to interfere. The CIA could have protected you at least as well, probably better.

I’m not even officially affiliated with the CIA, Charles reminded her, not that Moira needed reminding. Sometimes she recalled details even he couldn’t, which, considering the fact that he had a mind that never forgot anything, was saying something. What would you tell your superiors? ‘By the way, I’ve been using CIA resources to aid and abet Professor X, who incidentally needs protection because his alter ego is a controversial figure who’s constantly under fire?’ Come now, Moira. The CIA tasked you to cultivate me as an asset, nothing more. If you push it, you’ll risk jeopardizing your job at the very least, or being brought up on treason charges at the very worst. Let SHIELD do as they will. Erik is a problem, but we can work past him.

You don’t have to lecture me, Moira grumbled, her brow pinching as she ripped a sticky note off the pad more viciously than necessary. I know my orders. But if I’d told my superiors about the death threats, they’d have sent you guards, just like SHIELD has. The only reason I haven’t said anything is because you asked me to.

Because your CIA would have sent a whole team, and SHIELD’s just sent Erik. We can deal with one. A whole team would have been much trickier.

Fair enough. He felt her gathering her thoughts together. All right. I’ll contact you if I get wind of another situation for you to take care of.

Actually, Charles said apologetically, I have a situation I need help with. A spike of curiosity on her end; Charles never asked for anything. Yesterday, I was…tense.

Understandably so. Your X-Men were going out for the first time without you.

Yes, and Erik noticed, I might have…panicked. He winced now, remembering how flustered he’d been last night. He’d been too preoccupied with worrying over Raven and the others that he’d forgotten how closely Erik watched him, and when Erik had called him out on it, he’d promptly lost all capacity for logical thought. He’d ended up throwing out the first excuse he could think of, which was, thankfully enough, something they could manufacture. Thank God for small mercies. I might have lied to Erik and told him that my estranged sister was coming into town, hence my nervousness.
Moira’s thoughts raced with the implications. She had a very strategic mind, reading complications and searching for solutions without pause, without panic. It was a very calming place, and Charles couldn’t be blamed for liking it so much. His own mind was a comfortable mess most of the time, and it was occasionally nice to sink into a more ordered one.

We’ll have to keep up the charade then, she said finally. I’ll alert Raven and work out a plan.

Have her call me, Charles replied. We’ll set up a lunch date. Just one or two, just to allay Erik’s suspicions.

Moira’s disapproval flared up again. She hadn’t liked Erik from the beginning, mostly because Erik had been distrustful of everyone (and he still was, but to a much lesser degree, thankfully) and had had the entire building vetted by SHIELD from top to bottom twice, which had caused Moira all sorts of stress regarding her cover here as Charles’ secretary. It had been at that point that Charles had realized how serious Erik was going to be about his bodyguard duties, but he hadn’t worried excessively yet. That level of anxiety hadn’t come until Erik had pulled out his rules and sternly informed Charles that they would be joined at the hip indefinitely, and Charles had thought, very distinctly, Shit.

Fine, Moira said, briskly scribbling a note to herself. I’ll give Raven a call. Anything else?

Just...please remember to come to me with any mission details. Just because I’m sidelined for now doesn’t mean I don’t want to hear about any targets you’ve got planned, all right? He was already fretting like a concerned mother hen over everyone back at the mansion, and if he were kept out of the loop now, he was almost a hundred percent certain he’d go mad with worry.

Moira nodded minutely. Of course. You know I’m keeping an eye on them for you, Charles.

Thank you. We’ll talk later.

Yes.

He let their mental contact lapse and fade into nothing. When he glanced up over his computer, Erik was gazing out the window to his left, the coin now absently orbiting his palm. He had a spectacular profile, Charles mused, daring to stare while Erik was distracted by the skyline. Straight nose, sharp jaw, lips that looked capable of being both rough and gentle. Such a shame he was so utterly professional and so utterly contemptuous of Charles’ work. It was irritating, really, how few people seemed willing to acknowledge what good suppressants could do. All credit to the pro-mutant, anti-suppressant propaganda, he supposed. The bad press was frustrating, but there was little he could do except appear in public himself and give the occasional press junket that people tended to ignore or pick apart and criticize anyway. The most he could do at this point was act as a consultant for the government and attempt to dispel any misinformation they had on mutants, try to reverse long-standing negative opinions. But even as a SHIELD consultant and occasionally as the CIA’s, he didn’t feel like he’d been doing much good. That was the good thing about Professor X, really: he did the things Charles Xavier couldn’t.

Across the room, Patches had begun the ascent to the peak of Erik’s knee, clawing his way up Erik’s pants as he did. Erik let out a curse and jerked, nearly sending the kitten flying away.

“Don’t be mean to him,” Charles said, trying to hide a smile.

“Should’ve left the damn thing at home,” Erik grumbled.

Home. No, Charles’ heart most definitely did not give a tight squeeze at the fact that Erik called his
“No one’s home,” Charles reminded him, tucking away the sudden warmth in his chest for further examination later. (Not that it required further examination, as he was pretty sure what that warmth meant: it meant he was growing or had already grown unwisely fond of Erik, which was a Bad Idea for a myriad of reasons, not the least of which was the fact that Erik hated him and would probably ratherskydive sans parachute than return any of Charles’ affections.) “It would’ve been irresponsible of us to leave an animal home alone without food, water, company…”

“And we’re all about being responsible,” Erik muttered, nudging Patches off with his shoe as the kitten tried to leap for his shins. Undeterred, Patches attempted to scale the chair, only to lose his grip halfway up one arm and topple back to the ground with a startled meow.

“You’re heartless,” Charles remarked as he watched Erik dispassionately observe the kitten in distress.

“Growth through adversity,” Erik replied. “I’m teaching him about life.”

Charles rolled his eyes and stood up. “Come here,” he cooed, crouching by his desk and holding out a hand. Patches glanced his way briefly before clawing his way up the side of the armchair again. Determined fellow. “He likes you. I don’t understand why.”

“He understands the value of a firm hand,” Erik replied, leaning over to watch Patches’ progress. “Look, he’s already getting further than he did when he started. If you keep coddling him, he won’t learn a thing.”

Charles couldn’t help laughing. “Yes, sir, drill sergeant Lehnsherr. When does his combat training start? Before or after he gets his crew cut?”

“After,” Erik sniffed, as if it were obvious. Charles wondered briefly who had been Erik’s firm hand.

He sat back down behind his desk and said, “You know, a little kindness with that adversity can work wonders.”

“I don’t do kindness.”

“As I’m well aware.” Charles tapped his pen thoughtfully against the side of his computer. “I suppose I’ll have to be the kindness if you’re going to insist on being the adversity.”

Erik grunted noncommittally and leaned forward further as Patches neared the arm of the chair. With one last, determined push, the kitten managed to make it to the top, wobbled, and nearly tumbled backwards to the floor. Erik’s hand shot out and caught him before he could, steadying him.

“There,” Erik said, his voice gruff. “See? If I’d helped him, he wouldn’t have learned.”

“Yes,” Charles said dryly, “now he possesses the valuable skill of scaling chairs.” But he smiled anyway, enormously entertained by the idea of Erik molding Patches into some sort of killer bodyguard cat that attacked intruders and knew six styles of martial arts. Knowing Erik, he wouldn’t put it past the man.

The day passed slowly. Charles nearly fell asleep at his desk twice, lulled by the lethargic warmth of afternoon sunlight spilling onto his desk from the window behind him. He drowsily scribbled out a couple of notes on incoming lab reports and called NYU to graciously accept an invitation as guest speaker. Erik had picked up and begun to read one of the genetics books sitting on Charles’ office shelves, managing to look very interested where most people usually looked very homicidally bored.
His mind was a low buzz against Charles’, indistinct but present, sort of like a radio that had been turned way down low so that the sounds were impossible to make out but blended into the background ambience. Charles found it soothing. He was barely aware of setting his head down on his hands and closing his eyes.

He jolted awake when his phone rang in his pocket, flailing a bit in disorientation before he managed to get his bearings. His office. Right. He glanced up and caught Erik staring at him. There was something soft in Erik’s eyes before his expression hardened again, and he went back to glaring down at the open book on his lap. Charles looked hard at him for a moment. Had that been an almost-smile on his face?

No. Erik didn’t smile. More likely, it was Charles seeing things again. He was a master at finding things he wanted to find, whether they were true or not.

With a sigh, he rustled through the papers on his desk for his phone. RAVEN, said the name on-screen. Oh good. He swiped a finger across the screen to accept the call. “Hello?”

“Charles, my evil estranged brother!” she sang out, probably loudly enough for Erik to hear across the room. “Lucky for you, I’ll be in the area starting tomorrow. How do you feel about lunch at that nice Italian place down the street from your place? Yes? I’ll meet you there at twelve.”

“Ah, Raven,” he said, trying to rearrange his face into something resembling nervous surprise. “Yes, twelve sounds excellent. It’s good to hear from you.”

“I heard from Moira. Great excuse.” She shifted into a bad imitation of his accent. “‘Yeah, it’s just my estranged sister, never mind the fact that my sister’s needed at my mansion to keep these other kids I sort of adopted from burning down the estate, and oh yeah, never mind the fact that she’s not really estranged, really…””

“I’ll admit I didn’t think,” Charles said, fully conscious of Erik’s gaze on him. “Sorry. Can we talk about it tomorrow? It’ll be good to see you.” It had actually been a while since he’d seen her, or anyone at the mansion. Before Erik, he’d headed out to the mansion every couple of days or so, not to mention the nights they ran missions on intel fed to them by Moira. He trusted Raven and the older boys to keep order—with trust being used loosely, order even more so—but he liked to see them in person when he could. Creating suppressants to help the mutant population at large was all well and good, as unappreciated as he went. But seeing and working with the mutants he’d personally pulled off the streets and sheltered…well, there was no replacing that feeling with anything.

Erik’s arrival had changed everything. There was no getting away from him, and though there were certainly worse things in life than enjoying the company of the physical embodiment of sex on lean, muscular legs, Erik’s presence was proving to be something of an inconvenience. A very big one, if he was staying much longer, which, at this point in time, with no word from SHIELD, was likely.

“Tomorrow,” Raven agreed. “Should we nail down a story, or are we going to wing it?”

“I’m sort of busy right now,” Charles told her, in a tone he hoped would convey, my big glaring SHIELD agent is currently in the room and I’m not at liberty to speak. “So I’ll see you tomorrow. Twelve at the Italian place.”

“Okay. I promise I’ll be extra nice to your guard dog, too. Is he hot?”

“Raven…”

“Relax, Charles. It’s not like I’m going to flirt with him, unless he’s really, really hot. Besides, you
flirt enough for the both of us, don’t even try to deny that. Okay, I’ll see you.”

She hung up before he could properly reply, which was a good thing because he wouldn’t have known how to answer any of her statements anyway. Erik’s attractiveness did warrant two ‘really’s,’ and Charles was awfully flirtatious, often without meaning to be. There was a fine line between friendliness and seduction, Raven always tried to tell him, and he never did seem to be able to identify it.

“Your sister?” Erik asked, watching as Charles set his phone back down on his desk.

Charles nodded, shuffling a couple of papers around in an attempt to look vaguely nervous. “Yeah. She’s coming by for lunch tomorrow.”

“Ah. That’s good.”

Charles glanced over at him. One hand was on the book in his lap, the other absently rubbing circles on Patches’ back. Charles stifled a smile. Erik could pretend all he wanted that he was a hardhearted, brusque killer (and Charles knew he was a killer, knew the shape that people’s minds took when they had seen too much and done things that twisted them a little, darkened the corners of their mind, sometimes making things ugly, and sometimes, as in Erik’s case, twisting their minds into something damaged but beautiful, oh so beautiful and Charles wished he could push back that fog across Erik’s mind so he could see it all but managed to refrain, just barely), but there was a warmth in Erik that gleamed through in moments like these, moments where he forgot anyone was looking.

“Try not to scare her off,” Charles said, aiming for that stern voice he used when Alex blew up a room again.

Erik held up a hand. “I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“Good.”

“Do you happen to know her social security number? I’ll have SHIELD run her first to make sure she’s safe.”

“Erik.”
Chapter 3

Charles’ sister was a tall, beautiful blond girl who walked with confidence bordering on a swagger, and Erik very quickly decided that he liked her.

For one thing, she arrived right on time, which was a marked difference from her brother already. For another, she met his gaze unflinchingly, looking unimpressed when he narrowed his eyes at her. Then she slapped a file down on the table in front of him and said, “My personal details. Charles said you might want to vet me,” and Erik decided that he really liked her.

He flipped open the folder and found relevant documents within: a copy of a driver’s license, a copy of an immunization record, a background check, a short juvie record. He raised his eyebrows at the last one and directed a questioning glance across the table to Raven, who had settled in the chair next to Charles.

“Oh you can ignore that,” Raven said dismissively, waving a hand. “I was sixteen and stupid.”

Erik scanned her driver’s license. “Sixteen was only six years ago.”

“A lot can change in six years. Speaking of which—” She turned to Charles and held out her hand. “It’s good to see you again. Been a while.”

“Yes, it has,” Charles replied, shaking her hand politely. He had an odd look in his eyes, and his expression was contorted strangely—nerves perhaps? Or maybe he had a stomachache. Erik wondered if he had any Pepto-Bismol on hand. Then he decided it wasn’t his job to be Charles’ personal pharmacist and brushed the thought away.

Erik flipped through the file twice. She seemed safe enough. He’d already scanned her over with his powers when she first approached, and the only thing she was carrying that might remotely count as a weapon was a pair of nail clippers in her purse. He was relatively confident in his ability to guard against a girl armed with nail clippers.

“Is she approved?” Charles asked, sounding amused. Erik glared at him a bit. When they were alone, he was going to have to remind Charles again that the threat against his life was nothing to laugh at.

“For now,” he answered grumpily.

“Awesome,” Raven said, and oh, there was the evidence that these two were related: she had that same dry voice Charles used when he was almost annoyed but not quite.

“Raven,” Charles said, “this is Erik Lehnsherr, my bodyguard.”

“His associate,” Erik corrects. “Courtesy of SHIELD.”

“He carries ducks very fashionably, in case you were wondering,” Charles added. Erik glowered at him. Charles was never going to let that go, was he? Bastard.

“I won’t even ask,” Raven said after giving them both a long look. “I don’t really want to know.”

Yes, Erik thought, he liked her a lot.

“Anyway,” she continued, picking up the menu, “since it’s been a while, Charles, we should catch up. Any major life changes?”
Charles shrugged. “Not really. Well, except for the fact that Erik and I have become parents.”

Raven swiveled around to stare at him, and across the table, Erik jerked. Parents? What?

“For a kitten,” Charles explained, laughing. “I’m talking about the kitten we adopted, Erik. God, you should see your face. Absolutely terrified.”

Maybe if you weren’t deliberately trying to be misleading to get a rise out of me, Erik thought irritably. Aloud, he said, “It’s Charles’ kitten. I have nothing to do with it.”

‘‘Nothing—’’ Charles snorted. “Who was the one teaching Patches to climb yesterday? Growth through adversity and all that?”

“That was—” Erik’s mouth hung open for a moment before he snapped it shut. “No comment.”

“He’s the mean parent,” Charles told Raven. “I’m the nice one. And yet Patches still loves him more. Baffling.”

Before Erik could protest that a) he was not a parent to anyone or anything, let alone some scrawny stray kitten Charles had plucked off the street, and b) he was not a mean parent, he was a strict and engaging one, the waiter came up to take their orders. Charles, as usual, ordered some bizarre concoction Erik had never heard of before. He always seemed to aim for the most obscure item on the menu, regardless of pricing, and then he would devour most of it before insisting that Erik try some, ignoring the fact that no, Erik did not want to try something that barely resembled food, let alone edible food. It had become something of their restaurant routine, whenever Erik deemed it secure enough to go out, and Erik sullenly settled in for another taste of exotic non-food.

Raven, thankfully enough, ordered a good old-fashioned spaghetti and meatballs, and Erik went for lasagna. He’d never found any lasagna as good as the one his mother used to make, back when he’d been a child, but he always got nostalgic for it anyway. And if Charles was paying, Erik wasn’t going to hesitate.

The waiter returned within a minute with drinks, soda for Raven, water for Erik, and tea for Charles. Charles stirred the drink gently with the provided spoon and then raised the cup to take a tiny sip, making a small, pleased sound as he swallowed. So very British of him, as usual. Erik probably shouldn’t have found it endearing. It was maddeningly endearing anyway.

“So, Erik,” Raven said, sipping at her Coke through a straw, “you really think my brother here is in danger?”

Erik blinked. He hadn’t expected to be roped into conversation, not when this was the first time Charles and Raven had met in years. But maybe Raven was just as nervous as Charles and doing a better job of hiding it. Erik was safe, a neutral point between the two of them. He supposed, he thought with an inward sigh, that there were worse things than playing mediator for estranged brothers and sisters.

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” he replied. “I was assigned to protect him, and I’ll do my job.”

“But what have you heard?” she pressed, chewing on the end of the straw. “I mean, you must have heard something—some threats or something—that made them send you out. Charles has gotten death threats before.” She paused, then added, “So I’ve heard.”

“They’re no big deal,” Charles assured her, just as Erik nodded and said, “You’ve heard correctly.”

They both stopped and looked at each other. This was an argument they’d had before, one that
neither of them had satisfactorily won. Erik glared at him. “You need to take these threats seriously.”

“They’re really not a big problem,” Charles replied, shaking his head earnestly. “Don’t worry her. I’ve received threats like these practically all my life. I’m used to them.”

“Doesn’t mean you should let your guard down,” Erik growled. “They’ve never been this pointed before. Violent letters, menacing phone calls…And do I need to remind you that someone took a baseball bat to the headlights of your car?”

Raven shot him an aghast look. “Are you serious?”

“Ask your brother.”

“Charles!”

“It really isn’t that bad,” Charles insisted, infuriatingly calm. “This isn’t the first time my property’s been attacked. My father had many of the same problems.”

“And you know…” Raven hesitated, her voice softening. “You know what happened to him.”

Charles’ expression shuttered, his fingers going still around his cup of tea. Erik knew the history, remember hearing about it on the news even in Venezuela, where he’d been hunting down one of Shaw’s associates. Brian Xavier had died in a car accident, a hit-and-run. The car had gone right off the side of the bridge and plunged into the East River. Local police had fished his totaled Mercedes-Benz from the water and found him inside, knocked unconscious by the initial crash and then killed by drowning. No one had ever been able to prove who had done it, though the widespread speculation had been that he’d been intentionally rammed by an anti-suppressant extremist. But the yearlong investigation by the FBI had turned up nothing, and then Charles had taken over the company for his father. Many had hoped he’d take the company in a different direction, perhaps even shut down suppressant manufacturing entirely. But he’d continued his father’s work, and in doing so, had painted a new target directly between his shoulders.

It was a target that Erik had eyed angrily and speculatively from afar for years. And it was a target that, now, he was going to make sure no one hit.

“I’ll be fine,” Charles said, confident as ever. “I can take care of myself, and, failing that, Erik here is very thorough. I trust him.”

Erik wondered if Charles truly believed the death threats were nothing to worry over, or if he was drastically overestimating himself, or maybe both. Just because Charles might be able to read surface thoughts didn’t mean he’d actually be able to adequately protect himself, even if he could detect an assassin’s intentions in time. If he’d been a telepath of the caliber of Emma Frost, then that might be a different matter. Erik remembered Frost, remembered the stab of agony behind his eyes the one and only time he’d snapped closely enough on Shaw’s heels that they’d been forced to turn and fight him off. Telepaths were dangerous, he knew that better than almost anyone. But he’d seen Charles’ scores on the psionic scale, a page of charts and results tucked into the front of his file. He’d been below average on most counts, scoring a little above average on empathy. Which, knowing Charles, of course he would score highest on empathy. The man appeared to live and breathe compassion, Patches serving as the latest and greatest example.

Weak as his mutation was, Charles was unlikely to be able to defend himself with it. And seeing as how he’d never been trained in any martial arts, probably never even been in a fistfight, and balked when Erik had asked him on the first day they’d met if he could fire a gun, Erik found it gratifying how cavalier Charles was about threats against his life. Fury had given Erik transcripts of those hostile
phone calls. If Charles, who probably cried when he saw road kill, could handle men who wanted to *eviscerate him and hang him by his own entrails*, then Erik would gladly accept the title of Papa Kitten and ferry ducks across streets for the rest of the foreseeable future. Gladly.

“I *bet* Erik here is very thorough,” Raven said slyly, and before Erik could even decide if that was a come-on, their food arrived on steaming plates. Forgetting the conversation entirely, Raven dug into her meal with fervor, while Charles took the time to spread the napkin out on his lap before picking up the knife and fork and beginning to cut up his lunch neatly. Funny, how careful and mannerly Charles was with some things, while his house often looked like a hurricane disaster zone. Erik watched him for a moment, eyes caught on the way Charles’ fingers curled around the knife. Then he forced his gaze down to his own lunch and cut off a corner of the lasagna for a taste. Nope. As expected, not as good as his mother’s.

Raven and Charles spent most of lunch making small talk that was, oddly enough, not quite as tense as Erik had been expecting. They seemed fairly comfortable around each other for two people who hadn’t spoken in three years. Raven was, evidently, in town looking for a job. She’d dropped out of college, she told Erik, and had worked around as a waitress for a while. She wasn’t quite sure what she wanted to do yet, but she was keeping her options open. Charles politely offered her a position at his company, which she not-as-politely declined. Erik wondered what her position was on the family business. Her driver’s license had had a small *M* marked on the corner, designating her mutant status. He didn’t see any visible mutation, so whatever the X-gene gave her, he figured it was invisible as Charles’ was. What did she think of suppressants? And, more importantly, what did she think of her brother being the one putting them out there on the market in the first place?

“So, Charles,” Raven said, twirling the last few strands of her spaghetti onto her fork, “let’s get down to the important questions. Met anyone special lately?”

Charles groaned. “Can we not talk about my romantic life right now?”

“What? I haven’t talked to my brother in *three years*. You can forgive me if I’m a little curious.”

“*Still.*”

Raven switched her gaze over to Erik. “I’ll ask Erik then.” She tapped her fork against here plate expectantly.

Erik cleared his throat. “I don’t think I’m qualified to answer that.”

“No? Who else is more qualified? From what I heard from Charles here, you’re with him all day, aren’t you?” Something mischievous entered her eyes. Erik regarded it warily. “You even *sleep* with him, don’t you?”

Charles nearly spat out his tea. Erik swallowed very slowly to make sure the lasagna didn’t go down the wrong pipe. “Actually,” he said, a bit stiffly, “I stay in the guest room.”

“Ah, but you live together. Charles told me a little about you on the phone last night.” Raven grinned wickedly. “What’s that like?”

“It’s my job,” Erik answered neutrally.

She scoffed. “Boring. There’s got to be *something* interesting to tell. Is he still a complete mess?”

Right. She’d lived with him once upon a time, too. Erik hesitated a moment before nodding. “I assume that hasn’t changed since he was young?”
Raven groaned. “Are you kidding me? When I had to fetch him out of his room, sometimes I couldn’t even find him underneath all the clutter.”

“It’s not clutter,” Charles protested. “It’s all organized according to a system.”

“The system of ‘I’ll just put it here until I figure out where it really belongs, and whoops, where did I put it again’? That system?”

“That’s not accurate at all!”

“It’s a little accurate,” Erik said. A lot accurate actually.

“As if Erik isn’t equally difficult to cohabitate with,” Charles said, pouting that damned pout of his again that made Erik feel guilty, even if he’d done nothing. “All the doors must be bolted. All the windows must be closed with the curtains drawn. No sunlight allowed in Erik Lehnsherr’s vicinity, not at all—”

“There are snipers,” Erik griped.

“And you control metal,” Charles pointed out.

“That doesn’t mean I’m constantly alert enough to stop bullets flying for your head.”

“Oh yes, you are. You’re alert all the time, even when you’re sleeping. I can barely take a step out of my room without you waking up.”

“That’s not…”

“You tackled me when I was going to the bathroom!”

“One time! Once.”

Charles rolled his eyes, though there was a fond tilt to his lips that took away the sting of his dismissal. “As I said, Erik’s very thorough. Obsessively so.”

“I just don’t want you getting killed,” Erik grumbled, drinking his water to hide the fact that his cheeks were heating. He was blushing. Fucking embarrassing.


“It’s my job,” he snapped, annoyed. “Personal feelings don’t come into account, even if I had any for Charles, which I don’t.”

Charles’ smile slipped, and Raven stopped poking at the leftover pasta on her plate. For a second, neither of them said a word. Then Raven said, “Oh,“ just as Charles said quickly, “Well, of course not, the personal and the professional shouldn’t mix, even if—even if they often do, and—” He seemed to forget what he was saying because he just sat there with his mouth open and then, very slowly, closed it again.

Shit. Erik backtracked. “That was—that’s not what I meant.”

“And yet, I understood you perfectly,” Charles said, a bit rigidly.

Shit. He kept doing this. He kept making Erik feeling fucking guilty over saying nothing but the truth. He didn’t have any personal feelings for Charles. They weren’t friends. Charles was a mission, a means to an end—Sebastian Shaw’s end. And Erik was Charles’ protection, put in place to make
sure one of SHIELD’s best mutant consultants wasn’t gruesomely murdered. A business relationship. Charles was a businessman. He had to understand that.

Something told Erik that he didn’t. It might have been the wounded look lurking behind Charles’ eyes, there and gone in flashes. Erik fought back the urge to apologize; he’d already caved to Charles so many times over the last couple of days alone, goddammit.

“Well,” Charles said finally, his voice bright, “is everyone done? I’ll pick up the tab.”

Erik glanced at his plate, still a quarter full of whatever invention Charles had ordered. “You didn’t finish.” This was normally the point where Charles would foist the leftovers onto Erik, swearing that it was delicious, really, and Erik should try it, no need to be nitpicky over food.

Instead, Charles answered, “I’ll get a to-go box. Come on now, I’m sure Raven has places to be.”

“I…yeah.” Raven nodded. “Places to see, people to meet.” She wiped her mouth on her napkin and gathered her things as Charles pulled out his wallet and paid the bill. Erik stood as Raven did, pushing in his chair behind him and watching as Charles scrawled out his signature on the receipt that the waiter brought. Charles had neat handwriting, probably another byproduct of his upbringing, but his signature was a scribbled illegibility, a reflection of his personality. He always had two sides to everything he did, and Erik tried not to be fascinated. He wasn’t sure if he really succeeded.

As they left the restaurant, Charles pulled Raven close with an arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. It was an absent gesture of affection but not one that Erik would have expected from estranged siblings. It was that Charles Xavier charm, Erik supposed. Breaking down barriers, even familial ones that had been in the making for three years of silence.

“Call me sometime,” Charles said. “I’m always here.”

“I know.” Raven smiled at him. “Don’t be a stranger anymore, all right? Even with Erik here watching over your shoulder all the time.”

“I won’t. Here, let me call you a cab.”

“I’ll do it,” Erik offered, stepping to the side of the street. He reached out down the street for the distinctive feel of a taxi, with its overhead light and ticking meter, and found one approaching. As it turned the corner, he raised an arm to flag it down and waited until it stopped by the curb before pulling the door open with a flick of his fingers.

“Impressive,” Raven said, arching one eyebrow. “I’m counting on you to keep my brother safe.”

“It’s my—”

“Your job, yeah, yeah.” She waved dismissively as she slid into the backseat. “I’ll talk to you later, Charles.”

“Bye, Raven. Be good.”

She stuck out her tongue at him and then swung the door shut, drawing a quick smile from Charles. As the cab pulled off down the street, he turned and nodded in the direction of the house. “Shall we go?”

Erik fell into step beside him. The afternoon wasn’t silent in the slightest, filled as it was with honking horns and passing cars and the chatter of other pedestrians. But there was a silence between them that stretched on uncomfortably, putting Erik on edge. He hated feeling off-balance, hated it
especially when it felt like the uneasiness was his fault, which hadn’t happened often before but seemed to be occurring routinely now with Charles. Were apologies in order? For what exactly?

“Don’t feel bad,” Charles said, tucking his free hand in his pocket. He carried the to-go box in his other hand.

Erik tried to dig to the root of his guilt and couldn’t find it. And yet, frustratingly enough, he still felt as if he should apologize. “About what?”

“You know. What you said about this. About how it’s impersonal.”

“Charles—”

“You’re right, anyway. This is your job. I’m sure if you’d had the choice, the last thing you would want to be doing is tailing some young CEO around, particularly when you don’t agree with what that CEO is doing. And I’m grateful to you for staying anyway, Erik. I don’t know what exactly your relationship with SHIELD is like, but when Director Fury called me to tell me he was sending someone to protect me, I got the impression that you could have refused the assignment if you’d chosen to. So thank you for accepting it.”

“Fury would’ve sent someone else if I hadn’t agreed,” Erik said, a bit gruffly.

“He would’ve,” Charles agreed. “But still. I appreciate the effort you’re making on my behalf. I do value my life quite a bit, as much as you might think otherwise, and I trust you to guard it, even if you might think it’d be a good riddance if I dropped off the face of the earth.”

“I don’t think that!” Erik exclaimed. “Where the hell did that come from?”

Charles shrugged. “A lot of people who oppose suppressants think that. I wouldn’t blame you.”

“Charles,” Erik growled, slowing to a stop, “it wouldn’t be a good riddance if you dropped off the face of the earth. It’d be a fucking shame.”

Charles stopped, too, his eyes wide. “What?”

“I might have thought that before I met you,” Erik admitted, “but then I met you. And believe me when I say it’d be a fucking shame if you were gone because you’re…you’re a good person, even if you are responsible for the majority of the suppressants on the market right now, and God only knows that the world could use some more good people who pick kittens off the streets and always recycle and never forget birthdays.”

He stopped talking. Charles stared at him, his lips parted in surprise. “Wha…” he managed finally. “You really think that?”

“Don’t make me say it again,” Erik said irritably, starting quickly off toward the house again.

Charles had to jog to catch up. “You really think that?” he repeated, his lips beginning to curve up. “That’s the first nice thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“That’s the first nice thing I’ve ever said to anyone,” Erik grumbled.

Charles laughed. “I’m honored to be your first.” Then, before the atmosphere between them could grow tense again, he added quickly, “Though I suppose I should have asked you to buy me dinner first.”
“I’ll keep that in mind,” Erik agreed, the hint of a smile in his voice, and they sidestepped that potential patch of awkwardness.

By the time they reached Charles’ house, the tension between them was gone. Charles was back to his cheery self, humming a tune under his breath as he bustled around the house. Erik settled on the couch and flipped on the TV to the news channel.

“Don’t you ever watch anything but the news?” Charles asked as he passed by, a load of laundry in his arms.

“Nothing else worthwhile,” Erik grunted, turning up the volume.

“Oh, that’s just you being negative,” Charles called from the laundry room. Erik heard him riffle around for detergent before pulling the washer door open and loading in the clothes. A moment later, he reappeared in the hallway and padded over to drop down next to Erik. “Give me the remote.”

Erik fished it out from across the room from under a stack of papers and floated it over to Charles.

“You don’t have work to do?”

“It’s a Saturday,” Charles replied, kicking back with his feet stretched out to the coffee table. “I’m entitled to a day’s rest. Let’s watch a movie.”

“I shouldn’t—”


“I’ll…” Honestly, Erik hadn’t watched many movies. Hunting a man through his entire organization was time-consuming work. He hadn’t had much free time or inclination to sit in a dark theater alone watching films that bored him more often than not. Explosions on-screen lost some of their effect after you’d seen the real thing live, with a bonus of genuine cutting shrapnel and ringing ears and pounding adrenaline, too. “I’ll watch whatever you want to,” he finished.

Charles shrugged. “Okay. Let’s see…” He scanned through the list twice, then a third time, before rolling back up to the top and choosing what looked like a horror movie from the blood-streaked title cover. Tossing the remote down onto the table, Charles pulled the afghan down from the back of the couch, wrapped it around himself, and drew his knees up, compacting himself tidily in the opposite corner of the couch. “Let’s be scared,” he said, grinning impishly.

Erik was not prone to scaring. He’d trained himself early on not to be afraid, of himself, of Shaw, of anything. But the third time he jerked when the killer leaped out of the shadows, Charles laughed and asked, “Do you need me to sit beside you and hold your hand?”

Erik glared blackly at him. “No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. You think I’m scared by these—Jesus Christ!” He nearly uprooted the entire TV as the masked killer threw himself on the main character’s best friend, whose screams cut off into gruesome gurgles as blood bubbled out of her slit throat. Erik could feel his heart threatening to pound out of his ribcage.

“Well,” Charles huffed, scooting all the way over to settle directly beside Erik’s tense frame, “I’ll sit here anyway.”
“I’m not—”

“Well, I am.” Charles flashed him a winning smile. “If you could hold my hand, I’ll be okay.”

Erik gave him a flat look. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Shh,” Charles whispered, “you’re going to miss the important part.” He held out his hand and, after a moment, Erik took it.

He pretended he wasn’t squeezing Charles’ hand much more tightly than Charles was squeezing his, or that, after a few minutes, it grew increasingly difficult to focus on the movie with the warmth of Charles’ skin again his. Uncomfortably difficult to focus.

As soon as the credits began to roll, he yanked his hand free of Charles’ grip and stood up. “I should—I’ll check the perimeter.”

“Check the perimeter,” Charles echoed. “Are you never not on guard?”

Erik didn’t grace his question with an answer. He swept through the rooms carefully, making sure all the windows were latched and that the alarm system was functioning. The door was bolted, and when he reached out with his powers to meticulously feel out the layout of the house and its rooms, nothing was out of the ordinary. All quiet and good.

When he returned to the living room, Charles was lying on his stomach stretched out on the couch, snoring lightly into the arm cushion. Erik meant to walk past him to head for his room, but he stopped by the end of the couch instead and…looked for a moment. He was always watching Charles, watching for cues of danger or any sign of distress that might indicate an incoming threat, but those times, Charles always knew he was watching. But when Charles was asleep, there was a softness to his face that was absent when he was awake, like the walls he consciously kept up came down. Erik was surprised. He knew that everyone had masks that they wore, masks that slipped off when the wearer’s concentration waned. But he had never thought of Charles as a man with much of a mask, with much of anything to hide, but Charles’ bared expression seemed more different than the waking Charles than Erik had thought possible. There was a vulnerability in the curve of his eyelashes against his cheeks, a line of stress at the pinch between his brows. His lips pressed sharply in a firm line, as if he were sad or disappointed or worried, or all three. Erik wondered what he dreamed about.

He wondered who Charles really was, once the mask came off.

* 

The following morning dawned dark and stormy and cold. It was one of those days that made hot chocolate and a warm fire and a book sound magnificent, so Charles made two mugs of hot chocolate, turned up the gas fire in the fireplace, and curled up in the armchair with Fifty Shades of Grey.

Erik woke barely five minutes later. It was as if he could detect Charles’ movements around the
house, even in his sleep. Charles ventured out a thread of telepathy but was rebuffed by Erik’s shields before he could read anything of import. It was amazing, really, how quickly Erik snapped from unconscious to wide awake. Most people woke in stages, like rising out from the deep sea to the surface of the water. Their minds were especially vulnerable in those moments. But Erik went from sleep to completely shielded so quickly that Charles barely had a chance to skim his surface thoughts before he was shut out. Incredible.

He wandered out fully-dressed from his room a couple of minutes later, his hair uncombed but everything else—his customary slacks and turtleneck combination; if Charles didn’t like the look on him so much, he might have asked if Erik had anything else in his closet, but as it was, he didn’t want to risk discouraging Erik from his favored (and Charles’ favored, on Erik) style—crisp and neat. His expression was stoic. The thing about Erik was that he never looked refreshed in the mornings or tired; he just looked ready. Charles wondered if he even knew what a good night’s sleep was, the sort of sleep that left you boneless but energized when the sun came up.

“Good morning,” he greeted, glancing up over his book.

“Morning,” Erik grunted, padding toward the kitchen.

“I made you hot chocolate,” Charles called over his shoulder. “It should still be hot. It’s on the counter.”

Erik grunted again, something that sounded vaguely like a thanks, and Charles returned to his book to the comfortable sounds of Erik bustling around. It was nice to have other sounds in the house besides his own. The presence of another mind, even unreadable as Erik’s was, was soothing. Charles had lived alone since he’d left home for university, and he had to admit it could, and often did, get awfully lonely. He would be sorry to see Erik go, when his assignment was up. Or—and this was more likely, since death threats never stopped coming—when Charles would have to force him out, subtly, since he couldn’t lead the X-Men like this forever, furtively from his house with the possibility of being discovered at any moment looming over his head.

Erik collected his drink and stood for a while by the refrigerator, speaking in hushed tones on the phone. Charles couldn’t hear more than soft murmurs from where he was sitting, but he could feel a current of tension run along Erik’s mind. Checking in with Director Fury, probably. Charles had spoken with the man only a handful of times; when he consulted with SHIELD, he normally spoke to Maria Hill or Phil Coulson. But his handful of experiences with the director hadn’t been exactly pleasant. Nick Fury had a way of keeping you constantly off-guard, so that he could pounce at his leisure. He was also as well-versed as Erik was with mental shielding, or better, and Charles had decided very quickly that he respected the man enough not to forcibly pry. Granted, if he hadn’t imposed such strict rules on himself regarding his telepathy, he could have achieved his goal in SHIELD much more easily and efficiently. He’d first agreed to consult because he’d figured he could keep an eye on government activity in correlation with continued X-Men activity. At least if he had his ear to the railway tracks of the federal organization responsible for investigation and regulation of powered beings, he might be able to hear a warning train coming. But he’d respected Fury enough on that first impression not to plunder his mind, so his attempt to figure out what SHIELD thought of the X-Men was slow-going.

At least he had Moira. She was his one most reliable outlet into overall government activity, and she’d been invaluable so far. Every scrap of information counted.

He turned his attention back to the novel, where Ana was getting spanked again. She wasn’t enjoying it. Charles was all for experimentation in bed and kinky sex—his university years had been a wild ride, and he had only fond memories of those days—but whatever was going on in these
pages was no sort of experimental kinky sex that Charles would have liked to engage in. And Christian Grey was still running around doing whatever the hell he pleased, with no regards whatsoever to his company. Any trade secrets hidden within had yet to be revealed. Charles kept waiting for the grim announcement that the whole of Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc. (which Charles found to be an unnecessary mouthful) had gone bankrupt due to lack of oversight, or at least that the Board of Directors had voted Grey out of power for mismanagement or, more accurately, no management. No such announcement arrived. What a nice world, Charles thought, where Board of Directors didn’t exist and vacations were things of whims and the biggest problems to be found were negotiating the pitfalls of a relationship.

His phone rang from across the room where it sat on the high counter that separated the kitchen from the living room. Charles paused halfway through turning the page and asked, “Erik, could you…?” Without even looking, Erik waved a hand, floating Charles’ phone over to him. He grabbed it from the air and called out a thanks before looking at the caller ID.

Moira. He picked up carefully, knowing that it could be about his day-to-day schedule, or it could be something much more serious. “Hello?”

“Hey, Charles.”

All right, this was the more serious sort of news from the sound of it. Charles straightened a bit and shot a quick glance over at Erik, who still had his back to him and was muttering something irritably into his phone.

“Can you talk?” Moira asked.

“Yeah. Nothing too much though.”

“I’ll make this quick. Something’s come up. A new file, like the last one. The CIA’s been picking up some chatter that there’s a facility in upstate New York. All the classic signs are there: abandoned warehouse racking up electric bills, missing mutants, strange cars driving around at nighttime. The problem is, it has to be done tonight.”

“Tonight?” Charles repeated, startled. Erik glanced over, and Charles waved a hand, forcing his expression smooth until Erik turned back around. “Tonight?” he hissed again, more quietly this time.

“Yes. Intel says that they’re planning on moving shop tonight. They probably heard something on radios or the news, or they’re just paranoid and we’re unlucky. But if we don’t hit them tonight, they’ll be gone before local police can ever mobilize anything.”

Charles pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. Shit. The CIA had servers and computers that collected all sorts of surveillance, and some packets of data, once sorted, were deemed non-priorities and filed away for later. Mutant experimenting facilities fell on that list of non-priorities. Luckily enough, Moira had clearance enough to subtly request those files, which was how she’d been sending Charles relevant information over the past few years. They couldn’t do what they did without her. But sometimes she fed them time-sensitive intel like this, and it was a scramble to prepare the team and put in place a workable plan. It was difficult to plot out a workable operation in a limited amount of time already; with Charles sidelined, it would be even more so.

“All right,” he said finally. “I’ll give my people a call. Keep us updated.”

“Will do. And I’ll have Hank report to me once the op begins.”

“Good. Then I’ll talk to you later.”
“Yes, thank you.”

He hung up and pretended to go back to reading, watching Erik over the top of his mug as he sipped at his hot chocolate. Outside, the rain pounded down, splattering against the windows with loud clatters. Thunder rumbled in the distance. A good day to stay in.

Erik wrapped up his conversation in the next few minutes and then walked out to stand across from Charles by the fireplace, firelight flickering across his features, sharpening his expression. “Trouble?” he asked, nodding at Charles’ phone in his lap.

Charles shook his head. “Nothing too terribly important. Conflicting meetings.”

“Ah.”

They remained in silence for another long minute before Erik threw back the rest of his hot chocolate and said, “I’m taking first shower.”

“By all means.”

Charles waited until he disappeared into the bathroom. The moment he heard the shower start, he picked up his phone again and called the mansion, listed as Dentist in his contacts. The line rang three times, four, five…He could imagine one of the younger children scrambling for it, always eager as they were to answer the phone. They’d had such a problem in those early days with Ororo or Jean answering phones when they were meant to be laying low. It had gotten to the point where Charles had taken to leaving the phone in high places or hiding it, not that it seemed to deter Jean with her telekinesis, but at least it was something. Now, they’d been taught not to touch the phone unless otherwise instructed, but Charles still lived in fear of the day that a neighbor or policeman or anyone snooping around rang the mansion and someone other than Hank or Raven or one of the older kids picked up.

Today, it was Sean. “Hey, Prof, what’s up?”

“Hey, Sean. Listen, I need to speak to Hank. It’s urgent.”

“Oh—okay. One second.” There was a pause, then a muffled, “Hank! It’s Charles!” A moment later, Hank’s deep voice came through. “Charles?”

“Hank. I know it’s short notice, but Moira’s given me some information that has to be acted on tonight.” Ignoring Hank’s sharp inhalation, Charles said, “I’ll walk you through it again. Now listen to me carefully…”

“You’re tense again.”

Charles shot Erik a quizzical look. “What?”

He looked down at his hands, which were currently engaged in pouring a cup of tea. “No, I’m not.”

“That’s your fourth cup of tea in the hour,” Erik observed, eyebrow raised. He was sitting by the window with the curtains pulled back, watching the rain come down. Even from the kitchen, Charles could feel the strength of Erik’s assessing gaze, picking him apart.

“I like tea,” Charles sniffed, trying to keep nonchalant even though his mind was buzzing. The X-Men would have headed out from the mansion an hour ago, according to plan. They’d have already arrived at the facility or were arriving now. Charles’ entire body was alive with adrenaline and nervous energy. He debated the merits of watching the TV in hopes of hearing any news about the facility but decided against it. No need to amp himself up further. He didn’t need Erik any more suspicious than he was already.

“Right,” Erik said dryly. “I’ve watched you with your tea every day, Charles. The most you’ve ever had is two cups in an hour, and that was after your contract deal with that one pharmacy chain fell through.”

Charles was torn between alarm and flattery at the fact that Erik was watching him so closely. Mostly flattered, if he were to be honest, though he probably should have been more worried, given that even one slip could reveal the whole X-Men operation.

“I’m just feeling a strong tea craving today,” Charles replied as evenly as he could manage. He ambled back to the office across from the bedrooms, resisting the urge to run. He’d told Erik earlier that he was trying to get some work done ahead of time, boring financial settlements that Erik didn’t need to help with. After he’d sorted things out with Hank, he’d spent the day barricaded in his office, trying to shut away the worry, though he couldn’t help glancing at his phone every few minutes, dreading a call. On these operations, anything could happen. Normally, Charles’ presence eliminated many of the inherent risks of attacking a guarded laboratory with no weapons and little training, only their mutations to use as protection. But when Charles wasn’t there to quiet the minds of the humans, the risks skyrocketed all over again. And as much as he trusted his team, he had discovered over the past couple of weeks that he was a natural worrier. A very high-strung, pace-the-entire-room-for-hours type.

He was on his twenty-third round around his desk when Erik knocked on the door. Charles stopped instantly and tried not to seem too flustered. “Yes?”

Erik opened the door and stuck his head through. “You all right?”

“Y—yes. Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I can feel you moving around,” Erik said. “You’re restless.”

His metal watch, his belt buckle, the pen tucked behind his ear, the phone glued to his hand, even the eyelets of his shoes—of course Erik could feel him. Stupid.

Charles took a deep breath and forced himself to sit down and smile. “I’m fine. It’s nothing.”

Erik gave him a flat look. “Don’t lie to me, Charles. What’s wrong?”

Oh nothing, Charles thought. His CIA contact had just sent him some valuable intel, which his team was currently following up on without proper backup (himself) and without much of an action plan (as they’d only had the morning and some of the afternoon to plan out a mission that had to be surgically precise to risk being spotted). This facility was unusually secure and its owners were probably on high-alert, courtesy of the X-Men’s actions only a few days prior. If there were any
mission that could have benefited most from Charles’ telepathy, it was this one. And yet here he was, sitting tensely in the comfort of his office at home, being babysat by a tiresomely vigilant SHIELD agent who unfortunately took his job way too seriously.

Charles rubbed at his temples and sighed. “A little headache, that’s all. Sometimes moving around helps.”

“A headache.” Erik sounded unconvinced.

“Yeah, a headache. Side-effect of my telepathy sometimes.”

Erik frowned. “I thought that only happened to strong telepaths.”

“Well, you thought wrong,” Charles snapped irritably. Then he frowned, immediately contrite. “No, I’m sorry. It’s just—tension headache. Could you go see if I have any Advil in the pantry?”

His expression still skeptical, Erik nodded silently and disappeared from the doorway. Tension headache, Charles thought, annoyed with himself. Excellent excuse, Xavier, really. Glad to see those multiple PhDs didn’t go to waste. But he really did have a headache, one that was getting almost too painful to think through. The stress was getting to him.

This was the danger of working with a housemate who was unaware of what he did on his free time. It was too easy to get comfortable, to adopt kittens together and watch movies and make jokes and pretend that it would all turn out all right. He wished now that he’d been firmer when Fury had first called him about offering a bodyguard. He should’ve just said no, because he had known from the beginning this was dangerous. And what was even more dangerous was that it was clearly one-sided, and…and that was a thought for another time.

He wondered how much Erik knew. How much he suspected. Erik wasn’t stupid, and Charles had, admittedly, not been very subtle. It was just…easy to be around Erik, and Erik was usually so quiet that Charles forgot he was there. No, that wasn’t quite it—Charles couldn’t forget he was there, not when everything in him seemed attuned to Erik somehow. He was always looking for Erik in corners now, searching for him to deliver a quick smile or a light jab at Erik’s pride or his droll sense of humor that he denied having or his propensity for obsessively checking window latches in every room Charles entered. But it was easy to forget that Erik wasn’t his friend, that he couldn’t trust Erik, as much as he wanted to.

Part of him strained to peek into Erik’s mind, shields be damned, just to see. Telepathy granted him such clarity on who a person was; with one good mental study, he could know a stranger’s intentions, feelings, loves, hates, motives, needs, wants, fears, hopes, dreams. But it was an invasive power. Raven had been the first to fully accept it and also the first to balk from it. Even now, years later, he felt the harsh sting of rejection from the first time she had turned to him and snarled, “Get out of my head, Charles, or I swear to God I’m leaving.”

No, he wouldn’t do that to Erik. Beyond the fear of being detected was the fear of knowing too much. There was such a thing as too much knowledge, and knowing everything about a person was hardly the advantage that most people seemed to think it was. Every mind had its darkness, some small, some all-consuming. And a person never seemed the same to Charles after he had combed thoroughly through their thoughts and memories. When he had been a teenager, still experimenting with his powers, he’d used his telepathy liberally, sometimes embarrassingly so. And most minds had been wonderful, and some minds had been shockingly awful, but after his foray into mental landscapes, he would always know more about others than sometimes they even knew about themselves, and that made it difficult to carry on a polite, engaging conversation. Some people were hilariously hypocritical. Some people were unbearably dull. And Charles would sometimes get
mixed up with what he had been told aloud and what he had only gleaned with his telepathy, and he would reference something that hadn’t been voiced to him, which had led to awkward ends to friendships or passive-aggressive, or sometimes outright aggressive, accusations of mental manipulation. Eventually, he had learned to set boundaries for himself, to make interpersonal interactions smoother. And then he had taken to downplaying his powers as weak telepathy, almost just empathy really, and that had stuck. He couldn’t hide his mutation, but he could hide its potency, which he did legally when he turned eighteen, with some judicious research to figure out how to fool the brain activity monitors that doctors used to determine mutation strength.

He didn’t want to know everything about Erik. He was half-afraid he wouldn’t like what he found, if he ever dared to look.

But allowing Erik so deeply into his life without giving him even a cursory check seemed reckless and irresponsible. Fury vouched for Erik, and Charles trusted the director. But Fury was also the head of a government organization, which meant that that trust could only go so far.

His self-imposed limits were important. They’d kept him safely out of the spotlight mutation-wise for years. But the safety of his team was equally important, if not more so.

He drummed his fingers restlessly on the tabletop. Over two weeks now. He’d let Erik linger unchecked for over two weeks, and in that time, he could have discovered anything. He could know right now and Charles wouldn’t suspect him right now because a) he was sure Erik was skilled enough to act normal even if he uncovered anything incriminating, and b) Charles, on principle, refused to dip into his mind even for a second to reassure himself that Erik was…safe. Was he being a fool, acting so noble and polite when one or two incursions might protect those he loved? Probably. But he was afraid that one or two incursions might turn into three, or five, or ten, and he would not be able to stop. The temptation was great, and, like his mother, he had never been particularly gifted at self-control.

Erik’s voice echoed down the hall before he reappeared. “There was no Advil, but there was some Aleve.” He strode into the office and set the bottle and a glass of water down by the scattered files on the desk. “Take two.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Charles said wryly, shaking out two obediently and washing them down with water. The pills went down coldly, and he tried to ignore the way they felt sliding down his throat. It had been years since he’d taken any Inhib, but the memory was there: lying curled up on the couch unresponsive, his father speaking in hushed tones to a work partner, both of them checking his vitals and noting them in carefully-annotated files, while he squeezed his eyes shut and struggled to breathe.

There was a reason why he normally avoided medication whenever possible. He hoped his hand wasn’t trembling as he set the water glass back down.

Erik didn’t leave. He scrutinized Charles for a long moment and then leaned against the side of the desk, as if he was hoping to scare answers out of Charles by looming over him. He probably could; he was certainly intimidating enough.

Charles wondered if Erik had interrogated people before. Probably. He wondered if Erik had used more persuasive methods than the steady, menacing looming he was employing now. Even more probably.

It was moments like these that reminded Charles how little he really knew about Erik. What was Erik really, besides the ambiguous term of SHIELD consultant? Charles was a SHIELD consultant, and he was fairly certain the services that he provided for SHIELD and the services that Erik provided
were on different planes entirely. Erik was deadly, Charles knew that much. There was danger in the
coil of his muscles, a ruthless grace in the way he moved. He grumbled and griped and carried ducks
and kittens at Charles’ request, but Charles had no doubt that there was a core underneath Erik that
was made of steel that had been tempered in rage and, deep down, probably grief. He’d seen enough
glimpses of Erik’s mind to see that.

Which brought him back to the point that Erik was dangerous and it was dangerous to let him stay
without assessing his motives. What to do, what to do…

“Charles,” Erik said finally, “tell me what’s wrong.”

Charles sighed and covered his eyes with his hand. There was no hiding from Erik. Charles had
already done a terrible enough job pretending nothing was going on as it was. “I would appreciate it
if you would let it go.”

Erik glared at him. “If this is something that could compromise your safety—”

“It isn’t.”

“Even so—”

“Erik, please.” He was abruptly tired. His head was hurting, his friends were putting themselves in
danger, and he was stuck here, helpless to do anything but wait for news. He had never been given
to bouts of anxiety before, but right then, he felt as if he were itching out of his skin.

Calm down, he told himself sternly. If you don’t calm the hell down, Erik is going to pry everything
from you, if he hasn’t already guessed.

He took a breath. “I’m just very tired. Can we talk about it in the morning?”

Erik stared hard at him for another minute. “Whatever this is, it isn’t about the threat on your life, is
it?”

“No, it’s not.”

“Fine,” Erik said dubiously. He stepped back from the desk. “Get some rest. You look like shit.”

That drew a laugh. “I’ll be sure to,” Charles replied.

His grin seemed to put Erik a little more at ease. Charles kept it pasted on until Erik left, closing the
door behind him, and then felt it slip off his face like water off a tarp. Rubbing his hand across his
eyes, he checked the time. 9:36. No news was good news. They were fine.

He resisted the urge to call Moira. She was in contact with the team, no doubt, but he didn’t want to
distract her. So he set his phone down carefully on the corner of the desk and tried to focus on the
latest research numbers from the lab for eliminating some of the side effects of Inhib-4. The words
swam meaninglessly across the pages. Charles sighed and leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes.

He must have dozed for some time because he woke to his phone ringing. Instantly awake, he shot a
look over at the clock. 11:24. He grabbed at his phone and read MOIRA across the display. Shit. She
wouldn’t be calling him now if everything had gone according to plan. On the last mission, she
hadn’t reported to him until he’d come into the office the next morning. His heart was in his throat as
he answered. “Hello?”

“Charles.” She sounded very calm, as always, but there was a frightening edge of tension to her
voice. “Can you talk?”

“Yes, yes. What happened?”

“There was… You haven’t been watching the news?”

Oh shit. He leaped up and flew out of his office into the living room, turning on the TV with fingers shaking with adrenaline. He didn’t even have to change the channel: it appeared that this story was running on every news outlet.

**BREAKING:** X-Men caught in act — exchanged fire with facility guards — 28 humans rescued, 1 injured — 1 X-Man reported injured but fled scene

“Oh my God,” Charles said faintly. “Who?”

“Alex.”

Oh. Fuck.

He sat down hard on the couch. “How did this happen?”

“I’m not sure. I just—it’s been chaos. Hank called me, barely able to speak. They all seem pretty shaken up. I’m going to drive over to the mansion to check on them.”

Charles swallowed. “Good. Please do.” Then he stood up. “I should, too. I should—”

“No, Charles, you can’t. You’ll blow your cover with that SHIELD agent of yours dogging you around—”

“I don’t care. I should have been there.” He was angry with himself suddenly. He should have been there. “I should have—”

“There was nothing you could do,” Moira said sharply. “Listen to me, Charles. You can’t blame yourself for this. Alex is going to be okay. From what I heard from Hank, I don’t think it’s that serious.”

“You don’t think?”

“I don’t know for sure, Charles. But calm down and think about this rationally. This is when it’s most critical for you to lay low. You know this.”

She was right. He had to be logical about this. But it was difficult to think straight when he was furious at himself. He’d sent them on this mission. He had put them in danger, and this time, he hadn’t even had the decency to put himself there with them.

“Charles? Tell me you’re going to stay put and be smart about this. *Promise* me.”

He took a very deep breath and forced himself to sit back down. “I promise.”

“Good. I’ll contact you later, all right? Don’t worry. I’ve got it covered.”

“Just make sure… please, just make sure they’re okay.”

“I will. You know I will.”

She hung up and, after a moment, Charles tossed the phone down onto the couch next to him and
buried his face in his hands. Fuck. He’d sent them out there. They were practically still children and he’d made soldiers of them, shaped them into some vigilante taskforce because of—what? To indulge in his fantasy of saving the world? Being a superhero in the shadows, fighting the injustice of society when no one else seemed willing to do so? Childish dreams. Dreams that could get them killed and had gotten one of his friends hurt tonight. He’d sworn to protect them, and here he was, routinely throwing them out into perilous situations, playing hero. Fuck. *X-Men.* What the fuck had he been thinking?

A gentle hand touched his shoulder, and he flinched violently, his telepathy lashing out and—

Erik. It was Erik. He curbed his mind sharply, hoping Erik hadn’t noticed the swell of power against his shields.

“Charles,” Erik said, his brow furrowed. “What’s wrong?” He looked almost concerned.

Fuck. He was a mess. There was no brushing this off. He took a breath. “How long have you been out here?” He’d been sure Erik had been in his room earlier.

“Since you galloped out and turned on the TV.” He nodded at the screen, which was displaying a reporter on the scene. She was dutifully reporting facts that Charles barely heard. “*X-Men.* Did something happen?”

“N—”

“Charles.” Erik’s hand tightened around his shoulder. “If you keep lying to me, I am going to take you to SHIELD headquarters, and you are going to be under lock and key there *indefinitely.* And that’s *after* I strangle you.”

Somehow, he managed a laugh. There was something under Erik’s irritation—worry? was Erik even capable of worrying?—that made him want to tell Erik everything. Erik was an agent, a man of action. He would know what to do.

But no. It was too dangerous. He didn’t know how Erik would react. They’d had exactly one conversation about the *X-Men* before and Erik had seemed approving of the idea of the group, but it had all been just words. Words were easy. It was thoughts and beliefs that were hard.

He rubbed his hand across his eyes again. “I’m sorry. I just…” He looked up at the TV. The footage showed police trying to break through a door, except that it was frozen to the walls by its hinges and around the cracks. Bobby. Covering their escape?

“…word that police have recovered DNA evidence at the scene that they hope will lead them to uncovering the identity of the injured X-Man. This is the first breakthrough in the *X-Men* case that has been ongoing since July 2010, after the first *X-Men* attack on a warehouse in Maine. I spoke with an officer earlier, and he says the department is confident they’ll be able to move forward now with the sketch obtained from the witnesses at the Irvington attack three days ago and with this DNA evidence.”

A sketch. And DNA evidence. Shit. Alex was in the system. Alex had been in prison once. They had only to run his DNA, and they’d ID him in a heartbeat.

Very softly, Erik said, “Charles?”

He could hear the realization in Erik’s voice. He shook his head. “Erik. Don’t.”

“I’m not a fool, Charles. I can put two and two together.” He felt the cushion beside him dip as Erik
sat down, his touch vanishing from Charles’ shoulder. Without the contact, Charles felt oddly cold and ungrounded. He didn’t think he’d realized until then how much Erik’s trust had meant to him, how much it hurt to feel it slipping away. Erik sounded wary now, guarded not for Charles but against him. “You were nervous three nights ago, and you were nervous all day today, too. And both times, the X-Men attacked. And you looked like you were going to be sick just now when you heard that one of the X-Men was injured. You know the X-Men, don’t you. Personally.”

It was very clearly not a question. Charles wanted to hit himself. He’d been so obvious that a child could have put the clues together. So much for being Professor X, elusive, enigmatic, cunning leader of the mysterious X-Men. At this point, he was seriously doubting his ability to lead a Boy Scout troop.

Erik waited, seemingly content to let Charles process this at his own pace. Kind of him really; Erik was normally an impatient person. Grateful for the time, Charles let the silence lengthen as he fought for calm. He figured there were two ways to go about this. One: he could take the knowledge from Erik’s mind, cut it out and burn it away so that Erik would never know. But he would feel the gaps in his memory, a vague, niggling sense that something was missing. Of course, Charles could always construct new memories to fill in the gaps, but that was tricky work, and sometimes the memories wouldn’t take. Manipulating recollections was a precarious venture, and forcing it could risk extensively damaging a person’s mind. Erasure was a simple matter; covering up that erasure was quite another. The uncertainty of success coupled with the fact that Charles didn’t want to touch Erik’s mind at all without permission meant that that road was closed to him.

Two: he could tell Erik the truth. Not the whole of it, but enough to allay his suspicions. Erik had said before that he wouldn’t turn the X-Men in if he happened to run across them, which Charles took to be good news. As good of news as he could hope to get right now at least.

“I do,” he admitted finally. “I know them.”

He shot a quick glance over to assess Erik’s reaction. Erik looked…not just surprised but shocked. Charles wondered how long he’d suspected, or if he’d just put the puzzle pieces together today, when Charles’ furtiveness (or his attempt at furtiveness) had become too noticeable to overlook. Unable to help himself, he brushed his mind lightly against Erik’s, telepathy spread like a net to catch surface thoughts. Erik’s shields had rippled outwards with the revelation, and Charles gleaned snatches of thought in the spaces between: stupid, didn’t think—should’ve known—always been something strange—but then how—a flash of blue and yellow, as much of the X-Men uniform that had ever been caught on camera before—then an image of Charles as Erik saw him: slender, gentle-faced, smiling, blue eyes bluer than Charles thought they were in real life, red lips, tousled brown hair, accompanied by bursts of associated thoughts: kind and friendly and shame he’s responsible for all the Inhib, could be doing so much more with his life—then those images tossed against one another—can’t be, can’t be—

Charles could feel the moment Erik regained control of his emotions; the barriers of his mind slammed down again, firmly shutting Charles out. Both of them took a simultaneous breath. Then Erik said, very calmly, “Tell me what you know.”

Charles took a breath. “Promise me first.”

“Promise you?”

“That you will keep this a secret. That you won’t tell anyone else anything that I tell you. Even SHIELD.” He paused. “Especially SHIELD.”

Erik gave him a dubious look. Charles could see calculations flying behind his eyes, weighing the
pros and cons of going along with what Charles was asking of him. Eventually, he nodded and said, “I promise.”

Charles didn’t believe him. Best to be safe. “I…” His mind raced on ahead, deciding what was safe to reveal and what had to remain hidden. Sympathies. Play on Erik’s sympathies, make it so he understood. “I’m not ashamed of my work with suppressants. Nor do I regret entering the business.”

Erik’s eyes shuttered. “Keep going.”

“Suppressants are made with good intentions,” Charles told him, a bit wearily. It felt like he’d been making this same argument to a million different people ever since he’d taken over the company. “But that’s a debate for another time. What the X-Men are doing is…it’s more hands-on, do you understand? I help millions of mutants across the country—no, don’t scoff at me, I do—and the X-Men may only help a dozen or so at a time, but what they do has immediate results. And they aren’t only helping those mutants they rescue, they inspire people. They’re…they do good things.”

“So you believe in them. And you—what? Do you help them?”

Charles hesitated a second before nodding. “I do what I can. Um, funding mostly. I donate to lots of mutant charities, but the X-Men—like I said, they’re direct. I can see where the money goes every time.”

Erik was silent for a moment—considering the plausibility and truth of Charles’ words, no doubt. Erik seemed like a natural skeptic, and perceptive at that, which was a bad combination for anyone trying to lie to him. But Charles was…merely omitting some facts. Most of the facts. Almost all of the facts, actually. Hopefully Erik wouldn’t see that.

“What do you know them well?” he asked finally.

Charles released a silent breath. “Um. Well enough.”

“Do you know Professor X?”

“I…do. Yes.”

Erik stood up. His shoulders looked suddenly three times as tense as they had been before, and Charles wondered if he had said anything wrong. He could feel the metal of his watch, his belt buckle, and the pen in his shirt pocket rattling. The TV shuddered on its perch in the display cabinet, and the ceiling fan creaked slightly as it bent downward. “Erik?” Charles said, alarmed. He coiled his telepathy tightly, ready to lash it out like a whip in case Erik turned hostile.

Then everything went still. Erik inhaled slowly and said, staring hard at the wall, “I need to tell you something.”

That didn’t sound good. Charles hoped he didn’t look half as apprehensive as he felt as he said, “All right.”

“When I was thirteen, a man named Sebastian Shaw killed my mother.” Anger and grief roiled just beneath the surface of Erik’s mind, strong enough for Charles to read it without trying. “He was recruiting mutant children for a program. A government program, he said it was, and he’d seen my profile in my school papers. Back then, the MRA was still in effect, everyone had to get registered…”

“I remember,” Charles said softly. His father had fought against registering him. He’d still believed then that he could cure his son, that there would be no need to register Charles as a mutant after he
was done with the medication regimen. It wasn’t until Charles had been nearly twelve that Brian Xavier had finally accepted that there was no removing the X-gene, and by then, the MRA had already been repealed.

Erik took a rough breath. “My mother didn’t like him. She didn’t want me to go. But I was…I’d never met anyone who liked my powers as much as Shaw did. He was so…enthusiastic.” He shook his head angrily. There was a pain radiating off of him in waves, so powerful that Charles wanted to get up and steady him. But Erik didn’t sway on his feet, didn’t look once in Charles’ direction. He stood tall and strong and furious. This was a hurt that had never gone away, and he had learned to endure it, as stolidly as he did everything else. “I went with him. I was stupid. He wasn’t the man I thought he was, and I couldn’t…control my powers. I couldn’t use them for him, when he wanted. So he brought my mother to me and pointed a gun at her head and I couldn’t…”

His inhalation sounded like a strangled sob. Charles did get up this time, drawing close but hesitating to touch Erik when his fury felt like it would strike out at any nearby target, friend or not. He saw a brief flash—*I’m going to count to three, little Erik—please no—one—please—two—alles ist gut, Erik, alles ist gut—PLEASE—three—Eri—NO—*

He swallowed. There were no words to say. *I’m sorry*, he knew, would mean nothing. So he said instead, “Thank you for trusting me with that, Erik. But why are you telling me?”

“So you understand.” Erik turned on his heel, so abruptly that Charles startled back a step. “I need to speak to Professor X.”

“What?”

“I’ve been hunting Shaw for over fifteen years, Charles. I’ve gotten close before, but he has always been one or two steps ahead. After a while, I realized I couldn’t do it alone. I just didn’t have the resources that Shaw had. So when Fury approached me with a deal—work for SHIELD on a freelance basis in return for intel on Shaw—I took it.”

“Okay.” That explained Erik’s affiliation with SHIELD. “And…?”

“And last week, Fury gave me a new mission.”

“A new mission?” Charles frowned in confusion. “I thought you were supposed to be protecting me.”

“In conjunction with that,” Erik said impatiently. “The human government thinks it’s time to move on the X-Men. It’s getting too dangerous to let them operate freely.”

His words stole all the breath from Charles’ lungs. He fought back the automatic panic at the idea of the full brunt of the government bearing down on them. Local police and the occasional FBI inquiry was one thing, but if the government was going to make hunting the X-Men a top priority…there was no way they could continue. There was no way Charles was going to allow them to continue, because they were in too deep already, and if the American government got their hands on any X-Men member, Charles couldn’t imagine what would happen. Interrogation? Imprisonment? Or repurposed for government aims?

No. He refused to let that happen. And Erik…did that make Erik the enemy now?

When he looked up again, Erik was staring at him. Was that something predatory in his gaze? Something dangerous?

He hadn’t realized he’d retreated a handful of steps until Erik said, his expression softening ever-so-
slightly, “Charles, I’m not going to turn on you, or the X-Men.”

“So what are you going to do?” Charles asked warily. “Disobey your orders?”

“No, I’m going to tell you the truth. The truth is, Fury wants Professor X. That’s all. They want him brought in for questioning, to ask for his motives, his intentions. They don’t want to hurt anyone or prosecute anyone. They want to know what Professor X wants, they want to know if the X-Men are going to be a real threat against the human government, if they’ll ever attack federal buildings and not just illegal experimental facilities—”

“They won’t.”

“But still. They want to talk, Charles. That’s all.”

Charles eyed him. “And you believe that?”

Erik let out a long, frustrated breath. “I don’t know. What I do know is that Fury has promised me all the information SHIELD has on Sebastian Shaw in return for Professor X. You know what I just told you. You know how much those files are worth to me. And I am asking you—” Here his voice gentled, and his eyes, when they locked on Charles’, burned with old anger and determination and a deep, fervent need for Charles to understand. “—I am asking you to call your friends in the X-Men. Tell Professor X what I’ve told you. If he’s as powerful as he seems to be, then coming in to speak with a handful of agents shouldn’t be a problem. I’m sure a neutral meet could be arranged. Risk factors eliminated for both parties.” Erik hesitated. Then he added, almost too softly to hear, “Please.”

Charles stared at him. Everything in him felt torn with conflict. He wanted to help Erik. There was a vulnerability, a desperation, in Erik’s face that Charles was sure very few others had ever seen. And to be trusted with that sort of knowledge, to be trusted with this much of Erik’s history and Erik’s quest—Charles wanted to help him. He wanted nothing more than for Erik to find Sebastian Shaw and put to rest the demons of his past, because he could feel the weight Erik had been shouldering for so many years and it hurt to see Erik hurt. But revealing his identity, possibly jeopardizing the mansion and all its residents…how could he? Even for Erik?

“Let me…” He shook his head. “Let me think about it. Please?”

Erik’s anger flared, so sharply and abruptly that Charles winced. “I know what that means. Keep your secrets, Charles,” he snapped. “I’ll find Professor X, with or without you.”

Before Charles could stop him, Erik stalked off down the hall to his room. The door slammed shut so forcefully that Charles felt the entire house rattle.

Fuck. Slowly, he sank back down on the couch and buried his face in his hands. The soft murmurs of the TV bled into the silence, and Erik’s mind, normally so muted, was an overheated bomb now, deadly in its potential, frightening in its instability.

He couldn’t swallow the feeling that he’d ruined everything.
Chapter 4

Erik stared at his phone, his finger hovering over the green ‘call’ button on the screen. Above the button was the string of numbers Erik had had memorized for years, and above that was Fury’s name. One push of his finger, and he’d be on Fury’s direct line, and he could tell Fury everything: Charles’ involvement with the X-Men, Charles’ acquaintanceship with Professor X, Charles’ reluctance to cooperate. And Fury would…would…

What? Congratulate him? Call it mission accomplished and hand over Shaw’s whereabouts?

No, he wouldn’t give Erik Shaw’s files. The deal had been the files for Professor X, and Erik only had Charles and the hint of Professor X. It would be wiser to wait until Professor X was firmly in hand before contacting Fury. Until then, he’d have to pry answers from Charles, by force if necessary. He would not hesitate to use force, even against Charles—especially against Charles.

Charles. Erik couldn’t banish the spike of rage at the memory of what had happened last night. He had—fuck—he had told Charles about himself. Barring Fury, who had thoroughly vetted him for his work with SHIELD, he had never told anyone else what had happened with his mother, or about Sebastian Shaw. And Charles had refused to help. He’d said he’d think about it, but Erik knew what that meant. He had been told those same words too many times in his life already to believe that any goodwill lay behind them.

Even now he couldn’t understand what had possessed him last night to reveal secrets of his past that he had never meant to tell anyone, let alone a man he had known for less than three weeks. There was just something…trustworthy about Charles. Which was strange, because Erik was naturally suspicious and never found anyone trustworthy. He would never in his right mind spill so much of himself out for scrutiny, and that fact—which he knew firmly to be true—raised a possibility that could be terrifying: Charles’ telepathy.

He wanted to say it was impossible. He’d been training his mind ever since he’d learned that Shaw had taken to keeping a telepath by his side at all times. After that first and only confrontation where Frost had incapacitated him with a single thought and thrown him into the Atlantic, Erik had sought more diligently than ever to protect his mind. He’d found a low-level telepath in Miami who had agreed to teach him a few shielding techniques in return for some petty cash. When he’d joined up with SHIELD, he’d broken into some of the records, pulled whatever SHIELD had on telepathic resistance, and pored over those files in preparation for the day he’d fight Frost again. He’d run across a couple of telepaths since then, both of whom had told him that his defenses were excellent. If they hadn’t been lying, which he was fairly certain of it, given that people tended to tell the truth when they had knives to their throats, then he was sure his mental defenses were enough to fend off at least low-level telepaths. And Charles Xavier was, from all his legal documentation, a low-level telepath.

But if Charles had hidden his affiliation with the X-Men from the world all this time, what else was he hiding? Could it be possible that he was stronger than anyone had anticipated? Could he be manipulating Erik even now, having lulled him into thinking he was safe here and then slipping through his defenses?

The thought chilled him. How stupid had he been, accepting this mission and assuming SHIELD’s data on Charles was correct? Letting down his guard just because Charles was reportedly a weak mutant? He knew records could be faked. He’d faked his own for the years he’d been on his own, everything from passports to X-gene documentation that had understated his powers considerably. And here he was, sharing a house with a man who might be in his mind even now, capable of
controlling his every movement.

Shaken and furious, Erik stood up from his bed and strode to the door. The hum of Charles’
computer in his home office down the hall had been present since early this morning. It was now
three o’clock, and Erik hadn’t heard or felt Charles leave his office even once, not for the bathroom
or for food. He wasn’t sure if Charles had even gone to bed last night, as he’d been too angry to even
bother to notice. He opened the door of his room now and felt the metal of Charles’ watch, which
had been sweeping back and forth, probably as Charles wrote, come to a stop. Had he heard the
door? Or had he been riding in Erik’s mind all this time and read Erik’s intentions?

He didn’t bother knocking, just threw open the door of Charles’ office and walked stiffly in. Charles,
who had been sitting behind his desk, stood up. Erik glared hard at him before a flicker of movement
on the desk caught his eye—Patches, who was lolling in an overturned cardboard box lid that
Charles had set next to his computer. He was wearing a collar now, the magenta one that Erik had
selected. Somehow that only made him angrier.

“I shouldn’t have told you what I did last night,” Erik bit out.

“I’m glad you thought well enough of me to share that,” Charles said gently. “And I am thinking
about it. I want to help you, I swear—”

“I mean, I shouldn’t have told you. I wouldn’t have. It made no sense for me to tell you, but I still
did. So tell me the truth now.” Erik came to a stop just in front of Charles’ desk, almost close enough
to reach across and wrap his hands around Charles’ neck. Part of him wanted to. “Are you in my
mind?”

Charles gaped at him. “What—”

“Are you reading my mind?” Erik snapped. “Are you—are you manipulating me?”

“Erik.” Charles’ eyes were wide with shock. “What on earth brought this on?”

“You pulled that story about my mother from me,” Erik snarled. “I would never have told you that
otherwise. I never tell anyone. And you’re always—always in my head, all the time.” The pieces
were starting to come together. This explained it, didn’t it? All those Incidents he’d been cataloguing,
the way Charles’ eyes lingered in his mind long after Charles had disappeared, the way he couldn’t
keep his attention away from Charles for more than a second because the man was mesmerizing even
when he was doing something utterly mundane like making tea or reading progress notes or making
PowerPoint presentations for his Board. Nothing else made sense.

“Erik…”

“You did this to me,” he accused.

“Did what?” Charles sounded baffled, as if he really didn’t know how difficult it was for Erik to
stand here now, furious and scared and still absurdly aware of how blue Charles’ eyes appeared in
the bright light of the office, or how stupidly alluring his lips were half-open like that, or how
infuriatingly attractive he was when he was serious, brows drawn, eyes narrowed.

Oh fuck. The realization was like a bolt of lightning straight down his spine.

“Made me like you,” he said as steadily as he could manage, trying to keep a grip on his anger.

Charles stared at him. “You’ve already made it very clear that this is a job to you, and that you hate
me for what I do—”
“And I do.” Erik rounded the desk in three rapid strides, and Charles backed up until his back hit the wall, his lips pressed into a thin, confused line. “I hate you and your suppressants and how fucking naïve you are,” Erik breathed, “and I can’t fucking stop thinking about kissing you.”

“Wha—”

Erik kissed him, rough and fast. It was just a hasty, closed-mouthed slide of lips, but he felt something electric jolt all up through the contact, shocked and incredulous and terrified, and something pressed up hot and heavy against his mind, with enough coiled power to break his shields without any effort at all, he knew instinctively, he could feel the immense strength there, and it was Charles. Charles Xavier, CEO of Xavier Pharm and a weak telepath and a fucking liar.

He shoved Charles away, hard enough that Charles hit the wall behind him with an audible crack. “I felt you. In my mind—those were your emotions—I could feel you.”

Charles’ eyes were wide and desperate as they met Erik’s. “Please, Erik, I didn’t mean…I lose control sometimes, when I’m surprised or…or nervous. I’m sorry. But I haven’t been reading your mind, now or anytime in these last two and a half weeks. I haven’t made you do anything.”

“I felt you just now,” Erik spat, hands clenched into tight fists. The room’s metal bent toward him, ready to defend in case Charles attacked. But Charles didn’t look aggressive or even angry, just confused and worried. It was the act, Erik told himself vehemently. It was all part of his act. “I’ve fought telepaths before. You’re not a weak telepath, are you?”

“Erik, I—”

“Don’t lie to me!” He whipped the silver letter opener off the desk and stopped it a hair’s breadth from Charles’ throat. “Don’t lie to me,” he said again, more quietly this time but no less dangerously.

Charles swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing out to touch the cold metal. Both of them shivered. The way Charles’ power had borne down on his mind in that moment their lips had touched…Frost’s telepathy had felt very similar, powerful and overwhelming. If anything, Charles’ power had felt even heavier, a great, potent beast that could shatter Erik’s mental shields like a bear could splinter matchsticks. Just how strong was Charles?

“You’re right,” Charles said at last, barely breathing. “I’m not a weak telepath.”

Erik took a breath. “You lied to me.” To his surprise, the betrayal actually hurt.

“In my defense, I lied to everyone. It was my father’s idea, when I was a child. This was back when public mutant tolerance was even worse than it was now, and my father hated the idea of…of letting his son suffer from mutant discrimination. Stronger mutants are always more heavily scrutinized, as I’m sure you know, so my father tried to downplay my powers. He was a scientist, so he knew enough to fake records. And when I grew older, I found that it was…easier when people thought my telepathy was weak. They weren’t as afraid. So when I turned legally adult, I kept up the charade.” He started to shake his head, then stopped when the motion touched the letter opener to his throat. “Look, it’s hard enough to be a mutant in this society. Being a telepath brings along a whole slew of other problems. It’s difficult for non-psionics to imagine.”

“Hiding.” Erik couldn’t suppress his sneer. “No wonder you continued with your father’s company. Suppressants make it easy for you to hide, don’t they? Easy for you to pretend you’re not a mutant at all, pretend you’re a human just like the rest of them—”

Charles inhaled sharply, his eyes narrowing. “That’s not the purpose of suppressants at all.”
“But you’d see it that way, wouldn’t you? Make it easier for you to keep up with your charade. Avoid the whole slew of problems every other mutant has to go through all their lives because they refuse to hide, refuse to be anything less than they are—”

“Erik—”

“—while you’re sitting comfortably in your office on your billions, trying to fit yourself into human society by hiding the best parts of you. You’re a coward.”

Charles’ entire body froze. A spasm of emotions passed behind his eyes, too quickly for Erik to catch, and then anger—real, striking anger—filled his expression, cold and rigid. “Please leave.”

Erik’s own fury faltered. “What?”

Charles glowered at him. “I said, leave.”

“Charles—”

Erik, get OUT.

Erik staggered back, shocked at Charles’ voice echoing in his head, shocked at how easily Charles had slipped past his defenses, shocked at the rage that contorted Charles’ normally-pleasant face. His fingers twitched, all the metal in the room humming at his command, but Charles snarled, GO, and Erik felt the command like a punch to his gut, driving all the breath from his lungs. And he knew in that instant that Charles could crush him if he wanted, as easily as he could an ant beneath his boot. Frost had felt like a thunderstorm in his head, flashing lightning and jagged rain; Charles was a cold, howling hurricane.

There was a point in every battle where surrender had to be considered. Erik normally chose to ignore all such points and forge on ahead, because defeat or failure was never an option he cared to consider. But he wasn’t stupid enough to blindly ignore impossible situations, and right there, facing off against Charles, was an impossible situation. So he flicked his fingers, driving the letter opener across the room to embed itself, end quivering, into the wall beside the bookcase. Then he turned on his heel and stalked out.

Charles rarely lost his temper. He had been more lax about that when he’d been a child, less capable of controlling his emotions, more apt to let everything he was feeling flow free. But once he’d realized how negatively he could affect people by projecting his anger, he’d made more of an effort to maintain a calm, levelheaded demeanor at all times. He knew better than anyone how dangerous telepathy could be, and how dangerous an enraged telepath could be, so he’d taught himself to brush off little annoyances and mutantphobic slurs and discriminatory practices and every little thing that could set him off. He boxed away the anger and put it quietly in the back of his mind.

But this—this he couldn’t box away, this he couldn’t contain. Fury thrummed like electricity along his skin, and his mind, always the most ordered and neatest thing in his life, felt as if someone had
burst in and tossed the place, ripping his thoughts off their tracks and setting fire to everything.

He couldn’t stay here. He was brimming over with restless anger, and if he saw Erik then, he thought he might actually lash out at him. So he yanked open the door to his office, pausing only to make sure it stayed propped open to allow Patches in an out as he pleased, and strode down the hall. He could feel Erik in his room, his mind churning with a tangle of emotions Charles was in no mood to puzzle out. He slid on his shoes and opened the door.

“Where are you going?”

He looked back to find Erik standing in the doorway of his room, his eyes narrowed.

“Out.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“I’d rather be alone right now.”

Erik frowned. “I should still…It’s still my job to protect you.”

“Don’t worry,” Charles said acerbically. “Even cowards can protect themselves if it comes down to it.”

“Charles—”

He slammed the door hard enough that the frame shuddered and headed off down the street. The thrum of the city’s mental energy around him, blending into the audible ambience much like the ebb and flow of traffic, was ordinarily calming and almost peaceful. But right then, it was grating. A thousand stray thoughts prickled uncomfortably against his mind, like spider legs running across skin. He shut off his telepathy with an irritable snap, barely able to tolerate his own mind right then, let alone others’. The voices faded into muted, indiscernible whispers, then into silence. He was alone in his head.

He didn’t often cut himself off from the world entirely. The silence, when it stretched on for too long, became unbearable. But in brief intervals, the silence was a blessing. It gave him time to sort through his own thoughts without the possibility of outside influence, without the distraction of other minds. Clarity. Charles couldn’t be more grateful for anything else, at that moment.

He could still feel Erik’s lips on his, quick and passionate. Erik had kissed him out of anger, that much had been abundantly clear, but Charles had felt warmth behind it, in the split second before Erik had pulled away. The anger he could have handled. Had handled. But there had been the barest hint of something that had tasted, just for an instant, like tender regard. His stomach knotted with confusion and irritation and a terrible, terrible hope.

He’d been Professor X for years now. He had a responsibility to both his team and to his company as CEO, and as busy as that kept him, he hadn’t had any time for romantic relationships of any sort, or even for any flings. Honestly, he hadn’t even been thinking much about himself lately, too worried with what was happening at the mansion and how to put his powers to good use in cover operations and how to be a positive role model for these kids that he had unofficially adopted, much like he had taken Raven in that one night twelve years ago. It had been almost a surprise to find that he was attracted to Erik; it had seemed like forever since he’d last even thought about getting together with anyone. Over the last few weeks, he’d entertained the idea of Erik returning his interest, of course, but the idea had been a fantasy, nothing more. Erik was utterly professional and probably out of his league and spent 99% of his time annoyed at Charles for one thing or another, and yet…there had
been something soft in that kiss. Something real.

Dammit. He didn’t want to get his hopes up, and he certainly didn’t want to feel anywhere near fond of Erik after what had just happened. *Coward.* He bristled at the memory of Erik’s snarl, Erik’s contempt. The indignity of it burned. Erik didn’t understand. Erik saw only one half of the problem, one half of the problematic but helpful solution of suppressant use. The positive aspects of suppressants never seemed to exist for anti-Inhib proponents, and it infuriated Charles to no end. If only they were willing to *listen* for one fucking minute, they’d be able to see as Charles did, that suppressants were far from perfect but were the best option at the moment for thousands of mutants who otherwise might not be able to enjoy the freedoms and equality as others. Charles had seen both sides. Erik, like so many others, just wouldn’t.

The red light at the end of the block brought him to a stop. Taking a deep breath of the crisp air calmed the churning of his gut slightly. It was getting cooler, sliding from late summer into mid-autumn. He half-wished he’d brought a light jacket.

Maybe, he thought reluctantly, it was time for Erik to leave. He already knew too much, knew enough to bring Charles and the X-Men down with him. And Charles couldn’t be sure anymore how Erik felt about him. Charles had taken up space in all of three weeks of Erik’s life. This hunt for Sebastian Shaw had taken up years. In the overall scheme of things, Charles was an insignificant speck in a sea of stars. Surely Erik would not hesitate to turn him in in return for those files on Shaw. And once Fury figured out who Charles really was…

He swallowed, a solid, cold lump settling at the bottom of his stomach. How could he have been so stupid? He’d trusted Erik so quickly, so easily. He’d known from the beginning that he thought more of their acquaintanceship than Erik ever had, and now Erik could cut their ties and disappear, bringing Charles’ existence down with him, and the only one at fault would be Charles, Charles and his thickskulled, idiotic, thrice-damned *naivety.*

He had to warn Raven.

A quick search of his pockets yielded nothing. He’d left his phone on his desk in his office, right next to Patches’ box. And Erik could already be halfway to SHIELD headquarters, or he could have already called Fury and a SHIELD team could be mobilizing this very second.

Panic gripped him. He spun on his heel and tore off back down the street, opening his mind as he did. The sudden, renewed flood of thought dizzied him for a moment, and he stumbled before righting himself, forging through the stream and pushing apart irrelevant murmurs. His telepathy curled outwards, further, racing on ahead far faster than his feet could carry him and—

There. Erik was still in the house. Relief powered his sprint, and he was up the stairs to the house and through the door in the next couple of minutes, nearly slamming face-first into Erik, who was standing tensely in the hall staring hard at the door.

Charles skidded to a stop, the hallway rug underneath him sliding with his momentum. Flailing, he threw his arms out to catch a hold on the wall, but he caught a hold of Erik instead, who had stepped forward instantly to grab him under his arms. Charles’ shoes twisted up in the rug, and he toppled awkwardly forward, his weight causing Erik’s feet to slide out from underneath him, too. The world lurching in a blur of motion around him, Charles felt his head crack hard against the floor, and then everything went hazy for several interminable seconds, pain exploding like starbursts on the side of his skull.

When he was completely certain the world had stopped spinning, he blinked to clear the starbursts from his vision and sat up gingerly.
“Charles?”

Another blink. Erik came into focus, crouching by Charles’ side with an expression that couldn’t be anything but worry.

“Ow,” Charles told him succinctly.

“You’re bleeding.” Erik said. “Wait here.” He hopped up and disappeared into the kitchen, reappearing a couple of minutes later with several napkins and a handful of ice cubes wrapped in a kitchen towel. Charles reached for the napkins, but Erik ignored him, dabbing at the side of Charles’ head himself. Pain shot jaggedly through the wound at the contact, and Charles bit his lip hard enough for the skin to go white.

“How bad is it?” he asked, wincing.

“You’ve got a cut above your ear,” Erik answered. “It doesn’t look too deep or wide. The bleeding’s just—”

“Ow.”

“Sorry.” Erik slowed his hand, more gentle than Charles had thought he could be. “We’ll have to stop the bleeding and then put some gauze over it. It doesn’t look like you’ll need stitches.”

Charles exhaled audibly. “That’s a relief.”

Erik continued his ministrations for another silent minute before asking, “Does it hurt a lot? We should get you painkillers.”

“No, no, I’m fine. I can…” Charles waved a vague hand at his head. “I’m good with pain.”

“Still—”

“Really, Erik.” Taking a breath, he focused on the throbbing of his head, shutting the pain into a box and locking it securely away. He didn’t want to banish the sensation entirely—leaving the body deadened to pain was a dangerous business, what with the possibility of injuring himself and not noticing it—but he banked it to a low buzz in the back of his mind that was nothing more than an itching irritation. “I’m fine.”

Erik gave him an unconvinced look but didn’t press. He finished wiping the blood from Charles’ ear and face and went to the bathroom to fetch the first aid kit in the medicine cabinet. While he was gone, Charles stood up, steadied himself against the wall, and walked a bit unsteadily to the couch, where he sat down hard, hoped he wasn’t staining any cushions, and closed his eyes.

Seconds later, Erik shook his shoulder hard, jolting him into snapping his eyes open again. “Don’t fall asleep,” he ordered. “We should get you to a hospital. They should check you out for head injury, internal bleeding—”

“I’m fine. Can you just…”

“All right.”

Erik sat down beside him and tilted Charles’ head away slightly before popping open the first aid kit. Out of the corner of his eye, Charles watched Erik sort through the kit’s contents quickly and efficiently, pulling out the antiseptic wipes, gauze, and skin tape and setting the rest aside. “You’ve done this before.”
“I’ve had some experience,” Erik replied, dabbing a wipe along the cut. Charles hissed out through his teeth at the sting but held as still as he could. Then Erik reached for the gauze and tape, and it was only when he tried to fix the gauze in place one-handed that Charles realized Erik was holding his right hand unnaturally still.

“Are you hurt?” Charles asked, reaching for Erik’s hand.

Erik jerked back with an impatient noise. “I’m fine. Hold still.”

Charles acquiesced, but only until Erik got the bandage fixed firmly in place. Then he shook off Erik’s touch and reached out to grab Erik’s right wrist before he could pull away again, loosening his grip but not releasing him entirely when Erik’s mouth pinched in pain.

“I’m fine,” Erik said gruffly.

“Don’t be silly. Come here and let me look at it.”

“I’m fine.”

“This doesn’t look fine. Your wrist is swelling up. Did you hit it on something when we fell?”

Erik looked away, his brows furrowing and his lips pressed stubbornly together.

Charles leveled his best stern look at him, the one he used when someone broke something in the mansion but wouldn’t cop to it. “Erik…”

“It got twisted up under you,” Erik muttered quickly. “But it’s fine—”

His words cut off in a sharp hiss when Charles’ fingers pressed into the skin along his pulse point. Charles reached over him for the first aid kit and pulled out the ACE bandages inside. “My turn to patch you up,” he said wryly.

Erik watched him unwrap a length from the main roll. “Do you even know how to do this?”

“Oh please. I’ve played football nearly all my life, and I was on the wrestling team of my university. I’m not a medical professional, but I can wrap a wrist adequately.” Not the mention the times he’d had to tend to the children back at the mansion. He hadn’t remembered the shenanigans that teenage boys could get up to until he’d had six of them living under his roof, plus Raven, who egged them on horribly. He’d bandaged up more than one scraped knee in the last five years, and Hank, who was always so meticulous in his research of the best methods of doing anything, whether it was how to treat bruising or how to jump off heights without a parachute and without dying (Charles had seen that on the search history of the office computer and very pointedly not asked, though he probably should have, given that he didn’t particularly want anyone actually dying on his property), had given him a few tips here and there.

He wrapped Erik’s wrist carefully now, winding the bandage around his thumb to fix it in place, making sure to keep it tight enough to be effective. Erik watched him without so much as a flinch, his face stoically blank as Charles worked around him. He snipped the bandage off from the rest of the roll once he was finished and tucked the loose end along the fold under Erik’s palm.

“There,” he said, turning Erik’s hand over to examine his work. “Looks good.”

Erik looked it over, running the fingers of his opposite hand over the bandage. Once he nodded in approval, Charles tossed the roll of bandages back into the first aid kit and snapped it shut. He set it aside on the coffee table and then turned to face Erik again, taking a deep breath. “I came back
because we need to talk. Clear some things up.”

Erik stiffened immediately. Charles thought he felt the metal of his watch vibrate against his skin, but he wasn’t sure if he was just imagining it. The mental shields around Erik’s mind screamed for Charles to stay out, and Charles didn’t bother touching them; they needed to talk, and if Erik stormed out because he thought Charles was meddling with his mind again, it would likely end with both of them furious and silent, which wouldn’t solve a thing. So he kept his telepathy tightly wound around himself and clasped his hands between his knees.

“You haven’t…you haven’t told anyone anything yet, have you?”

Erik’s face hardened. “Have I told anyone you lied to me and you’ve been helping hide the X-Men? No, I haven’t.”

There was one relief. “With my telepathy…” Charles began hesitantly. “Ask me what you want to know, and I’ll do my best to answer you.”

Erik eyed him suspiciously. “Really?”

“Really. I have nothing to hide, Erik. Not…not about this anyway.”

“All right.” Erik seemed to think for a moment. Then he said, “On the Tolliver-Kenton scale. How strong are you really?”

“I’ve only been properly measured when I was a child,” Charles told him. “With my father. When I was eighteen, I didn’t really take the test to get legally registered. I…persuaded the evaluator that he had already tested me and to mark my powers down as weak to negligible.”

He could feel Erik withdraw from him, even though he didn’t move physically. “You mean, you altered his mind. Forced him.”

Charles sighed. “Erik, please. It’s not something I did lightly. I’ve set rules for myself. I don’t read minds without permission, for one, and I never use my telepathy to influence people into doing what I want them to. That evaluator was the last time I ever did it to anyone, and believe me, I agonized long and hard over my decision. I know the worth of a mind, Erik. I would never interfere with one if I could help it.”

“And mine?” Erik demanded. “Could you not help it then? You just had to—to—”

“I haven’t touched your mind,” Charles interrupted in exasperation. “I saw your shields on that first day, and I assumed you didn’t want me to pry, so I respected that. I never read your mind or forced you to do anything. You told me that story about your mother because you wanted to.”

Erik shot to his feet, like a coiled spring releasing. “And the—the kiss?” he snapped. “I would never have—You made me…”

Charles stood, too, wavering rapidly between offense and disappointment. “I didn’t make you do that, Erik. I don’t know why you did it, since you…clearly don’t have feelings for me in the slightest, regardless of the feelings I have for you, but I—”

Erik stopped him with a sharp cut of his good hand. His eyes were narrowed and confused when they landed on Charles’. “Feelings you have for me?” What?”

All right. So they were going to talk about something Charles had avoided scrutinizing too closely himself. He could improvise.
“I like you, Erik. I like you very much. If you weren’t here only because you were ordered to be and only because you’re—you’re trying to find this man you’ve been hunting, I might have liked to take you out on a date or two, or even three, if the first couple went well enough, fingers crossed and all. I—I would have liked that. A lot.”

Well, he’d handled that with about much finesse as an awkward teenage boy asking his first crush out to a movie. Charles huffed, flustered. He hadn’t even used any excellent one-liners from his repertoire yet, created and refined through his university years. A bad sign.

“Can I try that again?” he asked, a bit lamely.

Erik was staring at him, looking utterly perplexed. “What?”

Charles inhaled deeply and fought to organize his thoughts. “Look. Your feelings about this assignment notwithstanding, I consider you a friend. You’ve been very diligent about guarding my life, which, considering your opinions on my livelihood, is laudable. Thank you for that. And you’ve gone above and beyond the call of duty, since I’m quite certain indulging in my every whim isn’t part of your mission imperatives. I admire you very much for that. Your dedication. And you’ve been very patient with me regarding—well, regarding Patches, for one, and you’re good with him, for all you pretend you hate small animals. He can—he can climb all the couches in the house now, which I suppose I shouldn’t be condoning, but it’s a testament to your…mothering cat instincts, I suppose. Of course, your overall demeanor regarding living things could use some improvement, but no one’s perfect and you’re…um.” He coughed. “I don’t think that answered much of anything.”

“No,” Erik said, that puzzled crinkle between his eyes persisting, “it didn’t.”

Charles sighed. “Yes,” he said, simply, “I like you. I have feelings for you, and, given time, they might have even become serious feelings. But I think that ship has sailed, because you’re very obviously opposed to having feelings for me, given the fact that you keep insisting that I’ve done something to make you feel…however it is you’re feeling. That’s offensive, in case you haven’t figured that out yet. I like to think people are capable of liking me of their own free will, not because I made them.”

Fuck. His throat was tightening, as much in anger as in hurt. Even having strangers shy away from him when they learned of his telepathy was bad enough; coming from friends, the wariness and accusations were tiresome and exhausting.

He swallowed slowly, focusing on the part of him that was bristling at the insult. “Look, Erik. I didn’t force you to do anything. You can leave right now if you want and I won’t stop you. But I want you to promise me that you won’t tell anyone about me and the X-Men. I know you don’t owe me anything, but the X-Men isn’t my secret to give away.”

Erik scrutinized him for a long minute, his blue-gray eyes unreadable as they searched Charles’ face. Charles met his eyes without flinching.

“All right,” Erik said finally, reluctance curling around his words. At the very least, he wasn’t glaring suspiciously at Charles anymore. “I’ll…think about it.”

Charles supposed he couldn’t have hoped for anything better. “Fair enough.”

Part of him had hoped Erik would say no, no, of course he trusted Charles, of course Charles wouldn’t need his telepathy to entice anyone, he was enough as he was and Erik had been stupid to accuse him of meddling with his telepathy when he knew Charles would do no such thing.
But then again, Charles had always been the type to hope for all sorts of impossible things.

He sighed. “I’m not feeling too well, so I’m going to lie down. Just…if you leave, can you tell me first? I’d like to have some advance notice if I’m going to have to go on the lam.”

He waited to give time for Erik to assure him that he wouldn’t have to go on the run, that he’d be safe. But Erik only looked at him and said nothing, so Charles tried to bury his disappointment and fear. He could feel Erik’s eyes on him as he crossed the room and walked as steadily as he could down the hallway to his room, where he shut the door and then leaned against it, wondering what on earth had possessed him to say all that, to give Erik an out even when he knew Erik could destroy everything he had spent the last three years trying to build.

He was a fool. A stupid, utter fool, and he was going to regret liking Erik so much, he just knew it. It was going to break him.

Erik was sorry.

He was not sorry for being wary. That natural vigilance had saved his life more than once, and given the chance, he would have done the same thing the second time around. Charles was, for all intents and purposes, an unknown variable, and until Erik figured out for sure where Charles stood, he wouldn’t apologize for being cautious.

He was sorry, however, for hurting Charles. He normally cared nothing for how others thought of him, or how his actions affected others, except when those effects might come with negative consequences. But the thought that Charles might think less of him now after what had happened…stung. That damned guilt was back, rearing its head and forcing Erik to reevaluate their conversation, his accusations. He had been in the right. He knew he’d been. He couldn’t have known that Charles had boundaries about his telepathy, and even now, he couldn’t know that Charles actually adhered to those rules.

And he wasn’t the only one with trust issues. Charles had lied to him before. Granted, he’d been prudent in hiding his affiliation with the X-Men, given the fact that he couldn’t have trusted that Erik wouldn’t turn him in to SHIELD immediately. And granted, feigning weakness to lull your enemies into underestimating you was a sound tactic, which was likely Charles’ reason for understating his telepathy. And…granted, Erik supposed that, had he been in Charles’ position, he wasn’t certain he’d have done anything differently…

Fuck. He’d fucked up, hadn’t he? The only point of contention now was whether or not Charles had been manipulating him this entire time, but if he had, would Erik be feeling this doubt? Would Erik be capable of questioning the integrity of his own actions, or would he carry on obliviously, sure that he was acting of his own free will and no one else’s?

It came down to Charles’ telepathy and its true strength, and whether he was skillful enough to alter Erik’s mind without leaving any traces, without Erik sensing that anything was wrong. Charles was powerful, there was no mistaking that; Erik had felt the swell of his telepathy, suffused with cold
rage, and he knew Charles was stronger than Frost, stronger than any other telepath Erik had met before. Omega-level? Quite possibly. There was really no telling whether or not Charles had been inside his mind.

Erik considered the situation carefully.

Points of uncertainty:

1. Charles’ telepathy and the extent to which Erik could trust him not to use it on him.
2. Charles’ association with the X-Men and what that meant for his association with SHIELD. Did that make him a spy? A double agent of a sort? And did Erik, as a SHIELD consultant, have an obligation to report these details to Fury immediately, or could he let them sit and see what came of them?
3. Charles’ continued defense of suppressants, arguments that were confident and exasperated and made Erik wonder if he were missing something.
5. Erik’s supposed feelings for Charles, which Erik suspected might be related to Uncertainty Point No. 1, but which Charles had vehemently (and convincingly) denied.
6. Feelings.

Points of certainty:

1. That kiss had lodged in Erik’s mind, so much so that he thought he could taste Charles’ lips even now, even though their mouths had met for only a handful of seconds.
2. Charles was not who he said he was.
3. That look of hurt in Charles’ eyes couldn’t have been anything but genuine, and Erik felt uncomfortably guilty over it. Guilt implied some sort of fault, didn’t it? But he was sure he’d been in the right. About 85% sure, and that number was rapidly dropping the more he thought about it. He tried to stop thinking about it.
4. As confused as he was about this entire situation, Erik wanted to a repeat experience of Certainty Point No. 1, as soon as mutantly possible.

He wanted to trust Charles. It went against everything he had ever learned about keeping a safe distance from everyone else to minimize the possibility of injury of any sort, but Charles, for all his mystery and uncertainty, was…real. He was real. And Erik wanted to trust him because even with all his secrets and lies, he was the most genuine person Erik had ever known, and how fucked up was that? Clearly, Erik hadn’t known enough people.

The next morning was silent and awkward. Charles showered quickly and disappeared back into his room as Erik made himself some coffee and, after a moment of hesitation, made Charles tea. Then he got dressed for the morning, waited patiently as Charles finished preparing for work, and pretended he wasn’t carefully watching the thermos of tea on the counter so he could catch Charles’ reaction. Charles passed it, sniffed the air, backtracked, and picked up the thermos, a little furrow of surprise appearing between his brows.

“Is this for me?” he asked, looking straight at Erik for the first time all morning.

Erik shrugged and yanked open the front door. “I don’t drink tea.”

He waited as Charles put Patches into the makeshift carrier he’d fashioned from an old laundry basket, and then they collected the rest of their things and stepped out into the brisk air.

The day in the office passed even more slowly than usual. Charles sat hunched behind his desk all day, his face mostly hidden by the monitor of his computer. The only sounds that came from him
were the scratches of his pen and the occasional thoughtful hum as he considered the paperwork set before him. Erik settled in his customary chair in the corner and kept an eye on Patches, who wandered around the office twice before finally settling down to chew on the corner of some files stacked on the floor.

Their conversation, when they did speak, were short and stilted. Charles didn’t seem to know if he should still treat Erik with the same boundless friendliness as he had for the previous three weeks. Erik turned over the Points of Uncertainty versus the Points of Certainty in his mind over and over again, trying to find a tipping point, trying to figure out whether or not the uncertainty of the situation made it too dangerous to go on and whether or not it was time to cut his losses and get out.

But he didn’t want to get out. Not yet at least.

He kept putting his hand restlessly into his pocket in search for his coin for a distraction, but he’d forgotten it on the dresser this morning. Frustrated, he tapped his good hand against his thigh until finally Charles said, “Here,” and he looked up to see Charles tossing him his silver DNA helix paperweight.

Catching it with his powers a second before it hit him in the face, Erik glanced it over disinterestedly and raised an eyebrow. “What’s this?”

“Something for you to mess with before you start breaking things,” Charles remarked. Smiling slightly, he added, “I see you fidgeting over there.”

Erik gave him a flat look, but Charles, who had already bent his head over his papers again, missed it. After testing the weight and make of the paperweight in his palm, Erik spun it up into the air and took it apart into twin streams of flowing metal. He was in the middle of weaving both strands through his fingers when the door burst open, and MacTaggert appeared in the doorway, her eyes wide.

“Charles,” she said, breathless, “you need to see this.”

Erik had never seen MacTaggert discomposed like this before. He stood up immediately, reshaping the DNA helix and slipping it into his pocket with a flick of his fingers. Charles shot to his feet, freezing there for a moment, his eyes going distant. Then his face drained of blood, and he demanded, “Just now?”

Erik stared at him. “What?”

“Just now,” MacTaggert confirmed. “Hurry.”

They rushed after her out the door straight to the break room, where a crowd was already gathered. MacTaggert shoved through the throng, much stronger than her slender stature suggested, and Erik spared a second to remind himself that this was why he would not cross her unless absolutely necessary. He still wasn’t entirely convinced she was a secretary, clean background checks notwithstanding. If he was going to stay on this mission for much longer (and he couldn’t imagine leaving, not yet when there was still something to learn from Charles), he’d need to keep a closer eye on her. Everyone had secrets, and MacTaggert probably had too many.

The reason for the crush in the break room was quickly clear: this room was the only one of the floor with a television and the only one large enough to accommodate two dozen curious onlookers. Erik used the metal of the crowd to push it outward around them, giving them enough space to slip through to the front.
The TV was tuned to a news channel, and Charles froze beside him, pale as a sheet.

A fire raged on-screen in the ruins of a building. Fire trucks ringed the area, and the shouts of firefighters were audible as they fought the blaze, just beyond a crowd of rubbernecks gathered behind the police perimeter with their phone cameras running. The text across the tickertape read: BREAKING: X-MEN ATTACK — 14 DEAD — 2 WOUNDED — POLICE INVESTIGATION LAUNCHED.

The scene cut over to a tall young reporter in a suit jacket that looked too big for his skinny frame. He tapped his microphone experimentally before clearing his throat and announcing, “We’re on-site where the X-Men attacked just half an hour ago. It appears that the X-Men planted bombs in the southeast and northwest corners of the building, collapsing the majority of the structure and killing fourteen of the twenty-two people within. We have fourteen confirmed dead, and two victims have been transported to a hospital. Their conditions are unknown. There are six people still unaccounted for. The building, we’re told, was a processing facility for the Marchal Company, where they were preparing and packaging suppressants to be shipped out to consumers.

“Shortly after the attack at 3:25 PM this afternoon, we’re told that police received a recording from an untraceable source. On the recording, a voice identifying himself as Professor X took credit for the bombing and warned the police to expect a greater escalation over the coming months. Investigators are working to recover evidence from the facility, hoping that whatever they find will bring them one step closer to bringing the X-Men to justice…”

Charles swayed on his feet. Without quite meaning to, Erik reached out and steadied him with a hand to his elbow. At the contact, Charles looked down at his hand, as if puzzled and surprised to see him there. For a second, he looked terribly confused and terribly lost.

“Charles,” Moira said sharply, watching his face. “We need to…” She gestured vaguely.

“…Right.” Blinking owlishly, Charles seemed to unfreeze with an enormous effort. “Come,” he muttered. “Moira, my office.”

They strode through the murmuring crowd back to Charles’ office, where he shut the door firmly, locked it. Then he snapped abruptly out of his daze, all his energy releasing at once as he began to pace agitatedly by the bookshelf.

“How did this happen?” he demanded, and Erik wasn’t sure if he was addressing both of them or neither of them. His earlier confusion had broken into acute distress. “How could this happen?”

“You’re his friend,” Erik said calmly, watching Charles’ nerves fray. “Professor X’s. And he didn’t tell you about this?”

Moira shot him a startled look. “Charles…” she started, her gaze hard as she stared at Erik.

“...Right.” Blinking owlishly, Charles seemed to unfreeze with an enormous effort. “Come,” he muttered. “Moira, my office.”

Erik stiffened. Secrets again. Why was he even remotely surprised? “What aren’t you telling me?” he asked, eyes narrowing.

Charles barely seemed to hear him. He paced a rapid line from his bookshelf to the window behind his desk and back, clearly sunk so deep in thought that even MacTaggert was silent. Considering his options, no doubt. He could get off lightly if he rolled on Professor X. He’d be in trouble for sure for aiding the X-Men for so long, but if he was instrumental in bringing down this terrorist network—
and Erik was fairly certain the X-Men would be labeled terrorists now, after this—they then the authorities might be lenient.

Charles stopped abruptly behind his desk and clenched his hands around the back of his chair. He glanced at Erik and pinched his lips together so hard they went white.

“I think,” he said finally, “I need to see Fury.”

Erik nodded approvingly. “You should tell him everything you know. Anything you can give him will help. If you’re lucky, you’ll be able to negotiate an immunity deal out of it. I can’t promise you it’ll happen, but—”

“Erik.” Charles inhaled deeply, and Erik instinctively steeled himself. He knew he wouldn’t like what was coming. “I didn’t tell you the whole truth.”

“I figured,” Erik replied warily.

Still Charles hesitated. Clenching and unclenching his hands nervously around his chair, he said, “Please understand that I didn’t want to lie to you. I had to.”

“Tell me,” Erik ordered, dangerously close to snapping.

“I’m not just friends with Professor X,” Charles explained, sounding slightly helpless. “I am Professor X.”

The briefing with Fury took nearly two hours. SHIELD’s director hadn’t seemed thrown at all at the revelation; he merely ushered Charles into his office, called Maria Hill in, and shut and locked the door. He was, all in all, the most imperturbable man Charles had ever met, which was something of a relief since Charles had been deceiving his government agency for over three years and could quite possibly be labeled a traitor and an enemy of the state.

By the time the discussion (as Fury called it, though it fooled no one; this had been an interrogation, pure and simple, even as calm and polite as it was) ended, Charles was almost one hundred percent certain that Erik would be gone by the time he got out. It was something of a surprise, then, to find him sitting in the hallway just outside Fury’s office, ripping the DNA helix paperweight to shreds of metal and piecing it back together into something spiked and angry, and then tearing it apart to repeat the process. When the door opened, he climbed to his feet, his expression as flat and unreadable as it had been when they’d first met. But there was a muted fury behind his eyes. When Charles tried to meet his gaze, he turned away, toward Fury who was coming out on Charles’ heels.

“Fury.”

“Lehnsherr.” The director stopped. Maria Hill stopped behind him, still making diligent notes on her tablet. She’d been typing for nearly all of the last two hours, documenting everything Charles had said. He knew both she and Fury wouldn’t forget a single word he said, which was why he’d spoken
very carefully, skirting the line of giving them enough information to exonerate him and his team while still keeping the most important details tucked safely away in his own mind. Even now, he was still unsure of how SHIELD would react to the information he gave them. Everything was a game of chance now, and he hoped he wasn’t coming down on the wrong side of it.

Erik’s jaw tightened. “You promised me that if I delivered Professor X to you, you’d give me everything you have on Shaw. Now you have Professor X.”

“And you want the files on Shaw.”

Erik only gazed steadily at him, as if daring him to go back on his word. But Fury only sighed, his single eye narrowing, and nodded at Hill, who disappeared back into his office and returned a few moments later with a USB.

“Everything we have on Shaw is on there,” she said, holding the USB out to Erik. “Keep it safe. It’s valuable intel.”

Erik pulled it from her palm with his powers and closed his hand tightly around it. For a second, he paused, and Charles thought he might turn to him, might say something. But then he turned on his heel and started down the hall without another word to any of them. Charles watched his retreating back, glanced quickly at Fury, and, when neither the director or Agent Hill warned him against it, ran after Erik.

“Wait! Erik, wait.”

Erik didn’t slow his stride, so Charles reached out and grabbed his elbow to pull him to a stop. Erik shoved him hard, with both his physical strength and with the metal on Charles’ body, sending him staggering back into the wall hard enough that he winced, his head beginning to throb in earnest. At his grimace, Erik faltered for a split second, and Charles thought he saw a flash of concern cut through the anger in Erik’s eyes. But it was there and gone in an instant, and then Erik’s lip twisted up into a sneer. “Don’t follow me.”

“Erik, please!” Charles hurried after him, this time half-jogging to keep by his side instead of trying to stop him. “Just give me a moment to explain.”

“Explain what?” Erik’s voice was cold with anger. “Explain that I told you about myself and why I needed to find Professor X, and all that time you knew and you kept it from me?”

“You know I had to! I couldn’t—I couldn’t have trusted you then—”

“You know I had to! I couldn’t—I couldn’t have trusted you then—”

“You know I had to! I couldn’t—I couldn’t have trusted you then—”

“Trust,” Erik echoed with a hiss, rounding on Charles so abruptly that Charles had to skip back a step to keep from having his toes stepped on. “You’re a hypocrite in that as you are in everything else, aren’t you, Charles? You want me to trust you when all you’ve done is lie to me.”

Charles glared at him, irritated all over again despite himself because he was tired of being persecuted for all the misinformation anti-suppressant activists had been spreading ever since he could remember. “If you ever just listened to me—really listened—just once, I could explain to you why suppressants are beneficial. I am a mutant, and all I want to do is help mutantkind. You can’t call me a hypocrite in that regard. As for my telepathy and the X-Men—I’d only known you for a handful of weeks. How could I trust that you wouldn’t turn us in? For documentation fraud and for the dozens of infractions we’ve committed as X-Men. We had—have—enough on us to put us away for a long time. I couldn’t risk it. I couldn’t have known.”

“You could’ve read my mind,” Erik sneered. “That’s what you do, isn’t it?”
Exasperation flooded through him. “No, I would never. How many times do I have to tell you that I wouldn’t, without permission?”

“And I’m supposed to—what? Trust that you won’t use your powers on me?”

“Y—yes. I know how…how unfair that sounds, Erik, but please, consider the circumstances—”

“What circumstances? You lied to me. For all I know, you could still be lying to me, and I’d never know it if you didn’t want me to. You could be reading my mind right now and I would never know it.”

“Well, I’m not.”

“Of course you’d say that.”

“You don’t have to trust me to know that,” Charles told him, keeping his tone as even as he could. “Fury gave me a suppressant before the briefing. To make sure I told the truth. Necessary precautions, of course, and I—”

Charles took a breath, fighting the growing sense of uneasy fear in his gut that always accompanied power suppression. Telepaths, he knew from personal experience and from common knowledge, reacted strangely to suppressants. Each case was different, with some telepaths finding relief from the silence and others going mad from it. Charles fell somewhere in between, the silence like an unnerving itch he couldn’t scratch. Mindful of the sometimes negative reactions psionics could have to suppressants, Fury had only required Charles to take a minimum dose. But still, the world felt grayed at the edges and muffled. The sooner the drugs wore off, the better.

Erik watched him for a long moment, brow furrowed. Finally, he said, “Your telepathy…”

“Muted. For now. So if…if ever there were a time for you to know for sure I wasn’t reading your mind, now would be it.”

He watched Erik take a deep breath, his expression blank as ever but something considering in his eyes. “Ask me anything,” Charles said gently, “and I will do my best to answer you.”

For a minute, he thought Erik would deem him a waste of time and take off down the hall again. But Erik only crossed his arms and said flatly, “You can still lie.”

“Yes, I could. But I won’t. There’s no way I can assure you of that, Erik. But you’re good at reading people. If I lie, you’ll catch it.”

“You lied to me for almost three weeks and I never noticed,” Erik muttered. Before Charles could offer any apology, Erik straightened his shoulders and said, “All right. Tell me this: your feelings for me. Are they real?”

Charles’ eyes widened. “What?” Out of all the tacks Erik could have taken, Charles hadn’t expected this.

“This,” Erik said impatiently, waving a hand between them. “This—thing—with you, with me. Is it real? Or did you manufacture it? Make me like you so…so our interactions would be smoother or—or—”

“No.” Charles shot him a scandalized look. “Like I said before, I don’t meddle with people’s minds like that. The human brain is very specific, and pushing it unnaturally could be disastrous. Emotions are among the most delicate and most difficult human experiences to fabricate, and I’d never—” He
fought to keep the familiar, horrible, wounded feeling at bay. His chest felt tight, but he breathed past it. “I like you a lot, Erik, and if you were ever going to like me back, I’d want it to be because you liked me, not because I had to make you like me, as if I were somehow—somehow deficient and I had to force you to have any sort of feelings for me because you’d never have done so of your own free will. I have too much pride to stoop to that.”

The heat in Erik’s eyes wavered. “I don’t…That’s not what I meant.”

“No? All right then,” Charles continued, a bit aggressively, “it’s settled. Whatever attraction exists between us, whatever…” He almost couldn’t say it. Erik returning his interest felt impossible. “…feelings you might have for me, they’re real. I didn’t do that.”

He met Erik’s gaze steadily, willing Erik to read the sincerity in his eyes. Flickers of emotion played across the smallest parts of his face: the corners of his lips, his eyes, his brows drawing in. Charles was almost glad for the suppressant then; if he’d had his telepathy at hand, he would’ve found the temptation of accessing Erik’s thought process right then nearly impossible to overcome.

He wanted Erik to stay. More than anything, he wanted Erik to stay, at least long enough for Charles to explain everything to him, to try to make him understand why Charles had done what he’d done. Erik’s respect was something Charles didn’t want to lose, if he’d ever even had it in the first place. All he wanted to see in Erik at that moment, in mind or in body, was acquiescence, or tolerance, or a simple willingness to stop for a moment and listen.

“I see,” Erik said. Then he turned and walked away.

Charles didn’t have the heart to call him back.
He went home in the evening on house arrest under orders from Fury to not move a muscle or try to contact anybody or so much as breathe wrongly until SHIELD followed up with him.

The house felt empty without Erik. Charles supposed he’d gotten used to the feel of another mind around the house, to the quiet sounds Erik would make while making food for himself or checking the perimeter of the house or watching TV with the volume turned down all the way low. For just a moment as he stood in the darkened entryway, a terrible loneliness gripped him. He closed his eyes and told himself he would be all right. He always was.

He itched to pull out his phone and call Moira or Hank, to make sure their departure from the mansion had gone smoothly. He’d told Moira earlier—mentally, so that Erik wouldn’t hear—to tell Fury’s intentions, and even now, after Fury had absorbed everything rather calmly, he still thought it was best to be cautious. The team and the others would stay safely hidden away while Charles and Moira attempted to navigate this new obstacle course they’d fallen into.

He wanted to call to make sure they’d reached their destination without any trouble, but SHIELD was no doubt monitoring his phones now. So he forced himself to put his phone down on the hallway table next to his keys and walked to the living room, where he dropped down onto the couch without bothering to turn on the lights.

It was only nine-thirty, but he was suddenly too tired to do anything but turn on the TV, dial the volume down, and lie down on the couch, pulling the afghan over him.

He missed Erik. As antagonistic as the last few days together had been, he missed Erik with a fierceness that made it hard to breathe. In under three weeks, the other man had carved out a hole for himself in Charles’ life, and Charles, always so eager and quick to get attached, had let him. Fool.

He wished Raven were here. She was always good at snapping him out of his occasional patches of self-pity or despair, helping to channel his energy into action. He felt listless without her sometimes, like nothing he was doing was making the slightest bit of difference, and for all his lofty ideals and grand plans, he was powerless to carry through with any of them.

Something clambered up the couch arm and leaped onto Charles’ shoulder, and he jerked so violently he nearly fell off the couch. Patches let out a low yowl in his ear, tiny sharp claws digging into his shoulder, and Charles laughed aloud, his heart pounding in his chest.

“Hey, you,” he said, picking the kitten up and depositing him on his stomach. “Come here.” Moira had texted him earlier telling him that she’d dropped Patches off at his house before leaving for the mansion to escort the others to the safe house, but Charles had nearly forgotten about it entirely. Good thing they kept the food and water bowls in the kitchen well-stocked. Charles felt another pang of sadness at that; Erik, for all that he glared and muttered, had taken to feeding Patches in the mornings and making sure he had enough water. He supposed he’d have to do it himself from now on.

“I’m going to miss him,” Charles murmured, running his finger down Patches’ nose. The kitten meowed plaintively at him and then bit Charles’ finger, sharp teeth digging in enough to almost break skin. Charles yanked his hand back with a curse and watched as Patches yawned unrepentantly and curled up on his belly.
“You always did like him better,” Charles grumbled, reaching out to grab the remote off the coffee table to change the channel. He avoided the news and skipped over a couple of game shows. Landing on some sappy romantic comedy that would no doubt have him asleep within minutes, he tossed the remote back down and closed his eyes.

Sleep was a long time in coming.

In the morning, he made his own tea and didn’t set aside extra water for the coffee machine. He fed Patches, checked his water, and then ambled to the bathroom to take a long shower.

He didn’t bother to find something nice to dress in, since he figured going to work was out of the question when he was under house arrest. In sweatpants and an old Oxford t-shirt, he settled in his office to try to get some paperwork done while he had the time. Patches sat in his box on the desk, occasionally venturing out to knock over the stapler or the paperclip container or to sit on Charles’ keyboard while he was trying to work. “You,” Charles told him, “are a nuisance.” But he didn’t scold him.

He waited nervously for the phone to ring. He hoped Moira was wise enough not to call him while he was under surveillance, but still, he worried Raven or Hank might. But Moira should have given them advance warning about Charles’ precarious situation, and they were smart. They wouldn’t risk it.

He waited for Fury’s call. As he waited, he monitored the minds of the six SHIELD agents ranged outside his house, there to protect him and, in all probability, guard against his escape. They’d likely been there all night, but still drugged as he was, Charles had only felt them when he’d woken up. The suppressant made Charles’ telepathy feel tender, but he pushed past it and kept a light thread of attention on the agents’ minds, ready to act if any of their surface thoughts spiked with hostility. So far, everything had been quiet. Charles didn’t think Fury was the type of man to send his agents in to kill an unarmed man without any further discussion first, but it never hurt to be safe.

He spent the morning glancing over stock options. He answered two emails to investors, six to Board members, and another three to Tommy Hansen, head of his research department. He took a break to play with Patches, who gave him a scratch on his hand that he had to get a Band-Aid for. He checked on the dressing of the cut above his ear, found the wound looking as if it were healing, and re-bandaged it.

Lunch was taken in front of the TV and was over before Charles even really tasted any of the sandwich he’d made for himself. He sprawled on the couch afterwards, finished *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and ordered the sequel from Amazon on his phone. He watched half of a soap opera and fell asleep.

All in all, it was the laziest day he’d had in years. That should probably have made it the most relaxing, but Charles was so wired up, constantly refreshing the news page on his phone just in case something popped up and darting glances over to the phone every few minutes, that by the time the
sun set, he felt exhausted with stress and tension. He reorganized his desk and office bookcase just to have something to do. After that, he systematically cleaned his closet out, neatly bagged clothes he no longer wore, and checked for the nearest Goodwill so he could drop off the bags the next time he had free time.

By eleven, he could barely keep his eyes open, though he tried to sit in his office for another few minutes to work. He ended up staring unblinkingly at the phone, so he shut down his computer and called it a night.

He climbed into bed, switched off the light, felt Patches crawl up his covers and snuggle next to his arm, and closed his eyes. On habit, he ran his telepathy out along the house idly, acutely feeling the absence of Erik’s mind in the bedroom across from his. No one was here. He was alone, except for the guards outside.

He reached for them and couldn’t find them. Sleepily, he probed out in a wider radius and still found nothing but neighbors. That was strange. He was sure Fury didn’t trust him enough to pull off the guard detail. And they wouldn’t have up and left without orders.

He sat up, ignoring Patches’ irritated meow. Suddenly wide awake, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and in that same instant heard the window to his left shatter. Throwing up his arms to protect his face from flying glass, he flung himself to the floor, feeling a sharp sting on his forearm as he did so. His pulse thundered on wildly in his head. He cast out his telepathy, searching out intruders, trying to pinpoint minds that he didn’t recognize...didn’t remember...but...

Everything went abruptly fuzzy, and he could hear his breath, labored and shallow and sounding very loud in his ears...and he wanted to lie down and sleep...

Through hazy eyes, he looked down at his arm, clumsy fingers feeling out the spot where he’d felt the pain, and there—he felt out the shape of a dart, something sharp and barbed. Tranquilizer, no doubt, a sedative to put him under...and that was good, he thought blurrily, at least they weren’t meaning to kill him...but maybe the alternative was worse...

He tried to crawl to his knees, to reach a phone or call for help, but his limbs were weak and rubbery. Desperately, he pushed out with his telepathy, trying to find someone to call the police, my name is Charles Xavier, call the police...please...my name is Charles...

His thoughts fizzled away into darkness.

* *

He drifted for a while. When he came back to himself, he was in the back of a van, and his hands were bound tightly behind his back. His head throbbed distractingly. Something thick and stifling clung to his nose and mouth, and it took a disorienting moment for him to realize there was a bag pulled over his head, black enough to make it impossible to see beyond a few pinpricks of light. The air tasted stale and hot. He scrabbled outwards with his telepathy, felt his control slip, and fell into darkness again.
When he woke up again, the bag on his head was gone. He blinked in the dim light and tried to swallow past the dry, cottony feeling in his throat. His eyes focused slowly on a white wall across from him, smooth and unbroken by windows or doors. A room? A cell of some sort? He was lying on a thin, hard mattress, more of a pallet than a bed really. After a moment, he sat up, every movement sluggish. His head was killing him. The sedative seemed to have mostly worn off, but it had left him with a crippling headache and an aching body. He swayed for a moment, fought to retain consciousness, and eventually managed to turn his head to glance around him.

A cell, for sure. There were four white walls, all of them undecorated and indistinguishable from each other, except for the one to his left where a broad, imposing steel door sat in the very center of the wall. Locked, no doubt.

There was nothing else in the cell except for the bed, not even a blanket or a toilet. Charles tried to stand up, but his knees buckled as he did, and he fell back onto the bed, dizzy. So maybe the sedative had been stronger than he’d suspected. That was fine; he could explore without moving his body.

He reached for his telepathy and—nothing.

A slow, roiling panic rose in him. He grabbed for his powers, for the familiar strength that was always curled close at hand, ready to be used, ready to help. Surely he was only weak from the sedative. It was just a matter of the drugs interfering with his mutation, with his ability to concentrate—except the place in his mind where his telepathy was always hovering in wait was hollow, like a black hole had carved out empty space in his head, and he knew this feeling, knew the helpless shock of it.

Fury had given him a minimum dose of suppressants to keep his telepathy muted so that Charles could still feel out vague impressions but not touch them or reach out very far. But his telepathy had still been present, if just dormant. But this—this black space was infinitely more frightening, and intimately familiar. It was the same gaping emptiness from his childhood, when his father had still been hell-bent on curing him. He had cried a lot in those early days, terrified to feel his telepathy, which he had had for as long as he could remember, slipping from his grasp. Then, as he’d grown older and more accustomed to it, he hadn’t cried much at all.

His father had quit putting him on Inhib eventually, mostly because it would take him so long to recover from its effects and because of how obviously it was hurting him more than helping. By then he’d learned to control his telepathy well enough on his own, and he hadn’t needed any suppressants to keep from lashing out whenever he was angry or upset. But he had never forgotten the hollow terror of losing his telepathy. Of the silence.

It was silent now, and he forced himself not to give in to the panic that threatened to swallow him. He took one breath, then another, focusing on the feel of his lungs expanding, of his body gradually waking back up as the last of the sedative worked through his system. As far as he could tell, he was uninjured, except for the cut above his ear, which was stinging sharply. He was also free to move, no
handcuffs or zip-ties in sight.

After his legs felt strong enough to take his weight, he stood up and slowly walked the perimeter of the room, one hand trailing along the walls in search of another exit. Nothing. The walls were seamless, steriley white and disconcerting in their uniformity. He rounded the third corner and turned for the door, running his hands over it carefully to suss out weaknesses. It was solid metal under his hand, no windows, no handle, no lock on the inside. He wished Erik were here. Erik could have pulled this door apart with barely a wave of his hand.

Erik. He sat back down on the bed and tucked his knees up to his chest for warmth. He wondered where Erik was. Already on the trail of Sebastian Shaw? Probably. This man was important to Erik; Charles hadn’t seen much of Erik’s mind in their time together, but he’d seen enough to know that much. Erik was likely halfway across the country already, or across the world, one step closer to seizing the vengeance he had dreamed of for over a decade. Charles wondered if he was all right. Then he wondered irritably why he was even worrying about Erik. Erik had walked away, and Erik wasn’t the one who had been drugged, injected full of suppressants, and tossed into a cell without so much as a by-your-leave.

Time passed. He couldn’t be sure how long he sat on the bed, straining his ears to listen for any sounds. Once he thought he heard footsteps, but when he leaped up and rushed to the door, there was nothing.

He only tried to reach for his telepathy once. The silence shook him so badly that he resolutely shut himself away from the blackness in his own mind, trying to deny its existence altogether.

After a while, he curled up on the bed and tried to sleep. The room was chilly, and there were no blankets or even a pillow. He laid his head against the thin mattress and closed his eyes.

When he woke up, the room was colder, and the silence was still complete. He curled up into a tighter ball and shivered, waiting.

No one came.

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Erik stalked down the street with his shoulders hunched to ward off the cold, his hands tucked deep in his pockets. His sprained wrist throbbed. He knew he shouldn’t have used it to block the other man’s fist, but he’d had only a split second to deflect the blow and his right hand had been closest. Now it hurt like hell and felt so stiff he could barely move it. Maybe it was broken now, which would be just his luck. And he’d missed Shaw again, this time by only two hours. Dammit.

He kicked disgustedly at a broken bottle on the sidewalk and glared at a passing businessman who was eyeing him warily. To be fair, he did look something of a mess with blood drying on a cut on his cheek and his jacket ripped down the side. Shaw had gotten away, but he’d left a surprise for Erik in the form of half a dozen thugs with no metal on them to grab at. They’d attacked Erik with wooden clubs and baseball bats, and he’d taken a couple of knocks to his back and ribs before regaining his footing enough to overcome them with judicious use of the metal supports of the building. Half of
the structure had collapsed around them, what with Erik yanking rafters down without particularly caring where they’d come from, but the important part was that Erik had escaped only a little bruised and his six attackers had been buried underneath the rubble.

Shaw should have known better than to send a gang of unremarkable humans at him, Erik thought contemptuously. Erik was going to catch up no matter how far Shaw tried to run, no matter how many men he left behind to try to slow Erik down. He had enough intel to track Shaw’s movements with reliable accuracy now; it was only a matter of time before he reached Shaw’s next destination before Shaw himself did, and when that happened, Shaw would find that Erik could be very unpleasant and very creative with his powers. He’d had years to practice with them, after all.

He limped up the stairs of the hotel, glad his room was on the third floor and not higher. His shin smarted where one of the thugs had gotten in a lucky hit with a baseball bat, and his ribs ached. All right, so maybe he was a little more banged up than he’d figured. He needed to get some ice on his bruises before they swelled too much.

Once he was safely in his room, door locked and bolted behind him, he went to the bathroom to root around for towels and ice. Wiping the blood off his face with a hand towel, he probed at the cut under his eye for a moment before deciding it didn’t need stitches. Then he grabbed the ice bucket from the sink, slipped out briefly into the hallway to fill it up with the ice machine across from his room, and wrapped the ice in towels. He lay down on the bed and pulled up his shirt, hissing as he touched the ice to his bruised ribs. Well, he’d had worse. At least nothing felt broken.

As he gave his ribs time to numb up, he gazed speculatively at his right hand, still bandaged halfway up his forearm. He hadn’t changed the dressing since Charles had put it on. Charles had done a good job with it, and it would probably be much better now, if he hadn’t had to use it to protect himself.

He wished he had a first aid kit, some decent alcohol, and time to sleep. After scanning through the files, he’d hopped on a plane straight to Chicago and hadn’t slept in the forty-eight hours since, so impatient was he to latch onto Shaw’s trail. Now he could barely keep his eyes open.

He flipped on the TV at the foot of the bed and dragged himself up into a sitting position by the headboard, pillows settled behind him to ease the ache of his back. As usual, he scanned through the channels, found nothing interesting, and ended up on a news channel, reporting some five-car pileup on the highway.

He dozed without meaning to. When he opened his eyes again, it was dark outside and his entire body was stiff. With a groan, he got up from the bed and stretched, wincing when the movement pulled at sore muscles and bruises. The ice had melted completely, soaking the towels, so he went to the bathroom to fetch the spare towels and use the rest of the ice in the bucket. When he returned, he sat down on the edge of the bed and half-listened to the news as he reapplied the ice.

“…suspected to have robbed other convenience stores in the area. If anyone has seen the man represented in this sketch, please contact the police immediately…”

He’d have to review the files tonight. He doubted he would be much use in a fight right now, battered as he was. His best bet would be to rest a couple of days, use the time to figure out where Shaw might be headed next, and plan his own moves accordingly. At this point, it was probably better to act smartly rather than quickly.

“…In a surprising course of events, the local district’s school board has decided to reverse its previous decision about requiring mutant monitors in classrooms. The decision, meant to be instituted in August with the start of the school year, drew harsh criticism for its discriminatory nature, as it would have singled out mutant children among their peers…”
He unwrapped the bandages on his hand and examined it. His wrist was swollen and bruised, and his fingers were stiff but they bent fine, albeit slowly and painfully. Not completely functional, but not a total loss either. Again, he’d had worse.

“…the search continues for billionaire and controversial figure in mutant politics, Charles Xavier—”

Erik’s head snapped up.

“…missing since Wednesday night. Police, who were called by neighbors who heard his cry for help, found evidence of a struggle in the house. Investigators believe that he may have been kidnapped for ransom, though no one in his circle of family or friends has been contacted yet with any demands. Xavier is the CEO of Xavier Pharmaceuticals, a company that manufactures 52% of suppressants used in the United States and 23% of suppressants used around the world. His net worth is estimated as upwards of 6.8 billion dollars. No leads have been reported yet, but police continue to monitor Xavier’s home telephone, as well as those in his main office building downtown…”

Erik was on his feet before he even realized he was moving. Missing. Kidnapped. Impossible. Erik had left him barely two days ago. When he’d left, Charles had been under SHIELD custody. He’d been fine.

Hardly aware of what he was doing, Erik yanked his phone from his pocket and hit speed-dial two.

“You have reached Charles Xavier. I can’t answer your call right now, so do me a favor and leave a message if it’s urgent so I know why I need to get back to you. Thank you.”

Erik ended the call and hit speed-dial three. The line rang out as busy, and Erik hung up impatiently and tried again. It took him eight tries, but finally the call connected, an irritated voice snapping out, “Lehnsherr. Little busy.”

“Where’s Charles?” Erik demanded.

“Now that’s the million dollar question, isn’t it,” Fury said dryly. “You got any info on him?”

“No. I haven’t heard from him since I left.”

“Then I’ll have to talk to you later. I don’t have time—”

“How could you lose him? He was fine when I left, he should be fine now—”

“It’s not that simple. I posted six agents on his house, and all six of them are missing. We got to the scene, and all there was, was broken glass and a couple of hysterical neighbors who claim to have heard a voice in their heads. Now from where I’m standing, I can see this two ways. One: kidnapping. Simple as that. Two: escape.”

Erik frowned. “What?”

“Escape. Xavier was on house arrest. With his powers, he could easily have sent the agents away and walked out the front door. Why’d he run? I don’t know. Maybe his running what has now been labeled the greatest terrorist threat to our country had something to do with it. The point is, Xavier has every reason to disappear, and he’s got the means to do it, too.”

“Are you actually accusing him of running from the law?” Erik said incredulously. “Have you met the man?”
“I understand that on the surface, Xavier is all puppies and rainbows,” Fury replied, sardonic. “But we aren’t ruling out the possibility of his escape. Not until there’s conclusive evidence telling us otherwise.”

Impossible. Charles wouldn’t run, even facing charges as serious as these. For one thing, he shied away from breaking *office* rules; Erik didn’t think a man who followed the instructions down to the letter when loading the paper tray to the printer would be willing to duck a government agency and go on the run. For another thing, Charles wasn’t stupid. He had to know that any attempt to disappear would cast further suspicion on him and the X-Men, and the government would come after them even more determinedly than before. If he wanted to protect his X-Men, then he would stay close at hand to answer any questions he could and clear up misunderstandings, if they existed.

“He wouldn’t,” Erik said vehemently. “It wouldn’t make any sense. Why would he turn himself in to SHIELD and then run?”

“We don’t have many facts here, Lehnsherr. We’re working with what we have. We’ll find Xavier. It’s only a matter of time. If he contacts you at any time, you tell him that. Tell him SHIELD is prepared to respond accordingly if he ever—”

“I’m coming in.”

There was a pause. Then, “What?”

What the fuck? Erik wondered at himself. Was he seriously considering this? Shaw or Charles? His prey of over fifteen years, or his...his *what*...of all of three weeks?

Fucking hell. There really wasn’t any choice, was there?

“You heard me,” Erik growled, striding across the room to grab his bag. He tossed the ice and towels carelessly on the floor and collected his belongings. After a moment of hesitation, he shoved the Shaw files into the bag and zipped it up. “I’m going after him.”

∗

Charles woke up to silence.

There was no way suppressants lasted this long. His tongue dragged like sandpaper in his mouth, and his stomach felt as if someone had reached into his abdomen and squeezed it. He hadn’t known acute hunger like this before, the sort that sent stabbing pains through his gut like swords. He curled up on the bed and shivered, trying not to listen to the echoing emptiness in his head.

Had they dosed him again? They had to have. The hole in his mind was as complete as ever, which meant he was still strongly drugged. Average suppressants lasted eight to twelve hours. It had to have been at least that long since his capture. Days, maybe. He didn’t know. He only knew that he’d closed his eyes and woken up more than five times. Maybe seven.

Shit. It was getting harder to think. He didn’t know if it was dehydration or starvation or mutation
deprivation, but his entire body was slow to respond, and his thoughts flowed like thick honey through a straw. He needed to keep alert and ready in case the opportunity to escape presented itself, but he could barely bring himself to sit up from the bed. He was just so tired.

He closed his eyes and slept.

Charles’ house was silent and empty when Erik arrived. There were two SHIELD agents sitting in a control van parked on the street, but one call from Fury kept the men from stopping him. He ducked under the yellow police tape, strode up the sidewalk, and in through the front door.

Inside, it was dark, all the lights switched off. On first glance, the hallway, kitchen, and living room looked undisturbed. Erik lingered by the coffee table, where Charles’ copy of Fifty Shades of Grey sat next to a half-finished cup of tea. The TV remote perched precariously on the edge of the couch. Erik turned on the TV for a moment and was greeted with the ending scene of You’ve Got Mail. Romantic comedies. Charles was fond of them, if only because they sent him off to sleep quicker than anything. Erik turned the TV back off, set the remote safely on the table, and moved to the kitchen.

Charles’ tin of loose leaf tea in the top right cabinet was nearly empty. It had been half full when Erik left, which meant Charles had to have been drinking the stuff near constantly, which he only did when he was stressed or upset. Erik almost felt guilty for that, but even if he’d caused Charles any distress, it had to have been insignificant compared with Charles’ preoccupation with his future and the future of his X-Men. In the grand scheme of things, Erik was likely only one small problem in the scope of Charles’ worries.

He put the tin back and headed to the bathroom. Nothing in there except an open first aid kit. The cut above Charles’ ear. Erik hoped he was all right. Charles knew how to bandage things, Erik’s hand serving as proof of that. He probably hadn’t needed help. That didn’t stop Erik from wishing irrationally that he had been here to make sure the cut wasn’t infected anyway. Someone had to keep an eye on him. Charles could be so irritatingly flippant about his health and safety.

He ventured from there into the bedroom. The point of entry was instantly apparent: the window beside the dresser had been broken, shattered glass lying in jagged pieces on the floor. Erik crossed the room, jaw clenched tight when he saw the blankets twisted on the floor, the clock on the nightstand knocked over. Had Charles been conscious when they’d taken him? Probably not. Any suppressants Fury had given him during his briefing would have worn off within a few hours, which meant Charles would have been in full control of his telepathy. This hadn’t been a robbery gone wrong or a sloppy job. Whoever these people were, they’d planned the abduction well, to have caught a telepath off-guard.

Whatever clues might have been in this room had been taken up by SHIELD investigators. Erik examined everything carefully anyway and didn’t find anything that stood out. Then, frowning, he went through the whole house once again, then twice.
He pulled out his cell phone and dialed, glancing around the living room as he did. No signs of a struggle here. Just signs of a tired, stressed resident who had spent some time sleeping on the couch. Anger rose in him, anger at himself. He should have been here. It had been his job to protect Charles, and the instant he’d turned away, the enemy had struck. Stupid. Stupid.

“Fury.”

“It’s Lehnsherr. Did you find a kitten at Charles’ place?”

“What?”

“A kitten. Cat. Furry little devil. Did your team find one when they secured the scene?”

“Local police secured the scene. My team collected evidence when they arrived. But no, no kitten found.”

“I see.”

“Lehnsherr, what—”

Erik hung up. He’d searched the house almost three times now. No Patches. Three possibilities there: the damned thing had run out an open door when police had burst in, it was simply hiding in a crevice of the house that Erik hadn’t seen before, or someone had taken it. He figured that the police would have locked down the perimeter tightly enough not to miss even an animal the size of Patches sneaking out an exit, and when he reached out with his powers, he couldn’t feel the metal buckle in Patches’ collar anywhere nearby.

That left the last option. But who? Not the kidnappers surely. A policeman? One of the locals? Who worked closely enough with Charles to come to his house to check on him, who cared enough about his cat to take it from the scene, who, bizarrely enough, hadn’t called the police, had disappeared before police even arrived—

Oh. Several things clicked together jarringly, and Erik almost groaned.

Of course.

He wasn’t sure anymore whether he was asleep or awake. In his dreams, he could never touch others’ minds; they were reflections of his own subconscious and had no discernible thoughts of their own. They were like shadows, or people in photographs, depictions of someone real somewhere far away.

He’d hated dreams when he was younger. They’d scared him with how easily reality could bend, with how little control he had over people he would normally be able to read when he was awake. When he’d grown older and more assured with his powers, he’d sometimes been able to shape
dreams to his will, but even then, he hadn’t liked very much the feeling of drifting in a place where he might or not be powerless.

Suppressants felt something like lucid dreaming, where he knew what was happening and for a while, he could control his reaction to it. But if he stayed too long without his telepathy, it got difficult to tell if he had fallen asleep or woken up or both. Maybe he was asleep now. He couldn’t feel any minds around his. He couldn’t be sure.

He wondered, if anyone ever did come through the locked steel door, whether they would be shadows or humans, dreams or reality.

At some point, he got up off the bed. His muscles were weak and stiff. How long had it been since he’d moved from the bed? Was it disuse or the cold that made his knees threaten to buckle as he staggered slowly to the end of the room and back?

Strange. He’d been here for a while, but he didn’t feel hungry or thirsty anymore. He hadn’t needed to use the bathroom either, and there was no toilet in the cell so he couldn’t have used it and forgotten. Did that make this a dream?

He tried half-heartedly to reach out with his mind. Nothing. Pulling his hand into a fist, he dug his fingernails into his palm and felt the sting of pressure. Could you feel pain in dreams? Or was pain supposed to wake you up? He couldn’t remember.

Sitting down on the cold concrete floor with his back to a corner, he wrapped his arms around his knees and stared at the door.

If you fell asleep in a dream, he wondered, did you wake up in reality?

* *

When he opened his eyes again, he was sitting against the corner, his back stiff, his hands almost numb with cold. Shivering, he shoved his fingers under his armpits to try to warm them up and glanced around the room again. Nothing had changed since he’d last closed his eyes. Still just one bed, a locked door, and four blindingly white walls, and still nothing but emptiness in the back of his mind where his telepathy was supposed to be.

He wondered if he were in a nightmare now. Was it possible for him to fall so deeply asleep he got trapped within his own mind, in a cage of his own making? Maybe he’d fallen asleep on the couch at his home, and any minute now, Erik was going to shake him awake and scold him for falling asleep in front of the TV. Patches was going to jump up and sit on his knee as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, and Erik would act all disapproving and scowl a lot, even as he made Charles tea to fully wake him up. He would sit up and have a horrible headache, and once he managed to climb fully into the land of the living, he’d vow never again to go to sleep so late because clearly the hour did strange things to his dreams. And Erik would crankily mutter that they were going to be late, and that he was taking the first shower, and that Charles had better get up and get ready because Erik was leaving with or without him (which would be a blatant lie, given that Erik turned into a rabid wolfhound whenever Charles strayed even ten yards from him, but Erik always grumbled that it was the spirit of
the threat that counted).

That made sense. It made complete sense. Charles clung to the idea and willed himself to wake up.

In the same instant, the wall directly opposite of him disappeared. Charles stared. Where the wall had been, there were suddenly people beyond it. Computers. Workstations. Men and women in lab coats milling around, stopping to scribble notes on their clipboards, leaning over computer screens and speaking to each other. Their lips moved, but Charles heard nothing: no words, no hum of machinery, no footsteps. Still silence.

Unsteadily, he climbed to his feet and walked toward them. The closest few looked up as he approached, and he tried to reach out to them with his mind but he couldn’t. Suppressed still? He put out a hand toward the nearest one, a middle-aged man with a rumpled polo under his lab coat, his glasses perched crookedly on his nose. “Hello?” he tried to say, but his voice was hoarse and scratchy, the word barely intelligible. “Hello?” he tried again, stumbling closer. As he did, his outstretched hand hit something hard, and he hopped back a step, startled and wary. When nothing leaped forward to attack him, he put his hand out again and this time felt out the surface of the barrier he’d hit and oh, the wall hadn’t disappeared at all, it had just turned translucent. It was glass, somehow designed to go white on command, creating a prison that could be peered into at any time without providing the prisoner with even the slimmest opportunity to escape. No windows, a heavy locked door, and a means of looking in and studying him without opening the room at all—he was well and truly trapped.

He swallowed hard.

“Charles Xavier.”

He started so badly he staggered back and nearly tripped over his own feet. He’d been in silence for so long that even the sound of his own name, spoken at what was likely a normal volume, sounded deafening.

“Mr. Xavier.”

He found the speaker standing almost directly in front of him, having stepped out abruptly from behind one of the workstations. A lean, tall man with a severe face and short, neatly combed, pepper-gray hair that was beginning to recede at his hairline stood at military parade rest, staring at him with stern, dark eyes. He was sharply-dressed in a dark military uniform, army officer of some sort, by the looks of it. Charles’ head spun. Was he under military custody? Here under government orders? But why? Fury had told him to go home, pending further deliberation. He had known Charles would be cooperative. Abducting him from his home and locking him in a cell was a drastic measure against a man who would have gone willingly if asked.

“Or,” the officer said, “should I call you Professor X?”

Charles took a breath. “Where am I?”

The officer continued as if Charles hadn’t spoken at all. “You’re here for a very important reason, Professor. I want you to remember that in these next few days.”

Charles blinked. “What?”

“I’ve been waiting a long time to get my hands on you.” The man clicked his tongue and shook his head, his expression rueful for a split second before smoothing away into impassivity again. “You’re a hard man to find. But I did find you, albeit with some regrettably necessary casualties. But no
matter—you’re here now. Now it’s time to begin.”

“What?” Nothing he said was making sense. Casualties? Cold fear gripped him. Who? What? Was this still a dream? It had to be. He couldn’t touch anyone’s minds. He wasn’t entirely sure he could even feel his own. He locked his knees to keep from swaying and managed to croak out, “Who are you?”

The officer regarded him with a cool look. Shadows. He and the others were all dream-shadows, no thoughts of their own. They weren’t real, Charles told himself. No matter what happened, they weren’t real.

“I am Colonel Stryker,” the dream-officer said, “and you’re going to help me save the world.”

Moira MacTaggert had not been seen in the office this morning, had missed two scheduled meetings, and had not ordered lunch for the floor as she customarily did. A couple of ladies down the hall had tried calling her, to no avail. The general theory was that she was ill and had forgotten to call in sick this morning before burying herself back in bed.

Erik was sure that wasn’t the case. Her desk was still neatly ordered, not a page out of place, her pens still color-coded in their penholders, her computer set to sleep on her desk. There were still photographs pinned to the corkboard beside her computer—a dog, a young brown-haired boy on a swing, the outline of two figures standing on a beach in the sunset—so it wasn’t as if she’d packed to leave. But Erik was almost completely certain she wasn’t coming back. Come to think of it, those pictures on her desk probably weren’t even real.

He rifled through her desk for clues of her whereabouts, but she’d been careful; no address book, no contacts list except for company numbers, no careless notes that might have given her away. She had to be a professional. But what? FBI? CIA? And if that was the case, how was she affiliated with the X-Men? Maybe she was a freelance agent of some sort? Mercenary?

Her desk offered no answers. Erik left the office and considered his options as he took the elevator down to the ground floor. Finding MacTaggert would probably be an easier task with SHIELD resources, but Erik wasn’t sure how much he wanted to reveal to Fury just yet. He’d given them Professor X, and less than forty-eight hours later, Charles had been abducted. Did that speak to a leak in the agency? Erik wondered. How much could he trust Nick Fury and SHIELD?

Trust. He was asking how much he could trust a human, government agency. He was losing it.

He stepped out into the gloomy day and stopped on the sidewalk, looking up at the stormy clouds overhead and half-wishing he’d brought an umbrella. He had no leads of his own. Neither Charles’ house nor his office had revealed anything. There was really no choice but to see what SHIELD had turned up.

He pulled up the collar of his jacket, strode across the street, and tapped on the window of the black SUV that had been parked on the curb since he’d entered the building. After a moment, the window
rolled down just a crack and the man inside said warily, “Can I help you?”

“You can take your hand off your gun,” Erik replied, rounding the car to climb into the empty passenger seat. “I’m not here to hurt you. I just want you to take me back to SHIELD.”

The man gave him a half-convincing confused frown. “I don’t know what you’re—”

“You’ve been following me since Charles Xavier’s house,” Erik interrupted. “I’m not going to waste money on a cab if you’re going where I am anyway. So take me to SHIELD or get out and let me drive myself.”

“I…” A beat of hesitation. Then the agent silently turned the key in the ignition and pulled out into the street.

Fury was waiting at the door when Erik arrived. The director had his arms crossed, his face set in its usual unimpressed scowl as his one eye watched Erik approach.

“You had people following me,” Erik said flatly as he reached Fury and kept walking.

Fury fell in step with him. “You seemed to know more than we did, so I had them keep an eye on you.”

“Using your resources.”

“Exactly. Now you mind telling me what you’re doing here?”


“You think you can find something my people didn’t?”

“Maybe.”

He was, in fact, sure he could. He knew Charles better than any of Fury’s investigators did, knew Charles’ moods and his favorite tea and where he always put his keys and how he pretended he had some mysterious way of organizing his bookshelves when he really didn’t. If there was any clue to be found in Charles’ possessions, Erik would find it.

Fury led him to the evidence room and showed him what they’d collected from Charles’ house: laptop, computer hard drives, phone, glass from the window, some hair samples, anything and everything that could be bagged for forensic evidence, all spread out in evidence boxes on a wide, stainless steel table.

Conscious of Fury standing at the end of the table with an expectant look on his face, Erik opened the laptop first, scrolled through a few pages, found nothing. The computer techs had probably already gone over everything that could be found in Charles’ emails and web history. He set the laptop aside and went through a few of the books on the table, most likely the ones that had been on Charles’ nightstand that had gotten knocked over. They revealed nothing important, so Erik reached next for the evidence bags with the glass shards.

“Anything?” Fury asked.

Erik shook his head and finally picked up Charles’ cell phone, his real target of the visit. He pretended to scroll through it for a while before clicking on his call logs. Moira MacTaggert took up
the first four calls. Erik memorized her number and kept scrolling. Some calls from the office, some to a Chinese takeout place that Charles favored. A couple of calls from the dentist.

Erik paused. Charles hadn’t had a dentist visit in the time Erik had been at his house, and he hadn’t talked about visiting one either. He would’ve had to clear that with Erik first, and he would have done that before he scheduled an appointment.

Suspicious now, he scrolled back up and checked the dates for both calls. Each placed the day before the first two X-Men attacks, each lasting around twenty minutes long. The first one was time-stamped 11:04. The coffee shop, Erik remembered. The morning they’d found Patches, when Charles had absconded for nearly an hour, leaving Erik to track him down and do his very best not to murder a self-absorbed idiot who couldn’t be trusted to value his own life, who valued a fucking cup of coffee over his own safety. But maybe Charles hadn’t run off because he’d had a sudden craving for commercialized caffeine. Maybe he’d been…

Oh. Clever.

Maybe he’d been testing Erik’s reaction time, seeing how long he could get away for, and, when Erik had finally caught up, maybe he’d been reporting to his X-Men what the situation was. He had been in that bathroom for an oddly long amount of time, which Erik had noticed. But he just hadn’t made the connection. He should have at least seen something was wrong, but he’d been blinded by how naïve and innocent and contemptibly superficial Charles had seemed. Stupid of him.

“You got something, Lehnsherr?”

Telling Fury would be imprudent. Charles had been taken almost immediately after SHIELD had learned of his alter ego, and even if a leak wasn’t responsible, it would be best to play it close to the chest on this one. Charles was too important to risk.

“No,” he said. “Nothing.”

“Sir!”

They both looked over to the doorway where a young, rumpled-looking agent stood with files in-hand. “Agent Hill told me to bring you these updated reports,” she said, holding them out.

As Fury turned to take them, Erik quickly memorized the number listed under Dentist and then slipped Charles’ phone back into the evidence box. By the time Fury turned back, Erik was moving past him for the door.

“Find anything?” the director called after him.

Erik shrugged, his fingers clenched around his phone in his pocket, itching to pull it out, eager to have a lead at last. “I’ll let you know.”
“I’ve been looking for you for a long time,” Colonel Stryker said, staring hard through the glass prison. Charles couldn’t quite meet his eyes; there was something soulless in them, something dead. Any man without thoughts to read might well have been dead to Charles, dead or a photograph or a reflection in a mirror.

“Have you?” Charles asked, for the sake of conversation. Perhaps even in this strange half-reality, he might be able to pry some answers from anyone willing to give them. “What for?”

“Like I said,” Stryker said, his lips curving in a slow, eager smile, “you’re going to help me save the world.”

“I assumed that was hyperbole,” Charles replied politely. He was capable of remaining polite and calm. It was only a matter of forcing himself to be.

Stryker’s smile turned cold. “Not at all, Professor. Let me show you.”

“Please.”

Stryker nodded at a pair of men standing to the periphery of the room. They were wearing all black and even from the distance, Charles could see the guns holstered at their hips. Guards, not scientists. He tensed as they approached.

“Open it,” Stryker called over his shoulder. The woman sitting at the nearest workstation keyed a passcode into her computer, and to Charles’ right, the locking mechanism in the door unlatched in smooth, mechanical shifts. He stood frozen in the moment of indecision, torn between recoiling and making a sprint for it. The opportunity slipped away with his hesitation as the two guards appeared in the doorway, both with batons in their hands.

“Don’t give them reason to hurt you,” Stryker said. “They will if they have to.”

Charles had nothing to fight with. He’d wait for a better chance, he decided.

Or he’d wait for himself to wake up.

The instant he stepped outside of the cell, he staggered, mind expanding in a sudden, cresting wave. His telepathy. God. It always returned in increments after a period of suppression, but this—this was all his ability rushing back into him at once, and he stumbled to his knees, crying out with the force of it. His mind swarmed up and out with renewed power, sealing in the hole of his thoughts and rushing outwards, scrabbling for any consciousness to latch onto, intent on filling in the gaps of his perception. It was like having a long-tied blindfold removed, light flooding into his eyes and revealing the contours of the blackness he had blindly been groping his way around. He knelt gasping on the hard concrete floor, his mind bouncing rapidly from point to point as it remembered how to function fully.

When he looked up, he was more clear-headed than he had been for…for however long he had been curled up on the bed, forgetting himself.

“Professor.” Stryker stood above him, his hands clasped behind his back as he looked dispassionately down at Charles. “Come.”

Shakily, Charles rose to his feet and followed as Stryker led him through the row of workstations toward a door on the opposite end of the large room. Charles glanced around as they walked, noting the number of personnel and the size of the place. So many people and such a large facility. A building this size couldn’t belong to an inconspicuous operation. They had to be operating under false names and front companies. Just on par for the government’s black programs, Charles thought...
darkly. This couldn’t be anything legitimate. Kidnapping citizens from their homes and holding them in secret prisons wasn’t under the government’s official purview.

They passed dozens of scientists, only a few of whom looked twice in Charles’ direction. They looked strange. Something about them was off. Stryker and the two guards escorting him looked strange as well, like they were walking through a mist or a thick fog, the edges of their figures ill-defined. Charles stared muzzily at them, puzzled.

They were still shadows, he realized finally, with a trembling shock. No minds to read, no thoughts to discern. They were empty.

He stopped dead. His telepathy was there, he could feel it rolling out from his mind in great tides, like a creature stretching and unfurling after a long period of dormancy. But these people weren’t there. But he was sure they were there, he was sure of it; the sounds of their boots filled his ears, he could smell the leather of their clothes and the bland sterility of the room. They were real in all senses but the most important one.

Was this still a dream? Had he never woken up?

“Move,” the guard on his left ordered gruffly.

He turned to look at him. Very real. Details down to the seams of his protective vest. Slowly, Charles reached out to touch the man’s face.

He was on the floor in a blur of motion, pain exploding at his cheek. His telepathy snapped wildly outwards, seeking out enemies and finding none. Blood trickled from his mouth, tasting copper-sharp on his tongue. Sprawled on the floor, he bit his lip to keep from making a sound and breathed raggedly until the burst of pain receded into a dull throb.

“I told you they would hurt you if they had to,” Stryker said unsympathetically from somewhere above him. “Don’t touch anyone. Don’t touch anything. It’s very simple, Professor. Do as you’re told.”

“You…” Charles panted, closing his eyes. “You aren’t real.”

“Real?” Stryker barked a laugh. “Get him up.”

Firm hands wound under his arms and hauled him to his feet. He swayed there unsteadily, his vision blurry. The baton had struck him hard across his left cheek, leaving a swath of pulsing pain in its wake. His jaw felt loose, his mouth thick with blood. The sensation was oddly real. He never felt anything his sharply in dreams, did he?

“Bring him along,” Stryker said, and Charles stumbled along after him, the guards with their hands clasped tightly above his elbows, either to keep him in line or to steady him. Probably both. When they reached the door at the end of the room, Stryker keyed in a code to the keypad and stepped back as the door hissed open.

Inside, the room was dimly-lit and much smaller than the cavernous space they had come from. The guards released Charles, pushing him toward the center of the room where a single chair sat in the darkness.

“Sit, Professor,” Stryker said.

Warily, Charles obeyed. The moment he settled in, the chair hummed underneath him, and lights flickered on, spotlighting him and illuminating enough of the room for him to see equipment arrayed
around him: a couple of monitors to his left, a mass of wires trailing from the chair to the wall on his right.

“What is this?” he asked, ready to leap from the seat at the first hint of danger. Even the small motion of speaking made him grimace as it pulled at his bruised cheek.

“This,” Stryker answered, a spark of excitement springing to life in his dark eyes, “is Cerebro.”

* 

The line for Dentist rang for only two tones before a breathless voice said, “Hello?”

It wasn’t a voice Erik recognized. “Hello,” he said. “Who is this?”

“Who are you?” came the belligerent reply.

Erik suppressed a frustrated growl. “X-Men. I want to speak to whoever’s in charge right now.”

He heard a very distinct “Shit” in the background, a moment of frantic rustling like the phone was transferring hands, and finally a new voice, calmer than the first, saying, “Where is Charles Xavier?”

Erik frowned. “I don’t know.”

“Where did you get this number?”

“From his phone.”

“And where did you get his phone?”

“Enough questions,” he snapped. “Let me speak to someone in charge.”

“That’s impossible. Don’t call again.”

“Wait! Wait!” Erik rubbed a hand over his face and softened his voice. “All right. Let me speak to Moira MacTaggert.”

There was a long pause. Erik said into the silence, “I know she’s there, or she’s nearby. Either transfer me to her or let me speak to her now. Tell her it’s Lehnsherr.”

Another silence. Erik clenched the payphone tightly between his fingers, hard enough that the plastic almost cracked. As usual, while his body held still, his mind raced on ahead, plotting his next few moves. If he got an answer from MacTaggert, he’d go directly to her, find out what she knew about Charles, see if she had any leads to follow. If he didn’t, he’d go back to Fury. He’d taken precautions by not calling the Dentist number on his own cellphone, in case Fury or someone in SHIELD was tracking its logs. But if he didn’t have somewhere to go after this call, he’d return to SHIELD and have the techs run the number. Charles’ life outweighed any risk of exposing the X-Men to the possible mole in SHIELD. Erik had no loyalty to the X-Men. To Charles, though…
Loyalty? Was that what was driving him now?

Before he could consider the question too closely, a familiar voice said into the phone, “This is MacTaggert.”

Erik leaned a hand against the payphone’s side and let out a short breath. “MacTaggert. It’s Lehnsherr.”

“I know. What do you want?”

“I’m looking for Charles.”

“I don’t know where he is. I’m busy at the moment, so I need—”

“MacTaggert,” Erik interrupted impatiently. “I know you’re working with Charles. I don’t know who you are, but you already knew he was Professor X, before he told me in his office that afternoon. You’re with the X-Men. I need to know where Charles is.”

“I’m not telling you anything, Lehnsherr,” she said, her voice hard. “SHIELD’s done enough damage. Now excuse me, I’ve got to—”

“I’m worried about him.”

“What?”

“I’m worried about him,” Erik repeated, the words ground out through gritted teeth. “I’m not doing this for SHIELD, I’m doing this for him. If you know where he is, just tell me he’s safe. That’s all. I don’t care about anything else.”

For a second, he was sure she was going to hang up on him. But then she said, the hostility in her voice banked, “You’re looking for him?”

“Yes.”

“On Fury’s orders?”

“No. I’m here on my own.”

She blew out a breath that crackled over the line. “I can’t trust you, Lehnsherr.”

“If it helps, I don’t trust you either,” Erik replied. His jaw clenched tight, and he swallowed the automatic instinct to reach for aggressiveness. Instead, he reached for the truth, in some honest place inside him he hadn’t thought existed. “Please. Charles is my friend.”

He could almost hear MacTaggert deliberate. She was a strong-willed, implacable woman, Erik knew. It was what had made her an excellent secretary. She’d been impossible for other CEOs and businessmen to bully, and it would make her impossible for Erik to bully now. He couldn’t intimidate her into answering him. But she was perceptive as well as stalwart, and he could only hope she heard the sincerity in his voice. Charles was his friend, or at least he was the only one in Erik’s life who had ever come close to fitting in that category. He wasn’t sure if what they had between them could be classified as friendship, but the fact was, Charles was someone important to him and he wasn’t going to lose him. Not now.

“Fine,” MacTaggert said finally. “We need to meet. We’re at a safe house. I’ll give you the address.”

Erik told himself that the breath he let out wasn’t filled with relief. “Thank you.”
“It’s simple, Professor,” Stryker said. “The machine detects mutants using your telepathy and prints relevant data into a spreadsheet for our lab techs to decipher. All I need you to do is allow the machine to use your telepathy for what it needs.”

Charles stared at him. “This is why you were looking for me. You needed a telepath.”

“Not just any telepath. A powerful one. We tried a few before, but the machine burned them out.” Stryker shook his head. “To be honest, I was beginning to wonder if we’d wasted millions on a machine no one could use. But then I met Miss Frost. Quite a telepath herself. I would’ve hired her on, but she was…otherwise engaged. Then she suggested you.”

Charles blinked at him uncomprehendingly. “I don’t know anyone named Frost.” His memories felt far away and foggy, but he knew he’d remember meeting another telepath.

“She didn’t know you personally. But she told me that Professor X was a telepath the likes of which she’d never seen before. You see, she’d visited a handful of facilities where the X-Men attacked, and she’d examined the victims. Someone had put them to sleep, she said. Only a very strong telepath had that sort of control and power, to knock twenty, thirty guards out all at once.” Stryker’s eyes gleamed as they scrutinized Charles. “You were a difficult man to track down. Nick Fury did me a favor, having you come in like you did. Put you on the radar, and after that…” He shrugged. “For such a strong telepath, you didn’t put up much resistance, Professor. I hope you’re less disappointing in Cerebro.”

“I won’t help you find mutants,” Charles growled. He wasn’t sure what Stryker’s motives regarding mutants were, but he knew enough to know that they couldn’t be anything good.

“You’re not in any position to object,” Stryker said calmly, nodding at his men. Charles shied away as they came forward but there was nothing to do as they forced his arms into cuffs that extended from the chair’s arms, locking him securely in place. A deep hum sounded from above him, and he jerked his head back in time to catch sight of a half-spherical helmet connected to a myriad of wires that snaked up the machine’s core and disappeared into the dark corners of the room. It descended upon him so quickly that he had no time to recoil before it settled snugly around his head and began to whir.

Then everything shattered.

* *

You have got to be fucking kidding me, Erik thought, staring up at the safe house. He wondered briefly if he’d gotten the address wrong, but there it was written in black ink across the palm of his hand, unmistakable.

Fuck, he thought peevishly. The things he was willing to do for Charles.
He knocked on the door and was greeted with a familiar robotic voice. “Good evening, Mr. Lehnsherr. Mr. Stark has instructed me to admit you.”

“Mr. Stark had better have instructed you to admit me,” Erik muttered as the door swung open. He was annoyed at how JARVIS’ accent grated on him. It reminded him of Charles.

JARVIS directed him up a winding staircase to a cavernous den that could have comfortably housed the elephant exhibit from the Central Park Zoo. Erik barely batted an eye as he strode in. He’d learned long ago that Tony Stark did not understand the meaning of too much.

Moira MacTaggert stood by the fireplace at the far end of the room. Erik let his metal-sense explore the room and felt nothing but Stark’s gadgets here and there, the piping in the walls, the cables that powered JARVIS and fed him throughout the house, and MacTaggert’s watch, jewelry, and phone, which was clenched tightly in her hand. They were alone.

“Lehnsherr,” she greeted coolly once he’d reached her.

“MacTaggert,” he returned. “This is the safe house? Tony Stark’s New York mansion?”

MacTaggert shrugged. “He’s an old friend of Charles’. They had a mutual arrangement: in case of emergencies, they could use each other’s homes as safe houses.”

Erik shook his head, perplexed. “Old friends? And Stark and his ego would never fit in Charles’ house.”

“As far as I know, they met a long time ago,” MacTaggert replied. “And not Charles’ house, Charles’ estate—but that’s not important—”

Erik made a very great effort not to demand, “Estate?” Evidently there were a million major things he didn’t know about Charles Xavier, but he could rage at Charles and his secrets later, when Charles was safe again. For now, he had to focus.

“Forget Stark,” he said. Stark was stuffed to the back of his mind, where Erik preferred him to be. “Charles. What do you know?”

MacTaggert’s expression pinched. “Someone took him. We don’t know who. He wasn’t answering his phone, so I got worried. I went to his house and found his bedroom a mess. He was gone. I tried to look around to see if there were any clues, but the police showed up before I could figure out much of anything.”

“You took Patches with you.”

“What?”

“The kitten,” Erik said impatiently. Then, without meaning to, he asked, “He’s okay, right?”

“I don’t know. Charles could be anywhere—”

“The kitten.” He couldn’t believe he was asking. “The kitten’s okay?”

MacTaggert shot him a strange look. “Yeah, it’s fine. It’s around here somewhere. Stark embedded a hologram into its collar that projects a mouse scurrying around on the floor. Damn thing hasn’t stopped running since.”

Of course. Only Stark. “Okay, good. Then have you found anything about Charles since?”
MacTaggert shook her head. “No. Stark’s been running a few search programs, but they take time. You don’t have any leads, do you?”

Erik scowled. “Nothing. I would go to Fury, but I think there’s a leak in SHIELD.”

“Yeah, we figured the same. We flew under the radar for a long time, and everything was all right. Then the day after Charles reveals himself as Professor X, he gets abducted? I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“We’re in agreement there,” Erik growled, crossing his arms and resisting the urge to pace. So MacTaggert had no more information than he did. That was both frustrating and frightening. For every minute Charles was gone, the chances of them finding him plummeted. And he didn’t want to imagine what was happening to Charles while they were standing here, lost.

“So what can we do?” he asked. “Can Stark use some help? Is there anything else—?”

MacTaggert shook her head. She looked about as frustrated as he felt, brows pinched and mouth drawn in a straight, tight line. “Stark’s got the most advanced computer system in the country. I didn’t want him to tell me exactly what he’s up to—plausible deniability and all—but I got the feeling he’s hacking more than one government database at the moment. Illegal business. I don’t want to know. But I made him promise he’d let us know the moment he got anything.”

“Good.” Erik hated the idea of relying on Stark for anything—the man couldn’t be depended on to show up to his own birthday party on time—but he had to admit that Stark could be unparalleled on occasion, when it counted. And Charles counted. “We should still…” What? With nothing to go off of, they were stuck until Stark uncovered something. Given the choice between aimlessly wandering the streets hoping to come across Charles and remaining in Tony Stark’s home and presence for an indefinite amount of time, Erik would reluctantly choose the latter, if only because that meant he would be close at hand when Stark had news to share.

“We should sit,” MacTaggert finished, gesturing to the armchairs scattered around the fireplace. “Save your energy, Lehnsherr. We’re going to need it.”

MacTaggert sank into the white chair to the right of the fireplace, and Erik settled into the blue one across from hers. The moment he did, all the exhaustion seemed to slam into him at once. He hadn’t even sat down for more than twenty minutes since he’d seen the news about Charles, and now that he had stopped, his entire body was beginning to ache again. His cheek throbbed steadily, and the cut under his eye felt puffy to the touch. His chest was tight, each breath pulling painfully at his bruised ribs. He unwound the bandages to examine his right wrist. Red and a bit swollen, but he couldn’t feel out any broken bones. A bad sprain, he guessed. He wished he had a splint for it, but for now the bandages would have to do.

“Wait,” MacTaggert said when he went to rewrap it. She stood up and crossed over to him, kneeling and reaching for his hand. He pulled it back warily, eyes narrowed.

“I’m not going to hurt it,” she huffed, holding out her hand expectantly. “Not any worse than you have already anyway.”

After a moment of hesitation, he extended his hand so she could see. Her cool fingers probed at the swelling around his wrist, eliciting a sharp hiss from him before he could suppress it.

“You banged yourself up pretty badly,” she remarked, her eyes flicking up to the cut on his cheek before returning to her inspection of his hand. “Any particular reason?”
“No.” He wasn’t going to talk to her about Shaw. Until Charles, he’d never spoken of him to anyone but Nick Fury, and it was going to stay that way.

Her eyebrows lifted speculatively, but she didn’t push. Instead, she asked, “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“I’m fine.”

Before he could stop her, she reached up and pressed a hand firmly against his chest. Letting out a breathless cry of pain, he grabbed instinctively at the metal on her body and gave her a hard shove. She fell back against the carpet, eyes wide.

“What—” he spat.

“You’re fine,” she said flatly. “I can see that.”

He scowled at her. “Some bruised ribs. It’s nothing.”

She climbed to her feet and nodded at the door. “Come on. Stark’s got to have a first aid kit somewhere, and you’re going to need to get any injuries taken care of before we go after Charles.”

She gave him a significant look. “You’re not going to be helping Charles if you’re hobbling around trying to breathe.”

“I’m not that bad,” he muttered, but he got to his feet and followed her as she left the room. As they turned down the hall, he studied her out of the corner of his eye. “What are you then? FBI? CIA?”

The corners of her lips twitched. “CIA.” He should have known. Moira MacTaggert wasn’t anything close to a secretary.

“I was assigned to Charles,” she explained, and then paused. Probably deciding whether or not it would be safe to reveal anything to Erik. Eventually, she continued. “To cultivate him as a CIA asset so he could help us. I guess I ended up helping him instead.”

There was something soft in her voice when she said Charles’ name. Something fond. Erik’s gut twisted strangely. “You like him, don’t you.”

She blinked. “Well, of course I do. He’s my friend.”

“You don’t risk your entire career in the CIA for a friend.”

MacTaggert leveled an unimpressed look at him. It wasn’t nearly as intimidating as it could be; he could see behind her eyes that she was flustered. “I don’t know what kind of friends you have, Lehnsherr, but I would. For a good friend, I would.”

“But Charles isn’t just a good friend, is he,” Erik said unrelentingly. “Are you and he—”

“No,” she interrupted sharply. “No, we’re not—he’s not—” She took a breath, staring straight on ahead. “There are more important things to think about right now.”

She was right. Charles was missing, and all Erik’s mind was fixating on right then was the question of whether MacTaggert and Charles had ever been more than secretary and CEO, CIA agent and Professor X. What the fuck was the matter with him? Hesteadfastly ignored how abruptly jealous he felt at the idea of Charles with anyone else. Charles’ safety first—everything else could come later.

They made their way to the bathroom, getting lost twice under MacTaggert’s guidance before Erik ran his metal-sense out over the mansion and found the faucets and shower rods to direct them to the
nearest one. He sat down on the side of the monstrous tub that resembled an indoor swimming pool more than a hot tub and waited as MacTaggert dug through the cabinets for a first aid kit. She came up with three, chose the biggest one, and carried it to him.

“Wrist first,” she said, and then set to work.

Erik watched her move. She was quick, neat, and efficient, wrapping his wrist, cleaning his cheek, binding his ribs tightly, all in rapid succession. If she hadn’t been a CIA agent, Erik mused, she would have made a good medic. And if she hadn’t been dubiously linked to Charles in a way that Erik didn’t want to think about, he might actually have liked her.

Erik wasn’t ever given to small talk, but he figured that this might be one of his only chances to get answers to any of the dozen questions running around in his mind. As she inspected the bruise on his shin, he asked, “How long have you worked with Charles?”

“About three years.”

“From the beginning then.”

“At the time, the X-Men were just a vague idea that Charles had had. I was there to observe him and see how he might be a good CIA asset. All we really knew about him back then was that he was a genius and a mutant. Then I met him, we got to talking, and after a couple of weeks, he came to me with a proposition.”

“He asked you to help him with the X-Men.”

MacTaggert nodded. “He did. And I agreed.”

Erik frowned. “You’d only known him for two weeks then. You laid your career on the line for a man you barely knew.”

MacTaggert cocked her head, a quizzical smile tilting up her lips. “And how long have you known him, Lehnsherr?”

Three weeks. He’d known Charles for three weeks, and for him, he’d abandoned his chase for Shaw, choosing instead to follow a trail that had already gone cold by the time he’d reached its start. He was half-horrified at himself, half-confused. Everything in his life had had reason before Charles. Charles had brought wild, reckless, impulsive chaos.

“Did you ever…” He hesitated for a moment, then pressed on. “Did you ever think that he might have used his telepathy on you? Made you help him?”

MacTaggert stiffened, her mouth pressing into a stern line. “No,” she replied, tucking the roll of bandages and antibiotics back into the kit before standing. “Charles would never do that.”

“But how do you know?” Erik persisted, standing too.

“I know him, and that’s all I need to know.”

He scoffed. “That’s all?”

“Listen, Lehnsherr,” MacTaggert retorted. “Charles would never do that, and if you think differently, you don’t know him at all.”

He matched her glare. “There’s nothing wrong with being weary.” He hadn’t survived as long as he
had by being careless.

“No, there isn’t,” she agreed, sliding the first aid kit back into the medicine cabinet by the mirror. “But there’s a point where you have to decide whether or not you’re willing to trust someone, and if you don’t trust Charles, then maybe you shouldn’t be here.”

Clearly irritated now, she stalked past him and disappeared through the doorway. Bemused, he watched her go. She had to have been suspicious, at the beginning at least. A telepath as powerful as Charles couldn’t be trusted so quickly, so completely.

Could he?

It was unfair to Charles, Erik knew. It wasn’t his fault. It was his damned telepathy, hanging between them like a rope bridge across a canyon. Erik knew that if he trusted it, it would break underneath him and he’d fall. But Charles was on the other side.

Fuck.

He leaned against the sink counter and ran his good hand through his hair. It was getting long. He’d been planning on cutting it after his assignment with Charles was over, but he was beginning to realize that there wasn’t going to be an after Charles. He couldn’t quite imagine it.

He closed his eyes and breathed out very slowly. Fuck. He was in far, far deeper than he meant to be. Somehow he’d made the choice without meaning to—that rope bridge was swinging in the wind, and, against every self-preservation instinct in him, he had stepped out onto it and he was only now realizing that he’d done it.

Shit. Part of him wanted to turn back. He could give this up right now, return to the familiar road of hunting down Sebastian Shaw, forget about Charles Xavier and how utterly and infuriatingly confusing he made everything. But he couldn’t turn away from Charles. Not when Charles was…not when he…

Oh God. The realization shot down his spine like lightning, and he thought for a moment that he might actually have fallen over if he hadn’t been bracing himself against the counter. Moira MacTaggert might have been willing to risk her life’s work for a friend, but Erik Lehnsherr certainly was not. But Charles wasn’t a friend. There was no other explanation for everything he’d done in the last three weeks: he was fucking in love with Charles Xavier, and that was why he’d run back the instant he’d heard about Charles’ disappearance, and that was why he’d stepped out onto that swaying rope bridge, and that was why he was here now, standing in a bathroom in Tony fucking Stark’s house having something of a life crisis when he could have been across the country hunting down the man he’d made it his life’s ambition to destroy.

He loved Charles. Charles Xavier, a man he’d hated once, a man he was sure he still hated a little. But in that moment, Charles’ involvement with suppressants didn’t matter, his irritating naiveté didn’t matter, his telepathy didn’t matter—what mattered was that Erik loved him, and he’d already lost enough people he loved.

He’d spent half his life trying to avenge his mother. He wasn’t going to spend the next half of his life avenging Charles. Everything else was frighteningly new and uncertain, but that—that was unquestionable.

Steeling himself, he pushed off the counter and strode for the door. Time to find Tony Stark.
When they pulled him from the machine, he nearly blacked out. His legs gave way underneath him, and he hit the floor so hard his skull seemed to rattle, his mind spinning uselessly out into empty space. After the thunderous noise of a thousand minds, the renewed silence shocked him. He thought he might be sick.

The next thing he was aware of was lying on the thin mattress of the glass prison. But it wasn’t glass anymore: the wall had sealed back up solidly, and the cell was white again on all four sides, the steel gray door the only break in color.

He sat up. His head pounded mercilessly, sending a stabbing pain right down behind his eyes with every throb of his pulse. His telepathy was raw and overused, but he stretched it out anyway.

Silence, all around. Shivering, he pulled his mind back tightly around himself and built up his shields, one layer at a time. At least now he could pretend that the silence was self-imposed.

Without meaning to, he lay down and slept. When he woke up, the headache had receded somewhat, leaving him more lucid and more conscious of what had happened.

They’d put him in a machine. They’d put him in a machine that had seized his telepathy and dragged it outwards, against his will, blanketing the local area, the neighborhood, the city. He’d tried to fight against it, but the agony had been excruciating and he’d only been able to watch helplessly as his mind flew from one mutant to another, seeking out a bright splash of color among a gray world. The machine delved deeper than he would have, reading names and addresses and relationships, and though he’d tried to pull back against the breaches in privacy, the pain when he swam against the machine’s flow had made it impossible to resist for long. He’d been lost in the swirling eddy of too many minds, too many memories and details and emotions, too many loves and hates and desires and fears. With that many minds, he would have lost himself completely if the machine hadn’t anchored him, yanking him ruthlessly to a new mind before he could linger on one long enough to sink.

Registration. That was what Stryker was doing. Forced registration with Cerebro and a telepath, searching out mutants and documenting their details. The implications of the collected data made Charles blanch with horror. With this, Stryker knew enough to do anything—observe, abduct, force useful mutants into his plans as he had forced Charles, even launch coordinated attacks, if he had a mind to. Cerebro had been the door and Charles the key, and with them, Stryker was going to subvert every mutant rights battle that had ever been won. And Charles was sure, surer than he was of anything else anymore, that Stryker’s overarching plan went far beyond registration.

He didn’t think he could stop it. He was too tired and cold and hungry to use his telepathy at its full strength, and even if he could, Stryker and his men were invisible to him. They had to have some sort of suppression devices on their person, something to keep Charles from touching their thoughts. He’d never heard of any technology that protected its wearer from psionic mutations before, but if Stryker could build a machine that used Charles’ telepathy like a man would wield a telescope, then Charles had no doubt that he could build a device that would keep his mind safe from telepathic encroachments.

So he was stuck. He didn’t think there was any hope for him to escape without his telepathy; he was
too carefully-watched, and he didn’t have the strength to overcome the guards. But there was Cerebro, and with it, he could reach further with his telepathy than he could alone…

If this facility was anywhere near New York, he could find Moira, Raven, or the others. No, Moira was out—the machine only allowed him to dip into mutant minds; it ignored all the rest as if they didn’t exist at all. Raven though, or Hank or Alex or any of the X-Men. They would be together at Tony’s, so if he found one, he’d find them all. But could he risk it? If he so much as focused on them, the machine would catalogue them, tear out their secrets, and enter them into a database that Stryker and his scientists would see. Charles had worked hard in the last three years to keep every member of his team as far off the radar as possible. To contact them now would be to expose them.

But he couldn’t stay here. The silence and tension was fraying his mind at the edges. If he stayed for much longer, he wasn’t sure he wouldn’t go mad. And he wasn’t going to be a pawn in Stryker’s game if he could help it.

His mind began to wander as he grew too sleepy and exhausted to maintain his shields. A memory sprang up: Raven in his kitchen at eight years old, blue and defiant and shy. Then another: the both of them at Oxford, at Pembroke, sprawled lazily under a grove of trees on a hot September morning. In the pub celebrating Charles’ first doctorate. Trying to suppress his laughter as Raven paraded around his flat imitating his professors.

And oh, this was easier, going into his mind instead of reaching out. He burrowed deeper, ignoring the lacing headache in favor of the warmth of old memories. He and Raven discovering all the old streets of London. Buying sweets at every small shop they could find. Wandering bookstores until Raven demanded that he buy something or leave. Falling asleep at his desk at three in the morning, drafts of his thesis scattered from one end of the table to the other.

The memories turned darker, black-tinted at the edges: sitting at the old kitchen table in his flat, Raven perched on the counter across from him, both of them listening grimly as they heard the news about his father. Settling accounts in England before flying back to New York to meet his mother for the funeral. Taking over the company with all his grand plans and eager dreams for mutantkind and then discovering the true brunt of anti-suppressant hatred. Finding Alex, then Sean, then Kitty, then Darwin and all the rest. Sitting in the darkness in his New York house, wishing there was something more he could do for them, for any mutant that had ever been lost. Realizing that, with their help and careful planning, he could.

He thought of Erik. The way Erik moved, lithe and quiet. The way Erik scowled at everything but smiled sometimes when he thought no one was looking, just a tiny quirk of his lips but noticeable and lovely in its own way. The way Erik watched TV, with a serious furrow between his brows and his feet settled solidly on the ground, as if propping them up was too flippant for a man as serious as he claimed to be (and probably was, in all those times when there was someone to impress or intimidate or glare at). The way Erik talked, deliberate and sharp. The way Erik made him tea some mornings, and the way Erik combed his hair after a shower, and the way Erik had kissed him in his office, hard and unyielding and angry and entirely too brief.

He supposed Erik was gone now. He wasn’t sure how far Cerebro could pull his telepathy, but he wasn’t about to stretch his limits and give Stryker the satisfaction of seeing him cooperate. There was no point in looking for Erik anyway. Still, he wished, fleetingly, that Erik were here, because Erik would know what to do and Charles could just bury his face into Erik’s shoulder and sleep safe.

He fell asleep to that fantasy, and when he woke again, roused by the clanking of the door’s machinery, Stryker was standing outside his prison, hands clasped behind his back as he regarded Charles through the glass.
“Wake up, Professor,” he said. “We have work to do.”

Erik didn’t like Tony Stark on the best of days, and this was far from the best of days.

“Erik!” Stark called out, ignoring the fact that Erik had told him about thirty-five times that they were not on a first-name basis. He hopped off the stool he was sitting on, bounded across the room to Erik’s side, and clapped him on the shoulder, ignoring the fact that Erik had told him about seventy-six times that they were not on a casual, physical-contact basis either. He scowled at the hand on his arm, deliberated for a moment about slamming Stark into the concrete floor of his lab by the metal on his body—and Stark always had metal on him no matter what; it was the most likable thing about him—and decided, for once, to be the better man.

He gave Stark a tiny shove as he stalked past him and gestured up to the bright blue, translucent display that occupied the center of the room. “What have you found?”

“Right down to business then,” Stark muttered. “Okay.” He stepped past Erik and gestured to the display. “JARVIS is running a detailed search grid across the country. We narrowed down possible locations with several parameters, considering how long Charles has been gone, who could’ve taken him, where he could be held, that sort of thing. It’s still taking some time. Lots of factors to consider.”

“Can’t you make it go faster?” Erik growled, watching what he assumed was a progress bar inching across the room near the stool Stark had been sitting on.

“You know what, buddy?” Stark asked as he uncapped a water bottle and swept aside some of the papers on the nearest table so he could hop onto the edge. “When you set up a program to hack sixteen federal databases, collate the data to be sorted, and filter results all in under four hours, let me know. We can compare notes.”

Bastard.

Erik sat down on a nearby office chair and reached out idly with his powers. It was a shame Stark could be such an annoying asshole because Erik loved his lab. He tended to like anyplace with an abundance of metal and there was practically nothing in Stark’s lab that wasn’t emanating some sort of magnetic pulse. Even Stark himself pulled at Erik’s senses, with his arc reactor and his restless hands, always picking up bits of metal to play with, always tinkering with something or another. If Stark weren’t such an insufferable son of a bitch 98% (the other two percent coming when he was around Pepper Potts, who had him whipped, or Steve Rogers, who also had him whipped, in a different way) of the time, Erik would have actually liked to linger here, instead of itching to bolt out the door as soon as possible.

“So you worked with Charlie.”

Erik glanced over at Stark, who was fiddling with a blank Rubik’s cube, its stickers all peeled off, instead of looking at him. “What?”
“Charlie. Charles. You worked with him. The pretty CIA agent upstairs told me. Protection detail, right?” Stark spun the sides of the cube, staring intently at it as if he were actually trying to solve it by some method, even though all the colors were gone. “I have to say, you didn’t do a very good job.”

Erik bristled. “I wasn’t with him at the time.”

Stark pivoted on his heel, staring straight at Erik for the first time since Erik had arrived. There was something suddenly hard in his eyes. “So I heard.”

“I was on another assignment,” Erik protested, knowing his words sounded like excuses but unwilling to admit to any guilt. He hadn’t been wrong in leaving. Charles had known that Erik would leave when the mission was done, when Fury gave him leave to continue with his hunt for Shaw. He had been completely transparent in his motives, and no one could fault him for his actions. He couldn’t have known Charles would be in danger after he left. He couldn’t have predicted an attack.

“Another assignment,” Stark echoed, sounding unimpressed. He stared at Erik for another long moment before turning away, aimlessly flipping the sides of the cube again. “You know,” he said, in that flippant way of his that could hide a storm of anger underneath, “Fury should have come to me from the beginning. I could have protected Charles better than anyone else. Not that he needs protection, given his mind-magic thingy, but better safe than sorry, right? That’s what I always say.” He paused. “No, I don’t, but that’s what Pepper always says and she’s usually right about—what—86% of the time? I don’t know. The point is, if he’d wanted to keep Charles safe, he should have come to me. I’m even friends with Charles, so I’ve got a vested interest in keeping him, you know, alive. But he went to you.” His voice turned hard again, unforgiving in a way that Erik had never heard Stark before. “He went to you and trusted you with Charles, and I don’t know what you thought you did but I do know what you didn’t do, and that was your job.”

“I kept him safe for as long as I was assigned to—” Erik began, defensive.

“And that’s all he was to you,” Stark snapped. “An assignment.” He took a breath, looked away. When he spoke, his voice was calm again. “And that’s okay, I couldn’t have expected any better. I don’t give a shit what you thought or what you tried to do. I’m not even really mad at you. Charles is my friend, and Fury shouldn’t have entrusted his safety to some two-bit mercenary. That’s all.”

He shrugged, nonchalant. Stark was a master of masks, and that was why Erik forgot sometimes that he was dangerous. He was an egomaniac, an outrageous partier, and a man with enough zeroes in his bank account that they had scrambled his mind, but he was a genius and, when pressed, he could be as capable and harsh as anyone. His casual dismissal of Erik stung. Erik had nothing to prove to him, could not care less what Stark thought of him, but still he said, “Charles is my friend, and Fury shouldn’t have entrusted his safety to some two-bit mercenary. That’s all.”

Stark stared at him, eyes dark and curious and keen. Erik didn’t waver under his scrutiny, didn’t blink.

Finally, Stark barked a laugh. It was humorless but light. “Never thought I’d see the day that Erik Lehnsherr admitted to caring about something else besides himself and Sebastian Shaw.”

Erik started violently. “How do you—”

“Know about your ancient magical quest to slay the evil dragon running around somewhere in northern Canada right now? Please, don’t insult me.” When Erik continued to glower at him, Stark threw up his hands. “Fine, fine. Isn’t it obvious? I got curious, some databases got hacked, I got
information. Come on, you’ve known me long enough, you know how these things work.”

“Ilegally,” Erik growled. “Those files are confidential.”

“Incidentally, ‘confidential’ rhymes with ‘something interesting inside.’ Okay, no, it doesn’t, but I’m not a poet.” He shrugged and wiggled his fingers. “Can’t keep my sticky fingers out of interesting things though.”

It took an enormous effort to resist the powerful urge to flatten Stark into the floor using one of the dozen heavy robots he had helpfully scattered around his lab. The only thing that stopped Erik in that moment was the display still running in the center of the room, reminding him that Stark was the only one who could decipher the headache-inducing complexity of his own systems, and that Charles needed him right now.

“Find him,” he snapped.

“What? Not even going to interrogate me about how I did it? Not going to threaten me with any sort of bodily harm? Oh happy day—”

“Stark,” Erik snarled, grabbing hold of the arc reactor and twisting hard so that the man was forced to turn to face the diagnostic running in the center of the room, “shut your fucking mouth and find him.”

Stark gave him a flatly unimpressed look over his shoulder. “Pushy. Fine. Let me go?” When nothing happened, he added with a simpering bat of his eyelashes, “Please?”

Erik released him, disgruntled. Charles’ life, now in the hands of Tony Stark. Fantastic. Erik was almost one hundred percent certain that this was going to turn out to be an absolute fucking disaster, but there was nothing else to do. He hated the feeling.

He forced himself to sit next to the nearest lab table to keep from pacing restlessly around. Nothing could keep his mind from racing aimlessly in circles though. He entertained, briefly, the idea of rescuing Charles, making sure he was all right, and then resuming the hunt for Shaw. He still had some viable intel; maybe if he could pick up the trail before it went cold for good, he’d have a chance of catching up to Shaw.

But he couldn’t just…leave Charles. Logically, he could always come back after his business with Shaw was done, but he couldn’t be sure that Charles would wait. Charles had said—and Erik remembered this with perfect clarity, remembered perfectly the pitch of Charles’ voice and the quiet, almost despairing quality of it—that he had feelings for Erik, feelings that might become serious, and the very idea that Charles might reciprocate what Erik felt was staggering and breathtaking in equal measure. But feelings changed. Erik couldn’t be sure how long he’d be tracking Shaw, and if it was years…Well, he knew Charles. He knew how quickly people came to adore him, and how freely Charles returned their affection in kind. It was a miracle already that Charles had even come to like anyone as belligerent and moody as Erik. It couldn’t be long before Charles found someone better, someone more suited to him.

His gut twisted in automatic jealousy. Fuck. Being in love was hard. Erik wasn’t sure he particularly liked it.

It was between this thought and the next that the display began to beep. Erik shot out of his seat just as JARVIS said, “Diagnostic complete. Taking into consideration the parameters I was given, I have highlighted Dr. Xavier’s twenty-eight most likely locations.”
Erik stared at the red dots scattered across the map of the United States. “Twenty-eight?”

“It’s better than every single warehouse and storage facility from the east coast to the west,” Stark replied as he got up to fiddle with the display. “And that’s assuming whoever took Charles doesn’t have some super-secret hideaway in another country.”

Too many variables. Even narrowing the targets down to twenty-eight possible locations was twenty-seven too many. They didn’t have time to scope through all the results hoping to find Charles in one of them. Charles didn’t have time.

“You can’t narrow it down any more?” Erik demanded.

“Doing my best,” Stark muttered, his fingers flying as he minimized parts of the display and blew up others. Erik watched him work for several minutes, but the number of red dots on the map remained the same. “Still too many factors to consider,” Stark mused, slashing across the display to discard a chart. “Not enough information to go off of, even with access to all relevant federal databases. Hmm…”

“This angle isn’t working,” Erik said impatiently. “We need a new approach.”

Stark barely spared him a glance. “I’m all ears, metal-boy.”

“The facility,” Erik said, his mind whirring. “The last X-Men attack, the one with casualties. That wasn’t Charles. Someone attacked that lab, and someone killed those people and laid the blame on the X-Men. It didn’t just happen on its own, and it wasn’t random.”

Stark stopped and looked over at him, his eyes sharp. “You think that’s connected? No, wait, of course it’s connected, too much coincidence not to be…” He turned back to his display and shoved all the current data to the side. “JARVIS, give me everything we have on that attack. I want official police reports, unofficial police reports, interviews, witness testimonies, news cameras, the whole lot.”

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS said mechanically, and the display began to light up, information racing dizzily across the room from dozens of locations, indiscernible to Erik but evidently organized into some system that Stark understood.

“All right,” Stark said, his brow furrowing in concentration as he pulled down lines of data and set them in orderly lines in front of him. Erik walked over to stand behind him, arms crossed, studying the numbers that flickered through their lines of sight. “Let’s see what we’ve got.”

Everything blurred between the machine and the cell. He lost track of the number of times they dragged him into Cerebro and let it pull his telepathy so far he thought his mind might actually snap in half, like a rubber band that had been stretched too far. Each time they shut the machine down, it got harder and harder to bring his mind back, to remember himself and remember what was happening here, in the physical world that his telepathy couldn’t touch. It got harder, too, to feel his
physical body when he spent so long existing more as a consciousness than anything else. In Cerebro, he was thought and impulse, and sometimes only instinct. In the cell, he had a strangely heavy, confining corporal body that was weak and sluggish, slow to respond and feeble more than his mind. He knew he had to keep up his strength in case the opportunity to escape presented itself, but it was difficult to keep track of his physical state. Half the time he was sure he was dreaming. Most of the time, he couldn’t tell either way.

He clung to his name. ‘Professor,’ the military officer—Stryker, his name was Stryker—called him, and from that he remembered that he had PhDs, that he was Professor X, that the X was for X-Men and X-gene but also Xavier. His name: Xavier, Charles Xavier. If he forgot everything else, he would not forget that.

He closed his eyes and slept fitfully. The next thing he was aware of, he was back in the machine, his telepathy spiraling out almost before he regained consciousness. He shivered at the thought of losing so much control over his mind that the machine could move it without even his awareness. What would happen if Stryker figured he could use Charles’ telepathy without Charles himself? Permanent sedation? Put him to sleep so that there would be no chance of him fighting at all, just serving their purposes as a mindless power source for Cerebro, driving a million little circuits and connections that printed out lines and lines of data on strangers that Stryker considered his enemies?

No. He grasped his power firmly, feeling it surge and expand underneath him, against his will but not unnoticeable. He knew what was happening; he was simply powerless to stop it. But it was better than forgetting himself completely and allowing the machine to do whatever it was programmed to do unchecked. At the very least, he could watch for even the hint of a chance to turn the tables, and if he found it…well. He wasn’t sure what he could do, bound and weak as he was. But he would do it.

* *

He ended up dozing in one of the dens upstairs, after Stark kicked him out, claiming he was distracting, pacing back and forth from wall to wall, looking as if he wanted to rip someone’s spine out. And it had been true, mostly; he had been ready to rip someone’s spine out. At least it would’ve been something to do, and if that someone was the one responsible for Charles’ kidnapping, so much the better. But he hadn’t had any targets on hand, and Stark, probably rightly wary, had sent him off after grumbling that he was messing with calibration equipment and JARVIS was getting antsy.

Erik very pointedly did not comment that AI systems couldn’t get antsy, no matter how anthropomorphized they were, and simply stalked out the door. After a quick, unsuccessful hunt for MacTaggert, he sat down on one of the couches in the nearest den, intending to take a moment to breathe and think.

He fell asleep sitting up instead, exhausted. Charles swam around in his dreams, blue-eyed and laughing. They walked down the street side by side and every time they passed a car, a little plaintive meow would drift out from the undercarriage. Charles stopped for each one, reaching underneath it, straining until Erik lifted the wheels with his power, and out would crawl a tiny kitten, exactly like Patches, and Charles would grin and coo and cradle the kitten until they reached the next car, where
the process would begin all over again. Soon, they were surrounded by dozens of meowing cats, bounding alongside them and climbing all over Charles, who laughed and laughed and laughed until Erik started to laugh, too, for the sheer joy of seeing Charles happy. Then Charles put out his hand, absently, as if this were a gesture he offered all the time, and Erik slid his fingers in between Charles’, warm and firm.

He woke up, Charles’ laughter echoing in his ears, his chest aching, and not because of bruised ribs. With a sigh, he leaned back against the couch and rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

He was struck, suddenly, by the memory of the last time he’d seen Charles, how coldly he’d dismissed him and walked away. Charles had looked at him, a muted plea for understanding in his eyes, and Erik had brushed him off roughly, too stung by Charles’ lack of trust in him to even consider that Charles might have been right. He wished now he’d stifled his anger for even a minute. Stupid, antagonistic idiot.

Foreign metal pricked on the edge of his awareness, coming down the hall toward him. He stood just as a familiar figure appeared in the doorway, her long blond hair tied back this time, her posture tense instead of casually confident.

“Raven.”

“Erik.” she returned evenly, her voice cool.

He should have known. “You’re one of the X-Men, aren’t you?” His eyes narrowed. “Are you even Charles’ sister?”

“Adopted,” she replied, sauntering into the room, her stride slow and brimming with suppressed aggression that Erik could feel in the flatness of her stare. “Like Charles said.”

Erik eyed her warily. “You’re not estranged.”

“No. Charles asked me to meet you because he thought you were getting suspicious.” She shrugged. “Not the best of covers, but sometimes he gets flustered. Weird, right? You’d think the leader of the X-Men would be some gung-ho, big, muscled dude with some really cool mutation like, I don’t know, shooting these great big energy blasts out of his chest—which we do have, by the way, don’t think we don’t—but it’s not. It’s Charles, who’s dorky and skinny and probably too forgetful to really be scary, but yeah, that’s him. That’s my brother.”

Her voice, which had softened as she spoke of Charles, turned hard again as she gazed at him, arms crossed now. “You were supposed to take care of him.”

He swallowed against the guilt. Every fucking time, this same guilt. He opened his mouth to say, “My assignment with him was done,” but what came out instead was, “I’m sorry.”

Raven paused, clearly having expected a different answer. “What?”

Erik met her eyes evenly. “I’m sorry. It was my job to protect him, and I failed. There’s nothing I can do about that now. But I can get him back.”

She was silent for a moment, her gaze assessing as it locked on his face. “Why are you even here?” she asked finally. “I heard some things. Heard you were off on some other gig, something important. So why did you come back?”

There was something knowing in her voice that stalled the automatic, defensive answers in his throat. He looked away, crossing his arms to keep from fidgeting. “You already know, don’t you.”
“Yeah. But I want to hear it from you.”

He exhaled slowly. “He’s my friend. That’s why. Is that what you want to hear?”

Raven shrugged. “Not really. But if you want to keep it to yourself, you aren’t fooling anyone.”

Moving further into the room, she dropped into a thickly-padded green armchair and studied him carefully. He returned her scrutiny, noting the shadows under her eyes darkening into a color close to bruises, noting the strain in her posture and the way she tapped her fingers restlessly against each other, reminiscent of Charles when he was nervous.

“What do you do?” he asked eventually, not breaking eye contact.

She blinked. “What?”


“Oh.” Raven didn’t move, but her skin rippled suddenly, flying apart in blue flickers like feathers fluttering out across her entire body, from her shoulders up and her torso down in scattered waves until everything settled and she sat before him, her skin now a deep, deep blue, her yellow eyes staring curiously out at him, as if assessing his reaction.

With practiced ease, he shoved his shock away to be dealt with later, when he had the time to process it. “Blue?” he said, a bit dryly. “You can turn blue?”

She rolled her eyes. “I can do other things, too, you know.” Her skin rippled again, and suddenly he was staring at himself, right down to the leather jacket he was wearing and the way he hunched in a bit because standing straight pulled painfully at his ribs.

This time he couldn’t stop himself from gaping, and she laughed, in his voice. “Surprise.”

“That’s…you can take the shape of anyone?”

“There are certain limits, but yes.” Her eyes flickered yellow, though she kept his face. “Anyone you want to see?” She morphed seamlessly back into her blond persona, and then stood up, turning to an attractive redhead, then to Moira MacTaggert, then to a third, vaguely familiar face. She paused on the last one, waiting. When he only raised an eyebrow, she said incredulously, “It’s Adele. You don’t know Adele?”

“No. Should I?”

She rolled her eyes again with that irritating, juvenile type of condescension and sauntered close enough for Erik to see the flecks of gold that persisted in her eyes. He held perfectly still as she leaned into his face, tiptoeing a bit to reach, her eyes boring into his, her lips bare inches from his mouth.

“What are you doing?” he asked, eyes narrowing.

Her red lips curved up in a slow smile. Spectacular, really, the thorough complexity of her disguise: he could see mascara and shadow at her eyes, blush on her cheeks, lipstick painted delicately over her plush lips. He wondered if she had always had this sort of talent in details, or if she had had to work at it, studying people day to day and imitating them until she got them down just right.

“Nothing?” she said, one plucked eyebrow arching up. “Not even a little hint of interest?”
“What are you—”

She shifted in the time it took him to blink, and when he opened his eyes again, Charles was looking back.

He sucked in a sharp breath and took a stumbling step back. Charles regarded him with solemn blue eyes, his lips pursed, his expression considering.

“Oh,” he said, his posh accent perfect around words that sounded almost surprised, “you really do like him.”

“Stop,” Erik said, trying not to rake his eyes over Charles but doing so anyway. Raven had nailed every point, from the scuffs on Charles’ shoes to the way his collar hung askew sometimes when he was careless with it. He was so real that Erik wanted to reach out to touch him, but he kept his arms pinned by his side, fighting his body’s automatic reaction. “Don’t do that.”

“Why not?” Raven said with Charles’ voice. Then she melted back into her own form, blond and lithe, with the hint of a smirk curling at her lips. “Just testing.”

“Testing what?” Erik growled, suddenly angry. How could she be playing around like this when her own brother was missing? How could she be anything close to glib?

She must have seen something dark pass across his face because the smirk disappeared, replaced by a serious look that settled in her eyes and made her look years older than twenty-two. “Even though Charles is the older one, I feel like it’s my responsibility to look out for him. He can be really dumb sometimes, especially with relationships. So here’s the deal: you break his heart, I’ll break your arm. Maybe both, if you really fuck him up. Get it?”

Erik stared at her for a moment, then barked out a laugh. “Are you serious?”

Her gaze turned icy. “What? You think I couldn’t do it?”

“No,” he replied, because he wouldn’t put it past her mutation to be able to shift into the Hulk and beat the shit out of him. “But I didn’t expect to get the protective speech now.” When we have more important things to think about, went unsaid.

Raven only shrugged. “I figured I’d get it out of the way while we had time. You know, in case we have to move quickly once…” She took a breath. “Once Tony finds Charles and everything.”

Her brash confidence cracked, and vulnerability slipped into her expression, visible in the slight trembling of her lips and the deep furrows of her brow. Erik was reminded again of how young she was and how that was her brother out there, a man she’d known for much longer than Erik had. He couldn’t imagine what sort of fears were running through her head at that moment; if they were anything like his, it was a wonder a kid like her was holding it together at all.

As if she’d read his intentions in his expression, or maybe she’d seen the way he’d shifted forward slightly, about to reach out, she stepped back and muttered, “I’m fine.”

“I never said you weren’t.”

“No, but you’re thinking it.” Her tone turned derisive. “You don’t think someone like me should be worrying about this stuff. Too young to be fighting. I’ve heard it all before.”

Erik frowned. “I wasn’t thinking that at all. You’re never too young to know how to fight. Believe me, I know.”
At that, her scorn softened slightly at the edges, and, after a moment of silence, the lost, childlike look returned, more noticeable than before. She turned away, arms crossed, her teeth worrying into her bottom lip. “I just…This hasn’t happened before.”

“What? Charles put in danger? I find that hard to believe, given his extracurricular activities.”

Raven shook her head. “Not that. He’s always in danger. I know it. It’s just never been real before.” She shrugged, obviously striving for nonchalance but falling a little short. “I just wish we knew where he was, okay? It’s hard sitting around waiting.”

That, Erik could definitely understand. He’d hunted men across countries, over waters, through every border imaginable, and still, with all his experience, the restlessness of inaction had never gotten much easier.

“It helps to keep yourself busy,” he offered. He put his hand in his pocket, fishing for a coin. His fingers met the dull, cool metal of Charles’ paperweight instead, the one Charles had thrown at him to keep him occupied that last morning in his office. Erik pulled it out and levitated it in the air between them, making it spin so the spirals of the DNA strand seemed to twist endlessly along.

Some of the frustration in Raven’s eyes lifted at the sight, replaced with wonder. “That’s cool.”

He almost grinned. “Busy,” he reiterated, pulling the strands apart and letting them wind through the spaces of his fingers. “Keep your hands doing something so it feels like less of a wait and more of a warm-up.”

Raven nodded, her eyes riveted on the metal that beaded like mercury across Erik’s palm. “Yeah, makes sense.” She continued to watch for a couple of minutes, the restless tapping of her fingers against her crossed arms stilling. Then she said quietly, “Charles reads when he’s nervous, the dork.”

The fondness in her voice was unmistakable. Erik smiled reflexively at the memory of Charles slouched on the couch, a book open in his lap, the afghan tugged down around his shoulders. “Yes, I noticed.”

Raven grinned. “I used to tease him for being nerdy all the time when we were younger. He never really grew out of it. But I guess some people think it’s cute.”

She slid him a sideways glance, and Erik sniffed indifferently. “If you think you’re going to trick me into calling anything cute, even Charles, you’re mistaken.”

She laughed, eyes bright. “I can see Charles wasn’t lying when he said you had some sort of sense of humor hiding under all that gruffness. He thinks you’re hilarious.”

“He talked to you about me?” Erik asked, trying and probably failing to hide his interest.

“Only when we could talk, which wasn’t much since you came along.”

He shrugged unrepentantly. “Sorry.”

“No, you’re not. But whatever. He never said much, but I could tell.” Her smile turned introspective. “There’s this…I don’t know, his voice gets different when he talks about things he really likes, have you noticed? Like when he talks about science and mutations, he gets all excited, and when he talks about mutant rights, he gets all worked up.”

Erik almost didn’t want to ask, but the question came out anyway, sounding a bit more curious than he wanted it to. “And when he talks about me?”
Raven made a face. "Mushy. That’s the only word for it. He gets all mushy. You’re the only one he’s ever gotten mushy over, you know that? Which brings me back to my original point—"

“Broken arms,” Erik said, nodding. “I remember.”

She glared briefly at him. “You’d better.” Then, threat delivered, she held out her hand. “Can I see?”

He let the metal solidify again and dropped it in her open palm. She tested its weight for a moment before taking one of the strands with both hands and bending it clear in half, so that it went from a curved rod to a crumpled shape. Erik let his eyes widen in appreciation. “Strength, too?”

“I’m stronger than I look,” she said cheekily, tossing the bent rod to him. He raised his hand to catch it, and it was in that moment that he felt the shields around his mind that he regularly kept rigidly strong around him tremble.

At the same instant, Raven froze, her eyes shooting open wide. “Did you feel that?”

As soon as the sensation had come, it was gone. Erik shook his head in confusion. “What?”

Raven stared at him. “I could’ve sworn for a second there…I thought I felt Charles.”

Erik jumped toward her, grabbing her arm and turning her so he could scan her face for any clue, for anything. “What? How? Is he close? Did he say anything?”

She shook her head rapidly. “It was too fast—I barely got—”

The shields around his mind flexed again, bending inward with some external power, and Erik forced himself to drop his long-maintained defenses and shouted, Charles!

He wasn’t sure what he expected. Part of him was convinced he was imagining the whole thing, that desperation was twisting his mind to play tricks on him. But then he felt very slight pressure on the edge of his thoughts, so subtle that he might not have even noticed it if he weren’t paying such sharp attention. He grabbed clumsily at the contact, chasing its familiarity. Charles! Charles? Are you there? It’s Erik. Answer me. Tell me where you are, tell me you’re all right—

The pressure lingered for a moment, just out of reach. Then it dove for him, pushing in, and he staggered to one knee as the brunt of Charles’ telepathy flooded into his mind, bringing with it a chaotic maelstrom of emotions Erik could scarcely make out. Dimly, he was aware of Raven grabbing his arm and shouting a question at him, but the physical world felt impossibly distant, as if he’d been sucked down a long wind tunnel and Raven was yelling at the other end. The presence roaring through his mind was Charles, there was no doubt about it; he remembered the way Charles’ telepathy had felt after the kiss in the study, even dimmed as the contact had been by Erik’s meticulously-kept shields. This was Charles and Charles was…scared. He was scared and furious and confused, like a child who had lost his parents in a crowd. Erik caught the edge of a question, but there were no words behind it, just a desperate, overbearing sense of bewilderment.

Then out of the storm came a brief bolt of clarity. You said my name, Charles said, wondering.

Erik’s pulse thundered in his ears. Charles! It’s me, it’s Erik. Where are you? Are you hurt? Tell me anything you can, anything.

Erik…Erik? Recognition. Incomprehension. Then, brilliantly, realization. ERIK!

The roaring chaos cut so abruptly it left Erik’s ears ringing. It took him a terribly long moment to realize Charles was speaking, and he struggled to push aside his disorientation to listen.
Erik, Erik, Charles said, almost too quickly to catch. *Oh, my friend, I didn’t think—I thought for sure you were gone—I thought—*

*Are you all right?* Erik demanded. *Where are you?*

*I’m—* The relief in his mental voice vanished into urgency. *I don’t have time. Here—*

A dozen rapid images slammed dizzily into him, too much for him to decipher all at once. But before he could ask any questions, Charles let out a choked little cry and Erik could *feel* it, wrenching up through his gut like a fishhook. He wanted to reach out, wanted to pull Charles to him and shield him from whatever was out there, but he didn’t know how. There was a blinding flash of pain and then Charles was gone.

*Charles? CHARLES?*

Desperate, he closed his eyes, imagined whirling around in his mind, searching every corner for a hint of Charles’ presence. But he was alone.


A sting of pain flared across his cheek, and he blinked blearily, squinting against the bright overhead lights of the ceiling. His vision spinning, he focused on the indistinct, fuzzy outline that had to be Raven and croaked, “Get Stark.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

There will be a sequel since this fic completely got away from me. Big thanks to sunryder for being patient with me :)

People were shouting, deafeningly loud, but Charles could only make out Stryker’s voice cracking above the din. “What happened?” he demanded. “What did he do?” Then the voice was right by Charles’ ear, snarling, “What did you do?” but Charles could barely breathe, let alone answer him. Blood ran slick down his nose and down the back of his throat, and he lolled in the restraints of Cerebro, too stunned from the backlash to move.

He’d found Erik. He’d nuded the machine in the general vicinity of Manhattan, searching for Raven, Moira, or the others, knowing the slightest contact would put them in danger but desperate enough to take the risk anyway. But he’d lost himself in the lull of the machine, pulled mindlessly along through one mutant mind after another. And then it had hit an anomaly—a mutant that had learned to shield, a mind that had been familiar in all its steam-fogged glass mystery, and it had called Charles’ name.

Erik. Erik was with Raven, with Tony. Charles had managed to snatch that much in the seconds he’d had, and the very idea made a wild hope surge up in his chest. Barring the obvious fact that Erik had come back for him (and the thought had Charles’ heart beating far more rapidly than it should have been), his X-Men now had someone among their ranks who had enough experience to lead them properly. At the very least, Erik would know how to formulate a plan that wouldn’t get them all killed in the event of an attempted rescue.

“He spoke to someone,” one of the scientists explained, huffing as he ran up to thrust a sheet of paper in Stryker’s hands. “We don’t know who, but Cerebro was designed to control his telepathy, not to let his telepathy control it. But he resisted when it tried to force him to keep going and—and something went wrong.”

“Obviously,” Stryker snapped.

The scientist shook his head and pushed another paper into the colonel’s hands. “His brainwaves are going haywire. We should stop until he recovers or we might risk serious brain damage. While he’s out, we need to reassess Cerebro’s framework, make sure he didn’t break anything.”

There was a moment of silence, and Charles could almost feel Stryker’s frustration, crackling in the crowded room. Then the colonel jerked a nod and said, “Get him cleaned up. We start again as soon as the machine’s ready.”

The guards nearest to Charles moved to undo his restraints. One of them touched the cord winding past Charles’ head to move it away and jerked back with a hiss of pain, banging his wrist against Cerebro’s semi-circular edge as he did. “Fuck,” he muttered. “Be careful, it’s hot.” He reached in again, more carefully this time, and pulled the cuff off Charles’ wrist. As he did, his fingers touched Charles’ skin, and Charles felt a burst of annoyance. Who the fuck designed this thing to be so hot—gotta be a way to cool it—
His mind. His mind was *real*, and Charles raised his head groggily to stare at him, eyes wide. There was nothing remarkable about this man. He was the same guard who had ferried Charles back and forth a dozen times, indiscernible really from the others, and yet Charles could feel the shape of his thoughts. It was harder than it should have been to see them, but if he closed his eyes and concentrated, he could hear *need a fucking cigarette, the number of smoke breaks we get is inhumane*—

Hearing even that much after such an endless silence felt like breaking the surface of the ocean after spending an eternity submerged. Charles could have sobbed in relief.

The guard hauled him up, his hand clamped tightly around Charles’ arm, and then he saw it: a thin silver band around the man’s wrist, sitting snugly against his skin. It was cracked, right where he had banged it against Cerebro’s edge only seconds earlier.

Oh God. Dizzying realization struck him. Working in the suppressant industry, he’d naturally heard of new innovations all the time, including everything from a permanent cure (rumors really, more speculation than anything concrete) to a new brand of psionic protection devices small enough to fit around your hand. Old psionic protections had ranged from everything from a blocky helmet that had been ridiculed from one side of the world to the other, to lead-lined walls that supposedly blocked telepathic endeavors. But word had been floating around about psionic protection hardwired small enough to fit into a palm, small enough to wear unobtrusively under clothing.

Charles hadn’t put much stock into rumors at the time. He hated the idea of any device that would make people invisible to him, and besides, Xavier Pharm was a suppressant manufacturer, nothing more. But evidently, there had been more truth to all the buzz than he’d realized. Nothing else could explain why he was unable to feel any mind in the whole facility but his own.

The urge to reach out and wrap himself around the guard’s newly-exposed mind was almost overwhelming, but he held himself in check. For one thing, his head felt as if it was splitting open, right down the middle. As much as he’d overtaxed his telepathy in Cerebro, he didn’t think he’d be able to read much of anyone’s thoughts right now, let alone take control. And even if he could seize this guard, he was still surrounded by hundreds of other personnel who could stop them the instant they suspected something was wrong. The smartest play would be to tuck away this bit of knowledge, formulate a stronger plan, and bide his time.

Besides, Erik was coming. He’d given Erik all he could, and he knew Erik would make the most of it. If Erik and his X-Men could provide ample distraction, he would have a better chance of breaking free.

They locked him back in his cell, its four walls gone opaque again so that he was ostensibly alone.

But he could feel the faint pulse of the guard’s mind moving down the hall, turning the corner, heading off through the compound. And he knew now that it was only a matter of time before his imprisonment was going to end, one way or another.
“Stryker,” Erik said, words spilling almost unintelligibly out of his mouth in his haste. “He was wearing a uniform. Military. American. Older, forties, fifties.”

Stark’s fingers flew across the keyboard, dozens of images appearing and disappearing across his screen in quick succession. A familiar face popped up and Erik jabbed his finger at it, his stomach churning. “That’s him.”

“Him?” Stark read his bio as the information scrolled up to accompany the picture. “William Stryker, colonel in the U.S. Army. Got a ton of blacklisted files attached to his name. It’ll take a few minutes to dig up the copies that aren’t redacted. What else did he show you?”

“A cell. It was white, one door, locked.” Erik waved an impatient hand. “It was quick. He didn’t have time. He just shoved a bunch of images at me. There was a—a machine. He was hooked up to some machine, with a headset over his head, wires everywhere. I don’t know what it does, but the image felt…scared. There was fear in it.”

Beside him, Raven pressed her lips tightly together, her arms crossed. She’d barely spoken a word since they’d rushed down to Stark’s lab, Erik half-stumbling from the residual effects of the wild seconds of mental contact. Erik wasn’t sure if she’d left after ushering him to Stark, but within moments, MacTaggert and a handful of unfamiliar faces had joined them, crowding in around the walls of the lab to leave Stark with enough room to manipulate his holograms. The newcomers eyed Erik warily, just as he eyed them. The X-Men, he figured. Some of them were unmistakably mutant; a tall, blue-furred one towered over the rest, while the girl who stood to his left had wings that fluttered agitatedly. The others seemed to have invisible mutations, if they had any at all. There were seven of them total, including Raven. Erik resolved to speak to them later, after he helped Stark gather enough intel to move on. He’d need to know what their powers were and plan accordingly.

“Here’s something,” Stark muttered, flicking the edge of one hologram so that it spun out and expanded so that all of them could see it with ease. “This was linked to his name, something called Weapon X. Something tells me that isn’t a cheap porn flick.”

“What is it then?” MacTaggert asked, drifting closer.

“JARVIS?”

“Sir, the relevant files are sealed. Shall I proceed anyway?”

Stark rolled his eyes. “Yes, proceed anyway. I’m hurt. I thought you knew me better than this.”

“I always ask permission before engaging in highly-illegal activities,” JARVIS replied dryly. “In case you happen to think better of it, sir.”

“Oh hush,” Stark said breezily. “What’s the worst I could get for this anyway?”

“For the highest counts of treason, you could receive the death penalty, sir.”

Stark didn’t even blink. “Now you’re starting to sound like Pepper. Always so negative. Come on, where are those files? We don’t have all day.”

No, they didn’t. Erik could feel himself vibrating with pent-up energy and fear, everything in him ready to be moving. Charles had been scared and in pain, and if his captors realized he’d reached out to Erik…

They had no time to delay. The chances of Charles’ survival plummeted the longer they waited.
As they waited for JARVIS to retrieve the necessary information, Stark stepped a little closer to Erik and said, his voice dropping low, “When we find Charles, you’re going after him, aren’t you?”

Erik almost bared his teeth in a snarl. “You can’t stop me.”

Stark shook his head. “Don’t want to stop you. But if you’re planning on tearing off on your own after we get his location, let me remind you that I’m going after him, too, and so are those guys standing over there. You really don’t want to get in the way of the blue one. Fangs. Like a feral teddy bear, which is more than a little scary when you think about it.”

“What’s your point?” Erik asked testily.

“My point is, we’ll do better if we work together.” He held up a hand before Erik could say anything. “I know, I know. It hurts your soul to cooperate with another living being. I gotta say, I’m not overcome with joy at the idea of working with a guy who once resized my suit so I couldn’t fit in it anymore—”

“That was two years ago.”

“Feels like yesterday. You know the groin plate still doesn’t fit quite right? Never mind, it doesn’t matter. The point is, don’t go galloping off into the sunrise on your own. Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto.”

“What?”

“And now you sound like Steve. God, does no one watch television these days? And by these days, I mean twenty years ago. I swear—”

He cut himself off as JARVIS splayed a dozen pages across the screen, some heavily redacted, some untouched. “A weapons program,” Stark mused as he glanced through the data at a speed that belied comprehension. “Couldn’t have guessed that one. Something black-opsy. Can’t be that old—there’s barely anything on it…Hang on, what’s this? Ooh, interesting.”

“What is it?” MacTaggert asked, moving closer.

“Look at this address.” He pulled it up and highlighted it. Someplace in Illinois. It didn’t look familiar. “Anyone? Anyone? No? Let me show you the building…” A couple of keystrokes pulled up an image of what looked like an enormous old warehouse out in a field. “Now?”

“We’ve been there.”

Erik looked sharply over to the blue-furred mutant, who pointed at the warehouse with recognition dawning in his eyes. “December 2012. Right around Christmastime. It was an experimentation lab.”

The redhead boy Erik thought had been half-asleep throughout the entire conversation nodded. “Oh yeah. I remember that one. It was a quick job. There weren’t too many people there.”

“Only about a dozen,” Blue Fur confirmed. “There were four mutants there, too.”

Stark nodded. “It’s the site of an X-Men attack on December 21 of 2012.”

“That lab had something to do with Weapon X then?” Erik asked, trying to fit the pieces together.

“Looks like it. JARVIS, give me every address mentioned in these files and then correlate them with the addresses of X-Men attacks from 2010 onward.”
The data zipped in place within a minute, and Stark nodded, his brows knitting as his finger mapped out a pattern. “Well, would you look at that. Thirty-seven X-Men attacks over a three-year period, thirty-three of those attacks on illegal labs, and out of those thirty-three, thirteen of them with addresses matching those mentioned in Weapon X files.”

Erik frowned. “That’s not a coincidence.”

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Stark said solemnly, “or else we might never have realized that.”

“What does this mean though?” MacTaggert cut in before Erik could so much as bristle. “How does Stryker fit in?”

“JARVIS?”

“Colonel Stryker appears to be one of the central figures of Weapon X,” JARVIS explained in that even, moderated tone of his that seemed designed to cast the illusion that everything was under control. “He is listed on most of the dossier headings and he has authorized the majority of the Weapon X projects, but even the files that are not redacted do not provide a clear picture of his role.”

“What else is in the files?” Erik demanded. “Not just addresses and Stryker’s signatures. What sort of weapons are they making?”

Stark held up a hand. “Hold your horses, metal-boy. Let me see.” He flipped through a couple of holograms, scanned over a document filled with bar graphs and tiny print, and then froze, eyes narrowed, expression tight. Erik tensed in apprehension.

“Not weapons,” Stark muttered, his fingers tapping out commands on the keyboard almost faster than Erik’s eye could follow. “Not in the conventional sense anyway. Mix together secret labs, mutant experimentation, a whole gaggle of army scientists, and what do you get?” He pulled the mid-air diagram wide, which now depicted a human body, arms and legs spread like an imitation of the Vitruvian man. “Supersoldiers.”

Erik’s eyes widened. “What? Like Rogers?”

“Rogers,” one of the two blond boys repeated flatly. He was the one that looked surly; the other one just looked a bit worn. “Steve Rogers. As in Captain America?”

“No, Alex, the other Steve Rogers,” Raven said sarcastically, uncrossing her arms and stepping closer to the hologram. She nodded up at the slowly rotating figure and directed her gaze at Stark. “So they’re building supersoldiers? If they’re making Captain Americas, why are they experimenting on mutants? And why did they take Charles?”

“They’re not exactly making Captain Americas,” Stark replied, brow furrowing. “JARVIS?”

“From the experimental abstracts on file and available progress reports, it seems as if the team of Weapon X has been collecting mutants and using them to research methods to enhance mutations.”

“Make them stronger?” MacTaggert said. “Why?”

“To weaponize them,” Stark replied grimly. He flicked a document up so they could see it. Stryker’s signature was scrawled across the bottom. “They’re making mutant hunters to fight for them in the event of a mutant-human conflict.”

Erik’s stomach lurched as the implications of such a project sank in. Mutant-human conflict, in terms of warfare. Humans creating safeguards like mutant hunters, launching preemptive strikes. It was
what he had always feared, what he had always believed was the most plausible outcome of the constant struggle for mutant rights. When the X-Men had first appeared, he had thought more than once that if he hadn’t been so completely consumed by his quest with Shaw, he might have liked to join them in their fight against humanity. Of course, it had soon become apparent that the X-Men weren’t so much anti-human as pro-mutant—and there was a line between the two, however thin it might be. Still, Erik would have fought. He was the sort of man who needed a purpose, and fighting was all he really knew how to do.

“That’s…that’s insane,” Raven said shakily. “No mutant would ever fight for them.”

“Maybe not,” Blue Fur agreed, his voice a deep, troubled rumble. “Maybe that’s why they took Charles.”

Raven’s eyes widened. “What are you saying? They’re using Charles to make other mutants fight for them? Charles would never do that!”

“There are always ways of making people do what you want,” Erik growled darkly. “Everyone has a breaking point.” He didn’t want to think about Charles’.

“I’ll put everything we have together,” Stark said, turning back to his systems. “See if there’s some discernible pattern I can find that’ll tell us where Charles is.”

Blue Fur moved to stand next to him, his movements lithe and silent despite his bulk. “If I can, I’d like to take a look at some of the lab reports from Weapon X. Maybe if I can see it, I can get a better picture of what they’re doing.”

Stark waved a careless hand. “By all means.”

Erik watched them work, brimming over with impatience. They’d taken a leap forward, but now there was nothing to do but wait again. It was a cycle of starts and stops that had no real ending in sight. He just wanted to go.

“Now what do we do?” Raven asked, gnawing on her bottom lip tensely as she eyed Stark and Blue Fur scrolling across the consoles in front of them.

Erik hesitated for a second. Then he put his hand in his pocket and held out the DNA helix.

She took one strand silently, and he took the other. And they waited.

*  

Charles woke to an alarm. It was distant and muffled through the walls of his cell, but it was enough to rouse him. Blinking blearily, he sat up on the bunk and winced at the ongoing pounding in his head. He wasn’t sure how long he’d slept, but the headache hadn’t abated at all. For a moment, he slumped on the edge of the bed, rubbing his temples to try to relieve some of the pressure behind his eyes.
Then he realized—alarm. *Emergency*.

He shot over to the door, but he couldn’t hear anything through the heavy, plated steel. After a moment of hesitation, he shoved past the pain in his head and stretched his telepathy out.

His fear that the guard had noticed the crack in his wristband and had had it replaced was unfounded; he could feel the man’s mind moving quickly through the compound, probably rushing to his post in the event of an emergency. Charles nudged against his mind, wondering if he had enough strength to break through the wristband’s protection, which was weakened but still present. But there was nothing else for him to do. He gritted his teeth and speared through.

For a second, it seemed as if he wasn’t going to be able to punch through. Then the shields broke, like tearing through a thick fog into sunlit clarity, and the guard’s thoughts took intelligible shape. A spike of alarm shot through him at the intrusion before Charles smothered it away. *It’s fine. You’re fine, nothing’s wrong. Keep walking.*

As he obeyed, Charles rifled through his memories. The man’s name was Peter Gibson. He was Army, Special Forces, handpicked personally by Stryker and his team, sworn to every sort of secrecy imaginable before being allowed within ten miles of the compound. Even with his training, he didn’t seem to be allowed much clearance. He didn’t know specifically what the larger picture was; all he knew was that he was assigned to guard a group of scientists, along with a hostile mutant test subject who was telepathic, hence the protections they had to wear. He’d pondered briefly the ethics of testing on a live human like this, but then he’d remembered that it was a *mutant*, not human, and he’d never been a soldier to question his superiors anyway. So he didn’t say a word and took his orders as they came, and even if the mutant looked pathetically *human* at times, enough for a twinge of sympathy to pang through him, he was paid to keep silent, not raise questions.

Charles shoved past those memories and reached for relevant ones. This alarm was specific: it meant imminent attack. Charles froze for a precious second, his heart pounding in his throat. This was it. He needed to *move*.

*Come here,* Charles ordered, turning Gibson around. *Don’t draw any attention to yourself. You’re calm and walking to where you’re supposed to be.*

The guard obeyed silently and quickly. Charles rode along in his mind, watching the world through his eyes. Scientists scrambled down the halls, armfuls of papers in their hands as they raced to what appeared to be furnaces posted in regular intervals throughout the building. *Saving the irreplaceable files,* Charles read from Gibson’s mind. *Destroying everything else.*

He hesitated for a second, tempted to salvage a file or two before all the evidence vanished into ashes. But it was too risky; if Gibson were spotted trying to hide away any evidence, Charles would lose his only leverage. He had to keep as inconspicuous as possible and bide his time.

He hurried Gibson along, trying to glean information on what was happening as they speed-walked through the compound. Evidently, from the shouting of guards as they rushed past, the attack was concentrated on the northern side of the building. According to Gibson’s knowledge of the floor plan, Charles was being held on the east side, with two viable exits to make for once Charles was free. If at all possible, they’d skirt around whatever distraction was happening on the northern end and escape without running into anyone who would stop them.

He was so far entrenched into Gibson’s mind that he almost didn’t register the steel door opening until too late. Dimming his link to Gibson sharply, he scrambled back, narrowly missing being clipped by the door as it swung open.
Stryker stood on the other side with a contingent of six guards. Two of them men seized him under his arms, dragging him to his feet.

“What’s going on?” Charles demanded. “What’s happening?”

“Be silent,” Stryker growled. He looked tense for once, no longer in complete control. Good. Then this attack on the compound was serious. Perhaps—and Charles scarcely allowed himself to hope—it was his X-Men, with Erik to guide them. It had to be them. He could think of no one else brazen enough to attack a heavily-guarded laboratory like this.

He had to get away. If Stryker managed to move him to a secure location, the chances of his team recovering him dropped significantly. He needed to find a way to duck these guards and make it outside.

But first, he had to determine where his people even were. He cast his mind out, grimacing at the pain of too much mental effort with too little energy. Oh, he was going to feel this later, stretching his telepathy to its limits as he was, like running on a sprained ankle. Ignoring the ache, he reached out and out, going beyond the compound, beyond the walls of this building, seeking Erik or Raven or any of his X-Men, searching for a familiar mind—

Nothing. Disappointment rippled through him even as his mind whirred in confusion. Who else could be attacking then? Who else would have reason?

No sooner had he had that thought than the door ahead of them burst open, admitting a wild-eyed guard with blood streaming down his face. “He’s coming!” he gasped, staggering toward them. “He—he slipped through, he’s right behind—”

Stryker stopped dead in his tracks, fear crossing his face in a rapid spasm. In his moment of hesitation, a figure appeared in the doorway, blood streaked across his clothes. He was tall and broad-shouldered, his arms rippling with muscle, his hair cut sharply in a strange, distinctive style. Instead of any uniform, he wore a simple white wife beater and jeans with black combat boots. Civilian? Charles wondered wildly. Who…?

“Logan,” Stryker said, his voice emerging miraculously calm for the fear that Charles could read in the tightening of the corners of his eyes.

“Stryker,” the new arrival growled, his eyes smoldering. “’Bout time we met face-to-face again.”

“Fire,” the colonel ordered, and it was then that Charles realized the guards had drawn their weapons and before he could even duck or shout or do anything more than blink, their fingers curled around the triggers almost as one and the resulting blasts were deafening. Charles dropped to the ground, part of him instinctively wanting to cower there, cover his head, and hope for the best. Instead, he forced himself to move, crawling out from their group and scurrying as quickly as he could down the hall to the nearest empty room. Ducking into it and slamming the door behind him, he reached out with his telepathy for Gibson. The man was standing outside his cell, staring blankly at the open steel door. Charles grabbed at his mind and called up the floor plan, trying to figure his way out to the nearest exit.

Before he could come up with much of anything, a hand clamped around Gibson’s shoulder—ghost fingers echoing the sensation on Charles’—and a voice demanded, “What are you doing, Gibson? We need to go—Hey, you okay?”

Dark green eyes peered at him, and Charles said through Gibson’s mouth, “Yeah, I’m fine.”
“You sure? You look a little dazed. If you’re not at 100%, I swear—Shit. Your bracelet’s broken.”

He pointed at the band around Gibson’s wrist, the crack larger than before and clearly visible. “They said any damage to the bracelet could be dangerous,” the other guard said, his eyes wide. He drew his gun and aimed it right between Gibson’s eyes. “Are you—are you yourself right now?”

Charles hesitated, loath to let go of his one link to the outside world, but if he didn’t have the time to stop and convince the other guard that everything was fine. He cut his ties with Gibson, letting him drop unconscious to the floor. Then he was back in the deserted room, hunched against one wall as a firefight raged in the hall outside. The silence in his head returned full-force, and he gritted his teeth against it and the headache that made him want to lie down and curl into a ball of misery, like he had when he’d been a kid and the stimuli from other minds had overwhelmed him constantly. But there was no bed to curl up in here, and there was no Raven to soothe him with her small hands rubbing along his back. He was alone and in danger. He needed to go.

Pushing himself to his feet, he stumbled to the door at the opposite end of the room. His telepathy revealed nothing in the hall outside, but with those protective bands, Charles couldn’t rely on his mind to give him clues. He pressed his ear to the door instead. Nothing. Cautiously, he pulled the door open a crack and, when nothing burst out at him, slipped through into the hallway beyond.

The corridor was, thankfully, empty. Its white tiles and walls were bathed in red light from the alarms, giving it an eerie glow. The sight reminded him of that horror movie he had watched with Erik’s hand clenched tightly around his, with Erik looking as if he were half a second away from smashing the TV screen in. The warm memory seemed impossibly far away.

He hurried past a slew of open doors, glancing quickly into them but not stopping. They were laboratories, some of them filled with lab benches, others with computers and machines, no doubt to collect data. How many experiments was Stryker running here? Charles wondered. Then he stopped, struck by a thought he should have had ages ago. If there were so many labs, could it be that there were other mutants here? Other victims of Stryker’s plans? He hadn’t been able to feel other mutant minds, but that meant nothing if Stryker had access to an endless supply of those wristbands. With an operation this large, there had be others.

He hesitated, torn. On one hand, he wasn’t in any condition to try to save anyone. He was weak, growing a bit lightheaded, and useless against guns without his telepathy. But on the other hand, he couldn’t just run and leave possible prisoners behind. He was the leader of the X-Men. He believed in the responsibility that entailed.

He started to turn, intent on going back, but what he saw at the end of the hall made him freeze in place, fear shivering up his spine.

The man Stryker had called Logan stood at the other end of the hall, blocking the door Charles had come from. His white shirt was splattered with blood, his eyes dark and intense even from the distance as they locked onto Charles. He looked feral and furious, and the red light from the alarms only heightened the effect. Impossible. He’d been shot point-blank at least a dozen times, and yet here he stood, seemingly unharmed. And his mind—it felt very vague, like words on a page that had been blurred into intelligibility by rain. Charles shrank back instinctively, fighting his body’s automatic drive to run. There was nowhere for him to go.

“Where is he?” Logan asked, his voice a low, angry snarl. “Did he come this way?”

“Who?”

“Stryker.” He spat the name like a curse.
Charles shook his head quickly. “No one’s come this way. It’s just been—”

He cut off with a flinch as Logan strode toward him, one fist pointed in his direction. As he walked, claws sharp and long as knives extended from the skin between his knuckles, three gleaming points of lethality. *Mutant*, Charles realized with wrenching shock.

“Who are you?” Logan demanded.

“I’m a—I’m Charles.” He forced his voice not to shake. “Charles Xavier.”

Logan’s eyes widened. “The suppressant guy. Yeah, your face has been all over TV.”

All over TV. So there *were* people looking for him. “That’s me.”

Logan peered at him, eyes narrowed. “You don’t look like anything special. What’s Stryker want with you?”

“Telepath.” Charles waved vaguely. “I’m a telepath. He’s been using me to—to find other mutants for him. Hooked me up to a machine and I…”

“Telepath?” The other mutant’s eyes glinted with sudden interest. “Can you find him then? Stryker?”

Charles shook his head. “They’ve got these—these bracelets. It protects them from me. I can’t.”

“Dammit.” Logan glanced around, clearly frustrated. “He slipped me. Left his guards to die and ran for it. Lost his scent down the hall. He could be anywhere now.”

“Do you know the way out?” Charles asked, trying to formulate a better plan now that he appeared to have some sort of ally. “If we can get out—”

“No, I’m not leaving without Stryker.”

“*Listen.* The longer we spend in here running aimlessly around, the more time he has to get away. Stryker knows this facility better than we do. Better than *I* do, at least. Unless you have some sort of floor plan in mind…?”

Reluctantly, Logan shook his head.

“All right then. The sooner we get out of here, the sooner I can contact my people. They’ll have more resources than we do, and we’ll be more likely to catch Stryker then. Am I making sense?”

Logan blew out an irritated breath through his nose. “What people? Stryker’s going to be halfway across the country by the time we get the police on it—”

“Not police. Let’s just say I have Tony Stark on speed-dial and leave it at that. Is that acceptable?”

Logan’s eyes widened only fractionally. Then he nodded and grabbed Charles’ arm, retracting his claws in a blur of motion so that they didn’t spear through Charles’ skin. “Come on then.”

They ran down the hall, turned left through a locked door that Logan tore through with barely a pause, then hurried down the next corridor. They passed several scientists who took one look at Logan and bolted in the opposite direction. No one tried to stop them as they hurried through one room after another, until finally they came upon a door that Logan kicked open, allowing blindingly bright sunlight to spill through.

“Come on,” Logan said gruffly as Charles paused to shield his eyes. He dragged Charles bodily after
him by the arm, and together, they stumbled outside.

“This way.” Logan pulled him to the left, skirting the wall of the building.

“Where are we going?” Charles huffed, jogging to keep up.

“Stashed a car over here,” Logan grunted in reply. “There’s a phone, too. Get Stark on the—” He froze, throwing out a hand to push Charles back.

“What is it?” Charles whispered, adrenaline making him tremble.

“Something smells funny. Shouldn’t be anyone on this side of the building—saw them all evacuating south…”

“Let me…” Charles let his telepathy unfurl, spreading it out in a ring around them. Closer than he expected, he encountered a mind—no, three—and they were familiar—they were—

“Charles, get back!”

Erik rounded the corner of the building and flung himself at Logan, whose claws shot out instantly in response. “No!” Charles shouted, yanking back on Logan’s arm. The other mutant shoved him hard, sending him staggering away to smack his back against the hard brick of the building. He watched in horror as Erik leaped for Logan, perfectly in reach of those deadly claws, which Logan brought arcing down toward Erik’s head—

Erik thrust out a hand and Logan’s entire body flew backwards, slamming with crunching impact against brick. “Charles,” Erik said, keeping his hand raised to pin Logan to the building, “are you okay?”

“I’m…fine,” Charles said shakily. He was, mostly.

“Get behind me,” Erik ordered.

Charles didn’t move. “He’s a friend, Erik. He helped me escape. Let him down.”

“Yeah, Erik,” Logan sneered. “Let me the fuck down.”

Erik dropped him unceremoniously, glaring in his direction as he moved toward Charles. He reached out a hand and took Charles’ elbow, pulling him close. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Charles repeated. He could feel Erik’s mind. It wasn’t the unfamiliar terrain of Gibson’s, the terrifying nothingness of Stryker’s, or the strange blurriness of Logan’s. This was Erik. This was real.

“Oh God,” he said, suddenly embarrassingly close to tears. “You’re not a dream.”

Erik twisted to look at him, eyes narrowed. “Charles?”

“You’re not a dream,” Charles managed, unable to stop his hand from shaking where he clamped it tightly around Erik’s forearm. “You’re real.”

It was then that the weight of his exhaustion struck him like a heat wave, and he swayed on his feet. If Erik hadn’t caught him, he would’ve hit the ground in a boneless heap.

“Charles?” Erik demanded, sounding more than a little worried now.
“I’m just going to…to sleep now,” Charles slurred, and promptly dropped out like a light.

Erik sat by Charles’ bedside until dark. Even after the foul-mouthed brute named Logan had run off with Stark and a couple of X-Men as backup in search of Stryker, Erik hadn’t been able to tear himself away from Charles, who lay still and silent in one of Stark’s upstairs guest bedrooms, looking as if he were barely breathing.

It was the first time in Erik’s life that he had opted to remain on the sidelines while others went out to fight. It was the first time in his life that there had even been others to fight for the same cause he did. Fury had commented more than once that Erik’s interpersonal and teamwork skills needed work, and Erik had irritably flipped him off. The truth was, he’d never had reason to develop any collaborative spirit, working alone as he had for over ten years. It felt strange now to sit by idly when there was action to be had. But there was nowhere else he could be right then other than with Charles. To leave before Charles woke was unthinkable.

The digital clock on the nightstand read half past midnight. Stark and the others still hadn’t returned yet, which he hoped meant they had latched onto Stryker’s trail and had either captured him or were still pursuing him now. Erik rubbed the sleep from his eyes and fought down a yawn.

“You look tired.”

He jolted upright in his seat, instantly awake again. “Charles!”

The telepath grinned tiredly at him from the bed, his eyes just barely cracked open. “Hey.”

“How are you feeling?” Erik asked, scooting his chair closer. Charles looked more than a little worn, with the bandage over his eye and cheek and dark shadows under his eyes. He’d also lost enough weight that it was noticeable, which was alarming since he’d only been imprisoned for six days. The doctors at SHIELD had said he was dehydrated and undernourished but otherwise physically unharmed. Erik hoped water and food was all Charles would need to recover.

Charles grimaced. “Not great.” He raised a hand to rub his temple.

“Headache?”

“Yes. I overextended my telepathy. It’s happened before. I’ll be all right.” Opening his eyes wider, he looked at Erik and reached out. Without hesitating, Erik took his hand, and Charles let out a huff of clear relief. “You’re real.”

“Of course I am. You said that earlier, too. What did you mean?”

“I just…” He shook his head and glanced up at the ceiling. “Telepathy has its advantages and disadvantages. For me, when I can’t touch the minds around me, it sort of feels like a dream. It’s, um…it’s hard to explain. But not being able to feel the minds where they were keeping me was…hard. It made it hard to remember what was reality and what wasn’t.”
Erik clenched his teeth. What had happened to Charles in that facility? They hadn’t amassed much evidence from the warehouse; most of the paperwork and computer files had been burned or erased by the time they arrived, and the scientists that had been rounded up hadn’t said much before Stark had made the executive decision to turn them over to SHIELD, declaring that interrogation was more of Fury’s thing than Iron Man’s, which it was. So far, Fury hadn’t come up with much on his end, not that Erik had been paying particularly close attention.

He squeezed Charles’ hand tightly. “I’m real.”

“And you came for me.” His eyes widened. “The others? Is everyone all right?”

Erik nodded. “Everyone’s fine. The guards in facility couldn’t put up much of a fight with their guns twisted up in knots.” He waggled a hand demonstratively.

Charles laughed, the sound thin but still amused. “You know, you should have joined us earlier. Very useful, your mutation.” Then he sobered, a little bemused crinkle appearing between his eyes. “I thought you were going after Shaw.”

Erik shrugged one shoulder. “I came back.”

“Why?”

Charles sounded mystified, which confused Erik in turn. He’d been sure the answer was obvious.

“Why else?” he asked. “I changed my mind.”

“Well, clearly,” Charles harrumphed. “Do I get to hear the reason why?”

Erik hesitated. But what was the point in circumventing the truth? He already knew how Charles felt. It would only be fair to pay Charles the same courtesy, if he didn’t suspect already.

“You,” Erik said, rubbing his thumb across the back of Charles’ hand. “I came back for you because —” He took a breath. The words seemed to stick in the back of his throat, but he forced them out. “Because I couldn’t stop thinking about you. Because you’ve invaded my mind—”

“I told you I would never—”

“Charles,” he said, “be quiet for a minute.”

Something in his voice or face made Charles shut his mouth obediently. Erik spared a moment to wish he’d discovered that skill when they’d first met, but that was another thought for another time.

“Because you invaded my mind,” he continued, almost aggressively, “and I don’t mean with your telepathy. I mean you’ve taken over my life. I can’t get up in the morning to make coffee without heating extra water for your tea. I can’t look at a book without wondering what you’d think of it. I can’t do anything without thinking of you, and I have to admit, I really thought you did this to me. I thought you—you put yourself in my mind and made me like you so much for—I don’t know, for your own pleasure, for your enjoyment, anything. And if I’m honest, sometimes I still think that. But I don’t care anymore. Your telepathy is a part of you, and I’m…I can’t help that I’m suspicious of it, but I’ll learn to—to love it anyway. And even if you’re a naïve fool about suppressants, I won’t hold it against you. Not for now, at least. And I suppose that’s what it all winds down to. I…really like you.” He shook his head with a grimace, trying to drive closer to the truth. “No, more than that—I love you. That’s why I came back. That’s why I’m here.”

Charles stared at him, eyes wide, face pale. For a long, terrible moment, Erik thought he might shake
his head, might let Erik down gently, or maybe not so gently. But then Charles squeezed his hand and said, “That’s very kind of you. Thank you. But you don’t have to—to pretend anything for my sake. I’ll get over you, I know I will, I just need time—”

Erik blinked. “What?”

Charles blinked, too. “Aren’t you—I don’t know—sparing my feelings? I told you I liked you very much when I knew you didn’t feel the same, and now all of a sudden you’re saying things like…like that?” His voice trembled a bit. “I can handle being rejected, you know. Honestly, it’s more cruel to keep me hanging on, don’t you think?”

“Charles,” Erik said, exasperated, “when have you ever known me to spare anyone’s feelings?”

“I—” Charles thought for a moment. Then his eyes widened. “Never?”

“And I’m not going to start with you,” Erik said a bit roughly as he leaned forward and pressed their lips together.

This kiss was infinitely more gentle than the one in the study had been, and infinitely longer. Charles tasted faintly of blood and he whimpered when their movements pulled at his cracked lips, but he was perfect all the same and Erik let him take control, keeping still as Charles touched their mouths together hesitantly, then more confidently when Erik didn’t pull away. He raised his hands to cup Erik’s face, pulling Erik closer, and Erik rose from the chair, setting one knee on the side of the bed so he could lean over Charles’ half-prone form. They curled around each other, a mess of tangled limbs, and it was awkward and a little uncomfortable and perfect.

There was no denying this—this physical, solid attraction between them, tugging in Erik’s stomach like a fishhook connecting him to Charles’ rod. He didn’t think Charles could fake this sort of burning desire.

When they broke apart for breath, Charles was flushed and panting. Erik was glad to see some of his color return; for the first few hours after they’d taken him from the facility, he’d been pale as a sheet.

He brushed Charles’ hair back from his forehead, carefully avoiding the bandage above his eye. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Charles reached up and took Erik’s right hand in his, tracing over the wraps around his wrist. “You’re okay, too?”

“I’m fine,” Erik huffed. How like Charles to worry about everyone but himself. He shifted so he was sitting by Charles’ side instead of half-lying on top of him, though he kept the fingers of his good hand tangled in Charles’ hair.

“What happened?” Charles asked after a pause. “How did you find me?”

“Stark,” Erik replied. “The man is useful when he’s not being an ass.”

Charles laughed. “You just need to get to know him.”

“Oh, I do know him,” Erik muttered. “Unfortunately. I worked with him a few times for SHIELD.”

“Ah. Old friends then.”

“If by ‘friends,’ you mean ‘people whose heads I regularly wish I could cave in,’ then yes.”
Charles laughed again, harder this time. His eyes brightened, less groggy. “I’ll be sure to pass your affections on to Tony the next time I see him. Speaking of…we’re at his mansion, aren’t we?”

Erik nodded. “After we found you, we called in SHIELD to pick up the scientists at the lab. Fury insisted on taking you back to SHIELD for medical attention. He wanted to keep you there, but we refused. It isn’t safe there.”

He hesitated, wondering how much to tell Charles now and how much to explain to him when he was recovered. Charles’ yawn answered that question handily, and Erik stood. “I should let you rest.”

“No, wait.” Charles blinked sleepily but clung to his hand. “Stryker?”

“Your friend Logan and Stark went after him. No news yet. They might be back when you wake up.”

“Mm,” Charles murmured, his eyes slipping shut. “We need to get him, Erik. What he’s planning…it doesn’t bode well for mutants. We need to find him.”

“We will.”

Still Charles struggled to keep his eyes open. Erik sat back down and squeezed his hand. “Rest.”

“I can’t.” Charles’ voice was suddenly small, childlike. “I’m going to fall asleep and this will all have been a dream. When I wake up, you won’t be real anymore.”

His heart clenching, Erik kicked off his shoes and pulled back the covers to slot himself in beside Charles. “I’ll still be here,” he said, tugging Charles closer so that he could wrap his arms around him tightly. “Don’t be a fool.”

A tired smile flickered across Charles’ face. “Thank you,” he said simply, pressing his face into Erik’s shoulder.

A sudden blur of motion at their feet nearly had Erik toppling out of the bed in alarm. Both of them jerked up, and when they saw what it was, Charles burst out laughing as Erik scowled.

“He’s okay, too,” Charles cooed, looking a bit teary-eyed as he sat up and held out a hand. “I was afraid when—when the house was attacked…”

Patches marched up over their blanketed legs and rubbed against Charles’ outstretched hand before curling up imperiously in the space between their bodies. Erik glowered at him.

“He’s not sleeping with us,” he growled.

“But what if he gets lonely?” And dammit, there was that wide-eyed, pleading look that Erik could never resist.

“I’m not going to let a fucking cat spoon you,” Erik muttered, scooping up Patches with one hand and depositing him on Charles’ side, near his legs. He pulled Charles closer to him before the kitten could reclaim his spot between them and then pulled the covers over them. “He can stay on your side.”

“So generous of you,” Charles said, a smile in his voice. His eyes fluttering closed, he murmured through barely-parted lips, “Don’t leave.”
“I’m not going anywhere,” Erik assured him, pressing a kiss to his hair before closing his own eyes. He was exhausted himself. A nap would be good. When he woke, they would plan their next move. They would figure out what to do about Stryker. They would have to see, too, about the future of the X-Men and how to deal with Fury and the government if they decided against Charles and his team. And as always, Shaw remained lodged in the back of Erik’s mind, like an angry splinter driven through his skin.

But that was when they woke. For now, he could pretend nothing existed in the world but himself and Charles, curled together in a warmth that radiated out and out and out until Erik thought he might burn with it. And if it was with Charles, he wouldn’t mind burning at all. They were together, and that was enough, just the two of them.

He grunted in surprise when tiny paws marched up his shoulder and up to his neck, where a bundle of fur sprawled down across the side of his face.

Too tired to even be annoyed, he sighed and closed his eyes. All right. There was the fucking kitten, too.

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