The Waste Land

by nekosmuse

Summary

The White Queen and her Shadow King sit on their throne, safe behind the psionic shields of the Walled City. The armies of Genosha batter uselessly at the gates, a war locked in stalemate. Magneto, camped in the frozen mud, receives word the Citadel intends to send a telepath to the front lines. The same telepath he met two years ago, who sat across a carved wooden chess set and offered Magneto the first friendly smile in a lifetime. The same telepath who still haunts his dreams.

Notes

1) Title and inspiration taken from T.S. Eliot’s, The Waste Land, in particular, A Game of Chess and The Fire Sermon. Opening passage is from What the Thunder Said.

2) Many thanks go to my two alphas, Pookaseraph and Afrocurl, without whom this story would be a pale shadow of its self. They held my hand and kicked my ass and tore my words apart so that new words, better words, could rise from the ashes. I cannot thank either of them enough. Thank you.

3) This story contains darker elements, including dystopian politics, genocide, mind-rape,
captivey, psychological trauma, suggestions of non con (without actual acts), suicidal ideation, violence, torture and gore. It can be at times explicit. Please heed the warnings.

4) This is an alternate universe, alternate history, comics-XMFC fusion with science fiction/fantasy elements.

5) A HUGE thank you to the incredibly talented tehslowone for the cover art. Words cannot express my gratitude. It is simply stunning. Thank you.

6) The ever gracious Afrocurl has also written a collection of poetry that is thematically linked to the story. Please check it out. Hollow.
Chapter 1

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
After the frosty silence in the gardens
After the agony in stony places
The shouting and the crying
Prison and palace and reverberation
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains
He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience

~*~
Magneto stared at the missive in his hand. He glanced back to where Rogue was standing at attention, back ramrod straight. In the low light of the tent, and with her helmet firmly in place, it was impossible to make out the twin white stripes that ran through the front of her hair. Magneto returned his attention to the slip of paper in his hand.

"Is this accurate?" he asked. Rogue had just returned from headquarters. If anyone knew, it was her. He still suspected this was someone's idea of a joke.

"Yes, Sir," she said.

Magneto didn't have an answer for that. He gestured her at ease, her posture making him tense. Immediately she moved to the side of his desk, the slow slink of her hips no doubt meant to draw his gaze. Magneto frowned; eyed her sideways as she perched on the edge of the desk, crossing her legs to angle her body into his space.

"Fighting with Gambit again, are we?" He wasn't interested in her particular brand of flirting today, and he certainly wasn't interested in playing the role of stand-in in her tumultuous relationship.

"He wouldn't know a good thang if it bit him on the ass," she said. "And believe me, I've tried." Magneto crooked a finger. Rogue smiled, smug and just a little bit teasing, and then leaned towards him. He met her halfway.

"Out," he said, a breathless whisper. Her expression turned thunderous.

"Man, you ain't no fun," she said, but she quirked a smile as she slid from his desk, hips still slow and seductive as she crossed the tent and then vanished outside. A gust of wind caught the canvas door. It billowed out, muted light filling the space before it fluttered shut, the tent once again shrouded in shadows.

Magneto felt a tension headache coming on.

The helmet wasn't helping, but taking it off wasn't an option. "More damned telepaths," he said, glancing to the slip of paper still clutched in his hand. He stood from his desk, crossed to the tent's heater and set the paper against an element. It was quick to catch, sparks fanning and then bursting into flames. He let it burn down to almost nothing, dropping the charred remains to the floor and crushing them with the heel of his boot lest they set fire to the rugs. All that remained was cinder and ash.

He wouldn't be the only one getting these orders today. Summoning his cape by its metal clasp, Magneto draped it around his shoulders and strode from the tent.

Outside his protective canvas walls, the heavy scent of overcooked meat combined with the pungent aroma of overused latrines. Magneto swallowed against it, momentarily transported to a different camp; a different life. He shook the thought aside, glanced up at low, rolling grey clouds, and then went in search of Cyclops.

He found Wolverine instead.

"You got an explanation for this?" Wolverine asked, thrusting a sheet of paper into Magneto's chest. The heavy density of Wolverine's adamantium beckoned. Magneto ignored it.

"Orders from Genosha, telling us to expect a VIP, I'd say," Magneto said, letting sarcasm bleed into his tone. He had no idea why Wolverine thought he'd have any additional information. Genosha didn't like him anymore than they did Logan, or any of the other mutants stationed on the
front lines. They kept their golden children close; or at least, they used to.

"Genosha's sending us a goddamned telepath, here, in the middle of this shit storm and we're just supposed to smile and take it?"

Magneto hated to admit it, but Wolverine had a good point. Genosha didn't risk telepaths. They had an entire citadel built to keep them safe. Sending one to the front lines was unthinkable.

"Who'd this guy piss off? That's what I want to know," Wolverine was saying, spitting as he finished, like the idea was personally offensive.

"I'll guess we'll find out when he gets here."

Magneto didn't wait for Wolverine's retort, still intent on seeing Cyclops. His scowl deepened when Wolverine fell into step at his side. The man didn't bathe nearly enough and was starting to smell like wet dog. The latrine-smell was preferable. Magneto did his best to ignore him, concentrating instead on navigating the camp.

Days of perpetual downpour had left the ground slick with mud, some of it so thick they'd stopped getting vehicles through. They ought to move, Magneto thought, not for the first time. They were exposed here, out in the open, reclaimed farmland as far as the eye could see. The few houses that dotted the landscape were grey, rotting and abysmal.

All of it was disturbingly familiar.

"It does have that same, je ne sais quoi, doesn't it?"

There was always the chance that Wolverine had spoken, however out of character, but when Magneto glanced over the man was puffing contentedly on a cigar, ignoring Magneto completely. Magneto let his jaw clench and stared straight ahead, ignoring the new arrival. Schmidt was the last person he wanted to deal with today.

He focused instead on wading through the muck. Schmidt tutted and then attached himself firmly to Magneto's side, gliding across the ground while Magneto struggled to get through the quicksand-like mud. By the time they reached Cyclops' tent, his mood had soured considerably.

Cyclops' tent was military precise and yet completely unsuited to the weather. He'd chosen form over function, its appearance more important than its practicality. Magneto ducked inside, a steady stream of water dripping in its interior, Cyclops' rugs soaked through with rain. Wolverine barked a laugh.

"You're gonna need to trade in that desk of yours for a boat," he said.

Magneto ignored their interplay, stepping aside to avoid the stream of water dripping above his head. Schmidt stepped in to claim the space. The dripping didn't seem to faze him, but then, nothing ever did. The benefit, Magneto supposed, of being the figment of someone's imagination.

"Let me guess, you two are here for this." Cyclops held up the same missive Magneto had burned; the same missive Wolverine had trust into his chest. He carried it with him across the tent, setting it on the strategy table that occupied the tent's centre, the only space free from dripping. His pallet in the corner was soaked through, Cyclops having chosen to sleep in damp rather than ruin campaign plans. Magneto felt a grudging surge of respect.

"Genosha didn't send you anything else?" Magneto asked, stepping forward until he too was leaning over the table. Wolverine followed suit. Together they stared down at Cyclops' plans of the Walled City.
If they could get into that city, they could pull the White Queen and her Shadow King from their throne and the war would be over. Magneto could only assume that was why they were sending the telepath.

Cyclops scowled— as much as a man wearing a wide visor could scowl. He reached into his breast pocket and withdrew a second sheet of paper, setting it on the table.

Magneto didn't begrudge him the additional information. Too many eyes, was Genosha's philosophy, and one Magneto tended to agree with. It wasn't Cyclops' fault Genosha trusted him above Magneto. They knew he was only here because it was either fight for Genosha or crawl in the mud starving with what was left of humanity. Magneto had spent enough of his life crawling in the mud. It was not an experience he wished to repeat.

He glanced down at the missive. A single name stood out in sharp black ink. Magneto blinked, and then exhaled slowly through his teeth. Cyclops glanced up sharply.

"Do you know him?"

"Doesn't everyone?" Magneto asked, because as far as Genosha's telepaths went, there were few who ranked above Charles Xavier.

Cyclops shook his head. "I meant do you know him personally?"

Magneto knew where this was going even before he answered. Even Wolverine was staring at him now, while Schmidt was leaned against the side of the table, wide grin twisting his features into something straight from Magneto's nightmares. Magneto grit his teeth.

"I met him briefly at headquarters, two years ago, just after they recruited me. I spoke to him for less than an hour. I barely remember him, and I'm certain he doesn't remember me."

He was not going to get stuck with this. He outright refused.

Cyclops didn't say anything further, but he inclined his head, looking thoughtful. Magneto pushed back from the table, ignoring Cyclops and Wolverine both—would that he could ignore Schmidt—dismissing himself before his presence sent Cyclops' thoughts running in the wrong direction.

Schmidt followed him from the tent.

"Tsk, Tsk," he said, appearing at Magneto's shoulder, moist breath caressing his neck. Magneto recoiled.

"We're not doing this anymore," he said, which was probably the exact wrong thing to say, because it rather disproved the point he was trying to make.

Schmidt dissolved into laughter.

"Oh, my little Erik Lehnsherr," he said. Magneto flinched upon hearing the name. "You are such a beautiful liar."  

"It's not a lie," Magneto said. "You're dead. I put a coin through your head, so you can go haunt someone else. I'm not interested."

The rain had started up again; fat drops that beat against his helmet, water gathering on the ridge above his eyes, spilling over to obscure his vision. The edge of his cape was soiled, the purple spotted with dirt and debris. It dragged at his shoulders, the silk heavy with damp. Schmidt
practically skipped at his side. Impatient, Magneto gathered the material over his arm and folded it into the crook of his elbow, his steps marginally lighter now that he wasn't being dragged back. By the time he slipped into his tent, he felt like a drowned rat.

What a ridiculous waste of a morning, he thought, scrapping the mud off his boots, not wanting to track it across his rugs. He took his cape off and tossed it into a corner, where it landed on the floor in wet, sodden mess. It was beyond shaking out and hanging to dry anyway.

"That's not what I meant, pet," Schmidt said, coming into the tent, still stuck on their previous conversation. There were many a time when Magneto was convinced ghosts lived outside the normal laws of time.

He didn't immediately clarify, crossing the tent to throw himself onto Magneto's pallet. He patted the bedding at his side, as if Magneto would ever willingly crawl into bed with the man, dead or otherwise.

Magneto remained where he was, standing inside the entranceway. Schmidt made a clicking sound with his tongue.

"Very well, be that way. But you did lie. You know perfectly well who Charles Xavier is. You remember him exactly."

Magneto had no intentions of hearing the rest of that statement, so he turned on his heel and strode from the tent. The rain was worse now, and without his cape he was soon soaked through. Not that it mattered. He got all of three feet out the door before he ran head-first into Schmidt.

"Get out of my head," he tried. If it weren't for the helmet--and he slept in the damned thing--he'd suspect Schmidt was the work of a telepath. Sometimes he thought he was anyway.

"Those pretty blue eyes. Those lush red lips. Oh, you remember him quite well. He quite captured your attention, if I recall. Did it distress you, knowing you would never see him again? That he would remain safe and secure inside his palace while they sent you out to fight in the mud? We learned that the last time, you and I. War is nothing more than little boys, dying in the mud, while the real men of rule, men like Charles Xavier, sit on their thrones and play games of chess with our lives."

Schmidt had learned nothing of the sort. He'd had his throne, or at least the post of his choosing. The White Queen had been more than happy to give him his mutants; to let him oversee their training.

Magneto wondered what would happen if he picked up the nearest jeep and lobbed it at Schmidt's head. It wouldn't accomplish anything, but it might make him feel better. Clearly, he should have made the man suffer more before his death.

"It's our time, Erik. We should be the ones sitting in that palace, not stuck out here with the boys, playing their war games. What harm has the Walled City ever done, aside from trying to cement their rule? Are they any different? Think of the power they would hand you if you offered them victory."

It was easy to ignore Schmidt when he started talking like this: the nonsense of a madman Magneto had almost thought a mercy to put out of his misery. He walked steadily towards the mess hall. If he had to wait on Xavier's arrival, at least he could do it on a full stomach. He'd still rather be fighting, but with the King and Queen locked inside their tower, the battles were few and far between these days. They'd been locked in stalemate for weeks.
"He would give you anything you desired," Schmidt said, slithering like a snake to Magneto's side. Aside from shifting so that their shoulders no longer brushed, Magneto ignored him. There was no need to ask who he was. As far as Schmidt was concerned Emma Frost didn't exist. There was only the Shadow King.

"He would give you Charles Xavier, bound and broken at your feet, yours to do with what you pleased."

Magneto froze. Schmidt had, at various points in his life, frightened him, terrified him, repulsed him, filled him with rage, broken him, and put him back together again. Schmidt had made Magneto what he was, but until this moment Magneto had never truly hated the man. He had despised him, certainly, but he understood Schmidt, had recognized the enormity of what Schmidt had created, and so could never bring himself to label any of the myriad of emotions the man inspired as hate.

There was no other word for the surge of emotion that whited his vision now. Magneto snarled even as he turned to Schmidt. He reached out and caught Schmidt around his neck. It was only mildly satisfying to hear the gurgle of spit and air that escaped Schmidt's throat as Magneto crushed his trachea. It was even more satisfying to watch the brief flash of fear in Schmidt's eyes as Magneto lifted him, tossing him into the side of a barrack tent like he was little more than a ragdoll.

When he lowered his hand, Schmidt was gone and two sergeants were staring at him with wide eyes.

"Back to your posts," he barked, the men jumping to do his bidding, hastily saluting as they scrambled to escape his sight.

Undoubtedly the entire incident would be all over the camp before nightfall. Good, Magneto thought, let them think you're insane. At least then they will give you a wide berth.

He continued his quest for breakfast blissfully alone.

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"This is a terrible idea."

"Yes," Charles acknowledged.

"You're going to get yourself killed."

"It's possible."

"And I'm what? Just supposed to stand by and allow that?"

Charles sighed. He loved Raven dearly, he did, but as guardians went she was more than a little over-protective.

"I'll have you there, won't I?"

Raven spun on her heel, effectively bringing their walk to a halt. She stood, looking entirely too fierce, framed by one of the archways that lined the upper veranda, as still as the marble pillars at
either of her sides. Beyond the Citadel, the city was just waking, the sun glinting off green-slate rooftops and white-washed stucco houses.

"You're asking me to allow you to walk into the heat of battle, into a place where it would be impossible--impossible, Charles--for me to protect you and you think there is something you can say in this argument that will sway me?"

"I..." Charles tried, because really, they'd had this conversation three times now.

"I was nine years old when I kneeled at your feet and pledged my life to yours. It is not just my job to keep you safe. It is my duty."

"And it is my duty to keep this world safe, something I can no longer do trapped inside these walls. We are losing this war, Raven, and when that happens, how safe do you think any of us will be?"

His head was starting to hurt from having this argument; not just with Raven, but with the council and the Oracle. His plan was sound. Even the council had seen that; had agreed to send him. He'd thought all of this was behind him. For God's sake they were scheduled to depart in a few hours.

But Raven still looked set to protest, so Charles pressed on. "Our armies cannot defeat the Shadow King. It is impossible. But there is a good chance I can, but first we have to get past those shields. You speak of duty, Raven, but is my duty any less than yours?"

Raven shifted, so that the sun now hallowed her head. It highlighted the red of her hair, casting the rest of her into shadow, her skin becoming the colour of midnight. She looked ethereal, and so very beautiful. She had been his sole companion since he was eight. He wanted both her support and her approval.

"Your duty is not my concern. It is your life I am sworn to protect," she said, turning then, moving away from the window, the image shattering, her skin returning to its natural cobalt, her hair becoming its ordinary red.

She fell into walking again, expecting Charles to match her pace. Where she led, he followed. Duty. It was no wonder she was having such a difficult time agreeing to follow him anywhere, let alone into battle. Charles reached out with his telepathy; brushed fingertips against the surface of her thoughts. She was angry--so very angry--but more than that, she was afraid. Terrified, even, and that Charles could understand; he was terrified, too. But he'd been terrified for years now, since the war's tide had turned, since it seemed more and more likely they were set to lose. He could no longer sit idle, not when his influence might stem the tide.

Raven led them off the veranda, back into the antechamber of one of the Citadel's smaller libraries. She navigated elaborately carved tables, their legs fantastical beasts and birds that historians claimed once existed. She took them past wide, wingback chairs, upholstered in soft leathers, Charles having passed many a long hour curled inside their embrace. He eyed the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that circled the entire length of the room, longing to snoop amongst their shelves. Raven was not the only one reluctant to leave the security and comforts of the Citadel.

Charles squared his shoulders and followed Raven from the room.

The wide halls of the Citadel stretched in an arc around each floor, joined in the middle by sweeping staircases that led to the assembly hall. Charles knew this route well, though he still allowed Raven to lead, her boots ringing against the polished ceramic tiles. The second floor's north floors were decorated in golds and blacks, tiny dragon motifs inlaid at ever juncture, caught again in the tapestries that hung from the walls.
Raven did not seem to notice them. She led them swiftly to the staircase, and then down into the assembly hall, where a delegation was already awaiting their arrival. Her skin fluttered, Raven no doubt shifting the lines of her face, making herself appear fiercer than she already did. Charles slid neatly to her side.

"Charles Xavier," the Oracle intoned, voice echoing throughout the vast chamber. Charles came to a stop before her, inclining his head first to her, and then to her acolytes. He returned his gaze to her face, staring into the whites of her eyes.

"Destiny," he said.

He'd spoken quietly, with reverence and respect, and yet his voice carried just as hers had. It fluttered about the room, crossing rows of empty benches to reach the open rafters, catching in the spaces where sunlight no longer pierced. Charles had never been inside this room without Genosha's council. It felt oddly hollow.

"Have you made your preparations?" Destiny asked. Charles nodded. They were awaiting Charles' orders, but Charles was still awaiting Raven's permission. He did not want to do this alone.

"And your guardian, will she accompany you?"

He wanted to look to Raven, who stood now just to his left, poised and ready for combat even here, even now. The decision was hers, but Charles had to voice it, and she had yet to consent. 

_Don't be an idiot,_ her voice echoed inside his head. Tension Charles hadn't realized he'd been carrying dissipated.

"She will," he said, the words bringing the ceremony to its end.

Destiny and her delegation turned in unison. They swept a path across polished mosaic floors, the rise of the first mutants battling on a field of green, burnished yellow sun setting on the horizon. Charles followed in their wake, Raven now his shadow, though from her thoughts it galled her to have to walk a pace behind. She hated these formalities as much as Charles did.

The party swept from the council chambers, through a set of wide oak doors, lead lined, the only austere design in the entire room, their plainness misplaced against the rest of the Citadel's splendor. They were a painful reminder of the need for defense. Today they sat open to admit the morning sun; on the other side, the council's private terrace where a caravan, a great, glittering sky ship, sat ready for launch.
Chapter 2

The Great Hall always made Hank feel a little inferior. It was designed to do so, both in scale and opulence. Vaulted ceilings caught every sound, reflected them back to echo off the marble floors. Hank winced at the sound his claws made, a steady clicking that announced his presence long before he approached the dais.

An attendant glanced up at his approach. He waved a hand, a curt gesture that stopped Hank in his crossing. He paused in the middle of the room, eyes downcast as he awaited the Queen's leisure. Light from one of the large, arched windows reflected on the spot he was standing, Hank caught by it, spot-lighted in a way that made him twitch with discomfort. Without lifting his head, he took in his surroundings.

The Hall was the same as ever, luminous white marred only by veins of misty black running through the marble. Even the carpets were white, pristinely kept, no matter how many pairs of feet crossed them. White silk hung from banisters and windows, while tapestries featuring scenes of winter hung from several walls. Even the throne was done in white, plush velvet that was undoubtedly replaced long before it began to show its wear.

Hank had seen it all before, just as he had seen the Queen, though she still drew his gaze.

If the Hall was lost in winter, she was its cause. White Queen they called her, but outside her hearing they had named her the Frost Queen, Lady of Ice. She stared, not at the man currently addressing her, but somewhere beyond, her expression glass, the lines across her forehead seeming carved into stone. Addressing the Queen was always unsettling.

Today she wore robes of fur, artic fox, Hank thought, though only because he had been involved in the cloning project; had helped to reanimate the extinct species. If he'd known he was doing so purely for fashion, he might have objected. Not that it would have made a difference. She flicked her hand, white-tipped fingers dismissing her petitioner. He bowed deeply, but strode from the room scowling, displeasure showing on his features. Hank recognized Darwin, though he showed no outward sign of recognition. Instead he released a silent breath and waited, calling up his mental shields in a bid to keep her out. If she wanted to, she could batter them down, but he rather suspected she thought him unworthy of the effort.

An eternity seemed to pass, Hank caught in his beam of sunlight until the Queen's attendant waved him forward. Hank moved automatically--best not to keep her waiting--bowing deeply when he reached the foot of the dais.

"Your Majesty," he said, and then immediately fell silent. She had requested his presence.

"Beast." There was something hollow in the tone of her voice, an eerie reminder of who and what she was. Hank glanced up, gaze fixing on her forehead. He could still feel the piercing intent of her gaze. It was not Emma Frost looking at him now.

"My apologies, Your Highness," he said. He did not like dealing with the Shadow King, however much they were one in the same. A flare of something--fire that melted some of Frost's gaze--flashed in once dead eyes. Hank recoiled.

"I understand there have been delays," Frost's voice said, though it remained hollow, distant.

Hank tried not to cringe; whoever occupied the body, Frost was still a powerful telepath.
"My apologies, again. We have run into several complications."

The smile that flittered across Frost's face was not one she would have worn willingly. It was mocking; all jagged teeth and feigned mirth. Hank half expected her to laugh. Instead she narrowed her gaze.

"Perhaps your assistant is the problem. I cannot imagine the human is very helpful. We could replace her."

Cold fear struck in Hank's throat and lodged there. He thought of Moira, bent over her workstation in the lab, diligently working despite her horror--horror that Hank shared--over what they were doing. Hank knew precisely what would happen to her if she was deemed no longer useful.

"I assure you, the fault is my own. I shall renew my efforts. It will be ready before the week is out."

He'd known it would happen eventually, but he had hoped to drag it out a little longer. The last thing he wanted to do was give the Shadow King an advantage in this war. More than that, he didn't want his name in the history books as the man who had created a weapon capable of taking out Genosha's telepaths.

Death, Hank thought as he was dismissed, was starting to look preferable. He was not above playing that hand.

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"Do you think he's thought of you?" Schmidt asked.

He was leaned against Magneto's desk, staring at the scores of books Magneto had piled across its surface. Schmidt ran his fingers absently across one of the spines: The Collected Works of Goethe. It was a battered edition, but one Magneto had been lucky to find.

"Two years ago, he'd taken a tour of Genosha's main library. A sprawling complex of intricate architecture, they'd boasted a copy of every book ever printed--certainly the library had been large enough for the claim to be true. Magneto had never seen the like. The sight of Schmidt, Goethe in hand, spine cracked, brought forth an older memory; of Erik as a boy, standing in Schmidt's office, bookshelves overflowing with books. Do you know how to read, boy? Schmidt had asked. Erik had shaken his head. The teaching had not been pleasant."

"We barely spoke. I doubt he remembers me," Magneto said, reaching out to pluck the book from Schmidt's grasp. He set it purposely back down on the desk, just out of Schmidt's reach.

Schmidt arched an eyebrow, clearly amused.

Magneto cursed himself for having answered. He had no idea why he had; habit perhaps, that ingrained need to please Schmidt lest he earn Schmidt's ire. It was also entirely possible that isolation had finally made him snap; that conversing with the spectre of a dead man was preferable to idle boredom.

"You really shouldn't lie to me," Schmidt said, even as he shook his head. "You spent forty-minutes playing chess with the man. You remember everything about him. Surely he remembers you a little."

Magneto didn't deign to answer this time. Instead he focused on shaking out his cape, settling it
over his shoulders. He'd only played chess with Xavier because Xavier had asked and one did not refuse the request of a telepath, especially not one of Xavier's rank. He only remembered Xavier because Xavier had been kind and intelligent and warm in a way no one in Magneto's life had ever been. He had called their game an overture of friendship. No one had ever called Magneto a friend; certainly not someone with an impish smile and eyes that sparkled against the low light of the fireplace. Magneto had never met his like. He would have remembered him even if he wasn't a telepath.

"Then again," Schmidt continued, because he hated to be ignored and if there was one thing he was good at it was ensuring Magneto never forgot his presence. "I suppose you are rather forgettable. He probably thought you were a boorish brute, well suited to a life of campaigning. He was probably glad to see the back of you."

Magneto let his mouth press into a thin line, but otherwise remained silent. It did little good.

"I very much doubt he spent countless nights remembering your smile, or wrapping his hand around his dick and stroking himself until your name fell from his lips."

"Enough!" Magneto said, loud enough that anyone passing his tent would undoubtedly think him mad--and who knew, maybe he was. Still, Magneto lowered his voice. "I am leaving now and if you follow I will put a bullet between my eyes and end us both."

He didn't wait for a response--and he would have gotten one had he stayed--ignoring the way Schmidt cocked his head to the side, expression considering as Magneto strode from the tent. He found Rogue standing in the mud outside the flap. She saluted when she saw him, though it was obvious she'd overheard. It was hardly the first time she'd caught him talking to himself.

"At ease and come with me," he said. She immediately fell into step at his side. Unlike yesterday, her posture was entirely business, the sway of her hips replaced by cold intent and purpose. She and Gambit were no longer fighting, then.

He led her through the maze of tents and equipment, to the main road, now laid with sheets of wood. It made the going easier, Magneto's steps quick and determined. The landing pad was well away from the hustle and bustle of the camp; near one of the abandoned farm houses that had been converted into an officer's quarters. Magneto could have had a room there had he wanted one, but he thought it made them look soft, sleeping in feather beds while their men slept on the cold, hard ground.

A tent had been set up on the outskirts of the landing field; battered tan that showed dark circles where the rain had soaked through. Cyclops and Wolverine were already huddled inside, half a dozen mutants between them, sheltering against the drizzle. Damned weather; it seemed all they got was cold, unforgiving rain. By the time he took his place inside the tent, he felt like a drowned rat. If Rogue was any indication, he probably looked like one too.

He gave a curt nod to Cyclops and pushed his cape over his shoulders, so that it hung in a damp line down his back. He brushed beads of water from his arms and crossed to where Cyclops and Wolverine were standing, shoulder to shoulder, doing their best to ignore one another. They were staring out over the landing field. The raised elevation meant there was less mud here than in the camp. It boded well for getting a caravan landed.

"ETA?" Magneto asked. Rogue had followed him into the tent and now stood at his side, her hair hanging in wet strands around her face, like tangled yarn, half concealed by her helmet.

"Ten minutes," Cyclops answered. He was wearing his helmet today, something he didn't do often--even though it was regulation. He claimed he'd dated a telepath once, and that she had
taught him to shield his mind, calling the helmet a redundant piece of technology that would only slow him down. It was a mark of Xavier's reputation that Cyclops was wearing it now.

Wolverine had never bothered with a helmet, though his mind, Magneto knew, was impervious to telepathy. Of all the mutations he envied, it was Wolverine's most of all. He could have done without the strength, and the healing, and he certainly wouldn't have wanted to walk around with adamantium grafted to his skeleton, but immunity to telepathy; now that was a mutation worth having.

Magneto took his place at their side, the three of them forming a silent line, watching the horizon for the approaching Genoshian ship.

She took her time in coming.

Wolverine spotted her first, eyes sharp in the dreary grey, post-dawn light. He pointed her out over the horizon, a single black dot that eventually took shape, becoming the sleek, familiar design of a Genoshian caravan. A simple transport ship, meant to carry supplies, this one held a far more precious cargo. On radar, it looked like just another shipment from Genosha, replacement troops and foodstuffs; hardly worth blowing out of the sky. The White Queen did not fear Genosha's armies, but she did fear their telepaths.

The ship was close enough now to make out the gloss of her paint. The sun reflected off of it, grey-green shining like dragons' scales, the curve of her nose blunt compared to the reach of her tail. They could hear her now, engines humming in a way that made Magneto's teeth ache. Like everyone else, he brought his hands to the sides of his helmet, cupping its frame in a bid to protect his ears. The gesture did little to block the sound, the ship above them now, hovering like a gigantic blimp, its engines pivoting, blasting the ground with wind as she sank to the ground. It was a long while before she landed; a long while before her engines were cut. The resulting silence rang in Magneto's ears.

"Here we go," Cyclops said. He stepped forward, out from under the protective shield of the tent. Drizzle continued to fall from the sky. It permeated everything. Magneto followed him onto the field, Wolverine a pace behind.

They left their entourage beneath the tent.

It was almost insulting how long they were made to stand in the rain. The ship remained impassive, hatchway sealed against the weather, several long minutes passing before the door hissed open, steps descending in a cascade of metal. Shi'ar technology that. A shadowed figure filled the hatchway.

The shadow resolved into a blue-skinned mutant; her body coiled tight with densely packed muscle, her skin imprinted with elaborate scales. Her hair was a shock of burgundy-red, slicked back so that not a piece of it moved. She looked poised for violence. Magneto knew immediately he was looking at a guardian. It was she who first descended from the ship.

He had not met any guardians during his time in Genosha, though inside the Citadel telepaths hardly required them. It was only when they ventured outside the safe confines of their walls that those bonds became necessary. Magneto watched Xavier's guardian now--she could belong to no one else--and knew, without a doubt, that if he proved even the slightest threat to Xavier, he would die.

He was expecting the rest of Xavier's entourage to follow, but instead the man himself stepped onto the platform. He looked remarkably unchanged, dressed in a dark charcoal pea-coat and army black fatigues. He looked as at ease descending into chaos as he was sitting behind an
elaborately carved wooden chess set. Magneto watched him descend, his expression kept carefully blank. At the end of the steps, Xavier didn't hesitate to step down onto the soggy ground.

His guardian was at his side in an instant.

"He's just as pretty as I remember," a voice whispered in Magneto's ear. Magneto cringed. Had Schmidt really thought him joking?

"His bodyguard isn't so bad either," Schmidt continued, openly leering now.

Magneto clenched his teeth, gritting them painfully. He was only half aware of Xavier stepping forward. Dimly, he heard the beginnings of Cyclops' welcoming speech.

While Cyclops was talking, a third and final person descended from the ship, Magneto recognizing Cyclops' brother, Havok. He did not wear a helmet, seemingly at ease in Xavier's presence, though he had only been gone a few months. Magneto offered only the most cursory of nods before turning his attention back to Xavier. Cyclops' speech had come to an end.

"Thank you, for both the warm welcome and the opportunity," Xavier was saying. "It is an honour to meet you." He turned from Cyclops to Wolverine. "And you," he said, waiting for Wolverine's nod before turning to Magneto. His eyes grew wide.

"Erik Lehnsherr," he said, sounding oddly pleased. A wide smile spread across his face. Magneto's stomach fluttered nervously.

"Forgive me, Sir," he said, "but I prefer Magneto." He very purposely kept his expression neutral, not returning the smile. At his side, Schmidt was grinning wildly.

"Forgive me, Magneto," Xavier said, reaching out then to place a steady hand on Magneto's forearm, directly over his hated tattoo. Magneto stared at the place they were touching, uncertain how to respond. He was not used to being touched.

"I guess I was wrong," Schmidt whispered in his ear. He'd wrapped a hand around the back of Magneto's neck and was playing with the soft hairs that poked out of Magneto's helmet. Magneto recoiled.

Xavier misinterpreted the gesture, assuming it meant for him. He removed his hand immediately, frowning then, obviously unused to navigating such things without his telepathy. If Magneto could have killed Schmidt a second time, he would have, gladly.

"I'm glad you remember Magneto, Sir, because I'm putting you in his care," Cyclops said. Magneto shot him a look. They hadn't discussed this and while Cyclops outranked him Magneto was perfectly capable of tearing him apart; of doing so without hesitation.

"Oh, wonderful," Xavier said, like it really was wonderful; like he was personally delighted.

All Magneto's protests died on his tongue. In the face of Xavier's enthusiasm, there was relatively little he could say, save, "If you'll come with me, we'll see about getting you settled."

Xavier shot him another wide smile, the kind that made his eyes crinkle in the corners. Magneto tried to remember the last time someone had smiled at him like that, and found he could not. In fact, he was fairly certain no one ever had.

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"This is absolutely unacceptable," Charles said the second he set foot inside the house.
Even with the helmet, he could tell Erik—Magneto, he reminded himself—was confused. If the frown he was wearing was any indication, he was also mildly annoyed.

It wasn't that the house wasn't perfectly serviceable. It was clean, well-stocked, in decent repair and probably the most structural sound building for miles. It was also very obviously set aside for visiting dignitaries, and while Charles appreciated the implied respect, he had no intention of living in the lap of luxury while the men and women of Genosha's army went without.

"I know it's not what you're used to, Sir, but I'm afraid it will have to do," Magneto said. A half-drenched woman stood at his side, looking mildly bored, her face framed by the same helmet Magneto was wearing; the same helmet the entire camp was wearing. Charles hated the things. He glanced to Havok, whose conversation he'd had the pleasure of during their flight, but found the man staring resolutely ahead, clearly bowing to Magneto's authority.

"No, no, that's not what I meant," he said, "and please, call me Charles."

Erik had called him Charles in Genosha. He hesitated now.

"If it's all the same, Sir, I have twenty mutants in my outfit, and since you're my responsibility, that means you're their responsibility; twenty men and women who will be putting their lives on the line for you. For their sake, I'll continue to call you Sir."

Charles blanched. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so thoroughly reprimanded. Immediately Raven stepped forward, yellow eyes flashing. Charles floated a calming thought in her direction. She withdrew.

"My apologies, Magneto," he said. "The house is perfectly adequate, by the way, but I'd rather stay in the camp, if it's all the same."

The look Magneto shot him was somehow both incredulous and admiring. He shook his head.

"I'm afraid that would be impossible, Sir," he said.

Charles wasn't used to having his requests denied. The experience was as surprising as it was delightful. He cocked his head and stepped into Magneto's space, realizing then just how large a man Magneto was. He could feel Raven tensing, preparing to step in should the need arrive. He had seen her take down men twice Magneto's size.

Magneto didn't feel like a threat, but he stood his ground.

"And why, exactly, would that be impossible?" Charles asked.

Inside the Citadel, guests were forbidden from wearing the helmets Magneto now wore, and the last time they'd met, Charles had reveled in the steady thrumming of Erik's mind; in the flare of attraction that passed between them. He hadn't snooped, but had taken immense pleasure in the machine-like precision of Erik's surface thoughts. He would have given anything to remove the barrier between them now. Magneto was an impossible man to read, Charles unused to relying on facial expression and body language.

Rather than answer, Magneto glanced briefly to the half drenched woman at his side, giving her a brief nod. She saluted, and then headed for the door. Havok followed on her heel. Magneto turned his attention back to Charles.

"I could tell you you'll be easier to protect here, or that the facilities in the camp aren't designed to accommodate someone of your status, but the truth is your presence in the camp will unsettle the
troops. I'm sorry, Sir."

In all of Charles' life, he didn't think he'd ever been given a more direct and honest answer. It pained him, but he accepted it, nodding his agreement. Magneto squared his shoulders.

"If you'd like, Sir, once you're settled, I can arrange a tour."

Charles had been hoping, now that they were alone, that Magneto might drop the formalities. Certainly they hadn't stood on formalities in Genosha, but then, Magneto had been new to Genosha's ranks then.

Rather than answer, Charles asked, "What was it you were reading, that day I found you in the Library?"

He could remember everything but that; remember the shock of finding he wasn't alone, Erik tucked away in an alcove, nose buried in a book, looking bewildered and confused and overwhelmed. He was wearing the uniform of a private then, not this self-chosen costume only officers were entitled to wear. He'd glanced up, leery at Charles' approach, but with confidence radiating from every pore. He didn't shied away from Charles' bare head, or what it represented.

Erik, who had yet to answer Charles' question, appeared oddly startled. He glanced first to Raven, and then over his shoulder, staring hard at the peeling yellowed wallpaper on the wall. He shifted on the balls of his feet, away from the wallpaper, the floorboards creaking beneath his weight.

"I don't remember," he said, turning back to meet Charles' gaze. Charles didn't need his telepathy to know that Erik was lying.

Magneto had lied to him the last time as well, though they were entirely lies of omission. He'd told the truth when he'd said he could play chess, though. Charles had delighted at having found someone willing to play against him. He'd lost the match, handily, Erik a skilled opponent.

"I suppose the house will be fine, then," Charles said, but before he could say anything else the woman returned, Havok and another man in tow, the three of them laden with Charles and Raven's luggage.

Charles stood aside to let them pass, and then gestured for Erik to begin his tour. Erik looked strangely reluctant, but he gave a curt nod and led them into the kitchen.
A lifetime spent locked away in Genosha's Citadel had not prepared him for the true dark of night. It was far-reaching, coating the land in blackness that seemed as ominous as it did terrifying. Charles squinted, the warmth of his temporary bedroom fading as he stared out over the horizon. Only the lights of the camp broke the darkness; a single halo of warmth and light that drew his gaze, even as he mentally mapped the route Magneto had walked them this afternoon.

Charles turned from the window and reached for the hem of his shirt.

Raven was perched on the edge of his chosen bed. She'd already searched the house, including its outer perimeter; this after she'd lectured the three mutants Magneto had assigned to keep watch, never mind that they were all trained soldiers already well versed in defensive tactics.

She was now watching him as he undressed. Charles drew his shirt over his head, casting it aside and reaching for a cloth to wipe the excess dirt from his face. The house had a pump that brought water up from an underground source, but it worked sporadically and there was nowhere near enough to fill a basin, let alone a tub. Sponge baths it was.

"You're not going to sit up awake all night, are you?" he asked, because knowing her that was exactly what she planned to do.

"We're in the middle of nowhere, the enemy not ten miles from here, and all Magneto has given us are three mutants I could beat simultaneously with one hand tied behind my back."

Charles shook his head. He dropped the cloth in the basin and reached for his nightshirt. "Now you're just boasting," he said.

He let the shirt fall to his knees before toeing off his boots. The wood floors, worn and creaking with age, were cold beneath his feet. He glanced at Raven, nodding to the suitcase open on the bed. She shook her head, but retrieved a pair of wool socks and tossed them in his direction. Charles caught them in one hand.

"What I'm trying to say," he continued, perching on the edge of a dresser to remove his sodden socks, replacing them with the dry, "is that tomorrow is a busy day. You need to be rested."

Today had been entirely pomp and ceremony--and how Charles hated it; between the official tour of the camp and the welcome dinner, he'd had about enough of being marvelled over for his bald head. Tomorrow he would outline his plan and the real work would begin.

"You know as well as I that I am perfectly capable of operating on little to no sleep," Raven said, shrugging.

She had yet to have her turn at the basin, but she still looked pristinely clean, despite having spent the day traipsing bare-skinned through the mud. Her knees were drawn to her chest, the blue of her skin an exact match for the cornflowers in the quilt's pattern. She looked oddly misplaced, though Charles suspected they both were. In place of the Citadel's open, airy corridors and polished marble, he was standing inside a room with a wallpaper boarder and creeping mould stains.

A single light bulb hung over the bed, attached to a wire, the light flickering with the thrum of the generator. Damp permeated every corner of the house. Charles was soaked through with it.

At least Raven was dry, the benefit, he supposed, of not needing clothes. Charles turned to the
task of shaking out his worn clothes, hanging them over odd bits of furniture to dry. Something else Raven didn't have to worry about, though Charles could tell by the slope of her posture that she was having trouble adjusting to the change in climate. Genosha was a warm country, separated only by the wet and dry season. Raven had never known winter, but then again, neither had he.

"Do you want me to arrange some clothes?" Charles asked, because he was certain Magneto would oblige if Charles requested it.

Raven shook her head. "I just need time to get used to it," she said, ever the warrior, too proud to bow her head.

"At least take a blanket," Charles said, grabbing the extra blanket off the room's only chair, a holey, knitted thing that had seen better days. He crossed to the bed and draped it around Raven's shoulders. That she didn't protest told him how much the cold was getting to her.

"You know," he said as he crossed back to the window. He stared past cracked panes, gaze once again drawn to the lights of the camp. It seemed impossibly large when viewed from this vantage point. "You do have your very own room, with a bed, and blankets, and a heater."

Charles let his gaze sweep past the camp to the far horizon, into the pitch black, where the clouds were clearing, the true night sky piercing the veil, pinpricks of stars visible through the mist. The vastness of this place was overwhelming, Charles left feeling like he was the only person alive on the planet--save Raven, of course, but they were practically one being, their lives so intertwined they were impossible to separate.

He had never felt this before; this giddy excitement of being on the edge of something new. He imagined this was how the first mutants must have felt, discovering one another; finding that they were no longer alone, that they had a common brotherhood.

Oh, to have been part of it, but he supposed if he could not be there at the start, he would be there at the end. This war had dragged on entirely too long, and he would see the world's mutants united if it was the last thing he did.

He turned away from the window with some reluctance, and found Raven exactly where he'd left her, watching him intently with yellow flecked eyes. Charles cocked his head, a bid for her to speak her mind.

"In order for this to work, you're going to need to trust him. Can you do that?"

He'd expected the question, though not only because he knew her mind. He'd expected the question because he'd asked it himself.

Instead of answering immediately, he crossed to the bed, turned down the covers and slid beneath them. He patted the space at his side, but Raven refused with a gentle shake of her head. She truly did not intend to sleep, which meant she, at least, did not trust Magneto.

"I do trust him," Charles said, though he could not say why--the helmet prevented that. He though perhaps Erik was simply one of those rare individuals who inspired a leap of faith.

"He was one of theirs," Raven reminded him. Charles shook his head.

"No, he escaped one of their camps and defected to us."

"An easy story to tell," Raven reminded him, which Charles supposed was true, though he did not believe the rumours.
He gave an easy shrug, and then settled against his pillow. Only then did Raven move, slipping from the bed, padding silently across loosened floor joists to reach the light switch. She cast the room into shadow, her eyes glowing perceptively in the dark.

"Time will tell," Charles said. He turned onto his side, content to fall asleep.

Raven said nothing, but Charles was acutely aware of the steady weight of her gaze.

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"He wants you, you know."

Magneto stared at the underside of his tent, canvas bowed from the day's rain. His pallet was hard beneath him, cold creeping into his bones until they ached. Beside him, set far enough back to avoid setting the blankets on fire, the tent's heater did little to ward off the chill. He was getting old before his time.

"We could be inside that house right now, warm and comfortable, with running water."

Magneto rolled his eyes, partly because he doubted the house had running water, just a solar-powered pump and at least a month without sun. When it did work, it spat water out in spurts, rust-coloured sludge that stank of sulphur.

Also, "You don't exist," Magneto said. "You can't feel warmth, or comfort, and you sure as hell don't bathe."

Not that anyone really did these days, but Magneto took particular care to heat a pot of water every morning and sponge himself down. It did little good. Most days he still stank of sour sweat and damp earth. Schmidt almost always smelled of cinnamon, though occasionally, when he particularly wanted to annoy Magneto, he smelled of chocolate; the kind he used to feed Erik whenever Erik had done something particularly wunderbar during their training.

He stank of cigar smoke now, though Magneto suspected it was only the lingering scent of Wolverine's stogie, caught in his nose.

"That is true," Schmidt said, "but I do live vicariously through you."

He was stretched out across the pallet, not a foot between them, close enough that Magneto could almost mistake him for a lover. The thought twisted his lip into a scowl. It was probably good the dead gave off no heat; Magneto wasn't sure he could stomach the press of Schmidt's warmth.

"It's not going to happen," Magneto said, because no matter how friendly Xavier seemed, or how many times he'd touched Magneto's arm during tonight's dinner, or how many times he'd offered a smile during their tour, Xavier was a telepath, and telepaths were untouchable.

"You could make it happen," Schmidt said, pushing up onto an elbow. He leaned into Magneto's space, eyes reflecting the red of the heater's coil, flashing demonic intent as he smiled. Magneto closed his eyes to block out the sight.

"You could hold him down and make him yours. He couldn't stop you, and if you slit that bitch's throat first, neither could she."

Magneto swallowed against the surge of bile that crept up his throat; reminded himself that Schmidt wasn't really here, that he didn't truly exist. Were these his thoughts, then? Did he think these things? Unbidden, his hand slid from the pallet, fingers stretching across the room, to where
a revolver sat on his desk. A single bullet to brain was a tidy solution.

It might even be a mercy. God knew what he was capable of.

But Schmidt seemed oblivious to the thought, still caught in his own fantasy. He shifted closer, until his body was curled around Magneto's side. His breath ghosted Magneto's neck, his words muffled by the helmet. Vomit rose up to replace the bile, Magneto half afraid he might choke on it.

"I wish I could still masturbate. God, how lovely that image is. You could bite those lips until they bled."

There were lines that Magneto tried not to cross, even with Schmidt, because crossing them meant giving in to the apparition at his side; becoming the man Schmidt had tried so very hard to create. Still, his hands coiled into fists, body shaking with barely suppressed rage. Schmidt seemed to sense the change, because he leaned forward, tongue darting out to trace the edge of Magneto's helmet in a final push.

The tactic worked.

Magneto sat bolt upright and summoned a letter opener from his desk, the dagger-shaped utensil sailing through their air, finding his hand as though it belonged exactly there. He turned and found Schmidt lying across the pallet, mouth twisted into a parody of a smile. He was grinning when Magneto drove the blade through one of his eyes, the organ exploding with a sickening pop, blood and fluid running down his face. In the years since his death, Magneto had suffocated Schmidt three times, strangled him twice, and shot him once. This was far more satisfying. He twisted the blade, driving it home, the last of his tension seeping away.

When he withdrew the letter opener, Schmidt was gone, a knife-shaped hole torn into his pallet, the blade in his hand perfectly clean.

Magneto tossed the letter opener aside and fell back onto the pallet. Sleep was still a long time coming, and when he dreamed, it was of blood red lips and startled blue eyes.

He woke the next morning to an empty bed.

Schmidt nowhere to be found, and for one brief, delirious moment, Magneto thought he might be free of him.

A glint of silver drew his gaze, the letter opener lying careless on the floor. A temporary reprieve, then; Schmidt liked to pout whenever Magneto killed him. Once, Magneto had lived three blissful days without him. He doubted he'd be so lucky this time.

He pushed himself up, swinging his legs off the pallet. His body protested the movement, joints stiff and sore with premature age. The damp weather didn't help, Schmidt having broken far too many of Erik's bones. They'd healed awkwardly and now ached fiercely whenever it rained. An old man's bones, Magneto thought, cracking his knuckles and curling his toes.

He stood.

There was something different in the air today. Magneto breathed deep, taking in the sharp bite of frost that spoke of a clean, clear day. He could see it now, the way the shadows of his tent were illuminated, sunlight creeping in through the cracks and crevices in the canvas. It took a good deal of effort not to rush outside; stare up at the yellow sun and bask in its warmth. Instead he began the slow, steady process of performing his morning ablutions.

The carpets beneath his bare feet were stiff with morning cold, and when Magneto crossed to his
water basin he found a thin layer of ice coating the water's surface. It took little effort to heat the
bowl--he'd chosen a metal basin for a reason--the ice melting, steam rising from its surface. Magneto pulled his nightshirt over his head, folded it neatly and set it on the back of a trunk. His
dog tags were cool against the warmth of his skin, his mother's six-pointed star nestled between
them, Magneto's only memento. He wet a cloth and brought it to his chest.

His newest scar, the one that ran the length of his chest, had almost completely healed. The skin
was still raised, but puckered pink rather than livid red. Eventually it would settle; match the
myriad of white lines criss-crossing his body. For now it was still tender to the touch. Magneto
scrubbed its length--infection was not something he wanted to deal with out here. When he was
done, he ran the cloth over his shoulders, then under his arms, cleansing away the worst of his
stink.

Setting the cloth aside, he reached for his clothes.

The same suit from yesterday, garment spattered with mud, liner stained with damp and sweat. For
the first time since he'd heard of Xavier's coming, Magneto found himself hoping that whatever
Xavier’s plan was, it could do the impossible. If they could end this war, there was a good chance
Magneto could see about doing some laundry.

A quick examination of his cape showed it utterly ruined, and since the day promised sun, Magneto
left it behind, stepping out of his tent into bright sunlight, the sky washed clean, a
brilliant blue to replace weeks of grey. Magneto tilted his head up; stared until sunspots formed
across his vision. He tore his gaze away and found he wasn't the only one staring up to the sky.
He hoped it would last. It would be easier navigating the camp on streets of frozen mud.

He'd promised to retrieve Xavier before the ops meeting, but there was someone he needed to
speak with first, so he went in search of Havok, the streets still muddy, but there was a firmness to
them now that suggested that might soon change.

He found Havok in the dining hall, seated next to Banshee, the two of them conversing in low
tones as the ate runny eggs and too firm brose. Magneto caught Havok's eye, giving a brief a nod
before he detoured to the food line, getting his own runny eggs and water-soaked oats to bring to
the table. By the time he got there, Havok had pushed aside his empty tray. The seat next to him
was empty.

"Sir," he said, though when it looked like he might rise to attention, Magneto waved him back into
his seat.

Magneto set his tray down on the table and claimed one of the benches.

"Xavier, what do you know about him?"

He liked Havok; of all the mutants in the camp Havok was one of the few Magneto knew he
could trust in a hot situation. It helped that he was Cyclops' brother; that the pair were fiercely
competitive and Cyclops hated that Havok served under Magneto. Havok was also direct; blunt
and to the point in a way Magneto appreciated.

"Only met him on the ship, but he seemed all right. He tried to teach me how to play chess. He
seemed... eager."

Magneto narrowed his gaze, tried to fit Havok's impression into his own understanding of Xavier.

"Eager. Explain."

Havok blanched, one of the only times Magneto could ever remember him appearing nervous, like
the thought of speaking ill of a telepath could do what entire armies could not. He glanced briefly over his shoulder before answering.

"I got the impression he saw this as some kind of adventure, like going to war was something someone did to break the monotony of everyday living."

Magneto frowned at that, trying to reconcile the statement with what he knew of Xavier. It didn't connect. He wondered then how much of Xavier was subterfuge and misdirection. Did he truly want them to underestimate him; to dismiss him as a naive and inexperienced? The man had the power of a god. Underestimating him was the last thing Magneto intended to do.

"When we leave, I want you heading up the company," Magneto said, effectively ending the conversation. Havok nodded, stood from the bench, saluted and then disappeared. Magneto ignored his leaving; turned his attention to breakfast instead.

It was strange how much better stale oats tasted when Schmidt wasn't panting at his side.

He ate quickly, efficiently, but the sun was well past the horizon when he finally made his way to the converted farmhouse Magneto had already begun thinking of as Xavier's house. It sat upon a hill, overlooking the camp, oddly intact given the surrounding destruction. Even the officer's house was missing whole chunks from its straw-bale walls. This land had been fought for, and won, but the scars of war were everywhere. Sturdy construction and luck had spared the house the worst of it.

Magneto was born a good deal south of here, before the White Queen appropriated the land and began relocating mutants into training camps. He'd been in the camps a week before Klaus Schmidt took notice of him; made Magneto his pet project. By all accounts, Magneto had been a resounding success, until the night he killed his maker and escaped the White Queen's clutches.

How long ago that seemed now. The war had only just begun.

The lane that led to the house was little more than two dirt tracks, carved into the earth by the press of countless wheels. Steep stairs led to the house's front door, the wood sagging beneath his boots as he climbed them. He rapped his knuckles against the door, leather gloves doing little to soften the blow of flesh against heavily glazed oak. The door swung open almost immediately, Xavier's guardian standing before him, expression both appraising and suspicious.

"Come in," she said, glancing over his shoulder then, as though half expecting an army of invisible mutants to try to crowd their way inside.

Magneto stepped over the threshold.

"Erik," Xavier said the moment he was inside. He was carrying a mug of steaming liquid, the sharp scent of tea leaves filling the space. Magneto didn't remember anyone in the camp having tea. Xavier must have brought his own supply. "Can I get you a cup of tea?" he asked, as though he'd read Magneto's mind--Magneto went so far as to reach up and touch the side of his helmet, ensuring it was in place.

"Thank you, Sir, I'm fine," he said, despite the fact that breakfast sat like a lead weight in his stomach and would be well served by a cup of tea.

He didn't particularly like tea, but found he craved it now.

"In that case, give me a minute," Xavier said, turning back towards the kitchen, still sipping from his cup. His guardian followed on his heel like a shadow.
Xavier's minute turned into ten, much to Magneto's annoyance. He took his time finishing his tea, the scent of toast--though where he'd gotten the bread, Magneto didn't know--filling the house.

"I do apologize," Xavier said when it appeared they were close to leaving. "As Raven will attest, I am notoriously bad at getting moving in the morning." He laughed then, as though the character failing was something amusing as opposed to something that might get him killed. Magneto thought back to his conversation with Havok; found himself re-interpreting the slight glint in Xavier's eyes.

"Then I would suggest you work on improving, Sir," Magneto said, which seemed to startle Xavier, because he paused in what he was doing--slipping into a coat, fingerless gloves already on his hands--and glanced at Magneto, staring intently at him until Magneto wondered if he was meant to look away. He didn't.

Never anger a telepath, his mother used to say, before the White Queen's armies took her, before Schmidt put a bullet in her stomach. They are gods among men.

Schmidt had told him otherwise; had told him that telepaths were only mutants and that all mutants could be bent to his will. But then, Schmidt had said things like that often. Schmidt's delusions of grandeur were almost as bad as his zeal for destruction.

"If you're ready, Sir," Magneto said, which seemed to get Xavier moving again, his coat sliding into place, his fingers flying over the buttons as though dexterity and speed were among his mutations. His guardian remained as she was yesterday, naked as she was the day she was born, though undoubtedly protected by either her mutation or the thick layer of scales covering her skin.

It was she who led them from the house, poised for violence and hyperaware. If the White Queen's armies appeared out of thin air, Magneto suspected she would have been ready. Xavier walked a pace behind, casual and comfortable at Magneto's side, as though completely unaware of his surroundings; as secure here as he was in his Citadel. His gaze was far too alert for the slope of his posture to be anything but stratagem.

"I must confess," he said as they neared the camp, still locked in his role, "I am quite excited."

It took Magneto several seconds to process the statement. He wasn't used to conversation. He was used to receiving orders; to giving them. He wondered if he was expected to respond; to engage in idle chit-chat. He recalled then how easily he'd fallen into conversation with Xavier the first time they met.

"You have every right, Sir," Magneto eventually settled on saying. "If you can get us past those shields, we can kill the White Queen and be done with this war."

He took several steps before realizing that Xavier was no longer at his side. When he turned, he found Xavier standing stock-still in the middle of the road staring at Magneto like he'd grown two heads.

"I'm not here to kill Emma Frost, Erik," he said.

Magneto cocked his head, but before he could ask, Xavier continued.

"I'm here to rescue her."

For the longest minute, Magneto couldn't find the words to respond to that.
Storm swept through the halls of the Citadel, black cape billowing behind her, her boots echoing against the stone floors. Jean's voice whispered in the back of her head, urgent instructions that Storm obeyed without question; would have obeyed even if she was on her death bed.

The temperature had dropped considerably since yesterday--hence the cape--the season well on its way to changing. The air held no moisture, though, the rains still weeks away. If she'd wanted to, she could have summoned them sooner, washed the land in drizzle, or wrecked the seas with a heavy storm. Her steps faltered, the call of nature beckoning, but Jean's bond was stronger, Storm only temporarily delayed.

She found Jean in the council chamber, seated around the oval table that occupied the centre of the room. Her customary chair, sun-fire burst carved in the wood above her head, was pulled close to the table, Jean bent over a reef of papers. She glanced up briefly at Storm's arrival.

At her side, Psylocke sat, bald head held high, awaiting the start of the meeting. Her guardian stood behind her right shoulder, his hand curled over the back of her chair, fingers half obscuring the engraved butterfly. The chair next to hers was empty, Xavier's encircled X strangely prominent without the man to distract from it.

A glance around the rest of the table told her she was the last to arrive. She passed the only other empty chair--Emma Frost's, her etched snowflake a constant reminder of what they had lost--and took her place behind Jean's chair. At the head of the table, the Oracle, Destiny, sounded a chime. The room fell into silence.

Some guardians were not privy to these conversations. The choice belonged to the telepath. Jean had never shut her out, not in all their years together--not when they were children, learning their roles, and not when Jean came of age, sacrificing the long locks of her fiery hair for the power of her position, and certainly not now, a twenty year bond between them.

Storm felt her mind open, the presence of the others in the room intensifying until they were as much a part of her as her own thoughts. Jean blazed like lightning, Storm drawn to her fire even here. The others had their own textures, their own nuances, but a guardian was always drawn to their telepath's mind. Their bond ensured it.

Storm sought Jean's spark and sheltered behind it.

"Charles Xavier has arrived," Destiny declared. A wave of nervous apprehension circled the group. "He is safe."

"For how long?" someone asked. In this place, Storm had to concentrate to identify Cable as the speaker. He didn't sound as gruff inside her head as he did in person, his thoughts soft and measured.

It was Jean who answered. "We must trust Xavier to do what is best. If anyone can succeed it is him. But he is not why this meeting was called."

Had they eyes, they would have turned in unison to stare at Destiny. Instead, Destiny's presence merely came to the forefront of their thoughts. If chaos swirled around her, she was the eye of the storm.

"We have word from our informant," she said. "The Shadow King's weapon is no longer a mere
prototype. It will be completed before the week is out."

A collective sense of dread swept through the group, Storm acutely aware of the shiver that ran down Jean's back. She aligned herself close, fierce protectiveness surging in her breast. A weapon capable of tearing down a telepath's shields was a terrifying prospect. Their entire aim in the weeks since they learned of its development had been towards stopping it. Before it’s conception, they would have never allowed a telepath outside the safe confines of the Citadel. Fear drove them to desperation.

Storm's thoughts echoed their fear, the group unanimous in its decision.

Their plan must not fail. Charles Xavier must succeed.

~*~

Magneto stared at Xavier, half expecting him to clarify his comment, because Magneto was fairly certain he'd just heard Xavier say that he intended to rescue Emma Frost, and that was patently ridiculous.

Instead, Xavier remained silent.

His guardian had aligned herself at his side, eyes flashing yellow, shoulders squared like she was waiting for Xavier's command; like she would be perfectly willing to break Magneto's neck should Xavier request it. He had no doubt she was capable. Magneto's frown encompassed both of them.

"What do you mean you intend to rescue Emma Frost?"

The very thought filled him with rage, the White Queen the root cause of everything that had gone wrong in his life. It was her command that had seen him taken from his home and family. It was she who gave him over to Schmidt, ensuring he was tortured into his powers. Magneto had killed Klaus Schmidt for the things he had done, but he would not rest until she was dead and buried alongside him. He would willingly die to see that end.

Xavier took a step forward, his guardian moving with him, their steps perfectly synchronized.

"You do realize she's a prisoner, don't you?" he asked.

Magneto shook his head, because he had seen the White Queen--had watched her give audience over her dominion. She was as cruel and inhuman as the stories made her out to be. Her orders had brought about the deaths of thousands, Magneto's parents included. It was clear Xavier thought the Shadow King the bigger threat, but whatever sway he held over Frost, it was no excuse for the things she had done.

"Severe the head from the beast and the beast will fall," Magneto quoted. It had been their aim from the beginning. Kill the White Queen and the Shadow King fell.

Xavier shook his head. He looked marginally disappointed.

"Are they still telling you that?" He turned and addressed his guardian. "I suppose it is easier than admitting the truth. I'm not sure anyone would be willing to fight if they knew the truth."

"What truth?" Magneto said, not particularly caring that he was interrupted a telepath's conversation with his guardian. Instead of the reprimand he was expecting, Xavier's expression turned mildly amused. He turned his attention back to Magneto.
"The Shadow King is an entity of pure psychic energy. He has not partnered with Emma Frost. He has possessed her. And if you kill her, he will simply find a new host, except, now, instead of having a mildly powerful telepath at his disposal, he will have an exceptionally powerful metal-bender at his disposal. And make no mistake you would commit the same atrocities in his name. You would have no choice in the matter. Congratulations, Erik, you have just cost us the war."

Magneto's mouth fell open as he tried to process what he was hearing. He shook his head. "No, she is his concubine, nothing more," he said, because if what Xavier was telling him was true, what hope did they have?

The look Xavier shot him was pitying. Magneto seethed, jaw clenching, because the last thing he wanted was Xavier's pity. His next words were harsher than he intended; certainly harsher than any words spoken to a telepath should have been.

"Exactly how is getting us past the city's psionic shields going to help us then."

That was why Xavier was here, after all: to get past the psionic shields so that the army could breach the city.

Xavier frowned, the pity in his eyes shifting to something closer to sympathy. It did little to appease Magneto's mood.

"I'm not getting you past the city's shields," Xavier said. He sounded apologetic. "I'm getting me past the shields, and then I'm going to defeat the Shadow King, release Emma Frost from his hold, and end this war once and for all."

Any argument Magneto might have had vanished upon hearing Xavier's words. It was some time before he was capable of speaking.

"Is that all?" he asked, starting to worry Xavier wasn't entirely sane.

Xavier smirked. "Actually, after I was hoping to unite mutantkind and create a utopian state where mutants and what's left of humanity could live together in harmony."

Magneto didn't bother tempering his response this time. He let his eyes grow wide, his incredulity showing on his face.

Xavier obviously misunderstood Magneto's reaction, because he asked, "Is it human-mutant harmony you object to, or do you simply have no faith in my abilities?"

Magneto shook his head.

"I think if this Shadow King is what you say he is, then instead of a mildly powerful telepath, you'll be giving him an incredibly powerful telepath. Congratulations, Sir, you've just cost us the war."

He didn't wait for a response, not particularly wanting to know if Xavier was crazy or just hopelessly naive. Instead Magneto turned on his heel and made for the camp.

The temperature was steadily rising, the mud no longer stiff with frost. It squelched beneath his feet, puddles of murky water dotting the landscape where last night's ice had melted. Magneto navigated around a jeep, its back wheel stuck in a rut. A flick of his finger raised the vehicle, Magneto setting it gently back onto the road.

"You know," Xavier said, once again falling into step at Magneto's side, "I don't think anyone has ever spoken to me like that." He didn't seem in the least put out. If anything, he seemed pleased.
When Magneto glanced over, he found Xavier smiling.

Instead of responding, Magneto took them off the main road, navigating a densely strung network of tent wires as he picked his way to the ops tent. Xavier followed at his side, his guardian a pace behind. There was grace in his movements, but unlike Schmidt he struggled with the mud, tripping several times over the tent-ropes. Magneto slowed his pace; steering them towards the wider pathways.

"I knew her, you know," Xavier said when they once again walked side by side, "While she was still at the Citadel." It took Magneto several seconds to figure out he was talking about Emma Frost. "She was one of my teachers. I was quite young, my powers having only just manifested. I hadn't even bonded Raven yet." He paused, glancing fondly over his shoulder. When he turned back to Magneto, his expression had hardened.

"She was just gone one morning, and the next we heard the nameless empire in the north had a leader."

"You obviously didn't know her well," Magneto said. They passed two soldiers Magneto didn't recognize, new recruits who watched their passing with wide-eyes. Too late he realized the statement could be taken for insolence. He made no move to take it back.

"Well, yes, I suppose I didn't. Your next question is: why am I rescuing her?"

That was not, in fact, Magneto's next question--though Xavier's mistake at least reassured him that the helmet was working. His next question would have been: why do you care if she lives?

"You don't need to know someone to want to see them whole. The Shadow King is an entity of pure evil. We must defeat him, and if in doing so I can give Emma Frost back her life then that is an opportunity I must take."

There was conviction in Xavier's tone. He did not sound like a man blinded by naïve arrogance, but rather a man fueled by fierce, unwavering determination. For a brief moment, hope flared in Magneto's chest, like Xavier really was capable of doing the impossible.

It was then that he realized Xavier was serious about challenging the Shadow King.

Magneto stopped, just outside the flap to the ops tent, a great, hulking black thing that stood in the centre of the camp. Without thinking, he stuck out his hand, catching Xavier around his wrist.

"It's all right, Raven," Xavier said. Raven hesitated for several long minutes before she released her grip, Magneto's wrist throbbing with pain that promised finger-shaped bruises come morning. She retreated back a step. Magneto did his best to ignore her, turning his attention to Xavier. This time, he took particular care not to touch the man.

"Do you seriously plan on walking in there and suggesting that we send you into the Walled City, alone, to fight the Shadow King? You know the consequences if you lose. I cannot imagine Genosha would sanction such a thing."

Xavier smiled. "I won't be alone. Now, if you'd be so kind, would you mind carrying in that trunk?" He gestured to a non-descript black trunk, set against the side of the tent. Magneto
frowned, but questions about its contents and where it came from vanished when Xavier's hand landed on his forearm, touch lingering just long enough to brush against blooming bruises before he withdrew his hand.

Magneto swallowed, and then nodded them inside. He turned to retrieve the trunk.

~*~

Charles couldn't help the smile that spread across his face. It itched to shift into a grin, even as a wild flitting took up in his chest. Raven caught his eye, just inside the tent, gaze narrowing until Charles' expression turned neutral. He was not here to get distracted, however refreshing it was to speak with someone who didn't bow and scrape simply because of his bare head.

The tent's occupants all stood as he entered, coming to attention around a large, rectangular table. Charles recognized most of the people standing around the table, but he still let his gaze sweep across every face before turning his attention to Cyclops. Cyclops immediately saluted, but Charles waved off the gesture.

"This will probably run smoother if we skip ceremony and get straight to the point," he said. He took his place at the head of the table, the chair on his right empty; the only other empty chair two spots down. The chair on his right was undoubtedly meant for Raven, the one farther down meant for Magneto.

Raven slid neatly into the space behind Charles' chair. He allowed himself the briefest brush against her thoughts, finding only tightly focused awareness and faint amusement at his intrusion. Charles withdrew, casting a glance over his shoulder just as Magneto entered the tent. The trunk was braced between his arms, the weight of it written in the lines of his neck. Charles cocked his head, indicating the table. He did not miss the way Magneto rolled his eyes, the sight almost enough to start Charles grinning again.

He felt like a damned schoolboy.

He watched as Magneto set the trunk in the table's centre, the box almost big enough to cover its entire surface. Several of the table's occupants had to move papers and pens, though its only victim was a glass of water, liquid spilling off the side of the table, dripping onto carpeted floors. Catching Magneto's eye, Charles nodded him to the chair at his right.

Magneto hesitated only briefly before claiming it, his expression defiant and yet oddly pleased. Charles would have given anything to have known his thoughts in that moment. Damned helmets. Certainly this meeting would have proven easier without them. Only Wolverine was without one, but touching his thoughts was like trying to hold a sphere of ice. Try as Charles might he couldn't find purchase, Wolverine's mind eluding him.

Once everyone was seated, he let his gaze circle the table, the dark recesses of the tent falling away as he took in each face. Cyclops and Wolverine sat side by side, and next to them the half-drowned woman from yesterday that Charles now knew was called Rogue. At her side was a man he had yet to meet. Charles caught his eye and frowned. The man inclined his head.

"Name be Gambit," he said. Charles nodded and continued his circuit.

Havok and Banshee he'd met yesterday at dinner, and Nightcrawler had spent the night watching over Charles' sleep, but he did not recognize the two women seated on Magneto's right.

"Shadowcat," the first woman said, "and this is Jubilee." Jubilee smiled brightly, though her nervousness showed in her eyes. Charles inclined his head in their direction. He turned his
attention to Cyclops.

"There are psionic shields in place around the tent?" he asked. Cyclops nodded. "Then if you would be so kind." He gestured to the trunk. Cyclops caught Magneto's eye, waiting for his nod before he stood, efficiently releasing the trunk's clasps and then pushing back the lid to reveal a helmet not unlike the one he was wearing. Cyclops frowned. So, for that matter, did Magneto.

Charles allowed himself a small smile. He glanced briefly to Magneto and found the man watching him curiously, as though waiting for Charles to perform some magic trick. When he caught Charles' gaze, he arched an eyebrow, Charles flushing delightedly at his impudence. Charles inclined his head and then stood, holding out a hand when it looked like the others might follow suit. He gestured to the helmet.

"This is part of a device called Cerebro. It amplifies my telepathic powers and allows me to form a bond with other telepaths, not unlike the bond between a telepath and their guardian. There is a larger-scale device back in the Citadel, which connects three additional telepaths. Together our strengths combine."

He paused then, allowing the table to absorb the information. Even with their helmets--even only reading their facial expressions, which had never been Charles' strong suit--he could tell they saw the significance of the device. Hope shone in more than one set of eyes.

"With this device, we will be powerful enough to challenge the Shadow King and defeat him."

He did not tell them this was only theory--better for morale to state a thing as fact. "But in order for it to work, we must breach the Walled City's psionic shields. So long as the Shadow King is ensconced beyond them, he remains untouchable."

There was a flicker of uncertainty; they'd spent the better part of two years trying to breach the Walled City's shields. Charles let his expression turn smug. He reached into his coat pocket, the tailored wool plain and ordinary around a table of officer's custom-made uniforms, and pulled out a thumb-sized data-chip. He placed it on top of the helmet, matte black against glossy grey.

"We have been trying for years to breach the shields telepathically without success. This is because the shields are not, as we first supposed, generated by a mutant."

He held the table rapt with attention, but Charles took particular pleasure from the speculative look in Magneto's gaze. He knew why Magneto was here--knew why Magneto had joined Genosha's ranks; had discovered that the first time they met--and right now Charles was handing him the very thing he'd spent the bulk of his adult life searching for.

Retribution.

"They are generated by a sentient program called Mastermind, and we have recently come into possession of its schematics. This," he gestured to the data-chip, "is a computer virus."

A nervous ripple ran through the group; even without access to their thoughts, Charles could sense their tentative excitement, buried though it was in apprehension and confusion. Cyclops leaned forward, eyes glued to the data-chip, while a smug smile began tugging at Wolverine's lips. Banshee sat with his mouth frozen open; he exchanged a glance with Havok, receiving a tight nod in return. Charles could practically feel their questions, but no one spoke; no one dared.

"The virus," Charles continued, "creates a back door in Mastermind's programing, so that I can telepathically link with him. From there I can override his security protocols and lower the shields."

Only Magneto remained unmoved, expression hard, frown still fixed firmly in place. He leaned
back into his chair, gaze flickering from the data-chip to Charles.

"Where did the schematics come from?" he asked. Everyone else around the table went terribly still, even as they turned their attention to Charles, awaiting his answer.

Charles reclaimed his seat. He sat primly, crossing his legs as he leaned into Magneto's space. It both threw him off kilter and filled him with delight to have met someone finally willing to question his words.

"We have informants inside the Walled City, an entire network of dissatisfied citizens who smuggle out information. One of them is in a position of power and influence. The information came from them."

It should have been enough to quell any objection—the word of a telepath was law, after all—but Magneto's frown deepened.

"And we're just going to trust that this informant is who they say they are? We're going to trust that this isn't a trap?"

Raven, who during Charles' pacing had taken up residence against the back wall, tensed. She looked ready to spring into action, so Charles waved her aside, letting her feel his pleasure with the current debate. Her eyes flashed indignation, but she assented, though her disapproving scowl remained. Across the table, Cyclops was in the process of standing, no doubt intending to reprimand Magneto for speaking against a telepath. Charles waved him back as well.

"A very valid point, Magneto, and the truth is, yes, we are operating entirely on trust, but then, I am also operating entirely on trust by talking to you now. Any one of you could be an enemy spy, and unless you are all willing to remove your helmets and let me check, I will continue to trust that your loyalty rests with Genosha."

It was a low blow; there was hardly anyone at the table who didn't know Magneto had defected from the enemy, who didn't question his intentions. Charles expected outrage; instead, Magneto broke out into a shark-toothed grin.

"Fair enough," he said. He turned his attention to Cyclops. "It's your call."

Cyclops shook his head. "It's the Citadel's call, and if this is their plan, then it is our duty to see it done." He turned to Charles. "What do you need?"

Charles smiled.

"Magneto, if that's all right with him, and a company of his men: enough to get us to the rendezvous, so that we can get that," he pointed to the data-chip, "into our informant's hands. The virus needs to be uploaded to Mastermind's mainframe, and that's inside the Walled City. Once it's uploaded, I'll have access, but until then our hands are tied."

Cyclops nodded.

"And this informant can do this?"

Charles smiled. "I have the utmost faith."

He took the opportunity to once again catch Magneto's eye. It wasn't a surprise to find Magneto watching him, the weight of his gaze heavy and conflicted, laced with suspicion and doubt. After a moment's consideration, he nodded his acceptance. Charles inclined his head and then rose from the table. The others followed suit. Charles did not wait for their dismissal before turning to
Magneto.

"How soon can you be ready?" he asked.

"Two hours," Magneto answered.

"Tomorrow morning will suffice, I think."

Magneto nodded. He glanced over Charles' shoulder, Charles following his gaze to find Havok standing at the far end of the table. Whatever information Magneto conveyed, Havok saluted, repackaged Cerebro, and then strode from the room, trunk braced between his arms.

"We'll leave at 0700hrs," Magneto said, making a broad, sweeping gesture with his hand, one that Charles took as a dismissal from the tent. Had anyone else done such a thing, Charles would have been immensely offended; instead he smiled brightly and tried to ignore the growing flush that spread across his cheeks.
Long shadows shrouded the corridor in darkness. Hank hated coming here; hated the damp press of the underground, the sharp bite of mould and mildew. He hated the way the air caught at the back of his throat, thick and stagnant. Mostly, he hated the thought of what would happen if he was caught.

It was a dangerous game he played, cloaked in fabric, hood drawn over his head to hide his telltale appearance. Fortunately the weather had turned cold, soft snow coating the world above in white, otherwise the disguise would have drawn every eye; not a very good disguise, then.

As it was several people glanced curiously into his hood. There were none below ground who felt the need to hide their faces; an array of mutations navigating these same corridors. Hank passed tails and snouts and odd protrusions of bone. A woman, skin the colour of fire-coals, eyes wide and black, frowned in his direction, no doubt thinking him a spy from above. He could have told her otherwise; told her the Shadow King was too preoccupied with Genosha to care about the undesirables living beneath his city.

The Shadow King's preoccupation was the only reason Hank suspected he'd gone unnoticed this long. True, he did spend most of his time locked inside his lab, away from prying eyes, with only Moira for company, but often enough he stood in front of the Queen, thoughts shielded in hopes of escaping her notice. He didn't just play a dangerous game, he played a foolish one.

But what other choice was there? They all took risks, their lives small prices to pay.

The corridor ahead forked to the left, a single lamp illuminating the juncture. This part of the underground city occupied centuries-old aqueducts. Hank's claws echoed against the stone-cut floors. There were fewer people the farther he went, so that by the time he reached the juncture the corridor was deserted. He took the left tunnel, winding deeper into the earth, the space void of light, Hank forced to count his steps to find the entrance he was looking for.

A change in air pressure told him he'd found it, Hank narrowing his gaze, dim shadows resolving into an arched doorway. Glancing briefly over his shoulder to ensure he wasn't followed, Hank ducked inside.

Three paces led to the first step, Hank feeling them out with his foot, following the winding staircase down until the soft, red light filled the space, pulsing irregularly with borrowed electricity. The door at the bottom of the stairs was illuminated by a single bulb. Hank pushed back his hood and knocked.

The scent of sulphur filled his nose before strong arms braced his waist, Hank closing his eyes as the ground gave way beneath his feat, teleportation always leaving him dizzy and disoriented. The world solidified in a jolt, Hank opening his eyes to find he was standing in a well-furnished apartment, the damp-scent of earth replaced by filtered air. Somewhere above ground then, though the room's shades were drawn so it was impossible to say where; one of the Walled City's more affluent neighbourhoods if the décor was any indication.

Hank shook off lingering vertigo and turned to glare at Azazel.

"You couldn't have just given me this address?"

Azazel smirked, but didn't respond, nodding instead to a woman seated on one of the black-leather couches.
"Too risky," the woman said, coy smile pulling at her lips. Hank didn't need introductions to know who he was meeting; to know that this was her residence. It was no wonder she didn't want the Shadow King or any of his minions following Hank here.

"You're Angel, then," he said. Angel inclined her head. Hank crossed the room and took a seat on the couch opposite.

She was younger than he had expected--a good deal younger--but she was also the reason they were in contact with Genosha at all, so for that he owed her a good deal of respect. Hank folded his hands into his lap and waited.

"We've sent them your last update," Angel began. She nodded to Azazel. He disappeared in a puff of red smoke. "And they've sent their reply. They're sending a telepath with the virus. Cerebro is a go."

Hank's eyes grew wide, even as he leaned forward in his chair. "They're sending a telepath?" he asked, because that was going to complicate an already complicated situation. "They do know his weapon targets telepaths, don't they?"

"They know; which is why it's up to you to ensure the weapon isn't completed until after the shields fall. Cerebro won't work without the shields down, and then they need a telepath in range to operate it."

Hank fell speechless, during which Azazel returned, a familiar face in tow. Unlike Hank, Darwin seemed unfazed by the mode of transport. He smiled brightly when he saw Angel, giving Hank a respectful nod as he crossed to sit at her side.

"I know we're asking a lot," Angel said, which was the understatement of the year as far as Hank was concerned, "but not without reason. The rendezvous is in three days. Darwin will meet with the telepath, get the virus and then lower the shields." Here Darwin nodded, looking oddly pleased about the entire affair. Hank shook his head. "We just need to ensure the telepath survives until then."

Which meant that Genosha's telepath either needed to escape detection or the weapon Hank was developing needed to not work. He was beyond delaying the project--anything longer would arouse suspicion, and then the Shadow King would order his mind swept and all of this would be for naught.

He glanced to Angel; found himself contemplating her story. Rumour had it she owed a Genoshian telepath her life, that he had planted her here. At her side, Darwin leaned forward intently, ready to adapt to whatever changes they made to the plan. His story, at least, Hank knew. It was all too common: human parents, sacrificed to the empire, Darwin beaten but not broken. Across the room, Azazel lounged against the side of a wet-bar. Hank knew next to nothing of his story, save that he was a good deal older than everyone in the room and that once, when Hank was only a child, he was deep in the Shadow King's clutches. Why he'd had a change of heart, no one knew, and yet, for reasons he couldn't explain, Hank trusted him above the others.

"I can't delay production, but I might be able to program in some sort of a logic bomb. The weapon generates a telepathic dampening field, which neutralizes a telepath's powers, drops their natural shields long enough for the Shadow King to assert control. I can get it to change its cycling frequency the second it encounters a bonded telepath. Their shields would be unique. That way it'll get past testing, but won't work on any of Genosha's telepaths. It should destabilize the dampening field long enough for a telepath to repair their shields and then adapt to the weapon. Of course, the first time the Shadow King uses it in the field, he'll know what I've done."
Hank didn't feel the need to elaborate on what that meant. Everything he knew would be theirs for the taking, and when they were done with him he'd end up a hollow shell of a man, no longer useful to anyone.

If they were going to do this, it was a one shot deal.

"Then we better get this right," Darwin said, as though he were the telepath. Hank knew better, but the thought still sent chills down his arms.

"Right," he said, because this was all still easier said than done.

~*~

Light inside the tent suggested another day of sun. It bode well for travel, though the temperature had dropped considerably overnight. They were coming into winter now; soon they'd be knee-deep in snow, travel impossible. If they didn't do this now, there wouldn't be another chance until spring.

Magneto didn't particularly relish spending another winter sleeping in a tent. The last two had been bad enough.

He stretched against his pallet, body stiff with sleep. Quiet stillness permeated every corner of the tent, telling him it was early, and that he was alone. He'd not expected that; an entire day without Schmidt, and now it looked like today might bring the same. He wasn't foolish enough to hope this marked the end of the man, that he had finally done what he'd thought impossible, but it was a welcome reprieve.

The curve of his helmet was digging into his cheek. When the war was over—when the Shadow King and his puppet Queen were dead—he was going to banish the thing to the deepest reaches of the ocean. These days it only came off on the rare occasions when he saw fit to wash his hair. He'd been surprised to find streaks of grey running through it the last time; for all he knew it was washed through with white now.

At least the helmet suffocated the lice, he thought with a wry grin. He adjusted it now, and then pushed himself from the pallet, toes curling into half-frozen carpets. Another few weeks and he'd have to start sleeping in his boots—cape, too, his heater nowhere near powerful enough to drive out winter's chill.

The water in his basin was completely frozen over this morning, Magneto heating it slowly, watching as the ice's surface became slick and shiny. It took several minutes before the water had thawed through; several more for it to reach a decent temperature. Magneto pulled his nightshirt over his head and reached for his cloth.

The ritual was always the same, the process almost a meditation now. It reminded him faintly of his childhood; of the time before Schmidt and the camps. Water had been scarce, his childhood mired in drought. His mother used to fill a basin, much like the one he stood over now. She'd let Erik wash first, using what was left over for herself. He hadn't thought of it then, but in hindsight he saw the sacrifice for what it was.

They'd gotten no water inside the camps; not even a tiny basin. There was only delousing powder and the constant stink of perspiration.

A faint rustling, fabric on canvas, drew him from the memory. Magneto glanced over his shoulder, half expecting to find Schmidt lounging against the desk, or picking a circuit around the tent. Instead he was surprised to find Charles Xavier standing inside the entrance to his tent. Magneto
dropped his cloth. It landed in the basin, water sploshing over the sides, the cloth disappearing into the murky-grey water.

"How did you get here?" Magneto asked, forgetting himself in his shock. Xavier arched a pointed eyebrow.

"I walked," he said. Magneto didn't miss the hint of cheek in his tone. He ducked his head, turning back to his washing and refusing to apologize. He'd spent too much of his life bowing and scraping: never again.

"You shouldn't travel the camp on your own." He'd left specific instructions with Havok to ensure Xavier and his guardian remained inside the house; that they weren't permitted to travel without an escort, and yet here Xavier was, not even his guardian for protection.

"Raven's outside, as is Banshee. I asked to be brought to you this morning, and he obliged. I hope you don't mind."

He could hear Xavier moving into the tent now, Magneto ringing out his cloth and bringing it to his neck. He turned so that he could watch Xavier's approach.

Xavier managed another step before he froze, eyes growing wide as he took in the scar running the length of Erik's chest. There was something in his expression that went beyond horror and pity; something that looked very much like physical pain. Magneto frowned, talking a step towards him before he remembered himself. He sank back onto his heels.

"Ran into a patrol a few weeks ago; they had a telekinetic with them. She lobbed a rusty bumper at me," he said. He didn't mention sending that same bumper back to her; skewering her through. Somehow, he didn't think Xavier would approve, war or no war.

His words seemed to pierce Xavier's fog, because he shook himself, though his expression didn't clear. He stepped forward, moving as though compelled by some external force. He came to a stop not a pace away, light from a nearby seam cutting through the space between them.

"It must have hurt," he said even as he raised a tentative hand. Magneto tensed, but made no move to withdraw, letting Xavier's fingertips brush against the puckered skin.

"I've had worse."

Xavier froze, hand caught between them, his touch feather-light, Magneto overcome with the sudden impulse to lean forward. He'd felt this before; that spark between them that had overlaid their chess match, that had burned in him until he was left dizzy with want. The spark that had lingered far longer than he cared to admit.

Magneto took a step back. Xavier started, hand falling to his side. He visibly reined in his expression, instantly taking on the appearance of poised perfection.

"I wanted to discuss something with you," he said. He swept across the room then, claiming one of the chairs to the right of Magneto's pallet. Magneto set aside his cloth. He retrieved his tags from the bottom of the basin, polished the metal until it gleamed silver, and then hung them around his neck. He took his time getting dressed.

When he was done, he crossed the room and sank into the chair opposite, legs splaying wide as he sprawled across it.

"Something that couldn't wait?"
Xavier shook his head, pained smiled stretching his mouth into a thin line.

"This is only going to work if I have your trust." He held up a hand, Magneto inclining his head, agreeing to bite his tongue. "I know that is not easy for you, and I also know how much getting into the city means to you."

They were speaking in subtext now, Magneto knew, though he had no idea why Xavier didn't simply say what he so obviously wanted to say. Magneto wasn't an idiot; he'd spent time in Xavier's company without the security of the helmet. He had no delusions about what this man knew about him.

"You mean how much killing the White Queen means to me; or I suppose meant to me, because if what you say is true, then she is no more responsible than you or I."

Xavier nodded, enthused. "Yes, she is no more responsible than you or I, and that is my worry, because I intend to get us inside, and I need to know that you will not rush off on your own and do something rash. I will be relying on you entirely to watch my back, and I can't do that if you're chasing your own vendetta."

Magneto let a moment of silence stretch between them; let himself imagine not being the one to put a bullet through the Shadow King's skull, regardless of whose body he occupied. If Xavier was right, it wouldn't do any good anyway; he'd only offer himself over as the next puppet, the next slave. It wasn't his soul he was worried about--he knew he was beyond salvation--but he would die before he handed the Shadow King victory.

"I confess; it pains me, but I am willing to step aside if the end result is the same."

Xavier's look was level and searching. Magneto endured his scrutiny, feigning an indifference he didn't feel. Eventually Xavier must have found what he was searching for, because he nodded, content with the decision. He stood swiftly from his chair. Magneto followed suit.

"Thank you, Erik," he said. Magneto didn't miss the use of his given name. Xavier seemed determined to use it, regardless of Magneto's wishes. "I feel better knowing I'll have you with me."

He inclined his head then, and turned towards the exit. Magneto watched him leave, uncertain how to respond to the confession. Something warm uncoiled in his chest; the same sensation he'd experienced two years ago, when Xavier had called him a friend, smile bright and happy across the wooden expanse of a chess set.

"Oh, Erik, pet. I think we should keep him."

In an instant the feeling was gone, replaced by cold dread and surging rage. He'd known Schmidt's absence was only temporary, but he'd hoped for a slightly longer reprieve. Still, he supposed he ought to thank the man for waiting until Charles left.

"Charles is it now. Oh, things are progressing."

"Shut up. We are not discussing this. We are not discussing anything. Or do you want me to carve out your other eye."

Schmidt gave no response, but when Magneto caught his eye--both of them--he was smiling, delirious happiness painted across his face. Magneto's jaw clenched, scowl settling across his face as he turned in search of his boots. Schmidt was an annoyance, but his most pressing concern at the moment was his bladder.
Two dun-coloured armoured trucks sat in the middle of the road. Charles stood across from them, mud frozen beneath his feat. His breath caught the air, misting white against a backdrop of endless blue. Despite the sun, the air held the scent of approaching snow. Raven was nestled at his side, wearing the dull grey uniform of a private. She'd caved to the cold this morning and requested them, though she didn't look particularly happy about it. When Charles sought her thoughts he found her annoyed by their restriction.

Standing adjacent the trucks, Cyclops was making a speech.

He wasn't among the mutants travelling with them to the rendezvous, so he wasn't wearing a helmet--the first aside from Wolverine who'd gone without in Charles' presence. Charles couldn't help but reach out, brush against his mind, just for the sake of doing so. Being in a camp with so many helmets was like living underwater, everything muffled and blurred, Charles' vision limited in ways that made panic knot in his chest until he thought he might suffocate for it. He was grateful for Raven, their bond protecting her from telepathic interference, making a helmet unnecessary. Her thoughts alone were not enough, though. Charles craved the intricate hum that came with living in city, thousands of minds all calling for attention.

Cyclops thoughts were as orderly and precise as the man himself, but his worry was sharper than it needed to be. Charles didn't need to dig deep to know its source; Wolverine would be going with them today.

They were seven in total. Charles would have preferred less, but Magneto had wanted his entire company--twenty mutants--and Cyclops had taken his side. Long hours of negotiation had settled them on seven, and then only because Charles had refused adding any others. He glanced to the mutants standing alongside him and Raven. Magneto stared straight ahead, expression cold, his cape newly brushed, regal purple an odd compliment to the red of his suit. At his side, Rogue stood at attention, her greens and yellows an awkward contrast to Magneto's colours. Havok's uniform was a little more subtle, but Banshee's was as bright as Rogue's. Charles honestly had no idea why they were bothering with the camouflaged vehicles. Only Wolverine seemed to understand the concept of concealment. He was dressed entirely in fatigues and leathers.

Charles straightened the hem of his coat, dusty grey set against the same black fatigues he'd worn upon arriving. Cyclops' speech was coming to an end, so Charles turned his attention to Raven, found her frowning at Magneto across the clearing.

*You don't approve,* he floated in her direction.

She did not turn, but he could feel her attention.

*Of course not,* she sent back. *I think he's brash, unhinged and dangerous, but you've already made your decision so it's hardly my call.*

Charles frowned, glanced from the line of Raven's profile to where Magneto stood, head held high, helmet perched upon his head like a crown. He looked as though these proceedings were beneath him; as though he was only biding his time, waiting for the opportunity to claim rule.

*I haven't decided anything,* he told Raven. The distinct huff of her laughter echoed through his thoughts.

*You made your choice two years ago, Charles. Don't even try to tell me his presence didn't influence your decision to come.*
Charles wanted to claim indignation; he wanted to protest that he had done no such thing, that he was here for the very best reasons, but he'd only be lying to himself. Meeting Erik marked a turning point in his life, even if this Magneto only vaguely resembled the uncertain man who'd kept Charles' gaze over a game of chess.

Instead he said nothing, plastering on a smile as Cyclops crossed the space to stand before him. Charles inclined his head.

"The entire army is behind you, Sir, should you need us," he said. His thoughts betrayed his intentions, Charles holding out a hand before he could salute.

"Thank you, though I think we'll be quite fine."

It was obvious Cyclops thought otherwise, but he let Charles go, Charles following his gesture to one of the trucks. Rogue was holding open a door, looking none to please at having to do so. Charles offered her a grateful smile, and then climbed into the back of the truck. Raven followed on his heel.

It was somewhat of a surprise when Rogue shut the door behind them and then claimed the driver's side. Charles was used to being able to anticipate peoples' actions; people projected their intent as clearly as a map. The helmets blocked that, left Charles relying on instincts he'd never fully developed. It was frustrating.

"You'd think they could have managed a caravan, maybe a transport," Raven said, strapping herself into the seat. It was Rogue who answered.

"It's called tactic, darlin'. We go flyin' up in one o' them birds, they just gonna shoot us outta the sky."

Raven telegraphed her intentions long before she acted; irritation and affront congealing into a biting remark that was halfway off her tongue before Charles reached down and caught her knee.

_We have to work with these people_, he pleaded.

_It was rude, Charles. You'd think her mother raised her in a barn._ The last bit was said in a huff, but Raven relaxed, leaning back into her seat with a pseudo smile firmly in place.

Charles meant to reprimand her, but it was at that moment the passenger side door opened, Magneto slipping into the car. He glanced over his shoulder, catching Charles' eye for the briefest of moments before he looked away, the line of his posture strangely tense.

"We're good," he said, which seemed to be Rogue's cue to turn the engine and then start them down the road.

Charles tore his gaze from the back of Magneto's chair; turned instead to stare out the window, watching the beleaguered camp pass through the tinted window. Soldiers turned to stare as they passed, sombre gazes tinged with respect, admiration and the slight hint of envy. From this vantage point, the chaos of the camp seemed orderly, rows of tents forming straight lines, invisible when walking on foot, but obvious now as they sped past, the car rumbling over rough, make-shift roads.

Charles grit his teeth against the sensation. He leaned back into his chair, and closed his eyes. This was what he'd been waiting for his entire life; the chance to be part of something bigger. He wanted the chance for adventure, and yet, standing on the edge of it, he felt strangely displaced, stomach rolling with nerves, thoughts distracted by the impenetrable mind in the seat ahead.
"They're watching the north road," Banshee said. Magneto frowned, and then leaned over the hood of the truck to follow the line of Banshee's finger. The news was expected--why wouldn't they be watching the north road?--but it still made things difficult.

Perched at Banshee's side, Havok shifted onto a hip, truck swaying under his weight. He stared down at the map.

"We don't exactly have a lot of options," he said. Magneto agreed, but guarded his tongue, wanting to weigh all his options, however few, before deciding on a course of action.

Naturally Rogue had no such compunction. She pushed her way between them, hand slamming down onto the hood, likely leaving a dent. "So what are we waiting for? I say we go in an' bust some heads; cut a hole right through em," she said. Magneto shook his head.

"How many?" he asked Banshee, because it was his reconnaissance and Magneto had learned a long time ago to trust Banshee's instincts.

"I counted five, so it's doable."

An outpost then, which was easy enough to get through, but it would still draw the Shadow King's gaze. Not a problem if it was a straight hit, but they were trying to avoid notice. He considered the map, shook his head and then glanced away.

His gaze came to rest on the other truck, parked at the side of the road, precariously close to the ditch. Xavier stood at its back, leaned against trunk, his guardian braced at his side. She was watching the surrounding woods like she expected an entire army to materialize without warning. He could have told her the vigilance was unnecessary. Wolverine was out there somewhere, patrolling the area; he'd kill anything he came across, mutant or otherwise.

"If it's the telepath yer worried 'bout, why not send me and Wolvie? We'll take em out before they know what hit em. Trust me, sugah, ain't no one gonna connect a few dead mutants with your boy."

Magneto turned back to glare at Rogue, scowling at her assumption that Xavier was his boy. She tossed her head, clearly unimpressed with his denial; and his hesitance. If this was any other mission, he might have taken her side, but they were two miles outside the border, at least fifty miles from the Walled City, depending on the route they took, and getting Xavier there unharmed, without attracting notice, was his primary concern.

"We could ditch the trucks, go up the Elbe," Havok suggested, another option Magneto had considered, but he hated travelling by water. It left too much to chance. A damned pity they couldn't fly in, but between the terrain and radar sweeps, moving undetected through the air was impossible.

Magneto glanced back over to where Xavier still stood, watching the proceedings with interest. When Magneto caught his eye, he arched an elegant eyebrow.

"The decision's not ours," Magneto said. He pushed himself away from the truck, taking the map with him, leaving Rogue, Havok and Banshee behind as he crossed to Xavier's side. Midway across the clearing, the shadow at his side took shape, resolving into Schmidt. He floated across the road like he was taking a leisurely Sunday afternoon stroll. Magneto ignored him.
"Come with me," he said when he reached Xavier's side. He didn't wait for a response--didn't register that he’d just ordered a telepath to follow behind like a common lackey. He simply led Xavier and his guardian around to the front of the truck, where he spread the map out across its hood.

Xavier obeyed, sliding neatly against his side, close enough that Magneto could smell the pale floral scent of his soap. Magneto couldn't remember the last time he'd smelled soap. It took several minutes before he remembered what he was supposed to be doing.

"We're here," he said, gesturing to a thin line on the map. Xavier hummed thoughtfully. His guardian stood a few paces back, looking bored, but alert. Schmidt had come around the other side of the truck and was now perched on the hood, staring intently at the map over Magneto's other shoulder. So far he'd kept his tongue, but Magneto knew that wouldn't last.

"And this is the border. Unless we go completely off road, we can get across it here," he pointed to the north road, "back here," he pointed to the south road, a good twenty miles in the other direction, "or here," he pointed to the line of the Elbe. "The Elbe's probably the safest route, but it'll take longer and I doubt we'll make the rendezvous in time. We could turn around, but we decided against the south road because there's a camp within a few miles of it, so there's pretty heavy traffic in the area and lots of patrols." It was a shame, really, because it was far closer to their camp than they were now. Had the south road been a viable option, they would have been in and out by now.

"And the north road," Xavier asked, clearly seeing where this was going.

"Reconnaissance says an outpost of five mutants, though there could be an entire division hidden in the hills."

Xavier's expression turned thoughtful. He looked tired, but then, six hours in the back of a truck would do that to a person. Still, when he glanced up and caught Magneto's eye, there was eager excitement reflected in his gaze.

"Are they wearing these?" he asked, bringing up a hand to touch the side of Magneto's helmet.

Magneto startled, flinching away from the touch as though he expected Xavier to tear the helmet from his head. He wasn't even entirely sure what he was worried about--he had no reason to fear Xavier--save perhaps that he had no interest in being vulnerable to the White Queen or her Shadow King ever again.

He regretted the action almost immediately, Xavier's expression falling even as he stepped back, hand returning to his side. He made no move to apologize, so neither did Magneto, awkward silence filling the space between them. Magneto cleared his throat.

"No. The Shadow King's not particularly fond of them. He doesn't permit anyone in his service to wear them."

Xavier's expression grew bright once more.

"Then we have nothing to worry about."

It wasn't that Magneto hadn't considered using Xavier. He and Cyclops had discussed the matter at length. The problem, of course, was that the White Queen would sense telepathic interference the second she spotted any of the mutants Xavier manipulated. It might work here, an outpost unlikely to replenish their mutants as often as one of the main camps, but it was still a dangerous game to play. If they didn't get in before even one of the mutants guarding the north road got back
to the Walled City, there was a good chance they weren't getting in at all.

"I'm not sure if I should be insulted that you think me incapable of doing this without leaving psychic fingerprints," Xavier said, Magneto's gaze snapping up from the map. Xavier tutted. "I'm not reading your mind," he gestured to Magneto's helmet, "but it doesn't take a telepath to know what you're thinking."

"Oh, I like him. I really do like him. He has you so completely off your game," a familiar voice said in his ear, distracting Magneto from the conversation. Magneto's expression turned cold, Xavier no doubt thinking it meant for him.

"To be fair," Schmidt continued, "I can hardly blame you. He is quite distracting, and you're still thinking about this morning. It was nice, wasn't it, waking up to a pretty pair of blue eyes ducking into your tent? Tsk, tsk, Erik. Such inappropriate thoughts."

"You can get us past five, maybe more?" Magneto asked, ignoring Schmidt entirely. Schmidt barked a laugh and then circled around to stand on Xavier's side. Magneto shot him a glare, flushing slightly when he realized what he had done. He turned his attention back to Xavier and found Xavier watching him curiously.

"Of course," Xavier said, seeming unfazed by the prospect.

"What do you need?"

"Not much. Get me close enough. I could probably take them out now, but I'm not good with subtlety over distances. The closer I am the neater it'll be."

Magneto cocked his head, unwittingly impressed by Xavier's boasted range. If he could do even half of what he claimed he could do, then they stood a better chance of pulling this off than Magneto had originally estimated.

He meant to nod, to offer some indication of approval, but it was at that moment that Schmidt decided to move closer to Xavier, catching Magneto's eye as he did. Schmidt grinned and then leaned fully into Xavier's space, running his nose along the side of Xavier's neck, inhaling deeply. Xavier showed no signs of noticing, but Schmidt's grin shifted into a pleased smile, his eyes falling closed as an expression of bliss settled over his features.

Red clouded Magneto's vision, rage stirring in his breast until it threatened to break free, rip through his rib cage and flutter away like a bird too long denied its freedom.

He was moving before he'd fully considered the ramifications of his actions.

He reached forward, grabbed Xavier by the arm and drew him roughly towards him, away from Schmidt. Xavier gasped, stumbling slightly as Magneto pulled him to his chest, sheltering him there as he stared at Schmidt, murderous intent written across his features. Too late he remember Xavier's guardian, who had moved the second his hand had curled around Xavier's forearm. It was somewhat of a surprise when Xavier was wrenched from him and pinned against the hood of the car, too close to Schmidt for Magneto's tastes, but before he could act, before he could reclaim Xavier as his own, Raven was spinning, a streak of blur resolving into a foot. Pain exploded across his chest.

Magneto stumbled back, too slow to avoid her second kick, which landed just above the last, air rushing from his lungs is a whoosh, the ground giving way beneath him as he flew back, landing on his ass in the dirt. In an instant he was reaching for her metal--an impossible task had she remained naked, but she was wearing a private's uniform now, metal grommets like boldly lit...
targets in the dark. Magneto was only vaguely aware of the others, rushing towards to the scene. Power surged through him, Raven lifting several feet in the air, and he would have thrown her back, tossed her to the other side of the road like a rag doll, except it was then that Xavier's voice broke the fog.

"Raven!" he shouted.

Suddenly horrified, Magneto released his hold of her, Raven falling to the ground with a soft thud, feet steady beneath her. She stepped towards him, intent on finishing what she had started, but Xavier spoke again, his voice a steady, even command.

"You will stand down."

He'd pushed himself away from the truck, and now came to stand between them. It took Magneto several seconds to realize his ire was directed at his guardian, not him. He swallowed, and then shakily rose to his feet, hand coming up to rub absently at his chest. Tomorrow morning would no doubt see it mottled with bruises.

Once again perched on the hood of the truck, Schmidt was applauding.

"Oh, well done, my boy. Well done indeed," he said as he caught Magneto's eye. He offered a mock bow, and then disappeared. Magneto glanced over to where Rogue, Havok and Banshee were standing. He dismissed them with a wave.

"Charles, he grabbed you," Raven was saying, but she no longer looked intent on killing him.

Xavier shook his head. "I am sure he had a very good reason," he said, turning then to face Magneto, eyebrow arched like he was waiting to hear that very good reason. Not a single hair was out of place, the man unflappable. Magneto flushed.

"I thought I heard something," he said, a flimsy excuse, but as soon as he said it something cracked, all eyes turning simultaneously to stare into the forest, watching as Wolverine sauntered lazily out of its depths.

"You ladies gonna stand around gabbin' all day, or are we gonna go kick some ass," he said. Magneto could have kissed the man. Across the clearing, Rogue's, "'Bout damned time," was loud enough to startle them into action.

~*~

Charles stared hard at the back of Magneto's seat, as though in doing so he could force the man to turn around. He hadn't spoken a word to Charles since the incident in the clearing, and Charles wanted to know why. Mostly he wanted to know why Magneto had felt the need to pull Charles bodily towards him—not that Charles had particularly minded.

Raven was sulking next to him, her mind a tangle of irritation and betrayal. True, she was only doing her duty, but Charles still felt justified in having interfered. Charles floated over the thought, along with a belated thank you and apology, but she only huffed and turned to stare out the window.

It left him with precious little to do, so Charles closed his eyes and let his mind wander.

Raven's mind still buzzed with annoyance, but the others in the car were like black holes, completely void spaces where people should have existed, but didn't. It was a disconcerting experience, searching for minds that should have been there, but weren't. The other car was the
same, so Charles passed it, floating ahead, following the winding bend of the road until he reached another mind.

No, not just one; eight. He sorted through them one by one, identifying them easily as the mutants posted at the checkpoint.

Through their eyes he saw the checkpoint for what it was; an abandoned city from the time before--there were so many of them--hollowed shells of buildings made into make-shift barracks, while pocked and cracked streets and sidewalks were slowly being reclaimed by nature. How much of the population remained in this part of the world? If the sprawling libraries of Genosha were accurate then when humanity still reigned there were once countless millions. Genosha--the largest city in the world--only boasted a population of eighty thousand. He doubted the world's population measured more than ten times that. Mutantkind had claimed the planet for their own, but they had never mastered humanity's ability to reproduce in such startling numbers.

He left the town with the setting sun, circled into the surrounding hills, searching for stray thoughts and minds, but found no one. By the time he returned to the car, they were pulling to a stop at the side of the road. Raven was watching him curiously. At least it seemed she had forgiven him.

"There are eight mutants at the checkpoint. It's an abandoned city. There's no one in the surrounding hills," Charles said when Magneto glanced over his shoulder. His mouth fell open, whatever he was about to say forgotten. Charles smiled.

"You're sure?" Magneto asked.

"I'm sure."

Magneto nodded, twisting so that he could lean over the seatback. Charles didn't miss his wince.

"So how do you want to do this?" he asked. There was something in his posture that suggested he was tenser than he was letting on. His jaw was clenched into a hard line, his shoulders drawn tight.

"We're just going to drive through. No stopping, no hesitating. Drive through with purpose."

Magneto looked skeptical--which would have been a first, Charles not used to anyone questioning his abilities--but he nodded, and then gave the order.

"I'd say your funeral, but I guess I'm a comin' with. Oh, Remy," Rogue said, but she put the truck in gear and pulled forward, stopping next to the other truck so that Magneto could roll down the window and impart the same instructions. Wolverine jerked his head forward, silent acknowledgement.

Charles released a breath, and then closed his eyes.

A lifetime of exercises and training had prepared him for this, but today marked the first time Charles had used his telepathy for anything this important. This wasn't simply a drill put forth by one of his teachers, but rather, life and death, not just his own, but six others, all of whom he was now accountable for. The responsibility of it was staggering. Nerves fluttered in his stomach.

He let his awareness drift, beyond the car and up the road, bending as it curved, then cresting a hill, the abandoned town laid out beyond. He slipped past the make shift barricade, finding his first mutant, the woman leaned against the rusted remains of a petroleum fueled vehicle. Her thoughts were lost to boredom. Charles slid into her mind, neat and clean so as to not leave any trace, and then calmly walked her to the barricade.
He left her with instructions for lifting it and then swiftly sought the other seven. They were scattered in pairs throughout the town, but their physical locations hardly mattered. Charles slipped past their defences one by one until they were all under his control. Through their eyes, he watched the approach of the trucks, slow and steady, just as Charles had requested. He blurred their passing, no one batting an eye as the vehicles rolled past the raised barricade and then moved slowly through town. He bid the woman lower the barricade behind them, and then altered their thoughts, the passing of two trucks no more than a scattering of leaves. As he retreated, he picked as his imprint until it became a fine mist, ready to dissipate the second he was free.

The only evidence of their passing were tire tracks that none of the mutants would ever notice.

Charles drifted after the trucks.

A touch to his knee startled him back into his body. He blinked his eyes open, finding his chest tight with breath and his upper lip damp with sweat. He exhaled in a rush, shivering against sudden cold.

"It's all right, we're through," Raven said. Charles glanced over to find her watching him with a concerned frown. He glanced out the window and found the city had vanished, their journey once again swallowed by forest.

"How long?"

"About twenty minutes."

It had felt like seconds.

Charles nodded, glancing up then to find Magneto watching him over the shoulder of his seat. He nodded, soft smile knocking aside Charles' terror, replacing it instead with giddy pride.

"We're going to get over the next ridge and then stop for the night. We should reach the rendezvous tomorrow afternoon."

Charles nodded. Now that the excitement had passed, he could feel the pull of exhaustion. It sat like a heavy weight upon his shoulders, Charles blinking against the urge to close his eyes. He sank back into his seat, head lolling behind him. He brushed aside a spike of concern from Raven, drifting as they travelled the final mile. Today had been a test. Tomorrow would prove the true challenge.

~*~

"You're worried," Storm said.

She sat, crossed-legged on the foot of Jean's bed, watching Jean stare out her bedroom room, the city sprawled below. The line of her back was rigid, shoulders drawn tight. Her fingers, hand braced against the window frame, tapped nervously.

"Charles will succeed," Storm continued, letting her certainty carry with her words. She floated them across the room on a current of air. Jean shook her head.

"I trust Charles completely, but we are racing the clock here and I'm starting to worry we'll be too late."

It was comforting, knowing the source of Jean's worry. Storm nodded. "Time keeps her own mysteries; she is not ours to command. We have done what we could with the information we
received, as we received it. The war will not be won or lost by our folly."

"Somehow that's not very comforting."

Storm hadn't meant it to be, but she felt scalded by reprimand. Jean shook her head; turned away from the window.

"I'm sorry. I'm taking out my frustrations on you. I shouldn't do that," she said. She crossed to the bed then, climbing in to lean against the headboard, knees drawn to her chest.

"Your frustrations are valid, and I don't mind weathering them." Jean's worry was not without cause. Should Charles fail, there was not a telepath alive who wouldn't end chained to the Shadow King's will. Storm thought of Emma Frost; of dead, frozen eyes and the lifeless slope of her shoulders.

"I'd never even met her," Jean said, answering Storm's thoughts. "I was still a child when she left, but I remember the stories. They say they found her guardian in a pool of his own blood. What would that have done to her? I cannot bear to imagine it."

Storm shivered at the thought, her bond with Jean the brightest point in her life. She could not imagine someone taking that away.

But that was not the only reason for her disquiet. She'd known Frost's guardian, Janos Quested one of her first teachers. Word of his death had hurt her dearly.

"I'm sorry," Jean said. Storm inclined her head.

"Think nothing of it," she said. It was a long time ago, a full year before she was assigned to Jean, the first seed of their bond planted. It had flourished since then, the interweaving of two souls, connected by a rope so thick only death could sever it. Losing Jean didn't bear thinking of.

"It has been a long day. Tomorrow will look brighter," Storm said, though her earlier certainty had vanished.

Jean still smiled, gratitude reflected in her eyes. She shifted down onto the bed, Storm taking this as her cue to leave. She stood, her legs stiff with disuse, inclined her head and then made for the door that connected the adjacent room.

"Leave it open," Jean requested. Storm glanced over her shoulder and nodded.

"Of course."

Jean always slept better with the door open. If Storm was honest, so did she.
The fire of their methane stove glowed iridescent green. Charles watched it for several long moments, drawn by its hypnotic flickering. It took effort to tear his gaze away. He let his attention broaden to encompass the entire camp.

Havok was crouched next to the stove, stirring the evening's rations; a lumpy stew that smelled worse than it looked. Banshee and Wolverine were seated not far away, eyeing the pot's contents appreciatively, while Rogue puttered amongst one of the supply trunks, pulling out dented metal bowls and warped spoons.

Charles shifted a little closer to the fire, trying to appropriate its heat. The cold had leeched into his bones so that Charles could no longer remember what it was to feel warm. Raven was seated next to him, her jaw clenched against the urge to shiver. She held herself perfectly still, listening intently to the sounds of the forest. Charles was avoiding peering over his shoulder; instead keeping his gaze contained to the small pool of light emanating from the stove. Magneto had refused them a fire, and for good reason. They were only a few miles from the outpost.

It was alarming after so long in the city to be sitting here now. If he'd thought the ramshackle farmhouse was isolated, it was nothing compared to this place. Beyond their circle of light, darkness pressed in on every side, an oppressive, carnivorous thing that nipped at his exposed sides, threatening to claim entire limbs. Charles drew himself tighter; pressed a little closer to Raven.

"We're too open here," Raven said, well aware of his discomfort. "Anything could be out there."

"There's no one," Charles replied, because if there was, Charles would have sensed them. Save for the mutants back at the outpost, they were utterly alone. Even the helmets left a distinctive dead space. It was not the prospect of attack that worried him. It was the isolation; the never ending stretch of nothingness.

Charles thought it might drive him insane.

Raven grunted. "I'm still going to do a circuit, make sure. You are to remain here, with the others at all times. Do you understand me?"

Charles didn't particularly want her to leave, her presence comforting, her thoughts familiar and warm, but he nodded, trying not to shiver as she slipped away. He stifled a yawn, still exhausted despite his short catnap in the truck. He watched Raven until she was swallowed by darkness. Their bond still sung between them, making Charles acutely aware of her location, she of his, otherwise he might have panicked.

Instead he stood and stretched, eyes falling briefly closed as he stamped warmth into his limbs. When he opened them, he found Magneto walking towards him, two bowls of stew held in his hands. He handed one to Charles.

"This is for your guardian," he said, gesturing to the second bowl. He seemed strangely awkward, as though uncertain what to do with the meal now that Raven wasn't here.

"You go ahead; she'll be a few minutes." Charles clutched his bowl to his chest, warmth radiating through his fingerless gloves, warming his palms, heat spreading up his arms and into his torso. "Will you eat with me?" he asked.
Magneto's eyes widened perceptively, but he smothered the reaction, inclining his head, though Charles didn't miss his hesitation. It was frustrating, trying to navigate this while he was wearing the helmet. Everything Charles remembered from their meeting before suggested Magneto--Erik then--shared his attraction, and there were times--quite numerous in fact--when it was painfully obvious Magneto still wanted him. The choice was his--the choice was always a telepath's--but Charles wanted Erik to come to him. He'd seen the aftermath of Jean's relationship with Cyclops; knew the cause of it now, sitting on the other side of the fire, but there was no denying Cyclops had considered it his duty to accept her advances. Charles did not want to be seen as anyone's duty.

He sank back into his seat, folded stool wobbling slightly while he got his balance. He gestured to the one Raven had vacated. Magneto hesitated again before claiming it. A stray hand came up to rub at his chest.

"I'm sorry about that," Charles said, meaning the bruises Raven had undoubtedly left behind. Magneto inclined his head, clear dismissal. Charles bit his tongue.

He took a bite of his stew. It was just as bad as he was expecting, but it was warm and he was hungry. It filled the hollow ache that sat in the pit of his stomach, easing some of the chill that nipped at his bones.

"Does she do this often?" Magneto asked, startling them both. When Charles frowned, Magneto elaborated. "Wolverine's already checked our perimeter. There was no need for your guardian to do a second sweep."

"You can call her Raven, you know. It is her name. And yes, she does. I don't think she trusts anyone, not even me to tell her something is safe. She has to see it with her own eyes."

Magneto inclined his head. He brought a mouthful of soup to his mouth, chewed and swallowed. Charles did the same.

"Can't you order her not to?" he asked. Charles barked a laugh.

It drew the gaze of the others. Magneto waved them off, but Charles had no doubt they were now eavesdropping on the conversation.

"It doesn't work that way," he said. "I'm not her master. I'm not even her superior. If anything, it's the other way around, though those customs haven't been followed in a long time."

He could see confusion settling across Magneto's features, dimly lit though it was. The scrollwork of his helmet reflected the stove's light; casting odd shadows across his face. Charles had forgotten that he had grown up inside the Shadow King's domain. It was no wonder he knew so little of telepaths and their guardians.

"It's in the name," Charles said. "Guardians."

Magneto shook his head, clearly not following.

"A long time ago, after the first mutants had risen to power, the earth scorched by war and disaster, telepaths were deemed dangerous. It's one thing to manipulate metal, or generate plasma bursts, or even shift into someone else's form. It's another to manipulate minds."

A quiet hush had fallen over the camp, Charles well aware of their audience. Raven had returned--he could feel her--but she stood off the side, permitting Charles his privacy; permitting Charles time with Magneto.
"So they found a way to bond a telepath to another mutant, so that the other mutant had access to the telepath's powers; could determine when their telepathy was used, but more importantly, could nullify anything the telepath did. The first guardians were the first telepaths' guards.

"Of course, over the years the bond mutated--ironically enough--evolved into what it is now."

"And what is it now?" Magneto asked, an offensive question from anyone else, but Charles thrilled to hear it. It was part of the reason he was so drawn to Magneto after all; he was the first person outside the Citadel to treat Charles as an equal.

"A partnership," Charles said, "though there are some who advocate severing the ties, allowing telepaths and guardians to go their separate ways. Who knows, if we win this war that might be exactly what happens."

Charles kept his tone light, ignoring the tendril of fear that took up residence in his throat at the thought. He wasn't entirely certain he would survive being severed from Raven. She was all he had ever known.

Magneto was nodding, his expression thoughtful. He took another bite of his soup. Charles did the same, and found it had gone cold. He ate it anyway. By the time he had finished, Magneto had set aside his bowl and was staring into the fire.

"All mutants deserve freedom," he said. Charles didn't think he was only talking about telepaths and their guardians.

Their newfound intimacy had made him bold, so he asked, "Is that why you left?"

Magneto tensed, sitting up abruptly then, shoulders squaring. He turned, catching Charles' eye over his shoulder, body still angled away. Charles waited. For the longest time Magneto didn't say anything, scrutinizing Charles like he was trying to decide if he could trust him. Charles remained placid, his patience rewarded when some of Magneto's tension eased.

"I left because their brainwashing didn't work, and I could never buy into their ideal. I left because I had to."

He didn't add anything else, and Charles could sense he wasn't going to, so instead of letting the space between them grow tense, Charles set his soup bowl down next to Magneto's and said, "I've brought a chess set, you know. A luxury, but if you're game, I'd love a match."

For the longest minute Magneto didn't say anything, Charles half convinced he intended to refuse, but eventually he nodded. He stood, bent to retrieve their bowls and then walked away, Charles not entirely certain he meant to return until he glanced over his shoulder, caught Charles' eye and nodded to one of the trucks.

~*~

"I know it is not my place to comment, Charles, but please be careful."

It was almost amusing hearing the note of caution in Raven's tone. Magneto might have hesitated, save that he had never hesitated in his life and he wasn't about to start now.

At his side, Schmidt snorted. Magneto ignored him.

He was also invited, so regardless of how bad an idea this was, he wasn't about to be put off by an overprotective guardian, or an obnoxious hallucination.
A tiny voice inside his head, the one that sounded suspiciously like Schmidt—and how the man managed it even when he was strolling next to him Magneto didn't know—urged him forward. Magneto had half a second to wonder how much of his actions were still his own when he heard himself saying, "She's right, you know. You ought to be careful. I am a dangerous man." He was fairly certain he said it more for Schmidt's benefit than Xavier's.

Xavier and Raven turned in unison, Raven's mouth pressing into a thin line, Xavier's eyes growing bright. They were standing at the back of the truck nearest the camp, fission lantern sitting in the cargo area, its bluish-grey light spilling past the open doors, falling to pool upon the rocky ground. Xavier straightened his shoulders, drawing himself to his full height even as a soft smile spread across his face. Magneto's stomach fluttered at the sight. Schmidt smirked.

"She doesn't like you," he said, stating the obvious. The dull throbbing in his chest told Magneto exactly how little Xavier's guardian liked him.

Schmidt crossed to Raven's side and eyed her speculatively. "You may have to kill her after all. What colour do you think she bleeds?"

"Magneto," Xavier said, brushing past Schmidt as he crossed to Magneto's side. Schmidt scowled, displeased at having been interrupted. Magneto's smile turned genuine.

"If this is a bad time," he said, glancing to Raven, who was still watching him, expression leery.

"Of course not," Xavier said, far too bright. He was still smiling, pleased and smug, like he knew Magneto wasn't going anywhere.

Magneto hated to admit it, but he was rather looking forward to playing against the man. He hadn't played a game of chess in two years; not since that day in Genosha. He very purposely ignored his other reason for wanting to play. Memories of that day still suffused him with warmth; Xavier the first person in a long time to show him anything approaching kindness.

"Do you think it'll end like your fantasies this time?" Schmidt asked, unwilling to be cast aside. "Do you think he'll let you take him, bend him over the hood of the car and fuck him until he's weak-kneed and begging?" He came around to Magneto's shoulder, placing a firm hand upon it, squeezing like he used to when Magneto was a boy.

Magneto faltered; closed his eyes against the image. He had no idea what he was trying to accomplish here. They should be getting rest, preparing for tomorrow, but instead he was entertaining a night of strategy and tactics. More than that; he was entertaining a night of Xavier's company, the very thing he was trying to avoid.

"I hope you'll go easy on me," Xavier was saying, Magneto opening his eyes to find Xavier had returned to the truck and was in the process of setting up a travel chess board on the floorboards of the cargo area. His guardian had left, though Magneto had no doubt she was lingering nearby. He took solace in the thought. He wasn't joking when he'd told Xavier he was a dangerous man. "I haven't played in some time."

"Neither have I," Magneto admitted, crossing to Xavier's side, hesitating only briefly before levering himself up to sit on the truck bed, legs dangling over the side. Xavier set the last piece in place and then did the same.

"Well, isn't this lovely. All cozy and romantic," Schmidt said. He'd somehow managed to get himself into the truck, and was seated cross-legged behind the chess board. Magneto spared a moment to think of all the ways he had killed the man. The last brought a smile to his face. When
Xavier saw it, his smile grew brighter.

"That's still no cause for cockiness," Xavier said, obviously still lost in their earlier conversation. Magneto didn't correct him. He tipped his head and then moved his king's pawn forward two squares.

Xavier's attention was instantly riveted to the board. He bit his lip, frown of concentration appearing on his face, though his countermove was swift and decisive.

Chess was something Magneto's father had taught him--strange to remember that now, when he so rarely thought of the man. But his father was cold and austere, a direct contrast to his mother's warmth and light. It was no wonder it was she who still occupied Magneto's thoughts. Chess had been his father's game; a gentleman's game, he used to say, one that demanded poise and precision. Schmidt had had a set on his desk, but Magneto never saw him play, and Schmidt had never offered a game. Once, when he'd caught Erik eyeing the set, he'd laughed and said he was teaching Erik a better game.

For several years of Erik's youth, he'd entertained killing Schmidt with a metal pawn. He had no doubt it would have hurt, boring into the man's skull. He caressed the tip of one of Xavier's pawns now, wood, and moved it forward.

"Can I ask you something?" Xavier said, stealing the pawn Magneto just moved. Magneto frowned, but he glanced up and inclined his head, tactile permission. "I know it's common to take a mutant name, especially when you enter the ranks, but does no one still call you Erik?"

You did, Magneto wanted to say, but the truth was Erik had died a long time ago.

"I'm not sure if you've noticed, but I don't have any friends," Magneto settled on saying.

Hurt flashed in Xavier's eyes, but before Magneto could pinpoint its cause, he asked, "Am I not a friend, then?"

My dear friend, Xavier had called him when they met, flashing the first genuine smile Magneto had received since his mother's death.

"Men like you don't have friends," Schmidt said, taking a sudden interest in the conversation. "Men like you aren't worthy of them." He laughed, dark and bitter and so familiar that for a moment Magneto was transplanted back to a lab void of metal, his powers beyond his reach. "Men like you certainly aren't worthy of a telepath's attention."

"What about you?" Magneto asked, having to clear his throat twice before the words came loose. "Do you have a mutant name?"

If he did Magneto didn't know it. Xavier had introduced himself as Charles, even before Magneto knew who and what Xavier was. Such a simple thing, so thoroughly intimate; was it any wonder Magneto still tasted the name on his tongue?

"Oh, well," Xavier began, letting out a self-deprecating laugh. "Some of them call me Professor X, actually, though I've never been partial to it. I tend to prefer Charles." He glanced up then, hand hovering over the chess set. "I do understand your reluctance to use it, however."

"Why aren't you fucking him, Erik? Why are you sitting here droning on? I taught you better than this."

Then leave! Magneto wanted to shout. He wanted to lunge for Schmidt; wanted to tear his head from his shoulders, rip into his innards and pull him apart. Instead he swallowed, moved his
knight, and then glanced up and caught Charles' eye.

"Charles, then," he said, instantly regretting it, especially when Charles' eyes lit up, wide smile flitting across his face. Schmidt groaned, falling back so that he was half sprawled across the floorboards.

"Thank you, Erik," Charles said. He reached between them then, setting a tentative hand on the back of Magneto's, watching Magneto intently as he brushed his thumb against Magneto's wrist. Magneto swallowed, uncertain what to do with the contact. He wasn't used to it, and yet it now seemed almost commonplace to have Charles touching him.

A shiver ran down his spin, the hair at the back of his neck standing on end. Cold, dead weight pressed into his back. Magneto glanced to where Schmidt had been lying and found the space empty. Frozen breath ghosted his ear.

"Turn your hand, Erik."

He felt as though he was caught in a dream, Magneto turning his hand, fitting their palms together. Charles smiled, lip catching between his teeth.

"Wrap your fingers around his wrist and pull him across the board. Do it."

It was somewhat alarming to find he was obeying the instructions, a voice inside his head screaming for him to stop, even as he fit his fingers around Charles' wrist. He squeezed, hard enough to leave bruises, already tugging when a startled gasp escaped Charles' throat. The sound cut through him, breaking Schmidt's fog, Magneto dropping Charles' hand as though burnt.

"I'm sorry," he said, needing to be anywhere but the confined space of the truck. He jumped down from the truck bed, knocking aside his king in the process. He ignored the fallen piece, and the panicked sound of Charles calling his name. He moved forward until the light of the truck vanished, Magneto's gaze drawn to a set of flickering yellow eyes. He beckoned Raven to the truck, and then turned in the opposite direction, heading away from Charles; away from the camp.

No one followed; Magneto walking until the light of the camp was a tiny dot in the distance, no bigger than a far-off star. Only when he was content that he was far enough away to escape notice did he stop, sinking to his knees, hands shaking as he registered what he'd done.

Schmidt had issued a command, and he had obeyed. That had never happened before.

Magneto braced himself against his knees, leaned forward and vomited noisily onto the cold, hard ground. When he was finished, he found Schmidt crouched at his side, eyeing Magneto's vomit with distaste.

"Really, such dramatics, Erik..." was as far as Schmidt got before Magneto was moving. He lunged. Schmidt didn't struggle; going docile the second Magneto came into contact with him. It wasn't until Magneto had him pinned to the ground, hands wrapped around Schmidt's throat that he moved, and then it was only to bring a hand to one of the ones wrapped around his neck. He caressed the back of it, an exact mirror of what Xavier had done in the truck.

Magneto tightened his grip, feeling Schmidt's windpipe collapse in his hands. Schmidt smiled as he died, face mottle and blue from lack of oxygen. It never made sense to Magneto, why he was able to do this time and time again, but he took immense pleasure in it now, strangling Schmidt until he fell limp beneath him, and then vanished entirely.

Magneto reeled. He careened to the side, falling to curl next to his vomit, knees coming to his chest. For a very long time he stayed that way, staring into the darkness, the hushed silence of the
forest overwhelming. His ribs still hurt, bruised and battered, but a new pain had sparked in his chest, stabbing until he was almost certain it was a heart attack and tomorrow morning they would find him lying dead next to his vomit.

A twig snapped near his head, but the sound was distant, far off and removed. It wasn't until a pair of hands slid beneath his arms, lifting him bodily off the ground, that he registered the presence of another person. He had no idea how long he'd spent lying curled in the fetal position, but his muscles were stiff with disuse as the hands pulled him to his feet.

"You ain't supposed to run off like that, darlin'," Rogue said. Magneto turned and caught her eye, watching as she wrinkled her nose at the sight of his re-visited stew. He reached out to brace a hand against her shoulder.

"Am I insane?" he asked, shields down, unable to stop the question from slipping past his tongue.

"I'll say," Rogue answered, but she slid an arm around him and led him gingerly back to the camp. Magneto had enough strength that he could have pulled away, walked on his own, but he rather found the warmth of her body comforting. It was a shame she had reconciled with Gambit. He might have taken her up on her offer then, if only to block thoughts of Charles Xavier from his head.

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The Great Hall's east-facing window channelled morning sunlight across the room. It landed in a pool around the dais, the Queen illuminated. Had such a thing been possible, Hank would have thought she'd orchestrated the phenomenon.

The light highlighted the pallor of her skin; so pale it bordered on grey. She sat on her throne, eyes unblinking, staring at a spot beyond Hank's left shoulder. Hank remained on bended knee, awaiting her acknowledgement.

"Are you real?" she asked after a moment, though when Hank glanced up she was still staring into the distance; still lost to the world of dreams. He cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty?" he asked, uncertain if she addressed him or some otherworldly being. Cold blue eyes turned to stare in his direction. Hank met their ice, unflinching.

"Why do you throw yourself prostrate before the empire? Surely we have better uses for you."

Her words were clipped, angry, as though Hank had somehow offended in responding to her summons. He would have preferred to ignore the order, having spent the last twenty-four hours locked inside his lab, without sleep. The weight of his exhaustion pressed on him now, making him slow and sluggish where he ought to be quick and nibble. He struggled for several minutes to find an answer that would appease her anger, all while the Queen scrutinized him, disapproval written in the stern lines of her face.

"I was summoned, Your Majesty," he eventually settled on saying. There was nothing insolent in his response and yet her eyes flashed, ice melting under the force of fire, cold blue warming to steel grey. The Queen's countenance shifted, hard stone taking the place of carved marble. Hank recoiled, ducking his head as though blocking out the sight could spare him the Shadow King's ire.

"Your Highness," he said, hazarding a glance up. The Shadow King's gaze was piercing and disdainful; as though Hank was a mere insect, unworthy of the King's time.

"You have made progress," he intoned. "And so quickly. Could it be your previous delays were
It was strange watching the Queen mouth the words, her voice carrying throughout the room, and yet there was no doubt she had long since receded. Hank had no idea if the Shadow King had access to her telepathy, but he still ensured his thoughts were encrypted. Darwin had told him once that he shielded his thoughts by gathering them into the centre of his mind and then cloaking them in an armour-hard shell. Hank had no idea if Darwin's method was common, but Hank had always preferred encrypting his thoughts into random, nonsensical strings of characters and digits. He had no idea if either defense was effective against a telepath, but so far they had escaped detection.

The Shadow King continued his scrutiny, the Queen's brow furrowing into lines. It drew attention to the part of her hair, hung over her shoulders today, limp strands where once pale blonde tresses existed. For a brief moment Hank imagined her withering before his eyes. He did not think it was far from the truth to say that when the Shadow King was done with her she would be little more than a husk.

"We had a breakthrough," Hank answered. "It allowed us to complete the prototype."

In truth, the prototype was ready the last time he stood before the Shadow King, the only work he'd done since then the addition of some code designed to sabotage the weapon. He had no idea if it would work, or if it would fool the King, but at the very least it ought to buy Angel's telepath a few more days.

The Shadow King's expression turned thoughtful. A smile spread across the Queen's face, a mockery of emotion, its edges tinged with compulsion. Contrary to the white of her skin, her teeth were yellowed with age. Hank found his gaze drawn to them, which is why he missed it when she lifted her arm, fingers curling to beckon two guards forward.

They appeared at Hank's sides a moment later, flanking him between them. Hank swallowed and tried to remain calm. Do not show fear, he told himself. As far as the Shadow King knew, he had done nothing wrong.

Hank calmly met the Shadow King's gaze.

"Sabretooth and Toad will escort you back to your lab, where you will turn the prototype over to them. It may prove of use to us sooner rather than later. We have word there is a telepath en route to the Walled City. A worthy test subject, don't you agree?"

Cold dread seized in Hank's chest, heart clenching as he tried to reason how the Shadow King knew. Did he know of Hank's involvement? Had he gleaned the information using the Queen's telepathy? Or was there a traitor amongst the rebels? Too many questions and Hank feared the answers.

From the dais, the White Queen tilted her head back, the Shadow King's laughter echoing throughout the Great Hall. It was somewhat of a relief when Sabretooth and Toad led him away, Hank walking with his head down, frantically trying to work out how to get word to Angel; how to let her know their timetable had changed.
Chapter 8

The underground city stank in the heat of the day, regardless of the surface weather. People and vendors lined the narrow passages, filling the corridor to capacity. The air was thick and rank with the scent of sweat and foodstuffs. Here you could buy anything and everything. By evening, these same corridors would be deserted, but for now Hank had to push his way through the throng. He waved aside a young man selling meat dumplings and slipped into the narrow stairwell.

It was easier to see with channels of sunlight reflecting off dozens of mirrors. Even midway down the steps, Hank could still see the dim outline of the hall. He reached the bottom, no red light this time, but the door was clearly visible. Hank rapped his knuckles against it, but there was no scent of sulphur, no tell-tale explosion of red mist. He should have known this was easier said than done. It really only left him with one option. Hank knocked again, waiting a full ten minutes before he ascended the stairs, refusing the same dumpling as he sought a way above ground.

He fell into step behind a woman with a shock of red hair covering her torso, her arms and face strangely human against so obvious a mutation. She ascended a set of stairs in slow, leisurely steps, hands laden with her purchases. Together they spilled out into afternoon sunlight, the surface streets teeming with activity, though the mutants here were far more venerable than those below. Unlike the underground city, the Walled City imposed order where nature would dictate chaos. Even the outer ring, where wall-side slums fought for space and resources, had a better semblance of order.

Squat four and six stories buildings surrounded him, their design utilitarian. There was little variation in the Walled City. The place was awash in greys and tans, endless stretches of conformity that made its residents stand out all the more.

Hank bypassed the woman, stepped into the street and hailed a cab.

A sleek, bug-like vehicle pulled to a stop, hovering briefly before it sank to the ground. Hank tried not to fidget as he waited for the door to slide open. He did not managed to avoid diving in, immediately securing himself into the restraints. He glanced up to stare into the camera, the door sliding shut behind him, and said to the automated pilot, "The Archives, please."

The destination required his identification card, Hank loath to hand it over—he did not want to make it easy for them to trace him—but there was little else he could do, so he ran it across the scanner, the cab accepting it with a mild-mannered beep before lifting into the air and immediately pulling from the curb.

Ten minutes later he was standing in the Archives' main entranceway, his account credited cab fare, the Shadow King now undoubtedly aware of his movements.

A wide dome opened above his head, its underside decorated in scenes of battle, the Shadow King's triumph over mankind. He stood above the Shadow King's seal, emblazoned on the tile floor: a grasping claw clutching the earth in its palm, nails piercing five of the continents. What was once a delusional fantasy was now dangerously close to reality.

Hank shook off the thought and went in search of Darwin.

He found him down in the vaults, poring over texts. Hank had seen his mutation in all its forms, but this aspect of it fascinated him the most. To absorb and learn a language inside a few paragraphs was a rare gift, even if it had meant assignment to the Archives. He'd asked Darwin once if he was happy, but Darwin had merely shrugged, replied that he would be happy doing
anything, so long as he was useful. Hank supposed that stemmed from his mutation as well.

"Do you have a moment?" Hank asked when Darwin glanced over, Darwin showing no signs that Hank's visit was out of the ordinary. He gestured over his shoulder, to a side room where a long table sat, covered in reams of paper. Hank nodded and then moved towards it.

A few minutes later, Darwin joined him. He very purposely closed the door.

"No surveillance in here. We had someone in tech take care of that for us, and so far it's gone undetected, but this is dangerous, man. You can't just turn up here."

Hank nodded. He'd known that, of course, which was why he'd first tried to find Azazel and Angel. He cut straight to the point. "The Shadow King knows there's a telepath coming. I think he might also know where and when the rendezvous is supposed to take place."

Darwin's expression froze, even as his face drained of colour. He shook his head, mumbling under his breath. "That's not good."

"No," Hank said, which was probably the understatement of the year.

~*~

Magneto considered his options. They were less noticeable on foot, but it was still several miles to the rendezvous point, and while he was certain they could handle the march, there was always the chance things might get dicey. It was always better to fight fresh.

Xavier--and after last night Magneto refused to call him Charles--insisted the camp they were headed towards was deserted. Magneto could believe it--there were a lot of abandoned camps these days, the humans who used to fill them long since gone--but he didn't like to leave anything to chance.

The trucks would give them a quick out, too.

He glanced over the horizon, low stretches of fields framed by sparse outcrops of trees. Everything was tawny and wilted, obscured by a faint dusting of white. The clouds, hung low on the horizon, were heavy with snow; weather not made for travelling.

"Better chance of us getting spotted in the trucks," Havok said. He was leaned at Magneto's side, watching the same horizon. There was something in the slope of his shoulders, some unnamed excitement that suggested he was raring for a fight.

It was bad form to change a plan in the middle of the campaign, and the plan was to ditch the trucks, but Magneto still said, "I think we'd be wise to have them."

Havok nodded. "I agree."

Magneto smiled, clapped the kid on the back and moved to where Rogue and Wolverine were leaned against the other truck. He very intently ignored Xavier and his guardian, standing near a solitary tree, Xavier watching him with worried eyes.

They hadn't spoken since last night, despite Xavier's attempts to seek him out this morning. Magneto had brushed him off, choosing to ride in the opposite truck just to maintain some distance. Schmidt hadn't returned, but it was only a matter of time, and Magneto had no intention of allowing him access to Xavier ever again.

"We're taking the trucks," Magneto said when he reached Rogue's side. Wolverine glanced up
from the piece of wood he was carving, claws whisking over the wood with expert precision.

"You sure that's wise?" he asked.

In lieu of a response, Magneto offered a glare. This was his mission; he called the shots, and if Wolverine didn't like it, he knew the way back to base. Rogue slid neatly between them before the issue became one of contention.

"You gonna ride with us? Telepath was pinin' for ya," she said. Magneto scowled, even as his stomach fluttered, warmth spreading across his chest at the thought.

"No," he answered, and then turned and headed towards the other truck, this time actively seeking Xavier's gaze. Xavier took a step towards him, but Magneto only gestured to the other truck, effectively cutting off the potential for conversation. He tried to ignore the hurt look that pulled at Xavier's features.

He took up residence in the backseat, surprised when Wolverine slid into the driver's side. Magneto turned to stare out the window, watching as Havok claimed the other truck's passenger seat before glancing back to meet Wolverine's eye in the rear view mirror.

"Rogue kick you out?" he asked, because it seemed likely.

Wolverine snorted. "Nah, Havok wanted to chat with your boy. I think he likes him."

Magneto's jaw clenched at that, but he didn't say anything, half convinced Wolverine was lying. Instead he sank back into his seat and closed his eyes, ignoring the sound of Wolverine's barked laughter. The truck jerked forward, and they were off.

Riding in the backseat of a car always made him nauseous. He avoided it whenever possible, the experience reminding him too much of that long, endless drive he'd made with his parents when they'd tried to flee the Shadow King's growing empire, freedom a broken line on a map. Unbidden, his hand came to his throat, toying with the metal chain that held his dog tags; alongside them his star.

He followed the chain's links down until the star was grasped between his thumb and index finger, and then ran a calloused pad around each of the six points. The star's significance was lost, but he could still hear his mother's voice, terrified as their escape was cut short, too late to do anything except accept their fate. _Remember this, Erik. Remember that it has happened before. Do what you must to survive._

He'd whispered those words when they took them into detention, and then later shouted them when they pulled him from his mother's arms. He screamed them in defiance when they tattooed his number onto his arm, stark black '2' at its start labelling him a mutant. His powers had yet to manifest, but DNA did not lie.

For a long time after he'd forgotten them, let them slip away; drown in the mud of the training camps. They had only come back to him in recent years; broken free from their bondage by Schmidt's demise.

"Oh, my boy, do you really think the telepaths will be any better?"

Magneto kept his eyes pressed shut, listening to the low ramble of Banshee singing under his breath; the tense creaking of Wolverine's leathers as he shifted in his seat.

"This is your chance. I made you into a weapon; it's what you were designed for."
His mother's words had carried him out of the Shadow King's reach, Erik broken and beaten, half-starved when Wolverine's company found him. The words lingered still; reminder that his task was not yet completed.

You're right, he thought at Schmidt. I am a weapon: an instrument of vengeance. And Charles will help me achieve it. I am no longer your puppet.

He opened his eyes then, surprised to find he was alone, and that they had arrived.

~*~

"I promise you it's fine," Charles said, not for the first time. Raven had spent the better part of the day casting side-long glances at his wrist.

He drew the sleeve of his coat down to cover the bruises, ignoring the anger and frustration rolling off her in waves. Her thoughts were even less pleasant, and involved plotting out all the ways she intended to make Erik pay.

At least it was preferable to his earlier conversation with Havok, which pretty much consisted of Havok not-so-subtly asking for background information on Cable's guardian. He wondered if Polaris knew she had an admirer.

At his side, Raven was still silently fuming.

I told you, he said into her mind. He didn't do it on purpose. And besides, it's not as if I'm defenseless. You did take particular pains to teach me hand-to-hand.

At his side, Raven snorted. She shook her head, and likely would have said something except that Charles' attention was instantly distracted. He didn't miss the way she scowled, shoulders straightening when she noticed Erik approaching their truck. Charles shot her a brief glance, and then opened his door.

They're route had taken them off road some time ago; the trucks following a culvert, its water long-since dried up. Charles stepped out onto the uneven ground.

In the distance, buildings loomed, each facing the other, a narrow tunnel of decay and darkness. Crumbled brick lined the culvert, sparse crops of trees and weeds struggling to find sunlight. Ahead, a rusty steel bridge spanned between the buildings, connecting broken windows. Once, this place had housed countless humans, used for their labour until there was nothing left, the broken remnants of humanity thrown into shallow, mass graves--hardly the first time such a thing had happened. All that remained now was this monument; the hollow buildings their tombstones, looming, ominous. Charles tore his gaze away; glanced to the horizon.

The sky threatened snow.

Erik reached his side.

"You're going to grace me with your presence, are you?" Charles asked before Erik could speak. The look he shot Erik was hard, unforgiving, though only because he found Erik's impertinence irksome; strange that it had once delighted Charles beyond measure, but that was before Erik had taken to ignoring him.

"Something's not right," Erik said, Charles only then noticing the tight lines framing his eyes, jaw clenched as though he was expecting a firefight. Charles immediately stilled, letting his attention drift as he scanned the surrounding area. He found no one.
"There's no one here but us," he said. Their contact wasn't due to arrive until tomorrow.

"Just keep your eyes open," Erik said, turning then, as if to leave. Charles acted without thinking, reaching out to wrap a hand around Erik's wrist. Erik froze, glanced between them, expression unreadable. Charles very purposely did not relax his grip.

"Have I done something to offend you?" he asked, startling Erik enough that he glanced up, caught Charles' eye for the first time today. Charles watched as he swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing. He shook his head.

"You haven't. Now, can we concentrate on the task at hand?" He turned to look over his shoulder then, staring into the building on their right, as though he might find someone standing at the window. Charles could have told him there was no one there; only lingering spirits, their misery etched into every stone, every pane of glass.

"Then will you tell me what happened last night?" If it weren't for the helmet, Charles would have simply gone in and gotten the answer for himself. Instead he was relegated to asking--to practically begging. Erik turned back to face him, something dark and dangerous lurking in the shadows of his gaze.

He shook his hand free.

"I overstepped my bounds, and am now correcting my mistake," he said.

Charles meant to answer; wanted to answer, but it was at that moment something attracted his attention, awareness where once there was nothing. He went perfectly still, Erik obviously sensing something, because he stepped forward, peering into Charles' face like he could find answers written in the pores of Charles' skin.

"What is it?"

"New arrivals: two." Charles paused; scanned first one and then the other. The teleporter was tricky, his thoughts cycling, disappearing and reappearing--a standard teleporter trick--but his companion was next to impossible. Try as Charles might to penetrate the armour of his thoughts, it constantly adapted, shifting to something new, Charles forced to start at the beginning, work at finding a point of entry all over again.

"Oh," he said after another failure. He chuckled, just under his breath, shaking his head at his stupidity.

"What?" Erik barked. He said it so loud, stepped forward with such aggression that Raven was instantly between them, Erik deflating somewhat at the sight of her--and no doubt the memory of her blows. She'd once again ditched her clothes, despite the cold, claiming they only gave the enemy the advantage.

"Sorry," Charles said. He set a hand on Raven's shoulder, squeezing briefly as he pulled her aside. To Erik he continued, "Our contact is here." Adaptation mutation, which explained the constantly adapting shields surrounding his thoughts. "He's travelling with a teleporter. They've landed in the far courtyard," Charles gestured, "but you're right." Erik raised an eyebrow. "They're early. There's something wrong."

It was interesting to watch, Erik immediately shifting into the man Charles had met upon first arriving. This was no longer Erik he was looking at, but Magneto, fierce determination radiating off him in waves. He turned to glance in the direction Charles had pointed, Charles catching his reflection in the the back of Magneto's helmet. Magneto swivelled back to meet Charles' gaze.
"Get whatever you need," he ordered, and then he was off, moving first to Rogue and Havok, who were leaning against the truck. Charles overheard his barked instructions: Havok was to remain with the trucks, Rogue to form point, while Wolverine and Banshee did a circuit of the outer perimeter. When he was done, he turned back to Charles, arching an eyebrow when he found Charles still standing where he'd left him.

"I have everything I need," Charles said. Erik nodded.

"Rogue's going to lead us in. You and your guardian take the middle position, I'll bring up the rear. This is just a straight exchange, so we're in and out, but if things go wrong you get back to the trucks, do you understand me?"

It gave Charles somewhat of a visceral thrill to accept Erik's authority. He was unused to it, the Citadel making each decision by the vote of council, Charles' voice carrying tremendous weight with his fellow telepaths. Only Raven saw fit to order him about, and then it was always for his own safety. Magneto wore command like he was born for it. It was an exhilarating thing to witness.

"He understands," Raven answered, because in the end it would be her getting Charles back, regardless of Charles' wishes. Erik still waited for Charles to incline his head before he ordered everyone into position.

Wolverine and Banshee loped off in opposite directions, circling around each of the buildings, Havok already in the process of getting the cars turned around. Rogue sauntered over to where they were standing to get a brief idea of where they were heading. Charles wondered briefly why she was leading them in and not Erik, but the question hardly seemed relevant.

"From the plans I've seen, I'm guessing they've landed in the second courtyard," Charles said. Rogue closed her eyes. He could almost picture her drawing a mental map. She opened her eyes and nodded.

"Got it," she said, hand coming up automatically, as if to salute. She hesitated halfway, clearly uncertain if Charles was expecting one. Charles waved her off. She nodded, and then glanced to Erik who gestured her to one of the buildings.

It wasn't far from where they'd parked the trucks to the first building, Rogue darting them across the space so that before Charles quite knew it they were pressed against a moss-covered brick wall. They entered through a broken window, Charles half tempted to ask why they didn't just use the culvert, except that after he considered it the answer was obvious. It seemed regardless of how many times Charles told him there was no one else here, Erik didn't believe him. He was seeking a route with cover.

If the exterior of the building was ominous, the interior was heartrending. The room they'd entered was obviously once a dormitory, lines of metal-framed beds stretching out on either side of the room. They were pressed so close together there was barely enough room to stand between them. There was nothing else; no trunks, no end tables, no dressers. The people who lived here had nothing but the clothes on their backs.

There were no longer linens on any of the beds--only a handful of mattresses remained and those were stained, torn and sagging in the middle. If there ever were linens, Charles had no doubt they were sparse; thin blankets or sweat-soaked sheets. He felt bile rise up in his throat at the sight, imagining then tens of thousands of humans pressed inside these buildings, struggling against an empire that saw them as little more than a free labour force. He'd known about these places, of course; had seen the pictures and read the historical accounts, but standing in this room, staring at these beds, it made the stories entirely too real.
Entirely too familiar, too, his history lessons going back further than the last twenty years. This was not the first time people had been kept like cattle.

A hand at his elbow startled him from his horror.

He glanced up to find Erik watching him with knowing eyes.

"Try not to take it in," he said, and then nodded over his shoulder. Charles exhaled. He sought out Raven, saw the same horror etched on her features, her mouth pressed into a thin line. Charles moved to her side; guided her from the room by the crook of her elbow.

The main corridor at least could have belonged anywhere, Charles able to push aside the knowledge of what this place once was. He followed Rogue, several paces behind, Raven hovering at his side, tense like she expected to fight at any moment. Like Erik, she too didn't believe Charles when he said they were the only ones here.

The corridor seemed to continue on forever; the entire length of the building, the group passing countless doors, all open to similar dormitories. Charles focused his attention on the tense lines of Rogue's shoulders, occasionally glancing down at the linoleum floors, alternating grey and green tiles, obscured by dust and dirt and refuse. They passed discarded boxes and shoes; a child's doll, a wheelchair. Charles stepped over a mannequin's arm, and then skirted around a roll of carpet, breathing through his mouth to block out the stale, rotting stench of mildew.

Ahead, Rogue came to a stop, holding up a fist. Raven immediately stilled, reaching out to grasp Charles' arm, though he had no need of her instruction. Boots rang on the floor behind him, Charles glancing over his shoulder to watch Erik approach.

"That was Banshee," he said, gesturing to his helmet, which, until now, Charles hadn't known included communication devices. "He says the south side is clear."

"No word from Wolverine?" Charles asked, though he could have told Erik exactly where the man was. He wasn't able to read Wolverine's mind, but he could still pinpoint his location.

"He won't check in unless something crops up," Erik said. "He says the south side is clear."

"They're just on the other side of that wall," Charles said, pointing. Erik nodded, and then fell back to check their rear.

Charles caught up with Rogue at a juncture. She nodded left. Charles inclined his head.

"It's just the two of them, I've told you."

"Then this should be easy," Erik said. Charles hadn't heard his return. Erik ignored him, turning his attention to Rogue. "I want an inner perimeter check, then rendezvous here."

"Sure thang, boss," Rogue said, saluting briefly before darting off. Erik turned to face Charles once more.

"In and out," he said, something prickling up Charles' spine at the command in his voice.

"Of course," Charles said, because it had been his plan all along. He glanced briefly to Raven, then again to Erik, and then led them towards the courtyard. The teleporter became aware of their approach first, apprehension lacing his thoughts. Charles called out, "We're expected," and waited.
"Angel says hello," a voice replied, the words carrying around the corner, echoing through the hall. Charles smiled.

"Has her wing healed?" he asked. He felt both men relax, their shields dropping, minds opening. Charles let their thoughts brush against his own, though went no farther. It was enough to know he had access.

He stepped around the corner and through the open door.

The courtyard was little more than a gravel pit between two buildings. There was nothing but grey here; endless stretches of bleakness where once humans were allowed precious minutes to catch a breath of fresh air. Charles hated it. Everything he'd strived for—everything Genoshia strived for—stood in direct contrast to what this place once was. Charles did his best to block it out, focusing instead on the two mutants who stood in the middle of the yard. They watched Charles' approach with wary eyes.

"Hello," Charles said, stepping forward, Raven glued to his side. The teleporter inclined his head, his teleportation mutation accompanied by a startling visual mutation. The man with the adaptation mutation came forward. He smiled and extended a hand.

"Hello," Charles said, stepping forward, Raven glued to his side. The teleporter inclined his head, his teleportation mutation accompanied by a startling visual mutation. The man with the adaptation mutation came forward. He smiled and extended a hand.

"Darwin, man, and this is Azazel, and boy am I glad to see you safe."

Charles frowned, but didn't immediately seek the meaning in Darwin's statement.

"Charles Xavier and this is my guardian, Raven." Darwin's gaze flitted over Charles shoulder. "My apologies," Charles said. "This is Magneto, and elsewhere on the property are Rogue, Wolverine, Banshee and Havok."

Darwin nodded, seeming perfectly at ease learning there were seven of them. Azazel on the other hand had stiffened and was staring at Erik with wide eyes. Charles glanced over his shoulder to find Erik staring at Azazel like he'd seen a ghost. It was Azazel who ducked his head. Despite his curiosity, Charles turned his attention back to Darwin.

"I'm glad you're early, because we need to do this fast, and then you need to get out of Dodge. I don't know how, but they somehow figured out you're here," he was saying.

Charles paled at that, but before he had a chance to comment Erik was stepping into Darwin's space, Azazel forgotten. He radiated cold fury.

"Explain," he said through gritted teeth. Charles reached out and placed a calming hand upon his forearm. Darwin looked unfazed.

"Look, all I know is they got some kind of anti-telepath weapon, but if our boy did what he said he did then it shouldn't even work. But they know you're coming, and they know we're meeting, so if you give me what you're here to give me, I'll look after my part of the deal and you can get busy looking after yours. We don't have much time."

Charles could tell Erik was about half a second away from throttling Darwin, so he squeezed lightly, drawing Erik's gaze. Charles tugged, Erik seeming to get the futility of threatening the man who was trying to help them.

"I need to look," Charles said when Erik stepped away. He wiggled his fingers, gesturing to Darwin's head. Darwin nodded his permission.

It took less than a minute to scan through the relevant information, Charles getting a bigger picture than he was expecting. He saw the meeting with Angel; saw again the meeting with the blue-
furred mutant that Darwin's mind named Beast, Charles immediately replacing the name with Hank, despite having not yet met the man. Darwin was a third party, though, and didn't have nearly enough information. Charles slipped out of his thoughts.

He turned to Azazel. Erik tensed at his side, but said nothing. Azazel glanced first to Erik, then to Charles, nodding his head before closing his eyes. Charles slipped neatly inside.

And knew immediately the reason for Erik's reaction. He saw Azazel, a good deal younger than he was now, standing with his back against a wall, open door at his side, eyes closed as he blocked out the screams of a small child. Even without looking Charles knew that child was Erik. Anger coiled in his stomach, even as he swallowed against a new wave of bile. Charles pushed aside the memory and sought something more recent.

Angel. She coloured Azazel's thoughts, the entirety of Azazel's life devoted to serving her; to serving the cause. He thought he was making amends, but more than that, he was a man in love, willing to do anything to earn her favour.

At his side, Charles felt Erik shift, as if to move forward. Charles squeezed his hand, Erik instantly stilling. He flipped through Azazel's memories; found nothing that might indicate how they had learned of Charles' coming.

Carefully he withdrew, finding then that Erik was glaring at Azazel, veins at the side of his neck standing on end, as though he fully intended to kill Azazel the second Charles released him. It was actually somewhat surprising that Charles' touch had stayed him this long.

"Erik," Charles said, very slowly. Erik swivelled to meet Charles' gaze. "We need to get moving."

Even as he spoke he withdrew the data-chip from his pocket and handed it to Darwin. "The virus is designed to install a backdoor into Mastermind's programming, so that I can telepathically interface with the system and lower the shields. Until you've installed it, I would suggest you stay away from Emma Frost. The Shadow King might have found a way around your shields."

Darwin nodded, pocketing the data-chip and then turning to Azazel, who was still staring at Erik, looking contrite. Erik was lost entirely, as though someone was telling him something he didn't particularly want to hear. He still looked set to kill Azazel.

A sign that Darwin and Azazel shouldn't linger, not if it meant starting a fight with their own, so Charles nodded to Darwin, Darwin taking it as his cue to leave. He turned to Azazel, clearing his throat to get the man's attention. A mask of professional indifference immediately fell over Azazel's face. He extended a hand and accepted Darwin's palm. The two of them disappeared in an explosion of red smoke. Erik staggered as though struck.

Charles wanted to say something; to take Erik aside and ask, but it was then that something flitted across his attention, Charles having half a second to wonder why he hadn't noticed it sooner before cold hard reality came crashing, literally, down around them.

They were no longer alone.

And someone was firing missiles.
Chapter 9

The explosion wasn't close enough to cause any damage, but it was close enough to knock Charles to his knees, the earth jolting with the force of the blow. Behind them, somewhere near where they had entered the building, a column of smoke rose. Charles waved off Raven's concern, closed his eyes and cast out his thoughts.

He found the group not even half a mile off, six in total, and none of them with a teleportation mutation. It meant they were using teleportation technology. Of the six, only three had shields that would require Charles' concentration. The other three were low-level mutants, easily manipulated. Charles hijacked the eyes of one of them, a mutant with an amphibious mutation.

Immediately the camp came into view, though from a higher vantage point, telling Charles they were standing on a hill, overlooking the camp. He scanned the area, following the line of the culvert where it disappeared between two buildings. They were far enough back that the trucks remained out of sight. Charles turned the mutant's head--Toad his memories suggested, though his mind was slick and unfocused, so Charles didn't linger long. He scanned the remainder of the group.

The group's leader, a man who might have been Wolverine's brother for how ineffective Charles' telepathy was against him, was watching the camp. He gestured a woman forward. She stepped into place beside him and raised her hand, a sphere of energy crackling to life in her palm. Charles tried battering against her defenses, but he needed more time than it took for her to pull her hand back and toss the sphere. It raced through the air, heading towards the camp, easily covering the distance.

"Brace," Charles said moments before it hit. It landed closer than the last one, but still far enough away to avoid damage to the immediate area. The explosion scattered dust and debris into the courtyard. Charles coughed against it. He was only vaguely aware of Erik barking orders, Raven still crouched at his side.

Back on the hill, the group's leader tilted his head back and laughed.

"Like flushing rats," he said.

He beckoned again, but instead of another plasma ball, a grossly obese mutant stepped forward carrying an odd box-shaped object. He set it down on the ground, Charles narrowing his borrowed eyes, uncertain what to make of the device. It looked halfway between a seismograph and an amplifier. Unbidden, Darwin's warning of a weapon against telepaths came to mind, but before Charles could extract the information from one of the mutants, Erik's voice flittered to the forefront of his concentration.

Charles retreated.

His attention returned to the courtyard where he found Raven watching him, concern etched into her features. Erik was cursing Wolverine's name.

"They're trying to flush us out," Charles said, which attracted Erik's attention.

"How many?" As he spoke he knelt at Charles' side and exchanged a glance with Raven. She nodded. He offered a hand. Charles accepted it, rising gracefully to his feet, though he kept hold of Erik's arm, suddenly dizzy, as though the ground was still shaking beneath him. No one else seemed affected, so Charles shook it off.
"There are six, and they're using teleportation technology." It took him far longer than he would have thought possible to force the sentence out.

"We need to get out," Erik said. Charles blinked, only then registering that Rogue had returned. He was having trouble focusing, his thoughts skipping, as though he couldn't concentration on any one thing for longer than a few seconds. He frowned.

"Charles," Raven said, sounding concerned. Charles shook his head. Erik turned to address Rogue.

"Banshee's heading back to the trucks. Wolverine's not wearing his damned ear-piece, so I have no idea where he is, but he can handle himself. I need you to clear us a path," he ordered. Rogue nodded, and then disappeared back inside. Erik glanced down at his arm, where Charles was still clutching it. He nodded to Raven, Raven stepping in to take his place.

She led Charles forward, Charles staggering on the first step, as though the ground had once again lurched beneath his feet, this time without the corresponding explosion.

"Charles," Raven said again, tone laced with alarm. Charles shook his head again, but couldn't find the words to tell her he was fine. He felt like someone had stuck him underwater; sound was muted and the world's colours had faded into grey obscurity. He could still feel the six mutants outside the camp, but he could no longer tell who any of them were, and he very much doubted he could control any of them. They were like shadows; misty phantoms caught between one world and the next.

Charles took another step. His legs gave way beneath him.

Strong arms caught him around his waist, Charles only half aware of Erik lifting him. He was saying something, but his words held no meaning. Charles felt as though he was caught in a dream, everything slow and sluggish, the world moving in half-time. His carefully constructed shields began to bow, fissures running through them. True panic seized in Charles' chest when he realized what was happening. He reached out for Raven, hand curling around her arm, fingernails no doubt puncturing skin in his terror.

When he spoke, his words were strangled, each one pushed past his tongue with tremendous effort. They stuck in his throat; scraped like razors on the way out.

"They have something: a mutant or a weapon." He thought back to the strange device, horror filling him when he realized what it was. "They're breaking down my shields." Raven's eyes grew wide. She glanced over his shoulder.

"We need to get out of here, now," she said, an echo of Erik's earlier command.

Charles missed Erik's reply, but between one minute and the next he was thrown bodily over a shoulder. The fabric of Erik's cape brushed against his cheek, strangely cool, as though his skin was overheated. Charles struggled to remain conscious, fighting tooth and nail to keep his shields erect. It was like someone was standing on the other side, battering at them with hammers and pickaxes. The noise of it was deafening.

They stepped out of the courtyard, back into the hall, Charles staring down at the floor tiles, their colours leeched; gone grey around the edges. Raven hovered at their side, body coiled tight in anticipation of a fight. Charles could still sense her thoughts, though they seemed distance, like spotting a light at the end of a long tunnel. Something crackled in the air, like static electricity, Charles' hair standing on end.
"Down," Erik shouted, ducking them into a doorway. An explosion rattled the building, smoke and dust filling the corridor ahead. They were getting closer.

As soon as the ground stopped shaking, Erik was moving again, Charles catching a brief hint of blue at his side, though he tried to divorce himself from his surroundings, focusing instead on maintaining his shields. It was getting easier, the cracks coming fewer and farther between. Charles pushed, repairing more of the damage, feeling his shields solidify. He felt a rush of dizzying relief, but fought against it. He was fairly certain if he caved to unconsciousness he would never wake up; at least, not as himself. He had no delusions about what this weapon was designed to do. If his shields fell, regardless of where the Shadow King was, he'd claim Charles as his own. The thought was horrifying.

Charles clung to both Erik's shoulder and awareness, every ounce of his energy focused on winning this battle.

~*~

Magneto rounded a corner and spotted Rogue crouched against a wall. She motioned them down, Magneto instantly dropping, angling his body so that Charles was protected. Raven was still at his side, watching Charles intently, though he had no doubt she was completely aware of her surroundings.

Noise around the corner, a scuffling of dirt and debris, resolved into Wolverine, the man charging into the hall with claws extended. He stopped mere inches from running Rogue through.

"Hey kid, good to see ya," Wolverine said, retracting his claws. Magneto shook his head, rose smoothly to his feet and started forward.

"Good of you to join us," he said.

Wolverine smirked. "You finally decide to go all cave-man on him?"

Magneto glared.

At least he now knew where his damned team was—and at least Schmidt wasn't around to get in the way. He'd disappeared after the first explosion. Magneto would have thought him used to dying by now.

"If we're done playing catch up, do you think we could try getting the half-conscious telepath to safety?"

He gestured to the body strewn over his shoulder, very purposely ignoring the warmth that spread through him at the contact. Wolverine instantly sobered. He inclined his head into one of the rooms.

"Ain't getting' through that way," he said. Magneto nodded, letting Rogue take up the rear as he followed on Wolverine's heels.

The room they entered was a communal shower. Little more than a box, the room's only point of interest was the network of pipes suspended from the ceiling, the occasional showerhead spaced evenly along each pipe; that and the large drain in the centre of the floor. Magneto knew the design well. The mutant training camps were set up in much the same way. For however much the Shadow King despised humanity, he had little love for mutants. He painted everyone with the same brush; lesser species whose existence was only tolerated so long as they proved useful.

Humanity had not.
Would it have changed anything if the Shadow King hadn't turned up? It was a question he asked himself often. He'd seen firsthand the capacity for hate. Humans, mutants; even without the Shadow King they would have turned on each other. It could have just as easily been him relegated to extinction.

Magneto hefted Charles more firmly onto his shoulder, checking Raven's expression to ensure Charles was still breathing. Charles hadn't said anything since they left the courtyard and that, more than anything, was worrying. Charles Xavier didn't tend towards silence.

At the far end of the communal shower, a door sat propped open--obviously the way Wolverine had come in. At one point it was undoubtedly bolted from the outside, but now pale afternoon light streamed in through the door, the ground of the culvert covered in flecks of white. It was snowing. That didn't bode well for travel.

It galled him, running when he could be fighting. It made him feel like the coward he wasn't, but this wasn't about him. This was about getting Charles to safety so that he could batter down the Walled City's shields and take down the Shadow King. Magneto moved forward, half pressed against the building to avoid being seen, matching Wolverine's quick-paced lope. They made it almost to the point where they'd entered--the entire corner of the building was decimated, rubble and brick strewn about the ground, the ruins still smouldering--when another explosion hit, this one dangerously close to where they were.

The force of it knocked the wind out of him, driving him to the ground, Charles slipping from his shoulders with a grunt. Magneto was on him in an instant, covering him with his body, waiting several breaths before deciding no further attack was pending. He withdrew.

Charles blinked at him.

"I think they might have spotted us," he said, which for reasons Magneto didn't fully understand made him tip his head back and laugh.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," he said, but before he could add anything else--before he could help Charles to his feet and start them running, Raven was pushing between them, hand coming up to caress the side of Charles' face.

"Tell me you are all right," she said.

Charles smiled.

"I think so. That weapon Darwin mentioned, the anti-telepathy one, I think they used it. I think it was meant to incapacity me entirely, but Darwin said something about someone sabotaging it, which I suspect is the only reason I was able to fight against it. My telepathy's still off, but my shields are back up."

Magneto saw the relief in Raven's face; felt his own expression shift into something similar.

"Good, then we need to go," he said, extending a hand, Charles accepting it, allowing Magneto to pull him to his feet.

He wobbled for several seconds, but eventually got his feet under him. He brought a hand to his temple, rubbing absently as though to ward off an approaching headache.

"Something’s..." was as far as Charles got before the sky flashed, a wave of pressure washing over them like a sonic boom.
It rang in his ears, not at all dampened by the helmet. Magneto brought his hands up to cradle his head. He wasn't the only one. Only Wolverine seemed impervious to it, though he was now staring ahead to where the culvert ended. Magneto followed his gaze, finding a group of mutants—they could only be their assailants—standing between them and the trucks.

So that was their teleportation technology.

Magneto turned to Charles.

"Can you run?" he asked, but he knew even before Charles shook his head what his answer would be; he was barely standing. Magneto cursed; turned to face the oncoming mutants.

"We need to run," Raven said, already slipping an arm around Charles.

Magneto's eyes grew wide. He knew it was the logical thing to do, but Wolverine and Rogue were already fanning out, preparing to fight. Magneto could feel the call of metal, power surging in his veins. He didn't want to turn tail and run.

"I'm perfectly capable of fighting," Charles said, as though voicing Magneto's thoughts.

Magneto shook his head.

"She's right. You're too valuable, whether you can fight or not. They'll take care of this. We'll get out through the other end of the camp." He gestured over his shoulder to the Shadow King's mutants. "I don't think they've figured out Banshee and Havok are there. We've got them sandwiched in between. It'll be a short fight."

Charles looked set to argue, but it was then one of the mutants lobbed a sphere of light towards them, Magneto having barely enough time to grab Charles and throw him through one of the open windows, Magneto following immediately behind. Dust and debris exploded behind them, Magneto speaking into his earpiece as he shouted, "Havok, we could use your skills."

"On our way," Havok said, which was all the confirmation Magneto needed. Without waiting for Charles' input, he hefted Charles back onto his shoulder and rose from the rubble.

He turned to stare out the window, spotting Raven on her way in. Worry was etched across her features, but so was fierce determination, like she was willing to take down entire armies if it meant keeping Charles safe. He reached out a hand to pull her in, but just as their fingers brushed something hit the side of her neck, Raven stiffening, eyes growing wide as she reached for what Magneto now saw was a dart.

She waivered. Charles, who was struggling in Magneto's grip, called her name.

"Go," she said, tossing the dart to the ground. "Get him out." She staggered then, the tranquilizer entering her bloodstream. Magneto was torn between setting Charles down and rushing into the fray, or turning in the other direction and getting Charles to safety.

"Please, get him out," Raven said again, her words slurred. She slumped, collapsing to the ground, her legs giving way beneath her.

He hated the thought of leaving his team—of leaving any mutant behind—but Raven was right; Charles was more important than any of them. Magneto turned from the window and started them towards the hall. Charles struggled fiercely against him, fists pounding on Magneto's back.

"Let me down! I'm not leaving her!"
"You have to," Magneto said, maintaining his grip as they passed through another dormitory, this one with tiny beds, no doubt meant for children. It was almost good Charles had his face buried in Magneto's cape; Magneto wouldn't have wanted him to see this.

Out in the hall, the ceiling was entirely gone, the floor above having caved in, support beams scattered across the space. The building creaked and groaned like it could come down at any moment. Magneto took them as far forward as he could before their route was blocked. He set Charles down, but kept a hold of Charles' arm, hand curled around his wrist; a parody of his grip last night.

"We can't just leave her," Charles said, tugging against Magneto's hold. Magneto had no doubt that without the helmet Charles would have wiped his mind clean to get to Raven.

"She is more than capable of taking care of herself, and the only thing going back is going to accomplish is handing them you. She wouldn't want that."

"They'll kill her," Charles pleaded, looking so lost in that moment that Erik almost caved. Instead he shook his head.

"No they won't. They'll use her as bait. It's you they want. And once you've gotten us past the shields; once you've killed the Shadow King, we can worry about getting her free."

It was as much a promise as Magneto was willing to make, but it seemed to do the trick, because Charles stopped struggling.

"Duck against that wall, with your head covered," he instructed. Despite his earlier protests, Charles was quick to obey.

Magneto pulled.

A piece came free, the column above shifting, but Magneto knew it would hold. He pulled at another column, this time forced to lift the one above, hold it in place while he slid the one below free. When he was done, he let the one above fall, the space opened up enough to get them through and to the other side.

"You're sure there were only six?" Magneto asked, extending a hand. The last thing he wanted was to come out on the other side and find more mutants. Charles accepted the hand, seeming steadier on his feet.

"Yes."

Magneto nodded and then pulled Charles into the small space, Charles pressed tight against him.

The sounds of battle were louder here, the tunnel acting as an amplifier, sound echoing off the concrete, every cry, every shout magnified. Charles clutched at his hand.

Magneto squeezed in response.

The telltale static of an energy sphere was their only warning of another strike. Magneto surged forward, pulling Charles with him. He emerged on the other side just as the blast hit, the force of it throwing Magneto forward, Charles' hand slipping loose. He landed on his side, pain lancing through his ribs, still sore from Raven's remonstration. Magneto rolled instinctively onto his back. For several long seconds he blinked up to where the ceiling used to be, smoke and dust settling
over the hall like fog. He let out a strangled cough, tasting blood on his tongue.

*Charles*, he thought, and immediately pushed himself up onto his feet. The path they’d cleared was gone, Magneto waving aside smoke as he scrambled forward, Charles’ name a hoarse shout on his tongue.

"And you were pretending not to care. How pathetic you are, still nursing this little crush."

Schmidt was the last person he wanted to deal with so Magneto pushed passed the man, falling to his knees beside the debris, frantically shifting through it. His knuckles caught against bits of concrete, leaving his hands raw and bleeding. Schmidt knelt at his side.

A single piece of concrete lay strewn across the opening of the tunnel, Magneto taking a steadying breath as he reached for it. His palms scraped against its rough edges while he sought out the twisted coils of rebar. Using both his hands and his powers, he shifted the concrete to the side.

Miraculously—if Magneto could bring himself to believe in such a thing—the tunnel hadn’t collapsed. Charles was half crouched in its centre, looking worse for wear, but very much alive. He was covered in dust and bits of debris, but he glanced up and caught Magneto’s eye.

"Are you all right?" Magneto asked. Charles frowned. He glanced behind him.

"My leg's stuck," he said.

Magneto followed his gaze; found where a support beam had fallen across Charles' foot. Charles was grimacing, his jaw clenched tight, obviously in a great deal of pain. Erik traced the structure of the tunnel, found it sound, and then went in after Charles.

Schmidt stayed on the other side, watching with curious eyes.

There wasn't much light to work with, but Magneto was able to do a quick assessment. Charles was half sprawled, half knelt, leg trapped behind him. Magneto caught his eye and then began a quick assessment of his condition.

He was no longer completely bald, days of travel having resulted in a thin covering of hair—little more than peach fuzz. Matted blood sat at his temple—the same temple he'd been rubbing, ironically enough—but the cut looked shallow. Magneto traced a line down his torso, but aside from his trapped leg, he appeared unharmed. He was watching Magneto closely, patiently awaiting rescue. Under the circumstances, Magneto doubted he would have remained so calm.

"Give me a minute," he still said, well aware that they probably didn't have that much time. The last blast had shorted the receiver in his helmet—it buzzed now, obnoxiously, but the voices of his officers had grown silent—so until they were clear of the building, he had no way of knowing if his team had made it out.

Moving the support beam was easy, Magneto levitating it far enough up to slide Charles out without collapsing the entire tunnel down around them. Charles moved forward, cursing under his breath—the first Magneto had heard from the man. He twisted around so that he was sitting and reached down to pull his leg towards him.

The first thing Magneto noticed was the blood. He traced its source to a cut on Charles' leg.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" he asked, kneeling by the leg.

"I don't think so," Charles said. He gestured over his shoulder. "You're going to have to help me stand."
Strange that it was only this morning that he'd vowed to stay as far from Charles as possible—strange that it was only this morning that he'd vowed to go back to calling Charles Xavier. Even with Schmidt present—who was still strangely silent, sitting on a pile of rubble, watching the pair of them intently—Magneto felt no need to shy away. He knelt at Charles' side and lifted one of Charles' arms over his shoulder, wrapping his arm around Charles' waist.

"On three," he said, waiting for Charles' nod. "One. Two. Three." He lifted. Charles grunted, and then hissed, balancing awkwardly on one leg.

"I think I'm good," he said after a minute, though Magneto didn't miss the strain in his voice; strain he was trying desperately to hide.

It was still somewhat impressive; Charles one of the bravest people Magneto had ever met. Magneto nodded, intending to take them forward when the building shook, and explosion outside jarring loose debris. Small pebbles and dust rained down around them.

It was heartening in a way, knowing his team was still fighting.

Magneto glanced back the way they had come, the entrance to the tunnel once again blocked. The hall ahead was relatively undamaged, but more importantly, it got Charles away from the fight.

"Come on," Magneto said, ignoring Charles' startled protest as he slipped a hand beneath Charles' knees and drew him to his chest.

"This is hardly necessary," Charles said, but he clung to Magneto all the same. He knew what he was looking for, Magneto ducking them out of the tunnel and then leading them down the hall.

"There's a wheelchair just around the corner. We passed it on the way in."

"I remember," Charles said, and despite Magneto carrying him; despite being injured and clearly in pain, he remained entirely self-possessed. He carried himself with as much poise and dignity as he ever had. He was filthy dirty, incapable of walking, bleeding from a head wound, and yet Charles Xavier was every inch the telepath Magneto had met all those years ago.

And now his life was in Magneto's hands.

Magneto kept moving, ignoring the mocking sound of Schmidt's laughter, concentrating instead on getting Charles out.
Chapter 10

Charles drew Erik's cape up to his chin, adjusting it so that he was wrapped completely in it. He could still feel the cold. A good sign; it meant he hadn't succumbed to shock. Out here shock could be deadly.

Erik was gone, having taken Charles from the camp and into the surrounding wood before heading out to scout the area. Charles sat awkwardly on the borrowed wheelchair. Its wheels were useless on the uneven ground, so he was pretty much stuck until Erik returned, unless he decided to try his luck at crawling.

A somewhat impossible task, he thought ruefully, glancing down at his foot. It throbbed painfully, but securing their position was more important than seeing to injuries, so Charles had had no qualms about sending Erik away.

He regretted that now.

He did not regret taking Erik’s offered cape, the fabric the only warmth he had, twilight descending; the temperature along with it. If he'd thought the farmhouse cold, it was nothing compared to this; it had settled into his bones as a permanent ache. His only consolation was that it distracted somewhat from his foot. Charles drew the cape a little tighter; shivered beneath it. Erik's scent caught his nose.

He closed his eyes and let his thoughts drift.

His telepathy was slowly returning, vague outlines of thoughts flitting across his awareness. The edges were still fuzzy, like he couldn't quite catch hold of them, but at least he could brush fingers against them. Nothing in the world could have prepared him for the terror of almost losing this.

He concentrated on seeking one mind in particular. Dread coiled in his stomach at the thought of Raven in their hands; so much so that he still wanted to rush back into the camp, find her and take her back at any cost. But Erik was right; he was the more vulnerable piece, and so long as he remained out of their grasp, they would keep her alive.

And she was alive, he knew; he could still feel the steady thread between them; warmth and light frayed by distance, but the connection remained. He followed its length, travelling back to the camp, relief flooding him when he finally touched on her mind. Her thoughts were shrouded, Raven still unconscious, but Charles revelled in the steady pulse of her mind; taking comfort in the relative peace of her slumber.

He thought he might be able to coax her into consciousness--give her a chance to fight her way free--but the drug in her system was too powerful, his efforts sliding off the planes of her mind, falling to scatter amongst her dreams.

And then she was gone.

It was like being doused in cold water, Raven there one minute and gone the next, Charles flailing, panicking as he scanned the area she had just been. There was no one. He sent his thoughts out, scanning first the camp, and then the surrounding area. The task left him exhausted, his telepathy too newly healed for such strain, but he didn't stop until he was certain the whole of the area was deserted, their assailants having vanished, and with them Raven. They'd teleported out and Charles was alone.
Not entirely, he realized, a dead space moving silently towards him: Erik, Charles thought, or at least someone wearing a helmet. He had no idea if any of Erik’s team had made it out, or if they, alongside Raven, had vanished entirely. He was still too weak to extend his search beyond half a mile, but it was enough to know that no one remained inside the camp.

The snap of a twig drew Charles’ attention. Charles opened his eyes to see Erik emerging from the wilderness; coming slowly into the small clearing. He was winded, cheeks flushed with cold, his features set into hard lines.

"They've gone," Charles said. Erik blinked, and then nodded.

"They've got Raven and Banshee. Pretty sure Rogue and Havok made it out with the trucks. They'll be moving to the emergency rendezvous. I have no idea where Wolverine is."

Charles closed his eyes again, tried casting out his thoughts, searching for the unique slope of Wolverine’s mind, but he’d drained himself too entirely the last time, so the effort left him dizzy and disoriented. Charles slumped forward in his chair. Erik was at his side in an instant.


"Not quite up to par, I'm afraid," Charles said. Erik nodded, and then glanced to Charles’ foot. He looked over his shoulder.

"We need to get to the emergency rendezvous, but it's late, and you're hurt, so I think we should spend the night here, look at your foot and then start out in the morning."

There was something in Erik’s expression that suggested that was the last thing he wanted to do. Charles couldn’t be certain, but he didn’t think it was Charles’ company he was avoiding, or even this place. Some unnamed fear made itself known in the stark lines that framed Erik’s eyes.

"Is there a chance they'll come back? They want me, after all," Charles asked.

Erik shook his head, and then paused, frown marring his features. "I honestly don't know. It's possible they think we're long-gone. Either way, we need to take care of your foot."

The idea of waiting was physically painful, Charles picturing Raven in their custody. He wanted to protest; to demand they leave right now, but he knew Erik was right. They needed time to regroup; time to gather their strength.

"I think it's probably broken," Charles said, nodding to the foot. Erik followed his gaze.

"Come on," he said, levitating Charles’ chair, leading him into the clearing. He set him down just inside the embrace of a lopsided silver fir tree, her bows providing effective protection against the biting wind. "I'd build us a fire, but if they come back it'll highlight our location." He sounded almost apologetic. Charles offered a soft smile, the edges of it not quite reaching his cheeks.

"We'll be fine."

It was cold—certainly colder than Charles was used to—but it was only a night. Erik nodded, already moving to kneel at Charles’ feet. He reached gingerly for Charles’ leg and then glanced up, waiting for Charles’ nod before elevating the chair’s footrest so that Charles’ leg was parallel to the ground. Charles hissed.

"It's fine," he said when Erik hesitated.
"I'm going to have to cut your trousers." Charles grimaced, but nodded. At Erik's pointed look, he reached into his coat and withdrew the pocket-knife he kept there. Of course Erik knew he had it.

Erik's hand shook as he accepted the blade.

It was neat work once Erik got started, the blade sharp enough to split the material with little fuss. Only once did Erik pause, glancing over his shoulder, jaw clenching as though he had heard something he didn't particularly want to hear. Charles cast out briefly with his telepathy, but there was no one, and soon enough Erik returned to his task, cutting Charles' pant-leg and then collapsing the knife; handing it immediately back. Charles tucked it into his pocket.

The material was stuck in the cut on his leg, and although Erik was gentle, Charles couldn't help the whimper that escaped his lips. He immediately caught his bottom lip, teeth biting into it, the pain somewhat distracting. Erik muttered an apology, but kept at his work, the bottom half of Charles' leg soon exposed, the cold air soothing against the injury.

Erik tutted.

"There's a lot of swelling, and I'm going to have to take off your boot next," he said. He caught Charles' eye then, Charles instantly transported. He found himself once again staring across a chess board at a man so lost and uncertain the whole of Charles' being had rallied in sympathy. Without thinking he reached out, set his hand on top of Erik's shoulder. Erik exhaled sharply.

"It's fine. Do it."

Erik nodded, already working at the ties of Charles' boots. When he got it as loose as it would go, he paused, fishing around on the ground until he found a branch two thumb-lengths across. He wiped it clean in the snow, and then handed it to Charles.

"You'll want to bite on that."

A tremor ran through Charles' hand as he reached for the wood. He placed it between his teeth, feeling awkward, though he understood the necessity. Erik waited until it was in place and then counted to three. He pulled at the boot. Charles bit down; splinters of wood flooding his mouth even as the branch muffled his screams.

It was the work of a moment, but by the time Erik was done Charles was woozy and disoriented. Tears marked tracks down his cheeks and the branch was nearly bit through. He felt a hand on his cheek, Erik caressing his jaw until it relaxed. Charles opened his mouth, allowing Erik to remove the battered piece of wood. He turned his head to the side and spat.

"Okay?" Erik asked. Charles nodded. More than anything, he wanted Raven, the pain of his foot eclipsed only by her absence. It was like someone had carved out a part of him; it left him aching, hollow.

The sock was easier. Erik slowly rolled it down, inch by inch, Charles getting his first look at the foot. It was swollen and discoloured, though there were no protruding bones--something to be thankful for, at least. The cut on the side of his leg was shallower than he was expecting, though fiercely dirty. Erik eyed it critically for several seconds before once again catching Charles' gaze.

"I'm not a healer or a doctor, but I can splint it. You should probably have it looked at sooner rather than later," he said.

"We're getting Raven back first," Charles said, because he'd sooner cut his leg off than leave her in the Shadow King's hands.
He expected argument--any sane person would have argued--but instead Erik merely nodded, looking rather impressed, like Charles had just done something extraordinary. Charles smiled his thanks and then cast around for something they could use to splint it.

Erik was already eyeing the cape.

"*~*~

"Erik, Erik, Erik. I am disappointed in you. You're not seeing the bigger picture here."

Charles was watching him intently. Magneto kept his attention focused there, ignoring the growing irritation in Schmidt's voice. He cut slow, steady strips from his cape; not enough to render the garment useless, but enough to provide binding for Charles' makeshift splint.

"You're destroying your cape for him. Do you really think he's worthy of that? We're twenty miles outside the Walled City." Schmidt gestured wildly, as though Magneto could see the city on the horizon. In reality, there were only more trees. "You could drag him there, hand him over and they would make you a king."

It was growing increasingly difficult to ignore Schmidt. More than anything Magneto wanted to take Charles' knife and slide it between Schmidt's ribs. Would he truly die if Magneto used a telepath's weapon? Probably not, he reasoned, but he could still take satisfaction in Schmidt's temporary demise. Only Charles' steady gaze stayed his hand.

Schmidt was pacing now, gliding across the snow-covered ground without leaving a single track. He circled a tree, heedless of its low-hanging branches, and then came to crouch in front of Magneto. His breath smelled of chocolate today. Magneto recoiled.

"And if you don't want to be a king, at least slit his damned throat so that he doesn't slow us down. He gave you his knife. It's like he was asking for it. Hell, if you want to fuck him first then fuck him. It's not like he can stop you." Schmidt rapped his knuckles against Magneto's helmet. "Fuck him, or kill him, or hand him over to the Shadow King, but stop playing nursemaid. It's beneath you."

Magneto cut a wider strip, body shaking with tension. It worried him somewhat, especially after last night, the things Schmidt might be capable of. It was fine when they were surrounded by people, Raven hovering at Charles' side, but here, Charles alone and injured, Magneto wasn't entirely certain he could trust himself in Charles' presence.

He finished cutting the strip, closed the knife and very deliberately handed it back to Charles. Charles hesitated briefly before taking it. Magneto handed over the cape. This time Charles' hesitation lingered.

"We can share it later," he said when he eventually accepted it, immediately wrapping it around his shoulders. Magneto swallowed, and then turned his attention to Charles' foot.

The chair's footrest would serve to keep it elevated as they moved, but to keep the foot stable, Magneto used several sticks, binding them to Charles' foot with bits of cloth. Charles sat perfectly still the entire time, but Magneto could tell he was in considerable pain. When he was done, Charles' foot was twice its usual size, swaddled in wood and silk; swollen and purple with bruising. Magneto reached a shaking hand towards Charles' toes; thought better of it and retreated.

He still had several strips of cape cut, so he wetted one with snow--he hated to use the snow, the danger of hypothermia entirely too real, but there were few options--and began cleaning the cut on Charles' leg. It was shallower than he was expecting, but filthy, like the rest of Charles; the pair of
them still covered in dust and debris from their escape. Charles hissed several times, but he didn't flinch, sitting perfectly still until Magneto was done. He wound another strip of cape around the wound to keep it clean.

When he was done, he used the wider strip he'd cut to loosely cover Charles' bare skin. It would be a while before Charles was able to fit a boot on the foot; until then Magneto's cape would serve to keep him warm.

He hesitated then, the task of seeing to Charles' foot having kept him preoccupied, Magneto glancing up to find Charles still watching him. Schmidt was standing over his shoulder. Magneto gestured to Charles' head. When Charles nodded, he glanced away; occupied himself with cleaning the strip of cape he'd used to clean Charles' leg. When he was done, a streak of red and black ran through the snow. Magneto shifted up onto his knees.

"How is it?" he asked, gesturing down to the foot. Charles smiled.

"Better," he said, though his eyes were pinched, his skin pale. Magneto patted his knee. There was little else he could do.

He gestured Charles' forward, ignoring Schmidt's piercing gaze as he caught Charles' chin and tilted his head to get better light. It was a difficult task, their world having shrunken to a cloister of trees. They loomed above them, making Magneto feel claustrophobic in a way he hadn't since he was a child. There was at least half an inch of snow covering the ground. It reflected what little moonlight pieced the clouds; otherwise the darkness was far reaching.

Schmidt stepped out from behind Charles' chair, circled around to the other side of the clearing where he perched on the edge of a rock, still watching intently, seeming content to hold his tongue. Magneto dabbed carefully at the wound. Like the one on Charles' leg, it too was shallow but dirty. As Magneto worked, Charles watched him, gaze scrutinizing, though what he was looking for Magneto didn't know. He was tempted to ask, but before he could find the words, Charles watched intently, seeming content to hold his tongue. Magneto dabbed carefully at the wound.

"Everyone gets them," Magneto heard himself say, though he hadn't meant to speak.

Charles glanced up, and then back down at the tags. He turned them over and found Magneto's mother's star. His eyebrows lifted skyward. There was a question in his gaze when he once again caught Magneto's eye.

He hadn't spoken of his mother since her death, and he didn't particularly feel like discussing her now, but Charles was watching him, all silent acceptance and warm invitation, the cut on his forehead still covered in dirt.

"My mother gave it to me, before..." He paused. "She was human," he settled on saying. Understanding flooded Charles' features.

"I'm sorry. Did she tell you what it was?"

Magneto shook his head, curious now, because he'd worn it for years and never once thought it anything aside from a treasured memento; the only memory he had of his mother.

"You'll find more answers in Genosha, but it's a religious symbol."
Magneto frowned. There were no religions inside the Shadow King's empire; their practices outlawed, reduced to whispers that Magneto had never thought worth listening to. Schmidt knew of the star; had taken it from Magneto when he was a boy. Retrieving it was the first thing Magneto did after killing the man.

"It represents Judaism," Charles was saying. He was still staring at the star, as though transfixed. He turned it in his hand. "If your mother gave it to you, then it's possible she was Jewish."

He glanced up then, caught Magneto's eye, looking so impossibly sad in that moment that Magneto's heart constricted. He glanced at the star, new emotion surging in his chest. It sucked at his air until he had to grasp lungful's of it just to keep conscious. Charles' expression shifted to one of concern.

"Erik, are you all right?" he asked. Magneto exhaled sharply, closed and then opened his eyes.

"My apologies," Magneto said. "It's nice to know that."

The truth was he knew next to nothing about his mother. Even this one piece, however small, was more than he ever thought he'd have. He smiled then, something fluttering in his chest that he thought might be joy. Charles echoed it, seeming pleased by Magneto's reaction. He shifted closer, the movement breaking the spell, new fear replacing giddy discovery, Magneto still terrified of what might happen if he let himself fall under Charles' spell.

He pulled away, the star slipping from between Charles' fingers, falling to land against Magneto's chest. Magneto hesitated only briefly before tucking it back into his shirt. He let his gaze harden then, turning his attention back to the cut on Charles' head. A brief flicker of disappointment crossed Charles' face, but he didn't comment, once again falling silent; sitting perfectly still as Magneto finished his work.

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Storm skidded to a halt at the foot of Jean's bed. She scanned the room for the source of Jean's distress, but found nothing.

Jean sat in the middle of the bed, breath coming in laboured pants, her eyes blown wide with fear. She caught Storm's gaze, exhaling sharply as she struggled to master herself. Storm waited.

"My apologies, Ororo," she said, sinking back to fall amongst the pillows. Storm did not hesitate before climbing in alongside her, curling protectively at her side.

"Tell me what has happened."

Jean paused; ran a shaking hand across her head. "I'm not entirely certain. I only sensed overwhelming distress. I'm worried Charles may be in trouble, but until he activates Cerebro, he is out of range and we have no way of knowing."

Storm shivered. She knew as well as anyone the danger that came with Charles' failure. If he fell to the Shadow King then all was lost.

"He is resourceful; he will succeed."

Jean did not answer, but Storm knew what she was thinking. She had put in her own request to be sent to the front lines; to lead this mission. But Charles outranked her, his request granted while hers was denied. She was no doubt wondering now what might have happened had they sent her in Charles' place.
"It is not that I think I could do a better job of it, but it is impossible not to imagine myself in his place."

"I am glad he went instead of you," Storm said. It was not that she was a coward--by no means--but the thought of putting Jean in danger terrified her in ways her own death did not. She understood completely Raven's reluctance. She had spoken often of her disapproval of the plan. Storm was surprised she'd allowed Charles to go at all.

"You know Charles as well as me. When has anyone, including his guardian, been able to keep him from doing something he'd set his mind to?"

Storm laughed; a light-hearted chuckle that brought a smile to Jean's face.

"He is stubborn, and more than a little persistent." She shifted then, turning so that they were face-to-face. "He is also the second most capable telepath I know. He will not fail."

Jean hesitated only a moment before nodding, some of her earlier tension fading. It was out of their hands now anyway. Charles would succeed and they would triumph. Or Charles would fail, and they would perish.

Out the open window, the soft pitter-patter of the season's first rain beat a steady tempo against the ground. Storm closed her eyes and allowed it to lull her to sleep, content that Jean would follow behind.
Chapter 11

Hank hated these places almost as much as he hated the underground city. It evoked a different kind of claustrophobia. Instead of the press of dry earth and vendors’ stalls, there was the press of bodies, hundreds of mutants all vying for space inside the tiny alcove.

They shouted and jeered, a day's worth of regulation and order shaking loose in the exchange of insults and coins. They were pressed elbow-to-elbow, squeezed into corners and stood on ledges. Rapt faces, flushed with excitement and illegal drink, peered eagerly into the pit where two Shi'ar skrullhorns circled one another, their crests raised, talon-tipped wings extended to their sides. The male, grey scaled with a plume of violet feathers, gave a cry. The larger female, scarlet red on emerald green, answered in kind. She struck out, spiked tail clipping the male's wing. He hissed and retreated. Hank made a face, and turned away.

Skrullhorn fighting was not illegal, but it did attract a rougher crowd. Hank was jostled several times as he crossed the room. These were the city's workers, not her more affluent citizens. Hank felt as out of place here as he did underground. Even crossing the city to find the wall-side venue had proven harrowing. He was used to the pomp and order of the inner sanctum, the palace grounds a centre of obstinate quiet.

The press of the crowd lessened the farther away from the pit he got, Hank coming to stand beneath a single methane lamp. Its flame flickered, neon green that cast awkward shadows against the far wall. He turned his back towards it and scanned the crowd.

Darwin had a knack for punctuality, so it wasn't long before he slipped through the door, eyes scanning the room until he spotted Hank, easily illuminated. Hank briefly caught his eye and then glanced away; turned to flag down a man selling moonshine from an old distillery jug. Polished titanium coin bought him a dented metal cup half filled with the murky brown liquor.

"Tell me you're not actually going to drink that," Darwin said, already tossing over his coin for a matching cup. He inclined his head as soon as he had it, and then came to lean next to Hank on the far wall.

"I thought it might help me blend in," Hank admitted. The stuff smelled vile. Darwin chuckled, and then tipped back his cup, lips twisting at the taste. He exhaled, somewhat slowly as he tossed the cup towards one of the bins set up specifically for their disposal.

"I don't recommend it," he said, reaching over then to pluck the cup from Hank's hands. Hank gave it up willingly, Darwin retreating, Hank surprised to find a slim disk pressed against his palm. Darwin took a sip from Hank’s cup; winced and then spit it back out. Hank's stomach churned with nerves.

He curled his hand into a fist and tried not to look as out of place as he felt. At his side, Darwin chuckled.

"And this is why we use this place," he said, gesturing to Hank and then across the room, where a couple of wide-eyed mutants watched the proceedings with clear unease. "Everyone's nervous as hell their first time, like they're breaking a law, even when this isn't technically illegal."

Hank very purposely didn't mention the moonshine, which was illegal. He also didn't mention the lack of surveillance, which was probably the stronger reason for wanting to meet here.

"You just look like fresh meat," he said, clapping Hank on the shoulder. He pushed off the wall.
"Don't let anyone con you into a bet."

And with that Darwin was gone, slipping into the crowd, pleasant smile plastered across his face. Hank squeezed his fist tighter, glanced around the room and then pushed off towards the door.

Darwin was wrong. It wasn't the place that made Hank nervous. It wasn't even the slim disk still hidden in his fist. It was what came next. This had been the plan from day one, but installing the Citadel's virus, something only Hank had the knowhow and clearance to do, would give the Shadow King tangible proof of his treason. Even the weapon's sabotage could be excused as a miscalculation, but there was no one else who could hack this system; no one else who could implant this virus. If this was traced, it would trace directly back to him.

Hank made it to the door and stepped outside, into the damp chill of night. He breathed deep, trying to steady his nerves. They continued to rattle all the way back to the palace.

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"Erik, pet; wake up."

Magneto opened his eyes to find Schmidt leaning over him, his face upside-down, his smile manic. Magneto instantly recoiled. He jerked away, the memory of that smile entirely too vivid. In his flailing, he accidently kicked Charles' leg. Charles came awake with a screamed curse. He immediately curled in on himself, reaching for his foot.

He was still lying across the bed of fir bows Mageto had cut last night, the wheelchair parked at his side, footrest extended. Mageto hadn't meant to fall asleep—he'd sat at Charles' side last night, the promise to wake him midway through the night a lie on his tongue. He'd meant to forgo sleep, to allow Charles the opportunity to recharge while ensuring Charles was safe. When and how he'd succumbed to slumber—when and how he'd fallen asleep at Charles' side—Magneto didn't know.

Charles was still clutching his leg, breathing heavily now, steady in and outs meant to distract from the pain. Mageto was torn between apologizing and fleeing Schmidt, who was wearing a lab coat today and looked entirely too much like the monster from Magneto's nightmares to be anything other than a dream.

"Stay the hell away from me," he said, backing away from the apparition. Schmidt smiled mockingly.

"Erik, are you all right?" Charles asked, as if only then spotting the terror written across Magneto's face.

Magneto glanced towards him, panic no doubt reflected in his gaze. Charles was sitting up now, face pale, lip trembling, still holding his leg like he could undo Magneto's clumsiness by willpower alone.

Magneto let his attention drift back to Schmidt. He was holding a pair of surgical sheers. Magneto took an involuntary step back.

"Erik," Charles said again, sounding increasingly panicked. Magneto turned back to catch his eye, remembering then the warmth of Charles pressed at his side. He exhaled slowly, and stepped towards him, doing his best to block out Schmidt.

"I'm sorry; a nightmare," he said, crouching at Charles' side, intent on examining Charles' foot, but as soon as he was on his knees Schmidt was before him.

"Oh no, pet, we're not doing this. I am sick of this game. You are going to listen to me, or I'm
afraid I'm going to have to hurt you again, and we both know I don't want to do that."

It was so close to the things Schmidt used to say that once again Magneto found himself transported. He reeled back, his name a strangled shout that passed Charles' lips, but Magneto was too busy scrambling away to pay it any heed. He could no longer see Charles, Magneto having vanished into memory, little Erik Lehnsherr taking his place. He uttered a silent plea for help; freedom from a madman Magneto had killed too many times to count.

"Erik," Charles voice broke through the fog.

"He can't help you, Erik." Try as he might he couldn't seem to escape the man, Erik shifting back, only to find Schmidt pressed against his back, hands stroking at the sides of his helmet; caressing Erik like he was a kept pet.

Erik surged forward, strong hands catching him around the shoulders, Erik casting about wildly until he spotted a pair of brilliant blue eyes. He blinked, Charles' face coming into focus, the stark worry in Charles' gaze almost touching. Erik reached up, set his hands on Charles' shoulders and held him fast.

"Push him back, Erik," Schmidt ordered, and before Erik could process what he was doing he was shoving Charles roughly back.

Charles eyes grew wide, panic and concern reflected in their depths. He let out a grunted protest, but quickly fell silent, eyes piercing as he caught Erik's gaze. He reached out, hand coming to rest on the side of Erik's helmet. "Erik," he said, cutting through some of the fog.

"Hold him down," Schmidt said, but his words no longer held the same weight, Magneto creeping back into the forefront of his mind, Erik Lehnsherr retreating.

"Erik," Charles said again, steady gaze holding Erik captive. The hand on Magneto's helmet fell to Erik's shoulder, his squeeze as firm as his expression.

Magneto smiled as he retook control, understanding then what he needed to do. He cast a final glance in Schmidt's direction, Schmidt's features lit with fury. Magneto reached up and tore the helmet from his head. He pitched it into the forest, letting his shields fall gracelessly aside, no longer a threat now that Charles had access to his mind. Schmidt cursed, berated him for his stupidity, but the will to hurt Charles was gone, Magneto so relieved he toppled to the side, falling to land in the trampled snow.

Charles was hovering over him in an instant.

He set a trembling hand on the side of Magneto's head, Magneto realizing too late that it had probably been weeks since he'd last washed his hair. It was no doubt damp and matted with sweat. Charles didn't seem to notice.

"Erik, oh my God, Erik," he said, hand trembling. He withdrew it almost immediately, Magneto rolling onto his back, Charles face coming into view. Something very much akin to terror was written across his face.

Magneto couldn't help it; he started to laugh.

"Erik," Charles said again, cutting through his mirth. He fell silent, grasping for a moment at his identity, little Erik Lehnsherr receding; Magneto slipping in to take his place. He blinked up at Charles and found Charles white with terror.

"Are you all right?" he asked, as though it was a perfectly normal thing to ask and he hadn't just
had a psychotic breakdown in front of the man. Charles narrowed his gaze.

"You need to listen to me very carefully," he said.

There was something in Charles' voice that immediately caught Magneto's attention; a sense of caution and alarm that went beyond Magneto's display. Magneto sat, realizing then that Charles had dragged himself through the snow and was sprawled at his side, injured foot splayed awkwardly across the ground. It probably hurt, but Charles didn't look like he was in pain.

Charles looked terrified.

"What?" Magneto demanded.

"I need you to remain perfectly calm. Can you do that, Erik?" Charles asked, reaching out then, as though he wanted to touch Magneto again. He thought better of it, hand dropping to his side.

"Kill him, Erik," Schmidt said, making his presence known again. He'd retreated after the helmet had come off, but he stood at Magneto's side now, face a mask of fury. Magneto glanced up at him, then back across to Charles, eyes growing wide.

"He's not real," he said, making the connection. He'd take off the damned helmet and given Charles access to his head. There was no other possible explanation for Charles' terror. An apparition would have provoked curiosity; a hallucination pity. Schmidt was something else. A wide grin spread across Magneto's face.

He'd known; he'd always known there was a logical explanation. He no longer cared what that explanation was; only that Charles could do what Magneto could not: banish Schmidt for all eternity. For the first time in longer than he could remember hope surged in his chest, even as it was tempered by growing doubt. It couldn't be this easy, could it? He'd cast aside his helmet, meaning anyone could be manipulating him: the Shadow King, Emma Frost; Charles.

Magneto recoiled, pausing only in his flight when Charles' hand landed on his arm. Warmth infused the point of contact, Magneto shivering, staring down at the white of Charles' glove-less fingers. He forced himself to exhale.

"Is there someone else here, Erik?" Charles was asking. He sounded overly cautious.

Magneto's grin had vanished, but he felt like laughing again. Thoughts flickered from one extreme to the other, Magneto reaching out then, grabbing Charles' arm and pulling him forward. "I thought I was crazy, but I'm not, am I? He's real. He's something in my head."

It was as much a question as it was an entreaty, Magneto desperate for the answer. He wanted so badly to trust Charles; to hand himself over into Charles' care. Charles frowned.

"I don't know who or what he is, but you have psionic imprint buried in your subconscious. Someone has gone to great lengths to hide it and its intended purpose." He paused then, catching Magneto's gaze, expression still horrified, though something very much akin to pity flashed in his eyes. He swallowed before continuing. "It might manifest as hallucinations, I don't know, but you were right when you said you were not safe."

Magneto's expression fell, pain spiking in his chest as he processed what Charles was saying. He understood now Charles' terror.

"How am I not safe?" he asked. It was easy to ignore Schmidt now that he knew what Schmidt was. It occurred to him then that his escape from the Shadow King's clutches might not have been as easy as it had seemed. Who else would have done this save the White Queen and her Shadow
King? This was the work of a telepath.

Charles was shaking his head. "I'm not entirely certain, but I'm beginning to suspect you might be unknowingly providing information to the enemy. It is entirely possible you let them know I was coming." Charles squinted. Magneto could tell he was seeing beyond the physical now. "There's a dormant component. I'm a little worried that when activated you will fall completely under the Shadow King's command. Erik, this is very serious."

Magneto processed this, panic surging in his chest when he thought of himself as the Shadow King's unwitting tool. Was Charles right? Had they taken Raven and Banshee because he'd told them where they were? Why did he have no recollection of this? Was all of this his fault? Magneto reeled at the thought, breath coming in shallow pants.

"No, no, Erik," Charles was saying, Magneto fighting to focus on his voice. "Calm, remember? I need you to remain calm."

"You can fix it, right? You can get it out of my head?" Schmidt was snarling now, a litany of Kill him falling from his lips. Magneto blocked him out.

Charles frowned, which was not a particularly encouraging sight, but after a moment he nodded. Relief flooded Magneto. He sank back, not having realized he'd shifted up onto his knees, or that he'd grabbed Charles by the lapels. Charles followed behind, gaze never once leaving Magneto's face.

"Listen to me. I can't get rid of it, not on my own." Magneto's gaze widened, heart sinking.

"But you said..."

Charles held up a placating hand. "I can dampen it, so that it stops influencing you, but I can't remove it. Not alone. Certainly not without killing you, and believe me when I say, that is the last thing I want to do."

"But he'll be gone. You'll make him go away?"

He sounded desperate, he knew, but he'd spent the better part of two years wanting Schmidt gone. Death was a small price to pay.

"Yes. Anything connected to the implant will vanish, but when this is over you will need to come to the Citadel and have it removed."

Magneto nodded, willing to agree to anything to see Schmidt removed, however much it sounded too good to be true.

"How do we do this?" he asked, registering then how daunted Charles looked by the task. It was somewhat impressive when he squared his shoulders, resolve settling over his features.

"We get comfortable," he said, immediately moving back to the bed of bows where he sat, cross-legged, foot propped in front of him. He patted a space at his side, Magneto immediately moving into it.

Schmidt had long-since beat a tactical retreat.

~*~

The corridors of Erik's mind were long and narrow, the walls fitted to the ceiling at awkward angles. Everything glittered steel-grey, with bolts holding panels together across every surface.
The floor sloped to the left, Charles slipping with every step he took. He had to brace himself, arm shaking to keep from stepping on his injured foot.

Odd that that should manifest here.

He glanced down at it, frowning, and instantly it healed, pain receding, becoming a distant thing that buzzed in the back of his head; he was aware of its existence, but only in the same way that he was aware of Erik seated before him, the quiet hush of the forest and the chill of the approaching winter secondary to what he was doing here. Charles let it all drift away; came more firmly into Erik's mind.

Without a map he was just wandering corridors, getting lost in a maze, a mind's most basic defense. Charles was too skilled a telepath for that. He tapped at one of Erik's walls, the resounding echo reverberating throughout the corridor, the pitch enough to at least give Charles a direction. He turned to face the other direction; retreated back the way he had come.

It was faster going now that he had his bearings; and now that his foot was healed. The corridor twisted left, the floor leveling out, becoming a grated walkway, still slate-grey, Erik's mind void of colour—strange for a man who wore colour so loudly. The farther he walked, the closer the walls pressed, bending until the corridor changed, became a soft curve instead of the hard angles from before. Erik's mind had failed to confuse Charles with angles and misdirection and was now attempting to lull Charles into a false sense of security. Charles shook his head and pushed out. The walls bowed, and then shifted back into place.

A door appeared on his right. Charles brushed past it.

"Erik, love, you have to cooperate here," Charles said. This was so much easier with other telepaths. At least they could control their subconscious. The door disappeared.

Ahead, the corridor curved, not unnatural, but Charles still slowed, suddenly wary. He brought up his shields, sealing them tight, and then rounded the corner.

"Oh, Erik, not this," he said, staring at an exact replica of Raven. Her eyes flashed indignation and irritation. She stalked to Charles' side.

"You're just going to let them take me? Let them torture me? What good are you as a telepath if you can't even look after your guardian?"

Charles frowned. As facsimiles went, Raven was physically flawless, but those were not her words; they weren't even Erik's. "Ah," Charles said, suddenly pleased by the revelation. He turned in a slow circle then, scanning the walls, the floor, the ceiling; looking for anything out of the ordinary, looking for what Raven's presence was so obviously trying to hide. Clever defenses, this psionic imprint; it was clearly designed to adapt and improvise. He understood now why Erik was hallucinating.

He spotted it immediately, the entire hall an illusion; it flickered the moment Charles noticed it, as though incapable of maintaining cohesion now that Charles had recognized it for what it was. He turned back to Raven, pain still spiking in his chest despite knowing she, too, was an illusion, and smiled.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said. The hall shattered.

In its place was a space so large, so overwhelmingly empty, Charles could only name it a cavern. And it was, he realized, earth and rock filling the space, but cut into and overlaid with metal, shining columns and pillars, the seamless blending of nature with architecture.
Upon the floor, rings of circles grew increasingly narrower as they approached a desk, a solitary figure seated at its chair. The man who sat behind the desk was undoubtedly Erik, though he had aged considerably, his appearance weather-worn and beaten. His helmet sat discarded on the desk. Charles took a halting step towards him.

"You're going to choose him over me?" Raven asked, trailing at his side now. Charles paused on his next step; turned to face her.

"Your true form, please," he said. Not-Raven cocked her head, and then she too shimmered, shifting—not at all the way True-Raven did—into a man Charles didn't recognize.

He was older, though only by a few years Charles thought, his hair streaked through with grey, though mostly its nature colour. Hard grey eyes and a grim face stared back at him, the man's expression almost mocking.

"What do you expect to find here?" he asked, circling Charles as he spoke, the man's movements reminiscent of a snake.

"Do you have a name, or are you a direct projection of the Shadow King?" Charles narrowed his gaze. "No, that's not it. This was implanted, but he doesn't have direct control. You're more like an access point. He uses you to gain temporary access to Erik's thoughts, his memories, even his actions, but he's not strong enough to exert full control. That's why he hasn't activated your dormant code. He can't control it yet; Erik is too far away."

"And yet he's coming closer," the man said. Charles ignored him; pressed on.

"You took a shape his mind recognized, though. Not his father; you're someone he feared. Show me." He didn't raise his voice, but his words carried as a command.

The man narrowed his gaze, and then laughed. Across the room, the physical representation of Erik's mind glanced up, expression deeply saddened. He shook his head, silent pleading in his gaze, though it was soon replaced by something close to acceptance. He glanced away, the room vanishing, Erik along with it.

Charles found himself standing inside a white walled room. Slowly objects sprang into existence: a slab table, a stool, a computer terminal, an IV bag, a surgical tray, and finally, surgical instruments. They sprang into existence all at once, a complete absence of metal that made Erik's mind buzz with annoyance.

Charles turned to find the man who'd worn Raven's face standing before him. He was wearing a lab coat. He turned his gaze, Charles following, spotting Azazel standing at the door, holding a boy, no more than thirteen, by the scruff of his neck.

"He tried to run again, did he?" the man asked. "Tsk, tsk, Erik." Bile rose in the back of Charles' throat. He swallowed it down.

"Da," Azazel said. "He not get far." There was something in his eyes, even here; the reluctant acceptance of something he saw as his duty was waging war against the growing horror of realization. Charles was witnessing the first transition of a conscience. It was remarkable that Erik's mind had picked up on something so subtle, especially at such a young age.

Charles turned back to the man in the lab coat.

"So you're the man who tortured Erik. It's almost a shame you're not really him. I don't believe in killing, but I can think of several alternative punishments that might suit the crime."
The man smiled. "Oh, you don't have to worry about that. Little Erik Lehnsherr here," he grabbed Erik by the chin and pulled him forcibly into the space between them. Erik came stoically, though Charles could already see murderous hate in his eyes. "Has already taken care of it. He never seems to get tired of killing his old friend, Schmidt."

Now that he knew the man's name, Charles found he had no interest in remaining. He gestured briefly with a hand, the room dissolving, Charles instantly transported back to that cavern, only this time the desk was empty. Charles walked towards it.

Schmidt, for lack of anything else to call what was little more than a psionic manifestation--a ghost in the machine--followed on his heel, circling the desk to claim its chair when Charles made no move to do so.

"Tell me exactly how it is you expect to contain me?" Schmidt asked.

Charles ran a finger across the surface of the desk. The metal hummed. Warmth spread through his fingertip; it travelled up his arm and into his torso, nestled comfortably next to his heart.

"I already have," Charles said.

Schmidt laughed. "Have you?" His mirth faded when Charles smiled, an expression of confusion, and then uncertainty crossing his face. He was frowning now, so Charles very purposely glanced over his shoulder, Schmidt following his gaze to find Erik striding towards them.

This was the Erik Charles knew; the man seated across from him on a forest floor, twenty-odd miles from the heart of enemy territory.

"You see it now," Charles said. Erik caught his eye and nodded. "It's your mind. Lock him down."

Erik smiled. He turned to face Schmidt, an almost manic grin spreading across his face, bright row of teeth filling his mouth. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a coin. Rage flitted across Schmidt's features.

"You will not. I forbid it," he said, standing then. Erik levitated the coin, letting it spin in lazy, counter-clockwise circles.

"I'm going to count to three, and then I'm going to move the coin," Erik said. Charles watched, expression kept carefully blank. It was like watching twin projections displayed on the same screen. The actual memory of the event was playing overtop the representation, lines of reality blurring with lines of memory.

Schmidt's expression grew fearful.

"One," Erik said.

"You don't understand, Erik. Everything I did, I did for you."

"Two."

"He would make you a king. He would give you the entire world. It could all be yours, Erik. Do you think his power is limited to this realm? Do you think there is anything he can't do? Do you really believe a handful of telepaths can possibly match him?"

"Three."
Charles watched, unmoved as the coin rolled forward, piercing into Schmidt's skull both here and two years ago, the man dying twice over, his body dropping to the floor in memory; fading from existence inside Erik's mind. Charles turned his attention to Erik. He stepped towards him, placing hands on both his shoulders. Erik's gaze was haunted.

"You can let go now," Charles said, which seemed to be what Erik needed to hear, because a sob wracked his body; another and another until he collapsed forward, burying his face in Charles' neck, warm moisture spreading across Charles' skin. Charles caught his head in his hands, ran fingers through his greying hair and then pressed his face to the shell of Erik's ear.

"You can wake up now," he whispered, and opened his eyes.

The sun was well on its way to midday when Charles blinked across at Erik, the forest rushing back into existence. Charles waited, still entirely focused on Erik as Erik slowly blinked himself awake. When he finally came to, he seemed startled to find Charles sitting across from him; startled to find he was no longer wandering the halls of his mind.

He tensed then, glancing over his shoulder, scanning the forest as though searching for Schmidt.

"He's gone," Charles said. Erik swivelled back around to meet his eye.

"That's it? I put another coin through his head and he's locked away? What's to say he won't turn up again tomorrow, or the day after that, or the day after that?" There was something in his tone that went beyond incredulity, Charles' eyes widening when he found it. There was pleading, but more than that, there was hope. Erik wanted to believe Charles had done the impossible.

"It's a temporary fix, but yes."

Erik frowned, expression growing angry, as though he thought Charles might be lying to him. Charles took pity.

"All of that was a representation; it wasn't really what was happening. Your mind just gave it parameters; it acted out a scenario your conscious self could understand. In reality, I simply wove a telepathic blanket around the imprint, shrouded it from sight so that it would go dormant until I had both the time and the resources to remove it. The production, for lack of a better word, was entirely for your benefit. Apparently your mind knows you well."

Erik shook his head, as though not quite believing such a thing could be possible. Charles understood; the ordeal was overwhelming for him; he could only imagine how challenging it was for Erik, who in addition to killing his childhood abuser was also forced to relieve painful childhood memories. Charles reached across the space between them; placed his hand on Erik's arm, and squeezed.

"I'm sorry to do this, Erik. You need time to process this, but we don't really have it. We need to get me close enough to the city to set up Cerebro, knock down the city's shields, defeat the Shadow King and then get Raven back."

Erik, who was still looking more than a little shell-shocked, looked at Charles like he'd just said he intended to fly to the moon on the back of a duck.

"My chair, Erik," he said again. Erik shook himself. He glanced to the wheelchair, and then back to Charles, and then back to the chair. Finally it seemed to get through. Shaking himself again, he rose to his feet, grimace spreading across his face at the effort. After he'd stretched, he bent down, gathered Charles into his arms, and then lifted him into the chair.
Chapter 12

Hank's lab occupied one of the palace's centre blocks, which meant he was penned in on all sides by other buildings; other rooms. It meant the space had no windows, the light artificial, entirely too yellow to accurately predict what time it was.

Hank glanced at his watch: 12:30. It was later than he had anticipated.

Eight hours had passed since he'd installed Genoshia's virus, and yet nothing had changed. It was too soon, he told himself, the telepath needed time to get things in place. Still, he felt as though someone had flipped over an hour-glass, grains of sand slowly slipping away, their progression marking his eventual doom.

"Are you all right?" Moira asked, Hank jumping at the sound of her voice. He straightened his shoulders and then turned to meet her eye. She handed over a steaming cup of coffee. Hank accepted it with a grateful smile.

"I'm fine. I didn't sleep much last night."

Moira nodded, but she still looked concerned, so Hank offered his most convincing smile. He took another sip of his coffee and then set it down on his desk.

"I'm just going to finish a few things. Why don't you head out to lunch," he suggested. Moira hesitated only briefly before accepting the dismissal for what it was. She was a dear friend, but he didn't need to involve her in any of this. He'd already compromised her life by involving her in his work.

He kept his smile firmly in place while Moira gathered her meager belongings--the Walled City's human population, sparse though it was, were not permitted much. He waited until he was certain she was gone to deflate, breath leaving his lungs in a rush.

He glanced again to his watch--12:35--and then reached for his coffee; drained what was left.

If someone had told him a year ago, even six months ago, that he would be sitting here, waiting the potential end of all of this, he would have thought them crazy. His life until now had been little more than these walls. He wasn't a soldier. He certainly wasn't a hero--never wanted to be one--and yet it was impossible to ignore the battle waging around him; impossible to sit idly by and not do his part. For the first time in his life he was doing something he thought he might be proud of. Hank's smile grew genuine.

It slid away a moment later, the latch on his lab door catching, Hank glancing over his shoulder, half expecting Moira. It wasn't particularly surprising when Sabretooth stepped into his lap, Toad on his heels.

Hank swallowed, but as far as he knew this was just another summons; another order. He rose smoothly from his chair and stepped forward, inclining his head first to Sabretooth, then to Toad. Sabretooth grunted. When Hank reached his side, he set a hand in the centre of Hank's back and shoved him out the door.

Hank stumbled. Fear caught in his throat; moved down to lodge in his chest. Sabretooth was vicious at the best of times, but he had never manhandled Hank. Hank glanced over his shoulder, noticed the smug smile tugging at Toad's lips.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked, but Sabretooth merely grinned, a crooked, tooth-filled
smile that was both feral and deadly. Hank stomped down on an impending sense of doom. He lifted his head high and began walking towards the Great Hall.

Except midway there, at the juncture between the research wing and the White Queen's domain, Sabretooth grabbed his shoulder, nails piercing Hank's fur, digging into his skin. A low growl started deep in Hank's throat, a subtle warning of the damage he could do if Sabretooth didn't back up. It would be close in a fight, Sabretooth deadly, but Hank was not without his talents.

"It's this way," Sabretooth said, gesturing in the opposite direction from the Great Hall. Hank followed the line of Sabretooth's gaze, staring down the corridor to where polished marble was replaced by rough concrete.

At least he knew now where he was going.

The question was: How did they find out? Had they discovered the virus? Had they captured the telepath? Had they uncovered his sabotage? They wouldn't be taking him to the palace's containment cells for anything less. Hank felt his shoulders droop; reluctant acceptance taking hold when he should have fought. Some distant part of him still thought there might be some logical explanation, some reason he hadn't quite figured out.

For the most part he was simply hoping there was still a chance; still enough events in play to ensure their victory. What was his life in the grand scheme of things? He would gladly occupy the Shadow King's gaze if it meant giving Genosha's telepath a fighting change.

Now that Hank knew where they were going--now that he was prepared to bide his time, his curiosity piqued as he tried to reason what they knew and how it might change Angel's plans--the journey passed swiftly. He turned a corner without being asked, pausing outside a wide metal door, the only indication it might lead somewhere other than a courtyard or a hanger the keypad and retina scan at its side.

Sabretooth came forward, mashed his hand against the keys, growled and then lowered his gaze to the scan.

Hank was quite honestly surprised when the door slid open.

A mutant on the other side stepped out, nodding first to Sabretooth and then to Toad. He glanced at Hank, Hank given the distinct impression that was it not for the beak in place of his mouth, he would have sneered.

"This way," he said, leading them through the door. The hall on the other side seemed an endless corridor of too-bright light, though Hank knew that was mostly illusion; projections created so that anyone breaking in, looking to get someone out, would end up wandering aimlessly until security arrived.

Only once was the line of white broken. The mutant with the beak brought them to a stop next to a panel, its screen dark, the interface tied to his DNA--Hank had helped work on the design. He pressed his palm against it, the screen flashing green, coming to life, a keypad appearing in the bottom-right corner. He entered a passcode; too fast for Hank to catch anything beyond a three and a seven. When he was done, he tapped the screen twice. White tiles resolved into a door. It slide open.

Hank heard the raised voices of others even before he was led into the room, Sabretooth crowded at his back. Inside the room, two prisoners were segregated, left standing inside tiny cells, shields of crackling yellow energy pulsing around them. The woman, her skin entirely blue, her hair a shock of red, stood poised for battle, defiance written across her entire being. It was undoubtedly she who had been shouting. She was also easily the most beautiful woman Hank had ever seen.
Across from her, a man, his hair more orange than red, stood with slouched shoulders. He looked almost bored, though Hank could see the tension pinching at his eyes. Hank's gaze came back to the woman. Only then did he realize she was naked.

Then again, if they were keeping score, so was he.

"On what charge am I being detained?" Hank asked, not that it mattered. Due process and rights had held meaning once; now they were merely words historians tossed about, like they might someday mean something again.

He wasn't expecting it, but it still galled when no one answered his question. He was simply led to a blank spot on the floor, shields springing into existence around him, Hank resigning himself to a long wait.

He wondered if he'd die still wondering what they knew. It was entirely possible.

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*Telepaths hold the power of a god*, his mother used to say. Magneto wasn't sure if he believed that, but then, he didn't particularly believe in God, either.

Certainly in that moment Charles seemed a god.

He sat perched on his chair, broken foot stretched out before him, face a mask carved from porcelain. His eyes held such softness; such warmth it physically hurt to see. Magneto tore his gaze away; concentrated instead on ensuring Charles' foot was still wrapped.

The base of Charles' chair, where the wheels attached to the frame, was twisted. Magneto must have done that at some point; strange that he had no recollection of losing control of his power. Once, when he was younger, before Schmidt had beaten it out of him, metal would vibrate and levitate whenever he let his emotions get the better of him. He thought he'd long since grown out of that.

He took the time now to straighten the chair back into working order, even though Charles wouldn't be able to use it over the broken ground. When he was done, he glanced over his shoulder, half expecting to see Schmidt standing behind him, mocking smile set across his face.

He didn't feel any different. He still felt as though Schmidt was looming, biding his time until Magneto accepted what Charles had done; what Charles claimed to have done. It wasn't that he didn't trust Charles--for reasons beyond his comprehension, Magneto had the utmost faith in Charles. It was simply that he'd lived with Schmidt inside his head for so long now that such a simple solution seemed... Impossible.

"Erik," Charles said, touching the side of his head, Magneto startling, only then remembering that he was without his helmet.

He glanced first into the woods, in the direction that he threw it, but Charles' touch lingered, so he let Charles guide him around until he was once again staring into the blue of Charles' eyes.

"Don't think I didn't wonder," Magneto said. "It seemed the most logical solution at first, but he didn't do anything. I couldn't find a purpose to his existence except to torment me."

He shook his head, angry now that he'd felt the need to share such a thing. Charles ran his fingers through Magneto's hair, nails catching in the tangles.

"I told you, you'll need time to process this, and I am sorry, I really am, but we haven't got it."
This time when Magneto caught Charles' gaze, it was with the full force of his ire.

"And if you're wrong? If that little production was nothing more than show and I'm still a threat? Charles, I will get you to the emergency rendezvous, but then you have to send me away."

Charles' lips pressed into a thin line, his gaze narrowing. He shook his head. "I need you there," he said. Magneto wanted to argue; to grab Charles by the shoulders and shake until some damned sense got into the man's head--and was that Schmidt? Just because the physical manifestation wasn't present--though for how long?--didn't mean he wasn't still controlling Magneto's actions. Charles was too trusting by far.

"You won't hurt me," Charles said, answering Magneto's thoughts. Magneto scowled; he stood then, lifting his hand, calling his helmet to his side, its metal singing against his palm. Charles was watching him, features blank, nothing to betray what he was feeling. His gaze flickered from Magneto, to the helmet, and then back again.

"Then you need to take this, and you need to not let me hurt you," Magneto said, handing over the device. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been without it, and he hated the thought of having his thoughts so open, but he wouldn't risk hurting Charles; not even if it meant giving Charles access to the inner most recesses of his mind.

Charles took the helmet and sat it gingerly upon his lap. He caught Magneto's eye.

"Put your shields up. It'll keep me from hearing stray thoughts and anything you might project, but I can still get past them if I need to."

Some of Magneto's tension eased. He smiled, grateful, and then set about raising his shields; towering steel walls that closed around his thoughts, locking them inside a seamless box. When he was done, he opened his eyes and nodded his thanks.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" he asked, because Charles had just spent several hours traipsing about Magneto's head. He looked rather exhausted.

"I'm ready," Charles said. Magneto nodded. He lifted a hand and crooked a finger, Charles' chair elevating off the ground. Magneto started them forward.

It was a strange sensation, moving through the forest with Charles hovering at his side, Magneto forced to backtrack several times to accommodate the chair. It would have been easier had he been carrying Charles, but it was several miles to the emergency rendezvous--if anyone was even there. He felt as though he was forgetting something, but when he found himself once again glancing over his shoulder, expecting Schmidt to materialize, he realized he was simply waiting to prove Charles wrong.

But oh, how he wanted Charles to be right.

"How much did you see, when you were in there?" he heard himself ask, though as soon as the words left his mouth he wished he could take them back.

He navigated them around a copse of pines, the day having dawned clear. It was a good deal warmer than it was last night. The snow was beginning to melt, leaving the ground spongy and slick. None of that impeded Charles, but Magneto had to pick his path carefully.

"Not much," Charles said. He sounded like he might be telling the truth. "I tried to avoid snooping, but I saw Schmidt and who he was. I saw glimpses of your childhood. For that I am sorry."
Magneto waved him off. He didn't particularly care if Charles took the whole of his childhood. What use was it to him?

"But that's not what you're asking, is it?" Charles continued.

Magneto stopped walking. He turned; glanced down at the helmet that was still resting on Charles' lap.

"No, I'm not reading your mind right now, but I have seen enough to know what you feel for me."

Magneto blanched, his defenses automatically coming up. He scowled. "For that I am sorry," he said, intending then to turn and start their trek again, but Charles shook his head, holding up a hand as though bidding him wait.

Magneto waited.

"Surely you know I reciprocate? I've hardly been subtle about it."

It was like being sucker punched in the gut, Magneto's mouth falling open even as his breath left him in a rush. He shook his head, denying Charles' words; the promise too close to the things Schmidt had told him, too close to the things Schmidt had promised him. Was this all an elaborate hallucination? If the psionic imprint in his head could manifest Schmidt, why couldn't it manufacture this?

"Oh," Charles said, instantly drawing Magneto's gaze. He was shaking his head. "You don't believe me. Well, that's better than the alternative."

"Alternative?" Magneto asked, the word slipping past his tongue before he could prevent its escape.

"That I was wrong and you weren't interested." Charles smiled then, a slight quirk of his lips that tugged at something in Magneto's chest until he took an involuntary step forward. He caught himself before he could go any farther, hands coming to his sides to clench into fists.

He shook his head.

"I'm not entirely sure this is the time or the place to discuss this."

Charles sobered instantly. His smile fell away and he nodded, once. Magneto took it as his cue to get them started again, the path ahead widening, spilling out onto a wide trail. Magneto paused at its edge, taking a moment to get his bearings; seeing then the abandoned road for what it was.

Somewhere to their right, a twig snapped underfoot.

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Charles glanced to his right even as Erik darted in front of him, putting himself between Charles and whatever was out there. Charles scolded himself.

He should have been paying attention, not drawing Erik into conversation. He let his thoughts drift now, scanning ahead, but before his telepathy could do its work a familiar face stepped out onto the road. Charles instantly relaxed, even as Erik deflated. Wolverine shot them both a smirk.

"If you two had stopped flirting for five minutes, you would have heard me half an hour ago," he said. Charles watched as Magneto stepped forward to meet him.
"Or if you were a normal person, you could have just announced your presence instead of wasting half an hour stalking us."

"Now that don't sound like much fun," Wolverine said, but he clasped Erik on the shoulder, like he was genuinely glad to see him. Erik, after a moment's hesitation, did the same.

Charles, who was still hovering in the air, feeling a little conspicuous about it, waited patiently while they exchanged information. Wolverine had done a circuit of the entire area and if the Shadow King was searching for them, he wasn't doing it here.

"I talked to Rogue," Wolverine said, gesturing to the earpiece he was wearing. Erik perked up. "She and Havok are holed up at the meet point. Told 'em I'd make sure you lot didn't get eaten by bears on the way."

Erik scoffed, Charles allowing himself a moment to imagine Erik facing off against a bear. He couldn't quite help the snorted laugh that escaped him. Two heads swivelled to stare in his direction. Erik, who seemed to realize Charles was still hovering in the air, slowly lowered the chair until it connected with the ground. Charles barely felt the motion.

"You break him?" Wolverine asked, turning back to Erik. Charles didn't miss the way Erik's spine stiffened.

"It's just a broken foot," Charles answered, speaking loud enough that his voice carried to where they were standing. They turned again to stare in his direction. "And while I hate to break up your reunion, we are running out of time."

Wolverine looked amused by the reminder; Erik chagrined. Erik glanced down the road, first in one direction, then the other. He turned back to Charles.

"How close do you need to be?"

Charles considered. He closed his eyes and let his telepathy drift. He was tired from earlier, his trip inside Erik's mind somewhat taxing, but the damage from yesterday was done, Charles able to soar almost to the edge of the Walled City, a bright hive of thousands upon thousands of minds in an otherwise barren landscape. Somewhere beyond those walls--beyond those shields--was Raven. Charles was drawn to her even now, wanting nothing more than to bridge the gap between them; to tear at the Walled City's walls and destroy her armies just to find Raven safe. Instead he retreated, sailing back across frost-kissed meadows to Erik's side. Raven was the most competent person he knew; she was more than capable of looking after herself.

"If you could get me to within ten miles of the Walled City, I could manage it," he said when he finally opened his eyes. Erik nodded.

"I know a place," he said. He didn't sound too happy about it.

Erik turned back to Wolverine and gestured for his ear piece. Wolverine handed it over without comment. Erik tucked it into his ear.

"Rogue?" He waited, gaze drawn inward. A smile came to his face when she replied. "That's great and all, but I need you to get the trucks and meet us at a new set of coordinates." He paused and then shook his head, fond exasperation colouring his smile.

"There's an old road just west of the camp. It runs north-south, and I'm fairly certain the north end of it intersects that road we were on before we detoured down the culvert. It shouldn't be more than half a mile from our location. Get yourselves and the trucks there, and then we're going in."
He didn't say anything else, disconnecting the call, Charles watching as he pulled the earpiece from his ear and handed it back to Wolverine.

"You gonna tell me what's going on?" he asked. Charles was rather wondering the same thing.

"Charles needs to get close to the city, so I'm going to get him close to the city." He smiled then, though there was nothing particularly attractive about it. He seemed pained, as though whatever he was planning wasn't going to be pleasant. Charles grimaced, but kept his promise and stayed out of Erik's head.

Wolverine groaned.

"Tell me we're not," he said. Erik shot him a look, but Charles had already maneuvered himself forward, his wheels actually useful on the old road.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

Erik's expression hardened. There was no inflection in his tone when he said, "There's a recently abandoned mutant training camp about eight miles outside the Walled City. It's where I was trained."

"Oh, Erik," Charles said before he could stop himself, but Erik merely shot him a look, a silent request for Charles to drop the matter.

"It's close, it's isolated, and they won't think to look for us there, but more importantly, it'll have the facilities you need to get Cerebro working."

Charles recognized Erik's determination for what it was; and who was he to call Erik on his feigned courage? Charles had been clinging to his pretty much from the moment he boarded the caravan. He nodded, glanced briefly to Wolverine and then back to Erik.

"All right," he said.

Relief flooded Erik's features, though it was marred by apprehension, as though making this choice had cost Erik more than he'd realized. He looked determined, too, turning them north, towards the main road.

"I'll scout ahead, give you two love birds some privacy," Wolverine said, and then he was off, once again disappearing into the bush. When Charles glanced over, he found Erik blushing.

He didn't comment, sensing Erik's need for focus. It was enough to know they were on the same page--to no longer have to wonder--Charles more than willing to set this aside while they did what needed doing. He waited patiently, hands curled around Erik's helmet as Erik levitated him into the air, floating Charles alongside him as though this was something they did every day.

He didn't miss the way Erik glanced over his shoulder, still looking for the phantom Charles had banished. Charles swallowed at the sight of it, seeing then all the ways this could go wrong. His foot no longer hurt quite as much--the pain having receded to a dull ache--but a new pain had taken up residence in his chest; one that suggested there was a very good chance this was a battle he wasn't going to come home from.

At the very least, it was a battle he wasn't going to come home from unchanged.

He reached out then, brushing his fingers against the side of Erik's gloved hand, suddenly no longer willing to wait. Erik glanced over, startled, but he must have seen something in Charles' face, because his expression softened, his palm turning upwards as he slid their hands neatly
together. He squeezed, thumb caressing the back of Charles' hand.

"You can do this," he said, sounding so utterly convinced that for a moment Charles' worry disappeared, a future of infinite possibilities stretching out before him, Charles utterly certain they would succeed.

How could they not?

"I know," Charles said, earning a tight-lipped smile. Erik squeezed his hand a second time, the gesture both awkward and nervous. Charles didn't need access to Erik's head to know this was as new for him as it was for Charles; even without reading his mind Charles could tell he was still laced with doubt.

There were platitudes he could offer, reassurances that might be appreciated by someone else, but Charles had come to know Erik--impossible not to know a man once you'd walked the depths of his mind--so instead he remained silent, letting Erik lead them, hands twined together, a comforting point of warmth between them.

He did not pull away until they reached the main road, and then it was only to scan the area, Charles closing his eyes and doing the same. The only presence he sensed were the two entombed minds travelling rapidly towards them. Charles blinked his eyes open, soft smile flitting across his face when he found Erik crouched before him.

"They're on their way," Erik said, gesturing over his shoulder, towards were he no doubt felt the pull of the two trucks.

"I know," Charles said. It felt like time had leapt forward, the end goal now in sight. It was only a matter of time before he pulled down the Shadow King; only a matter of time before Raven was returned to him.

Erik hesitated and then placed a hand on Charles' knee, looking like he expected to be scolded for doing so. Charles reached out and set his hand gently over Erik's, offering a soft smile of encouragement. Erik's features lit up, though he still looked uncertain; unused to such displays.

"The trucks have med kits and Havok has first aid training. I'll get him to look at your foot before we leave."

Charles nodded, intending to say something else, to seize a moment he might never have, but it was then the trucks rumbled into view, Erik withdrawing, Charles left with twin aches in his chest. He pushed the Erik-sized one aside, Raven the more important goal.
"I was seventeen when they shut down the camp and moved us to one near the border."

Magneto had no idea why he'd felt the need to share that information, except perhaps that there was something in Charles' gaze--soft and infinitely fond--that drew the confession.

"The camp was full when I first came, but by the time I left there were only a few hundred of us left."

Charles nodded. He was sitting sideways in the truck, back pressed against the door, his foot, newly splinted with proper first aid supplies, propped on Magneto's lap. Magneto was trying very hard to cushion the appendage without succumbing to the temptation to caress it.

"Mutant birth rates are significantly lower than their Homo sapiens cousins. I read an article once that suggested the rapid, forced decline of the human population might in fact endanger the continued survival of mutantkind."

For the longest minute Magneto couldn't find the words to respond to that, not because it was particularly profound, or even something he hadn't known--anyone could see the mutant population was dwindling--but because when Charles finished speaking he took the time to lick his lips, Magneto mesmerized by the sight. He glanced away, half expecting to feel Schmidt's breath against his ear.

When that didn't happen, he glanced back over and found Charles watching him curiously.

"How many do you think are left, across the entire planet?" he asked. Charles frowned, considering. From the front seat, Rogue's head was cocked, clearly eavesdropping on their conversation.

"Mutants? Not even a million. There are probably half as many humans left, though most of them are living in nomadic tribes in the former Americas. It's enough for repopulation, provided we can bring this war to an end. If not..." He shrugged, Magneto watching the rise and fall of a single shoulder, the sight somewhat breathtaking.

Now that he was allowed to look, he found it impossible not to, though it was still hard to believe he was allowed this. It was too close to what he wanted to be real.

"And you're really going to unite them," Magneto said, remembering then Charles' grand pronouncement.

_I was hoping to unite mutantkind and create a utopian state where mutants and what's left of humanity could live together in harmony_, he'd said after announcing his intentions to free Emma Frost. At the time Magneto was certain he was boasting--or crazy, and that was still a distinct possibility given that Charles appeared interested in him of all people--but now he wasn't so certain.

Charles was smiling, looking impossibly young; as young as he'd looked that day in Genosha, Magneto still caught by the steady weight of his gaze. There was something wistful in his expression, but he still nodded and said, "Of course," like he was perfectly capable of doing exactly that.

Magneto shook his head. Charles held up a hand.
"But first let's concentrate on getting me into the Walled City. Changing the world requires a good deal of patience, my friend."

Patience was not something Magneto understood, but he nodded, turning then to glance out the window. Long, lonely stretches of fields dotted the land, broken only by hills, the region as desolate as it was isolated. They crested a hill, the road bending down the other side. Across rolling hills, separated by straw-coloured meadows, a lone building sat, framed neatly on either side by two poplars. Its plaster had yellowed with age. Dozens of windows lined each of the floors; like broken eye sockets they stared out towards the road.

"There ain't a ton of cover out here," Rogue said, turning the truck down a narrow, dirt-track lane. Nature had long since reclaimed it, two distinct lines cut from the press of thousands of tires now overgrown with grass and weeds. Ahead, Havok and Wolverine were in the second truck, already approaching the house.

"There's a hangar. We can park the trucks there," Magneto said. He'd made this same drive when he was only a boy, seated in the back of a truck with dozens of other children his age. They'd watched these passing fields through the tiny, port-hole like windows; the only source of air in the cramped space. Magneto closed his eyes to block out the memory. It did little good.

A hand on his shoulder jolted him back to the presence, Magneto glancing sharply to his side, but instead of Schmidt he saw only Charles, expression understanding, tinged around the edges with sympathy. Magneto shook his head; waved off Charles' concern. The last thing he wanted was Charles' pity.

"It's not..." Charles began, Magneto realizing then that his shields had fallen. He drew them up, trying to ignore the slightly hurt look that flickered across Charles' face. It was an impossible task, Magneto relenting a minute later. He reached over and set a hand on Charles' knee; still a little uncertain the gesture was permitted. When Charles didn't recoil, he squeezed until Charles offered a smile. Magneto returned it, and then glanced back out the window.

Once upon a time the property boasted a fence, wide gates an impenetrable barrier from either side. Now all that remained were the posts, their metal rusted through in places. He could feel the decay, like a cancer eating at its host, the metal beginning to lose its stability. The rest of the fence was undoubtedly carted away, recycled and reused wherever there was a need. The Shadow King had made a grievous error in ordering the human population culled. Without their labour, there was a distinct shortage of materials.

"The hangar's around the back," Magneto said, Havok having already deduced as much. Rogue fell in behind him, following the gravel road that circling the building until it ended in a wide courtyard, several smaller buildings lined against its left edge. She pulled to a stop next to the second truck.

"Stay here," Magneto ordered, gingerly lifting Charles' foot and then setting it back on the seat.

"There's no one else here," Charles said, because of course he'd already checked. Magneto nodded, but he still slipped from the truck, senses alert as he scanned the area. He held up a hand when Wolverine showed signs of joining him, eyes peeled as he crossed the courtyard to the hangar doors.

Opening these doors was one of the first tasks Schmidt had assigned him. It had taken Magneto weeks before he was able to manage it. Now they called to him, muscle memory as much as anything else. He held back, taking a moment to feel along the hangar's metal skeleton, taking in the defects that weren't there the last time. He focused his search inside then, but the hangar was empty of metal, all of its previous contents undoubtedly removed long before their arrival. Only a
few nuts and bolts remained; the odd scraps of metal deemed worthless. Magneto pulled back, brought his attention back to the hangar door. He paused.

_This is a small thing, Erik_, he heard, though when he turned to glance over his shoulder there was no one; only the wind rustling through the grass and the soft purr of the trucks' engines. The words still lingered in his memory; caught there for eternity, an endless loop from which he could never escape, Charles or no Charles. Erik pushed the voice aside, brought a hand up, and opened the doors.

Unoiled hinges creaked loudly in the near silence, the door rolling up, disappearing overhead. The first time Erik had done this, Schmidt had patted him on the back and offered him a piece of chocolate. Then he'd punished him for not having done it quicker.

The scent of synthetic polymer rushed from the hangar in a wave, catching in Magneto's nose and burrowing its way into his throat. He coughed against it and then stepped inside, scanning the darkness for anything that might prove a threat. There was nothing; only the occasional crate or discarded piece of equipment. The hangar had seen better days, the roof riddled with holes, streams of sunlight cutting through the air to land upon the floor. They held captive thousands of tiny dust motes, Magneto's gaze drawn to their hypnotic dance. He took a step forward and startled a bird, Magneto instinctively ducking as it took flight. It flitted past his head, cawing loudly in protest at the sudden intrusion. Magneto exhaled, and then turned to watch it fly across the meadow, coming to perch on one of the poplar trees. He turned to the trucks and waved them inside.

Magneto was never permitted near the hangar without Schmidt, but he'd watched it sometimes from his window--third floor, fourth from the right--a room he'd shared with at least twenty other young mutants. Schmidt was often away, but when he returned he left his personal transport locked inside; a sleek vessel that hummed with a distinct pitch, a sound that still raised the hackles on the back of Magneto's neck whenever he encountered its like.

Magneto shook aside the memory and followed the trucks inside.

"Get Cerebro and anything we might need," he told Rogue as she climbed from her truck. She glanced over her shoulder and caught Wolverine's eye. He jumped down from the second truck and sauntered towards her.

"Get unpackin'," she said. Wolverine rolled his eyes.

"You're lucky you're pretty," he said, wicked grin on his face. Rogue didn't hesitate to return it.

"And Remy's lucky you ain't," she said.

Magneto spoke over their bantering. "There's a door at the back." He nodded towards the main building. "Follow the hall straight, and then take the stairs on the first left. There's a lab in the basement that has its own solar generator. We should be able to get it working."

Rogue nodded, already digging through the trunk, sorting through various bags and crates for anything they might need. Wolverine easily lifted the Cerebro crate, offering Magneto a pointed smirk before he headed for the building. Magneto ran a hand through his hair--odd that he could do so, he'd grown so used to the helmet--and moved to Charles' door.

Havok was already retrieving the borrowed wheelchair from the trunk. Magneto left him to it and climbed back into the truck, finding Charles exactly where he left him; still leaned against the door, legs stretched across the seat.
"How's your leg?" he asked, hesitating only briefly before sitting against Charles' hip. Charles smiled.

"The drugs Havok gave me have helped considerably," he said, though Magneto knew he hadn't taken nearly enough to block out all the pain. I still need my telepathy, he'd said when Magneto had protested, Magneto relenting, though only because Charles looked a thousand times better when fed, marginally clean and sporting a properly dressed foot.

He was already in the process of winding his arm around Magneto's neck, Magneto wrapping one around his waist. It brought them into close proximity, Magneto shifting slightly, feeling the warmth of Charles' breath against his cheek. He turned; Charles' eyes startlingly large this close, Magneto momentarily lost to their depths. It would have been such an easy thing to turn completely into Charles' embrace; to press their lips together and steal a kiss. Instead he slid a hand beneath Charles' knees and lifted.

Getting Charles out of the truck and into the chair was easy enough. In fact, he suspected Charles might have been able to do it on his own. It was relinquishing his hold that was difficult, Charles' hand curling around his arm, keeping Magneto captive.

"We are going to discuss this after," he said.

"After," Magneto agreed, because too much was at stake for them to get distracted now.

Charles nodded and let go, sitting primly in the chair, looking more like the man Magneto had first met than he did this morning. It was relinquishing his hold that was difficult, Charles' hand curling around his arm, keeping Magneto captive.

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The wheelchair clattered to the floor, Charles jolted as he hit the ground. He managed to keep his seat, but the landing jarred his foot, pain shooting through it, enough to send a wave of nausea rolling through his stomach.

"Whoa," Havok said, already crouching at Erik's side, though Charles could tell--even with Erik's shields--that he was no longer present. He should have seen this coming; he really should have.

He wheeled the chair forward, setting a hand on Havok's shoulder. "It's all right, let me," he said, Havok stepping back, Charles resting a hand atop Erik's head. Somewhere along the way, Erik had combed out the worst of the tangles.

"Erik," he said, already scanning Erik's mind. He found the psionic imprint, still shrouded in Charles' make-shift prison. It wasn't the cause of what was happening. This was something simpler; something very, very human.

He debated for a moment stepping directly into Erik's mind; navigating those tight corridors a second time, but the threat didn't seem worth the risk--worth the exhaustion such an act would bring--so Charles merely kept his voice low and level as he repeated, over and over again, "Your name is Erik Lehnsherr. You are safe. You are having a flashback. Please calm your mind," all while blanketing Erik's mind in warmth and security.

Several long minutes passed, Erik crouched on the floor, head between his knees, before some of the stiffness drained from Erik's shoulders. He staggered as though drunk, half falling forward, catching himself on the rail of Charles' chair. Charles caught him around the shoulders and held him steady.
"Erik," he said, gentler this time. Erik shook himself; glanced up, clear confusion written across his features.

He blinked, and then turned to stare at Havok.

Charles followed his gaze, finding Havok standing off to the side, looking more than a little uncomfortable; more than a little confused about what he ought to do. Charles squeezed Erik's shoulder in a bid to get Erik's attention.

"Given the circumstances, I'm surprised this hasn't happened before now," he said, not only meaning this place. The psionic implant and what they'd done this morning had undoubtedly knocked loose a good deal of memories, some of which were probably quite painful. Even now Charles could recognize the same tiled floors from Erik's memories. He didn't say as much, Erik not wanting the others to know--and Charles didn't blame him--but he did his best to project the thought into Erik's head without disrupting Erik's shields.

Erik relaxed considerably.

"Is this why they give us helmets?" he asked, Charles suddenly aware of the weight of Havok's gaze.

"I'll be gentler next time," Charles said, smiling. Erik returned it, gratitude and something Charles thought might be permission reflected in his gaze. Charles squeezed his shoulder again--a brief, fleeting thing--and then removed his hand, allowing Erik the opportunity to stand. Erik slid smoothly to his feet.

"It's this way," he said, once again levitating Charles' chair. He seemed determined to ignore the last few minutes, Charles content to let him. Havok hesitated only briefly before following them down the hall.

The building was old--very old--and had obviously been converted numerous times in its lifecycle. Its last incarnation was that of a mutant training camp; sort of a barracks-slash-prison that showed in its bleak colours and sparse design. Erik led them to the end of a long hall, where a narrow staircase--almost too narrow to fit Charles' chair--led down into a basement. Erik kept his chair perfectly steady as they descended, though his hands shook, even coiled into fists as they were. He set the chair gently upon the ground when they reached the bottom. Before them, a wide, once impenetrable door sealed off the basement from the staircase. It stood ajar. Erik pushed it open and stepped inside.

"Stay here," he said, giving Havok a pointed look. "I'm going to see about getting us some light."

Charles could have told Erik it wasn't necessary; there was light enough to see by, and besides, he hardly required the comfort. But there was something in the slope of Erik's shoulders that suggested Erik needed to do this--needed a moment alone in this place--so Charles bit his tongue. He inclined his head, Erik's shoulders squaring, and then he was off.

Charles turned his attention to Havok.

"If you don't mind me asking, what did you do to him?" Havok asked. There was hesitance in his tone, like he was half expecting to be reprimanded for daring to ask a telepath such a thing. Charles smiled. He could see why Erik liked the boy.

"I was inside his head earlier. I knocked a few memories loose. They chose upstairs to manifest," he said, a simply explanation, and one that left Erik with a modicum of privacy. Havok nodded.
"I kind of thought he'd finally lost it. I mean, not that he's crazy, well, he is, but, you know..." He shrugged then, but his expression broadcasted his relief. A grin came too his face. "I'm actually a little surprised he let you inside his head." When Charles frowned, he elaborated. "I don't think I've ever seen him trust anyone, that's all."

Anything else Havok might have had to say on the subject disappeared along with the darkness, light flooding the hall beyond the door. Charles wheeled through it and got his first look at the sub-level.

In place of the damp concrete and rough dirt floors he was expecting--if the upstairs was any indication--the building's lowest level resembled an industrial research lab. Charles stared down a long, sterile hall, a row of lights humming quietly against the ceiling. The walls were scrubbed clean, still a tidy white that hurt to stare at too long. The floor was polished tile, so pristine Charles could almost make out his reflection. Charles stared, agog.

Footsteps echoed from the opposite direction, Charles glancing over his shoulder to watch Erik's approach. Dark shadows played against his skin, his eyes hollow; gaze haunted. Charles turned to face him.

"We got the generator going," he said when he reached Charles side. He levitated the chair then, though Charles could have easily pushed himself across the floor. "They're in the process of clearing us a space."

Charles nodded.

He brushed briefly against Erik's mind and found his shields firmly in place, though when Erik sensed Charles' presence they relaxed. Not enough to let Charles in, but enough that got the sense of Erik's mood. Erik knew these halls well; had spent a good deal of his life locked away in this basement. It was no wonder his face looked carved from marble. Charles floated a pulsing wave of affection in Erik's direction, Erik relaxing considerably. He glanced to Charles and offered a weak smile. Charles returned it, his considerably brighter.

"Schmidt had this place built while he was here. He called it the conditioning room," Erik said when they reached another metal door, this one also ajar. Inside, Rogue and Wolverine were clearing a space in the centre of the room, tables and equipment cast haphazardly across the space. Cerebro's crate sat on one of the tables.

The room itself resembled a bunker, all reinforced concrete and steel girders. It was impossibly long, running at least half the length of the building, its ceiling an arched curve that didn't seem to fit the parameters of what Charles had seen above. There were no windows and only the one door; and that with a vault-like lock that undoubtedly secured the room from both within and without. A conditioning room Erik had called it, but Charles suspected this was a place reserved for the training of those with more dangerous mutations. There were clear scorch marks along the walls; entire chunks of concrete missing from the ceiling.

Charles wheeled into the centre of the room.

At some point someone must have decided it would work as storage, because in addition to the tables and equipment Rogue and Wolverine were clearing, there were also dozens of boxes and crates stacked against the far wall. Why they hadn't taken everything with them, Charles didn't know. He turned back to Erik, opened his mind and reached out with his telepathy. He floated across the room and then through the concrete, expanding out once it reached the second floor; drifting from the house and out into the fields.

"This will do," he said, somewhat surprised to find the room wasn't shielded against telepathy, but
then, it wouldn't have been much of a conditioning room if it limited a single mutation.

Erik nodded. He glanced to Havok. "I want you and Rogue on the surface, open comms. I want to know if so much as a rabbit twitches."

Havok saluted. "You've got it," he said, glancing to Rogue who was single-handedly carrying what Charles could only guess was an x-ray machine. She set it down in the corner, and then returned to Havok's side.

"Wolverine, I want you by the door. Nothing gets in this room."

"Like I hadn't already figured that out," Wolverine said, but he pulled a crate towards the door and sat down upon it, extending a single claw that he used to scrap hair from the side of his cheek.

Charles turned to watch as Erik crossed the room to kneel before him. After a moment's hesitation, he set his hands on Charles' knees.

"What do you need?" he asked. There was something in his gaze that looked suspiciously like worry. Charles offered a smile, and then reached forward to place his hands on top of Erik's.

"Just you," Charles said, enjoying the way Erik blushed. He withdrew his hands then and gestured to the crate holding Cerebro. "Actually, I need that assembled. The interface works off my kinetic energy, but the amplifier needs to be connected to a power source. In a pinch I have a fusion generator, but the solar generator should have enough power."

"Should?"

"If it doesn't, it just won't work, but it was designed to require minimal energy."

Erik nodded, squeezing Charles' knees before he withdrew and crossed to Cerebro's side. Charles sat, watching patiently as Erik withdrew the helmet and handed it to Charles. Charles slid it neatly onto his head. Next Erik pulled the amplifier from the crate and began running its cable towards a power outlet.

It was strange, how calm he felt, impossibly focused, his foot a distant throbbing--he'd grown so used to it now it no longer occupied his every thought. Even the fluttering in his stomach that came with spending time in Erik's presence had faded into obscurity. Even the fluttering in his stomach that came with spending time in Erik's presence had faded into obscurity. Charles stood on the edge of war and yet he felt like he was waiting to serve afternoon tea. His only wish was that Raven could have been here, but even the dull ache of her absence had faded, Charles' faith in her unshakable. She would be fine, and he would set her free.

Cerebro required little set up, Charles waiting until Erik was done to point to the power coupling and say, "Connect those." Erik did as instructed, and then returned to Charles' side.

"Are you sure this is safe? Are you sure you're up for this?" He glanced to Charles' foot, then back up to meet Charles' gaze. His expression betrayed his worry.

Charles reached forward and placed a hand against his cheek. God, this man, whom he barely knew, who'd occupied his constant thoughts from the moment they'd met. Charles had never believed in fate, however much Destiny touted such a thing, but in this moment he was convinced such a thing was possible.

"Do you know," Charles said, Erik cocking his head, confusion settling across his features. "I rather think we might win this one." He smiled then, Erik hesitating for half a heartbeat before doing the same.
"What do you need me to do?" he asked, and Charles could tell he wasn't just talking about Cerebro.

"Stay with me," Charles said, as open and as vulnerable as he'd ever been. He extended a hand, only this time Erik didn't hesitate before sliding their palms together. He crouched at Charles' side, gaze intent, the green of his eyes the last thing Charles saw before he closed his eyes, Cerebro humming to life, Erik tethering him to the earth even as Charles' mind ascended into the stars.

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"Charles is connected to Cerebro," Destiny intoned.

Her pronouncement drew every gaze, the council chamber falling into silence as those around the table, only a moment ago occupied by bickering over resource allocation, collectively gave their attention to the Oracle.

Storm squared her shoulders and aligned herself closer to Jean. The tension in the air crackled with electricity; Storm could have called it forth, made it strike like lightning.

"Then it is time," Jean pronounced. She pushed back her chair, Storm shifting to allow her room, waiting until Jean was standing to take her place at Jean's shoulder.

Only three of the room's telepaths were needed: Jean, Psylocke and Cable, along with their guardians. Jean led them from the room, the path to Cerebro still newly made, her nervous excitement as palpable as a coming storm. Storm glanced to Polaris and then to Bobby, her fellow guardians more on edge than the occasion demanded, but she understood their fear. This was a battle they could not fight, their telepaths beyond their protection. Storm's stomach swirled with dread.

It will be fine, Jean said into her mind.

Of course, Storm replied, though she did not feel it.

The hall outside the council chamber circled around the perimeter of the building, eventually turning in, heading towards it centre. It spit them out at the foot of the grand staircase, the carpet beneath their feet giving way to smooth marble. The doors of the assembly hall already open, Storm and the other guardians sweeping ahead to scan the empty room before permitting their charges entry. It seemed silly to observe the custom now, especially given what they were about to do, but Storm took comfort in the habit.

When they finished, Jean led them forward, until the entire party was standing on the burnished sun set into the mosaic floor. Storm took her place at her side; glanced to the far end of the room where Destiny and her acolytes had followed them into the hall.

"Good luck," was all she said, Storm half expecting a speech. It occurred to her later, as the sun began its rotation, the platform decoupling from the floor in order to take them down into the Citadel's sub-level, that grand speeches didn't win wars, that not giving one was a token of Destiny's respect.

The chute was a tight space, Storm's claustrophobia momentarily getting the better of her. A tendril of calm from Jean sent it skittering away, but by then they had arrived. At the bottom, the seamless walls of the chute rotated to reveal a door, Storm stepping off the platform and into the wide dome that housed Cerebro.

She'd seen it only once before, though Jean had visited numerous times. It still struck awe into her heart, the central console a pillar of wires and cables that shot up from the centre of the room,
coiling tighter and tighter until they resembled an inverted tornado. Around its base, three chairs sat in a circle, bolted to the floor. Cables ran from adamantium helmets to join the mass running up into the ceiling, where they connected to a transmitter designed to bridge with the remote unit. When linked, it would project their combined powers onto the astral plane.

Jean moved immediately to her chair, Storm remaining where she was. Polaris and Bobby took their places next to her, outside Cerebro's circle. Jean was close enough that Storm could have reached her side in four long strides, and yet in the dim light of Cerebro, walls a dull gunmetal grey, she seemed impossibly far away. As though sensing her distress, Jean caught her eye, offered a confident smile, and then disappeared beneath her helmet. She closed her eyes. Around the circle, Psylocke and Cable did the same. At Storm's elbow, Polaris tensed.

There was little to do now save watch. The lights inside the room dimmed, Cerebro humming to life, Storm watching with wide eyes as Jean slipped beyond her reach.
Chapter 14

The woman was watching him; yellow eyes narrowed into tiny slits, like she could somehow penetrate his mind, uncover his every thought. Hank paled, wondering then if this was Angel's telepath. He racked his brain for what little he knew. Had Angel told him the telepath was a man? Or had he simply assumed? Would that make the other one her guardian?

They had yet to tell him why he was here—they had yet to even send someone, and if the charge was serious, Hank would have been dragged before the Shadow King before now. Unless the Shadow King was dead. Had the telepath succeeded? Was that why she was here? Were they simply being left to rot because no one knew what to do with them? It seemed impossible, too little time having passed since Hank installed the virus; nowhere near enough to breach the city's walls and take down the king.

Hank furrowed his brow, frustrated by the lack of answers. They'd stuck him in this cell hours ago and since then he'd seen no one save his fellow prisoners who may or may not be a telepath and her guardian.

Clearly this was getting him nowhere. Hank cleared his throat and caught the maybe-telepath's eyes.

"I'm Hank, by the way," he said. The woman cocked her head. "And I think I'm being charged with treason."

It was somewhat comical watching the woman's eyes grow wide—though that might simply have been desperation sending him into hysterics. She glanced briefly to her companion, then turned back to catch Hank's eye. Her skin rippled—there was no other word for it—cobalt blue replaced by cappuccino brown, Hank left staring into Angel's familiar eyes. His mouth fell open. The women smiled and then shifted back to her original form.

He hadn't known telepaths could possess secondary mutations.

"You're our inside man," the woman said, which pretty much confirmed Hank's suspicions. Until now he'd been hoping the shape shifting mutation had proven him wrong; hoping the telepath was still out there, still capable of taking down the Shadow King. But if she was in here then the virus was for nothing, the three of them simply waiting for death. The Shadow King had won.

Hank groaned and sank his head into his palms.

"I'm sorry. It wasn't supposed to work. It was supposed to change its cycling frequency the second it came into contact with a bonded telepath. It should have given you a chance to adapt; become immune to the weapon's effects. But there was no way to test it, so I had no way of knowing if it would work."

Hank glanced back up and found the woman watching him, confused frown etched across her face. He stepped towards her, close enough to the shields of his cell that they flickered and crackled, pulsing with energy Hank didn't particularly want to get in the way of. He held up his hands, a submissive gesture. She shook her head.

"That was you? You created some kind of weapon that affected Charles?"

Hank paused. Charles? He glanced to the man he'd assumed was her guardian. Had he got that wrong? Was he the telepath?
"I created the weapon, yes, but I also sabotaged it so that it wasn't supposed to work. I'm also the one who got you Mastermind's schematics and uploaded the virus."

Belated he realized confessing everything was probably not his best course of action, but if he was honest, he'd prefer an open confession to having the information extracted telepathically. Either way they'd learn exactly what he'd done. This way, he supposed, was a good deal less painful.

The woman, whose name he still didn't know, stepped forward abruptly, so close her shields flared orange-red before settling. Her eyes had gone wide again.

"You've installed the virus?" she said, like that would somehow make a difference with her--or him--in here. Hank still nodded.

"Last night," he said, "but unless you've got an army in your pocket, I don't see us getting out of here anytime soon."

The woman was smiling now, the white of her teeth glowing against the blue of her skin. Once again he was caught by her beauty, Hank ducking his head, because regardless of whether she was a telepath or a guardian, he shouldn't be thinking those thoughts.

"Don't you see?" she asked when it was clear they weren't on the same page.

Hank glanced up and shook his head. "Charles still has a chance."

Hank glanced to "Charles", uncertain exactly how he had a chance while locked down in containment, but...

"No, you idiot; God, clearly Charles lied when he said you were brilliant. That's Banshee. I'm Raven. And Charles is fine. Your weapon temporarily incapacitated him, but he's still out there, and if you've installed the virus, then he can still pull this off."

She sounded ecstatic, more hopeful than Hank thought she had a right to given their current situation, but if what she said was true, if they really did stand a chance...

Hank's excitement lasted all of three minutes, until the door to their prison slid open, their jailer stepping inside, his beak clacking as he took in the poise of their bodies; deduced their conversation. He gestured over his shoulder.

Toad came through the door, dragging a very frightened Moira.

Oh, Moira. He'd forgotten about her; had hoped she'd hear of his arrest and make herself scarce, though he knew her better than that. He should have thought to have put in place a contingency plan for her. This is what he got for being arrogant.

Hank caught her eye, expression apologetic. She offered a faint smile, and then, to Hank's complete and utter surprised, reached into her lab coat and pulled out a tranquilizer gun.

Hank recognized it immediately; they'd used it during their research with the arctic foxes. She spun, shooting Toad square in the chest. He staggered forward a few steps, but clearly she was using a different serum than the ones reserved for the foxes, because he collapsed almost instantly.

It happened so fast that by the time their jailer even noticed what had happened, a dart was sticking out of his chest as well. She didn't even wait for him to hit the ground before approaching Hank's cell.

"Moira," he said, sounding more than a little flabbergasted. She smiled.

"I always knew you were going to get me into trouble," she said. She tucked the tranquilizer gun back into her lab coat pocket. When she saw Hank staring at the very noticeable bulge it
produced, she shrugged. "Who's going to expect a human to fight back? I don't think it even occurred to them to search me."

Hank shook himself. "I think I can walk you through lowering the shields," he said, but Moira rolled her eyes, Hank reminded of just how often she'd corrected or adjusted some of his code. He smiled. "So it would be reasonable to assume you took surveillance offline?"

Moira smirked. "I realize I may only be a human, but I'm not an idiot. They've been offline for over an hour now."

That meant they didn't have his confession on record after all. Not that it really mattered.

Raven and Banshee had fallen strangely quiet since Moira's arrival, but when Hank glanced over he found Raven watching Moira intently, like she was trying to decide if Moira was too good to be true. A second later it didn't matter, because the shields of Hank's cells fell, Moira stepping away from the terminal she was working at.

"Are you coming?" she asked.

"What about them?" Hank gestured to Raven's cell. Moira frowned.

"Who are they?"

Hank considered. He glanced back to Raven, caught her eye, and then turned back to Moira. "They're friends," he said, already moving across the room, picking up where Moira left off. It didn't take long, Raven and Banshee's shields falling simultaneously, Banshee jumping out of his cell; Raven stepping calmly forward like she had all the time in the world.

"I think I might be able to get you out of the city, but we have to be quick," Hank said, hoping that finding Azazel would prove easier than last time. Raven looked like she was capable of getting herself out of the city without breaking a sweat, but she nodded. Hank swallowed, suddenly aware that getting her out of the city also meant getting her out of the palace and that was easier said than done.

"I don't think he'll mind if we borrow his passcode," Moira said, pulling a card off Toad and holding it up for Hank's perusal. It solved at least one of their problems; they could get past a few locked doors. Hank nodded and then turned back to Raven.

"Thank you. We owe you our lives," she said, but Hank waved her off, wanting then only to be out and away, preferably before anyone noticed the non-working surveillance system. He gestured over his shoulder, and then turned them towards the door.

Moira took the lead, tranquilizer gun at the ready.

~*~

Charles blinked and found himself standing inside the Citadel's assembly hall, burnished sun beneath his feet. He made a slow rotation, taking in the empty stands; the lines of benches that on any given day were filled at least to half capacity. The scuff of his heels against the tiles echoed against the rafters, startlingly loud in the otherwise stillness. Charles turned towards the Oracle's chair. It sat upon a slight dais, but aside from the added height, there was nothing that marked it out of the ordinary. It was made from the same plain wood as the councillors' benches. Above it, Genosha's flag, a three-pronged scarlet crown on a field of lavender, was meant to draw every eye.

Charles finished his circuit. He turned to stare at the entranceway just as Jean Grey winked into
existence.

She was followed by Nathan Summers and Elizabeth Braddock. Charles left the protective circle of the sun and glided towards them, his steps light in this place, the move between the two points considerably shorter than it was in the real world.

"Jean," he said, inclining his head. He turned to Nathan and Elizabeth. "Cable, Psylocke." They each offered him a polite smile. Charles turned his attention back to Jean.

"Charles," Jean said, and then before Charles quite knew what was happening he was enveloped in a hug, Jean clinging to him, her entire body shaking with joy. Charles returned the embrace with just as much affection.

When he finally pulled back, Jean's eyes were misted. "It's really very good to see you, Charles," she said.

"Likewise," Charles replied, and then set about filling them in on what had happened so far. The only thing he left out was Erik. He had no way of knowing how much of their plans Erik had unwittingly communicated to the Shadow King, but it hardly mattered now. It was too late to change their plans. They only had one chance.

"They have Raven?" Psylocke interrupted when Charles got to her capture. He nodded, pain spiking in his chest as he relieved her loss. He could feel their connection even here--stronger perhaps because it wasn't tied to any physical barriers--Raven alive and unharmed, though mounting frustration crept along the thread. He had no idea what he'd do if the link was severed.

"She's still alive, but aside from that I don't know much. Once I breach the walls, I should be able to pinpoint her, but only if I can manage it before the Shadow King notices I'm inside."

Psylocke nodded; her expression grim. Her guardian was one of Raven's closest friends. Charles turned his attention back to Jean.

"Are you ready?" she asked. Charles nodded. Jean glanced to her two companions. They nodded in turn. She glanced back to Charles.

The assembly hall vanished: in its place, the vast expanse of nothingness that was the astral plane. Charles could have projected a corporeal body here, but the effort seemed superfluous. He was everywhere and nowhere, content to float within the void.

He could feel the others, though they, too, had no form. Jean flared like fire, so bright and so hot Charles' first instinct was to pull away. He let himself imagine the strength of her fire-wrought wings; pulled until she circled above him in a dizzying orbit.

Cable was a steady presence, solid and stabilizing. The astral plane bent to his will; curving to accommodate his gravity. His abilities here had always outshone Charles'.

Psylocke was all speed and light, a bright, flickering coil of energy that was impossible to focus on for more than a few seconds at a time. Charles pulled them, too, into orbit, opening his mind to grant them access, even as he felt them open theirs in kind.

Jean merged first. It was like trying to embrace the sun, fire searing him as they became one. He struggled against her psyche, Jean both powerful and feral, her will determined. She did not like to relinquish control.

"Calmly, Jean," he implored, her flames licking at his mind, Charles struggling not to recoil--if he gave her an inch she would overwhelm him completely. Bit by bit he tamed her back, her fire
fading, wings drawing in as she gave in to his coaxing. When at last she had settled, a bright spot of light coiled inside his mind, Charles turned to Cable.

Cable, by contrast, merely stepped neatly into place, Jean settling further when confronted by his steady weight. His presence inside Charles' mind was like stone and steel--something akin to what Erik might feel like, Charles suspected, if Erik were capable of such a thing. When he had settled, he was little more than a heavy point of intense concentration. Charles turned to Psylocke.

She was a different creature entirely; light and flitting, she fluttered about his mind like a trapped firefly, bouncing off the walls of his psyche, refusing to settle. Her buzzing was distracting, so Charles focused calming energy in her direction. It was like smoking a bee, her chaos slowing to a steady crawl, Psylocke growing drowsy and content until she too settled.

When it was done, he shared his mind with three distinct others. Charles could feel their combined strength, but at the moment they were still distinct entities, not yet the seamless being they required. Charles focused on drawing them together.

It was as easy as forming a link now that everyone was in place and knew what was expected of them. Charles felt his own psyche waiver, threatening to give way entirely in the face of such strong personalities. It took a good deal of effort to keep his core, to absorb them into him completely without sacrificing himself in the process. When it was done, he opened his eyes and saw the world with new perspective.

He was back in the assembly hall, though now alone. His mind blazed: fire and ice and electricity combined. He was strength and steel and molten energy. He was everywhere and nowhere, at once elevated to god status and reduced to a single atom. Charles exhaled. The assembly hall vanished.

Colours shifted, the world blurring as though he was sailing above it at tremendous speeds, watching the pass of it out the window of a low flying caravan. When it stopped, Charles found he was standing in the centre of a glen, towering forest pressing in around him on all sides. Charles frowned, and then turned in a slow circle, gaze immediately drawn to a flicker of light. It was impossible to measure distance in this place, but the light seemed miles away--though that couldn't have been right, because when Charles stepped towards it the world blurred yet again and he was standing over himself, not twenty-four hours ago. His foot was newly wrapped in Erik's cape, Erik dabbing at the cut on his forehead with a bit of silk. Erik wore an expression of infinite fondness, concealed by doubt and uncertainty. It looked unnatural against the stark lines of his usually severe face. He touched Charles with such reverence and longing--such insecurity--that Charles' breath caught, even here. Charles blinked. The image vanished.

It was replaced by swollen grasslands, the scent of hay reaching his nose. The sun above was warm; the breeze warmer. Charles closed his eyes and glanced skyward, a pulsing black dot marking out the sun. He breathed in the dry island air, feeling tension he didn't know he was holding dissipate. The sound of laughter caught his attention.

Across the meadow, two children ran side by side. The girl--skin the colour of sapphire--laughed, bright and musical as she surged ahead. The boy, hair a shaggy mess of brown locks, shouted in protest, arms pumping as he struggled to catch up. It was a losing battle. Raven was always faster. She slowed as she reached the edge of the grass, where white sand stretched along an azure coast. His younger self stumbled into her, winded, cheeks stained bright pink from his exertion. He stepped towards the water, but he was still caught in her arms, Raven pulling him back. She glanced over her shoulder, Charles following her gaze.

The Citadel occupied the whole of the horizon: Genosha's shining jewel, her towers reaching up
to kiss the skyline, glittering like a beacon in the brightness of day. But it was not the Citadel which drew Raven's gaze. A line of soldiers, clad in Genosha's uniform, stood upon the nearest hill, watching their play with cautious eyes. One of the men had come forward, white wings expanding out, as though preparing to take to the sky. They were not permitted in the water; and he would ensure the rule was kept. Every taste of freedom Charles could remember was staged; a telepath too valuable to be allowed outside the security of the Citadel without escort; without restrictions.

Raven had yet to fully learn her role as guardian, but Charles watched as she took his younger self's hand; led him back to the waiting party.

The world blurred.

When it solidified, he was standing inside a study. Light from several lamps and a lit fire reflected off polished rosewood walls, the room warm and inviting: one of Charles' favourite rooms in the Citadel. Two wing back chairs, upholstered in soft burgundy leather, sat face-to-face, separated only by a sturdy octagonal table, upon which a chess board showed the progression of a vigorous game.

Erik smiled as he moved his knight.

"It is necessary to fight, of course. We must stop the Shadow King. He has given us no other choice," his past-self said. Erik inclined his head.

"So you would agree the ends justify the means," Erik replied, a counter to their earlier argument, when Charles had suggested violence was never a solution.

"That's not what I said. You're putting words in my mouth." His past-self laughed, bright and happy, the first true debate he could remember having. Erik gave him a pointed look.

"And yet you admit we must stop the Shadow King. How are we to do that without violence? Are you really naïve enough to think he'll go down without a fight?"

Certainly it marked the first time anyone had called Charles naïve. There was something defiant in the way Erik was looking at him, like he knew damned-well he'd broken convention by speaking to a telepath in such a tone, but didn't particularly care. Spikes of pleasure raced up Charles' spine, even as his younger self smiled, pleased and flirtatious. He moved his queen out of harm's way.

"Of course not, but no one says that fight has to end in death. There are other solutions."

Erik was shaking his head, but the scene already fading--too soon, too soon--Charles reaching out, trying to draw it back, even as he slowly registered what was happening. The warmth of the study receded; replaced by the cold chill of darkness. Raven, no more than fifteen, sat cross-legged on the foot of his bed.

Light from a lamp outside the window cast pink shadows across the room--the same one Charles slept in now--the bed a dark mass of pillows and duvets. Charles, on that awkward threshold between childhood and adolescent, sat nestled amongst them. He shook his head at whatever Raven had said.

"I'll admit it would be nice to get out from under Professor Marko's thumb for a while, but we can't just leave the Citadel, Raven. Do you have any idea what the Shadow King would give to get his hands on an untrained telepath?"

"I can protect you, Charles. That is my job," Raven replied, fierce and determined. She had yet to grow into her curves and held herself awkwardly; her shoulders slouched as though unused to the
weight of her newly developed breasts. The other boys her age had noticed too; had taken to staring at her whenever they thought she wasn't looking. Only Charles saw past them. To him she would always be simply Raven.

"You really want to get out there so bad?"

Raven shifted. She inched forward until they were sitting almost face to face, Raven leaning forward as if to impart a great secret. "I'm not like you Charles. You can float your thoughts out into the city, experience a thousand lives overnight. What have I experienced? I'm more trapped than you'll ever be."

Charles remembered the conversation well; remembered the next fortnight, Charles and Raven midway out of the Citadel before they were caught. Charles wasn't yet strong enough to master a shield; Raven not yet trained. Professor Marko had been displeased. Charles hadn't sat for a week—despite Raven's protests, he'd taken responsibility for the fiasco. Another year would pass before they made a second attempt, this one successful. Raven had delighted in shifting her form, taking the faces of anyone who caught her fancy. They'd eaten skewers of grilled lamb under the stars while navigating the tight passageways of Hammer Bay.

"As much as I appreciate the trip down memory lane," Charles said, focusing on the arch of Raven's neck as she laughed, the memory wavering and then vanishing completely. "It's not quite what I'm here for."

It confirmed his fears; the Shadow King knew he was coming and was prepared. Unfortunately for him, he seemed under the impression Charles was alone, the trap designed to occupy Charles' mind alone. Had he not merged with the others, it was entirely possible the ploy would have worked; Charles might have been trapped inside memories for an eternity. Instead Charles drew on the strength of the others, breaking the trap with relative ease. Genosha vanished, Raven's laughter fading away, his younger self vanishing, acne and all.

When awareness returned, Charles was standing before the Walled City, its walls in ruins; its city having crumbled to dust. Charles narrowed his gaze; focused on breaking the illusion. The city shattered.

In its place, the true Walled City stood, ordered splendor that praised function and efficiency over form an aesthetics. There was still an ethereal beautify to it; Charles captivated by the mathematical precision of her lines. Not a single part of the city seemed out of place; like each piece was designed to function as part of the greater whole. Even Genosha, stunning as she was, was a mishmash of confused architecture and make-shift construction. This city was meticulously planned; meticulously constructed.

Charles followed the lines of her walls—these entirely symbolic, easily overridden by even the smallest army. He found a point of entry and stepped towards it, the ground moving beneath his feet in a rapid blur until he was standing before a wrought-iron gate.

Charles smiled. He lifted a hand a waved aside the misdirection; found himself standing on a metal platform, time and space stretching out in every direction; endless blackness that existed both everywhere and nowhere.

"Hello Mastermind," Charles said.

The virus gave him the window, but that didn't make telepathically linking with a sentient program any easier. It was like being stuck inside a tin can, the hollowness of it as discomforting as the claustrophobia. Waves of hostility seemed to permeate from all around, Mastermind clearly having deduced the cause of Charles' presence. He wouldn't have much time. Charles narrowed his gaze
and got to work.

A helmet, not unlike the one he wore back in the bunker, materialized before him, Charles conjuring it to mind if only because it made the task easier. He was a telepath, but his mind was still human; still limited by human understanding. He did not need an interface to interact with Mastermind, but his brain wanted one.

Charles slid the helmet over his head and closed his eyes. In the transition, some distant part of him registered someone squeezing his hand, Charles instinctively returning the gesture.

The physical representation of Mastermind's program could have been anything, anywhere. Charles could have influenced the choice, but Mastermind was a sentient program; he could adapt, fight Charles on his own ground and have the advantage. So instead, Charles went to Mastermind.

The space around him shifted, becoming a dome not unlike Cerebro back in the Citadel. Strings of code flashed before him, Charles using his telepathy to translate it into something that made some semblance of sense. There, a firewall, easily skirted, though only because it was not designed to resist telepathic interference. And there, a scan that searched for foreign commands--Charles nudged it aside, sent it spinning in a bid for more time.

Charles skirted hostile code bent on destroying his mind, brushing aside defense matrices that battered against his telepathy. This was the easy part. The difficult part would happen once the shields were down. Charles was tempted to linger.

Instead he pinpointed what he was looking for, reached out and plucked at a line of code, pulling until the entire thing unraveled, Charles distantly aware of Mastermind's confusion; Mastermind's panic. Charles paid him little heed.

The Walled City's shields began to fall.

~*~

Magneto stared at the soft lines of Charles' face. If it weren't for Cerebro and the damp spread of perspiration, Magneto might have thought him lost to slumber. He was so incredibly peaceful it was all Magneto could do not to reach out and touch. Was this really his, he wondered, Charles' words still ringing in his ears and yet...

He was unworthy of it.

The thought wasn't his own, Magneto stiffening, glancing over his shoulder then, but save Wolverine, who was still perched by the open door, the room was empty. He glanced back to Charles, found him unchanged, still lost to repose.

Would he even wake up?

It was a stupid question. Magneto berated himself. He stood then, detangling their fingers before gently setting Charles' hand down on his lap. His foot was still propped before him, his entire body relaxed, though upright. He held his head high, helmet enclosing his still mostly bare skull like a cervelliere. Magneto tore his gaze away and then strode to where Wolverine was sitting.

"And here I figured you were going to coddle him the whole time," Wolverine said.

Magneto scowled. "I was not coddling him."

Wolverine arched an eyebrow. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a half-smoked cigar; tucked it into his mouth and chewed on the end. He didn't light it.
"But you are sweet on him," he said around the offending thing, words half muffled.

Magneto didn't dignify the question with an answer.

"I'm going to stretch my legs, take a look around." Magneto said, catching Wolverine's eye then. "If anything happens to him while I'm gone, I will hold you personally responsible." As if to emphasize his point, Magneto grasped at Wolverine's adamantium, tugging slightly, just so that his shoulders drew up. Wolverine scowled, purposely shrugging when Magneto released it.

"Relax. I'll keep a close eye on lover boy here. He won't even know you're gone."

It was a mark of Magneto's frustration that he didn't rise to the bait, instead stepping around Wolverine and out into the hall. He turned in the opposite direction of the staircase, heading deeper into the building, muscles oddly stiff.

Schmidt hadn't used the bunker--at least, not with Erik--but at the end of the hall was a lab Magneto was intimately familiar with. Magneto could have counted the steps needed to get to it; the tile beneath his feet etched into memory. He quickened his pace, wanting for his cape then--his helmet, too--feeling oddly naked without his amour.

He slowed to a stop as he reached the end of the hall.

The door to Schmidt's lab stood open, Magneto exhaling slowly before he ducked inside, terror rattling in his chest as he crossed the threshold. It was almost anti-climactic to find himself standing in an empty room, Schmidt's equipment gone. In their place, endless expanses of tiles--washed clean of Erik's blood on more than one occasion. Magneto crossed to the room's centre.

And felt nothing.

He'd expected another panic attack like the one he'd had upstairs; memory spilling over into his mind until he could barely breathe for it. Only Charles' steady presence had drawn him back, Magneto close to drowning, like something had dragged him under water, Charles diving in to pull him free.

Had Schmidt truly succeeded in his task, then? Had he stripped Erik of everything that might ever make him human? And if that were the case, how could he ever foist that on Charles?

You have to let go of these human attachments, Schmidt used to say. He'd said it right before he'd taken Erik's star. He'd said it again when he found Erik with a strip of cloth, a piece from his mother's headscarf, dusty blue roses having long since faded to grey. At night, when he'd closed his eyes, he imagined her scent still lingered. Once it was gone, he'd had nothing.

Except now he had Charles, sitting sedately in a borrowed wheelchair half a building away. Would Schmidt take him too?

Magneto scowled at the empty room, not a trace of metal anywhere to be found--even the door was held together with plastic screws. Schmidt had designed this place well; Erik his pet project.

It was foolish of him to come here. He had no idea what he'd hoped to accomplish. Magneto turned, intent on leaving, on returning to Charles' side where he should have stayed from the onset. Except, when he stepped towards the door, he found his path blocked, Klaus Schmidt standing inside the doorway.
Chapter 15

Magneto stared at the apparition filling the doorway, half convinced it was the man himself, come back from the dead. He took an involuntary step back, but found his path blocked; a rather solid object in his way. He turned then, still hoping to find the room as empty as it was when he'd arrived. Instead he found it filled to capacity, the object blocking his path a plastic examination table, complete with restraints. Magneto recoiled. He spun back to face Schmidt.

"You're dead. Charles got rid of you."

He meant the words as a gesture of defiance, but instead his voice cracked, fear bleeding into his tone.

Schmidt hadn't inspired fear since Magneto was a boy.

It was this place, he decided. It accentuated Schmidt's powers; returned Magneto to the child he no longer was. He could no longer remember why he'd decided to come here; why he'd abandoned Charles when Charles had specifically asked him to stay. He'd certainly had no intentions of returning to this place.

"Tsk, tsk, my boy, do you really think he didn't anticipate telepathic interference? Your little telepath isn't half as clever as he thinks he is. The Shadow King is going to thoroughly destroy him."

Magneto shook his head, terror seizing in his chest, the urge to push past Schmidt and run to Charles' side so overwhelming he shook with it. His feet remained stubbornly frozen in place.

"You're wrong. You're not even here. This is just a flashback, like the one I had upstairs." A normal by-product of the war Charles had waged inside his head, and more important, temporary.

"Is it?" Schmidt asked. He stepped forward, confident smirk painted across his face. Magneto took a step back, his retreat once again thwarted by the table. He cast his gaze about the room, desperate for an alternative exit. Instead he found himself transported in time.

Against the back wall was a chair Magneto remembered all too well. The linoleum tile beneath it was yellowed with age, rust coloured stains splattered in a semi-circle around the chair's base. How much of that blood was his, Magneto wondered. The examination table was equally familiar. A surgical tray--more plastic--sat at the head of the table, on it instruments that still haunted Magneto's nightmares. He shook his head; a fierce bid to deny what he was seeing.

"He failed you, Erik. He failed you," Schmidt said. Magneto shook his head, clinging to his faith in Charles.

A distant part of him--the part that was still nine years old--wanted to curl into a protective ball; plead and beg until Schmidt left him alone. But Magneto had banished Erik years ago, so it was easy to cast him aside now. He squared his shoulders and took a step forward, fire flashing in his eyes. He cast out with his power, searching the room for metal. He found nothing.

"Do you think you can intimidate me?" Magneto asked, letting a grin spread across his face. "After all this time, do you really think you have any power over me? I deny you, and I deny the
Shadow King, and there’s nothing either of you can do about it. Now get out of my way."

The smile that spread across Schmidt's face held a familiar edge of mockery. Some of Magneto's certainty retreated, but he took another step forward.

Only to blink and find he was staring at the ceiling.

Magneto started, brain failing to process what had just happened. He struggled to rise, but found he was strapped to the table, restraints so tight they cut off circulation. Schmidt's face appeared above him, his expression gleeful.

"I do so enjoy it when you defy me," he said.

Magneto surged against his restraints, table rattling as he struggled to break free. Panic no longer lurked in the recesses of his mind; it had claimed him completely, his breathing having gone shallow, his pulse racing, all thoughts having retreated, his sole preoccupation getting out.

The restraints didn't budge. He tried tipping the table, anything to escape this living nightmare, but it remained bolted to the floor, Schmidt never one to leave anything to chance. Schmidt was watching him intently, looking entirely too amused. He reached out, ran what was undoubtedly meant as a calming hand through Magneto's hair. Magneto bucked against him, trying and failing to pull away from that touch.

"You're not real. You're not real," he repeated.

"Little Erik Lehnsherr, I am disappointed in you. This wasn't what I wanted for us? We were going to be kings. We were going to rule the world, you at my side. And now you've chosen him after everything I've done for you. Who unlocked your powers? Who made you what you are? Compared to that, what has he done for you? Offered you a pretty smile? Abandoned you to this fate? Do you really think you'll fit into his world?"

It was getting harder and harder to remember who he was; to remember what he was. Magneto railed against his captivity, even as Erik stilled, reluctant acceptance creeping into his thoughts as he prepared to meet his fate. It was always worse when he fought back; always worse. Magneto scowled. A single tear slipped from Erik's eye to roll down Magneto's cheek.

"Tell me, Erik; how do you see this ending? Do you think he'll take you back with him to his Citadel? Will he keep you like a pet; take you out on his arm when the occasion demands it? He's a telepath, and you're a worthless waste of existence."

Magneto wanted to shake his head, to deny Schmidt his words, but the restraints prevented him from moving. Erik sobbed; a near hysterical sound that used to fill him with shame long after these sessions were over. The memory of it filled Magneto with indignation.

"You're wrong," he said. Charles wasn't like that. He treated Magneto as an equal; valued his input and respected his opinion.

"Am I?" Schmidt asked, tilting his head as he stared into Magneto's eyes. He laughed then, shaking his head as he walked away, vanished from sight. Magneto listened intently to the clinking of something in the distance. He struggled again against his restraints. They didn't budge.

Memories of what came next momentarily flooded his mind, true panic surging in his chest, the urge to beg floating to the tip of his tongue. Erik was already shutting down, building walls around his mind to block him from the coming hurt. Magneto swallowed down the impulse to do the same. He was no longer a scared little boy at Schmidt's mercy. He was not without power, even here. He pushed aside his growing fear and forced himself to think rationally.
None of this was right.

He'd spent the last two years with Schmidt as his constant companion. He was used to Schmidt's taunting. He was used to his teasing and mocking and the irrational whine of his delusions, but this was different. Magneto had never once seen him manipulate the physical, which meant this wasn't his Schmidt.

The revelation was somewhat freeing. He watched, no longer overcome with terror as Schmidt returned. He reached out and patted Magneto's head, Magneto registering then that he wasn't wearing a helmet. Hysterical laughter escaped his throat.

"You know this never gave me any pleasure, Erik," Schmidt said, glass scalpel in hand. Magneto didn't bother calling Schmidt on the lie. "But I made sacrifices, all for your own good."

He smiled as he said it, scanning Magneto's face as if deciding where to start. He shook his head and moved to the side of the table, scalpel running the length of Magneto's tunic, cutting the fabric easily. He hadn't truly registered how cold it had gotten until his skin, still puckered with scars, was exposed to the air. It was shockingly real, but in place of the fear Magneto might have felt there was only growing certainty.

All of this was confined within his head--Schmidt, the table, the scalpel--which meant it was only as real as he imagined it. Magneto smiled. Schmidt paused, obviously not expecting the reaction. He cocked his head to the side, as though waiting for the punch-line.

"Here's the question," Magneto said, catching and keeping Schmidt's gaze as he detached his dog tags from their chain, leaving only his mother's star against his skin. In the blink of an eye he held them in his closed fist, the tags merging into one, becoming an indistinct blob of metal. He sculpted them then, the metal fanning into a razor-sharp blade. It dug into his palm, slicing the skin, the pain more real than anything that was currently happening.

"If you are the Shadow King, or maybe by proxy Emma Frost--who knows--why was it so important to get me away from Charles?"

Hesitation flashed in Schmidt's eyes, as though he hadn't anticipated Magneto deducing the true purpose of this charade. The pause lasted long enough for Magneto to release his fist, blood dripping over the side of the table, falling to pool on the worn floors where countless pints of Magneto's blood still undoubtedly occupied every crack and crevice. He directed the blade to the restraint holding his wrist, slicing it neatly in half, his forearm coming free. As soon as he was free he raised his hand and gestured, blade flying through the air, Schmidt registering it too late, the blade piercing his forehead, Magneto pushing it clean through.

Schmidt disappeared, and with him the illusion, Magneto staggering, barely catching himself against a wall, the room once again empty. He stared at the blade now back in his hand, blood still dripping from his newly inflicted wound. His tunic was once again hole, the expected marks around his wrists nonexistence. Magneto glanced to the door, and took off running.

Wolverine was already on his feet when Magneto skidded into the room, eyes scanning the space over Magneto's shoulder, like he half expected to find an army on his heels. His sniffed the air, glancing then to Magneto's still-dripping hand.

"You wanna tell me what the fuck's going on?" he asked, clearly expecting a fight. Magneto shook his head and darted to Charles' side.

There was no change that he could see, Charles exactly as he'd left him, seeming unfazed by
Magneto's absence. Magneto lifted a hand, intending to reach out and stroke Charles' cheek, but the sight of his blood-slick fingers made him hesitate, Magneto pulling back, letting his hand fall back to his side.

He turned back to Wolverine.

"Get the others back here," he said, gesturing to Wolverine's ear comm. Wolverine frowned in confusion, but he was quick to obey. When he was done, he crossed to Magneto's side.

"I'm not gonna like this, am I?"

Magneto shook his head. "The Shadow King knows where we are. It's safe to assume we can expect company."

Wolverine shook his head, even as he ran a skeptical eye around the bunker, clearly plotting their defenses. Magneto turned back to Charles, taking in the pallor of his skin, the slight sheen of sweat on his brow. He fell to his knees, cupping Charles' thigh with his good hand.

"Whatever you're going to do, Charles, you need to do it quickly," he said.

They were running out of time.

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Piercing the Walled City's shields was like unleashing a tidal wave. Thousands of souls, too long concealed, too long silenced, rushed the breach, clawing desperately in a bid for freedom. Charles staggered back, overcome by their need.

In the space of a heartbeat Mastermind's construct vanished, the platform replaced by cobblestone, Charles left standing in a plaza, hundreds of hands reaching towards him. They grabbed at his wrists and ankles; tore at his hair, fingers kneading his flesh. The sharp bite of fingernails scrapped along exposed skin, fingers prying into his mouth, forcing their way down his throat until he sputtered and choked. Charles fought against them. But there were always more hands; touching and groping, pushing and pulling, tearing him to pieces. Regardless of where he turned he could not escape them. The Shadow King had unleashed the Walled City's citizens; pointed them in Charles' direction. The swell of the crowd grew more frantic, the hands more forceful. They pulled, Charles fighting now to keep from being pulled under. If they got him to the ground, they would overwhelm him completely; nothing he could do would prevent his demise.

"I'm sorry," he said, and pushed.

A last recourse, and one that pained him dearly, but the hands retreated, thousands of minds screaming in agony, shying away from the bright force of light that stood at their centre. Outside the astral plane, the Walled City's population would startle awake, or fall dead-asleep, heads aching fiercely, minds numb from the force of his blow.

They parted before him now, slinking back into the darkness of the town. The location was wrong, Charles waving it aside with a flick of his wrist. The Shadow King was a master of this domain, but Charles was not easily swayed by tricks. He focused his attention; found himself standing in a narrow corridor, the lights overhead flickering with the residual energy of his presence.

He knew now what had drawn him here, his bond singing with joy and relief. Charles turned, spotting Raven crouched next to three mutants—one of whom was Banshee—all three on their
knees, heads clenched in their hands. Only Raven was unaffected, her bond protecting her from psychic attack. Charles floated towards them, non-corporal, but Raven stiffened all the same.

And here I thought I'd get to rescue you, Charles spoke into her mind. Her smile lit up her entire face, the corners of her eyes crinkling with delight.

A guardian doesn't require rescuing, Charles. Now tell me you're all right.

I'm fine, but I'd like you to remain in the city. When it's over, you'll need to get to Emma, protect her. They will blame her for the things he has done in her name.

Raven was shaking her head, fierce determination hardening her features. She is not my charge. My place is at your side.

Charles let a measure of his disapproval bleed through their link. She is a telepath. You are a guardian. She requires your protection. I do not.

He could tell she was set to argue—ever stubborn, that was his Raven—so he sent a note of finality across their bond, Raven scowling, but her shoulders drooped, reluctant acceptance creeping into the poise of her spine. She knew as well as Charles the importance of keeping Emma safe. It was the greater duty.

He did not linger now that he had imparted his instructions, pausing only long enough to appease her worry and then release her companions.

The city is incapacitated, he said in parting, the ache of leaving Raven's side, even willingly this time, as bad as it was the last time. He took solace in the steady weight of their bond, their connection spanning between them like a coiled thread of indestructible steel. He let that connection tether him, the Walled City falling away, Charles floating through time and space, the astral plane once again stretching out before him, a landscape of infinite possibilities.

With the shields still up, the Shadow King was shrouded from him, but now Charles could lift a hand and point directly to him. He'd known, even before this began, that their final battle would happen on the Shadow King's terms, though Charles had hoped the Shadow King might come to him. It was for not, the astral plane remaining empty, Charles descending into a tightly knit web, the Shadow King at its centre.

Charles blinked, and found he was standing in a great hall, its walls carved from ice, its floors hard-packed snow. Charles' breath misted the air before him, the chill of it nipping at exposed skin. Damp frost crept into his bones.

Charles smiled.

He was well used to the cold now; it did little save remind him of his purpose. He stepped forward, following a line of lit lanterns, the only illumination in the otherwise darkness.

The lanterns led to a dais, upon it a throne, carved from ice, pelted in furs as soft as they were undoubtedly warm. Emma Frost sat upon it.

"Do you really think you can match wits with me, boy?" she asked, though they were not her words.

Charles tutted. "If it's all the same, I'd rather do this face to face."

The Shadow King laughed. The sound of it echoed through the hall, the tremor of it shaking the chandeliers so that bits of ice rained down around them. Charles pointedly ignored his mirth. He
widen his stance and stood his ground.

Emma Frost stood. She descended from the dais, the low sway of her hips stuttered and unnatural. It was like watching an animated corpse, her eyes hollow sockets, her hair limp straw, her skin like parchment. She came to stand before him, wicked smile stretching across her face, growing in size until it consumed the whole of her. Charles retreated.

The transition was painful to watch, Emma torn to pieces as the Shadow King emerged, his true form grotesque and terrifying. Charles let his gaze follow twin glowing eyes as the Shadow King rose above him; a great, hulking black beast that filled the entire end of the hall. His head brushed against the chandeliers, his tail knocking aside the throne, its ice shattering into thousands of tiny shards; razor sharp bits of glass that scattered across the frozen ground.

A wide smile, filled with jagged teeth, seemed set to devour him. Charles stamped down his fear and stood defiant.

"Clever little telepath, getting past my shields, but did it ever occur to you to wonder why it was so easy? And now you expect to defeat me, here, in my realm?" His smile grew; teeth along with it until there seemed nothing to the Shadow King but a mouth full of blades.

"Oh, I knew precisely how easy it would be. Your host is dying. You've used her up and need a replacement. That's why you didn't look for us after your weapon failed. You knew I'd come to you and just in case you were wrong you took my guardian to ensure it."

The Shadow King seemed pleased by Charles' deduction. He tipped back his head and laughed, the entire hall shaking this time, threatening to collapse and bury them inside.

"And now I have your pet Magneto. He's led me directly to you. It's only a matter of time. You're no match for me, telepath."

He reached out an arm then, twisted claw in place of a hand, his nails as long as his teeth and just as sharp. He gestured up, Charles lifting into the air, back bending, pain shooting through him as the Shadow King bent him over backwards. A hoarse shout escaped his lips, but Charles quickly regained his focus. He twisted his head and stared into the Shadow King's glowing eyes. He might look like a broken puppet, but power still surged in his veins.

"You're right," he said. "I am no match for you. But you've made a mistake."

The Shadow King's smile faltered, though he still looked amused. He cocked his head, gesturing with his hand, Charles straightening abruptly and then sailing across the air until he hung, suspended feet above the ground, close enough to smell the rancid stink of the Shadow King's decaying breath.

"I'm not alone," Charles said.

A surge of light, blazing like fire, shot out of his forehead. It hit the Shadow King square in the chest, the Shadow King recoiling. He dropped Charles to the ground, Charles landing awkwardly upon his foot. The ankle twisted, pain a strange echo of the pain his body felt outside the astral plane. Charles staggered to his feet, bracing himself on one foot as he opened his mind.

He projected out.

It was like opening a door, Jean and Cable and Psylocke surging through the opening, materializing at his side, the four of them forming a single line, still linked, though no longer merged as one. The Shadow King's eyes dimmed, shadows playing across his face as he took a hesitant step back.
"One telepath or four; it hardly matters," he said, though Charles could hear the uncertainty in his voice.

Cable had already projected a weapon into his hands; was pointing it at the Shadow King's head. At Charles' nod he fired, plasma racing through the air, hitting the Shadow King square in the eye. The Shadow King flew back, landing upon the dais with a heavy crash. The ground cracked, fissures creeping across the ice, great chasms opening. They threatened to swallow whole anyone unfortunate enough to be standing over them.

"Now Jean," Charles said, Jean bringing two hands to her temples, eyes falling closed as she reached out beyond the astral plane. She would need time to open the portal to the Shadow King's dimension, but Charles could buy her that time. He glanced briefly to Psylocke, earning a brief nod before they moved forward as one.

The Shadow King was already on his feet. His eyes blazed, teeth bared as he snarled in irritation and defiance. He stepped forward, the weight of his foot against the cracked ice sending new tendrils of cracks running throughout. Cable shifted aside as one crept between his legs. He reloaded his weapon and brought it up to his eye. Before he could fire, the Shadow King lashed his tail, the end of it striking Cable in the chest, sending him sprawling backwards. He landed with a crash against an ice pillar, the support crumbling with the force of the blow, the roof above it sagging and then collapsing, Cable half buried in the snow.

"Now," Charles said, he and Psylocke combining their powers, attacking the Shadow King from both sides. They pelted him with psionic energy, the Shadow King staggering before turning his attention away from Cable; fiery gaze falling on Charles.

The blast of his counterattack sent Charles flying through the air. He landed on his back with a good deal of force, the wind knocked out of him, pain flaring seemingly everywhere at once. He rolled to his side, coughing up blood that stained the snow scarlet. Dazed, and more than a little disoriented, he forced himself into his knees, Charles heaving oxygen as he tried to catch his breath. The Shadow King barked a laugh.

Across the room, lying in an impact creator, no doubt created at the time of her landing, Psylocke was sprawled across the ice, eyes closed, arm bent at an awkward angle. Cable was only just digging himself out of the snow.

"Did you really believe you could defeat me? Like sending cockroaches to do battle with a snake; I will consume you."

Charles shook his head, trying desperately to clear it. He fought vertigo as he attempted to stand, his ankle still useless. He balanced precariously on one foot. Jean remained unnoticed, swaying now under the effort of opening a portal. Psylocke lay unconscious in the snow. Charles hopped forward.

"We've only just begun," Charles said, lashing out then, a psionic bolt that struck the Shadow King square in the forehead. He staggered, head thrown back, a hoarse cry pushing past rows of teeth. Cable followed with another blast from his weapon, this time hitting the Shadow King in the shoulder. He fell back as though drunk, knocking aside a chandelier in the process. It spun for several seconds until, caught by the weight of its own gravity, its ice chain broke, sending it crashing to the ground. Charles immediately hit the ground, covering his head as splinters of ice shot like projectiles across the room. Cable was not so lucky.
Charles watched him fall, blade of ice sticking out of his shoulder, blood seeping out to pool in the snow.

Charles struggled to his feet a second time, turning then to find the Shadow King looming above him, fire-wrought blade pulsing in his hand. He swung wildly, Charles only just managing to deflect the blow. It was clear now the Shadow King thought him the only threat; was focusing the whole of his energy directly on Charles.

Charles brought up a psionic shield. The Shadow King landed a direct blow. Charles staggered back, momentarily putting his weight on his bad foot, scream tearing through his lungs at the fresh surge of pain.

"Do you know how I took your precious Emma Frost?" the Shadow King asked, advancing.

Charles conjured his own blade, fierce steel that froze like the surrounding ice, though a thousand times as strong. He caught and deflected the Shadow King's next blow.

"I took the one thing that gave her strength," the Shadow King continued, blade slashing through the air, but instead of the blow Charles was expected, he spun, circling around Charles and slashing down, blade crashing into the ice. New cracks fanned from the point of contact, confusion momentarily staying Charles' hand.

And then he realized what the Shadow King had done.

Charles dropped to his knees, hollow pit forming in the centre of his chest, oxygen leaving his lungs. He could feel the edges of shock creeping into the corners of his mind, even as he fought against the instinct to lie down and die.

The Shadow King's blade had cut the thread between him and Raven. He'd severed their bond.

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"I'm sorry, but I need you to explain this to me again. You're saying your telepath has contacted you and instead of wanting you to get out of the city, he wants you to rescue the White Queen who may or may not still be under the Shadow King's control?"

Hank's head felt like it might implode. Lingering hurt from whatever the hell had happened earlier--a psionic attack, Raven had called it--struck like hammers against his temples. He was struggling to understand now why they weren't simply using this opportunity to get as far away from the Walled City as they could; as fast as they could.

"Yes. Charles wants Emma secured, so we're going to secure Emma," Raven answered, already moving deeper into the palace.

She moved like she was made for stealth; like this was something she did every day. There was little Hank could do save trail along behind, occasionally giving her direction when she glanced over her shoulder to ask. Moira kept pace at his side, Banshee following behind, eyes darting everywhere like he shared Hank's paranoia.

Raven had insisted the city was neutralized, and every one they passed--every guard, every attendant, every servant--was either unconscious or curled up in a ball, heads held in their hands, wordless screams stuck in their throat. What had Raven's telepath done?

It was a terrifying thing to consider, so Hank pushed it out of his head. He glanced briefly to Moira who looked as frightened as she did determined. He offered her a brief smile, and then followed Raven around the corner.
"The next left," he called, because Raven was moving so fast now it was nearly impossible to keep up. Raven took the next left, stepping around an unconscious guard. She came to a stop outside the heavy oak doors of the Great Hall.

Hank was breathless by the time he reached her side.

"She'll be inside, but if she's still under the Shadow King's control he'll know we're here."

Raven narrowed her gaze, clearly considering the matter. She shook her head. "We'll have to risk it," she said, reaching for the door then, but before she could reach it, it swung open, Sabretooth stepping into the hall. His lip pulled back into a snarl when he spotted them.

Right, Hank thought, spontaneous regeneration mutation; that meant he was impervious to telepathy.

"You did this," he said, though Hank wasn't entirely certain if he was talking about the state of the city or something else. "And now I get to kill you."

He extended his claws then, sharp shards of bone that could tear them in half if need be. Hank sank into a low crouch, getting between Sabretooth and Moira, but before he could charge--before he could do anything--Raven was moving.

She was faster than anything he had seen; a blur of blue and red, agility matched by strength. Sabretooth was obviously ill prepared for the attack; he staggered back, clearly not expecting either the ferocity of her blows or speed of her movements. She caught him once in the chest, and then immediately again under the jaw, Sabretooth flying back, crashing into the doors, flinging them wide open. Raven was on him before he'd even hit the ground.

He got in one or two good swipes, but she was too fast and he was growing increasingly frustrated. He snarled, leaping towards her even as she spun, her foot connecting with the side of his head. He flew across the room.

It was then Hank got his first look at the throne room. It was in pieces.

Like a bomb had gone off, dust and debris was everywhere, entire columns crumbled, the floor cracked and torn apart. A chandelier had fallen from the ceiling, crystal and diamond littering the floor. The throne was cast aside, and lying in a crumpled ball was Emma Frost, her temple wet with blood. Banshee immediately rushed towards her, falling to his knees at her side.

Sabretooth was rising, clearly intent on charging again, but before he had the chance Raven let loose a scream, so startling, so loud the entire group instinctively reached up to cover their ears. Raven fell to her knees, hands coming up to brace the sides of her head, eyes wide as she threw her head back, still screaming, the sound as terrifying as it was deafening. Across from her, Sabretooth saw his opportunity; he snarled, coming into a crouch before springing forward, halfway to Raven before one of Moira's tranquilizer darts hit in him the chest.

He toppled, landing in an unconscious heap at Raven's side.

She was still screaming.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There was enough steel and iron in the building for Magneto to maintain structural integrity over top of the bunker; otherwise it would have collapsed ages ago. The effort was exhausting, sweat dampening his brow, curling the hair at the nap of his neck.

The helmet, newly retrieved after the incident with Schmidt, only exacerbated the problem. Magneto longed to throw it aside. Fear stayed his hand.

They were blind in here, but relatively secure and Magneto didn't like the idea of taking the battle outside. Not while Charles was stuck attached to Cerebro. He still hadn't moved; hadn't done anything except sit in a semi-conscious state, the only indication he was alive the steady rise and fall of his chest. His complexion had waned, colour draining until his skin matched the concrete of the walls and dark circles ran beneath his eyes. The only thing that kept Magneto from unplugging him was the uncertainty of what that might do.

Magneto braced against another hit.

He could only presume this was the same mutant from the first camp, the blasts similar. They rocked the foundation of the house, the bunker trembling with their force. Dust and debris rained down around them, clattering against Magneto's helmet.

"We outta be out there," Rogue said, rocking on the balls of her feet, clearly itching for a fight. Another blast rocked the bunker, Magneto pushing out to keep the ceiling from caving in.

"We stay here," he said, remembering the last time they'd fought, two of their party taken into custody, Charles temporarily stripped of his powers.

That didn't seem to be happening this time, Charles still lost to Cerebro, though Magneto had no way of knowing if he was even doing anything. He might be unconscious for all Magneto knew.

"Ain't right, hiding in the basement when there's fightin' going on," Wolverine chimed in. He was extending and retracting his claws, the sound startlingly loud in the silence between blasts. Magneto curled a hand into a fist to keep from slamming it into a wall.

He didn't particularly enjoy hiding in the basement either--he was a man of action--but there were priorities here and Charles was it.

Only Havok seemed content to sit this out, though Magneto suspected his time in the Citadel had given him a much clearer understanding of what was at stake. He'd taken up residence between Charles and the bunker's only door. If anyone got in, they'd have to get through Havok first.

"I'd settle for just a look," Rogue said. She was pacing now, restless energy with nowhere to channel it. Wolverine tossed her a grin. Magneto shook his head and braced for another explosion.

When it didn't come, he frowned. Rogue seemed to catch on first that something was amiss. Her pacing stopped and she turned to catch Magneto's eye. She cocked her head, glanced over Magneto's shoulder and gestured with her chin. Magneto followed her gaze and found Wolverine listening intently, head cocked to the side. Havok had risen to his feet.

"Flushing us out didn't work," Havok said. He sounded resigned. "Looks like the bozos are
coming in."

Magneto scowled. He'd known it would happen sooner or later, but he was rather hoping for later. He glanced down at Charles, and then scanned the bunker.

"I want a barricade between him and the door. You have three seconds."

The remarkable thing about his team was how quickly they could spring into action when the occasion called for it. There was only one entrance into the basement—shitty place to get into a firefight—so there was only one way they could get in. So long as they could stay between them and Charles, Charles would be fine.

Magneto repeated this several times over until he almost started to believe it.

He set Rogue to hauling some of the heavier equipment, while Havok and Wolverine moved crates and bits of furniture, piling them high in a semicircle around Charles' chair. While they worked, Magneto knelt at his side, hesitating only briefly before placing his hand—recently bandaged—to Charles' cheek.

"Tell me you're close," he said.

He wasn't expecting a reply, which is why it was somewhat alarming when Charles shuddered, body spasming as though having a seizure. It lasted only a few seconds, Charles stilling almost immediately, but he coughed, bright red spraying out his mouth; drops of it catching Magneto in the chin. Panic seized in his chest, his grip on Charles' knee—he hadn't even realized he was holding it—tightening. He peered into Charles' face, searching for some sign of awareness; some sign that Charles might be all right. He found nothing.

He glanced over his shoulder then, Cerebro's amplifier still humming contentedly in the corner. He hadn't thought to ask what to do if this went wrong; he hadn't thought to consider that things might go wrong.

"Damn it, Charles," he said, but Charles had returned to the world of Cerebro, and the fighting had begun.

A blast shook the hall outside the bunker, the force of it when contained within the building so strong the floor heaved beneath them. "They're going to bring down the building on top of their own damned heads," Magneto said, cursing as he stood from Charles' side, reluctant to leave but unwilling to sit idle while idiot mutants brought the building down around them.

Wolverine and Rogue were standing at the door, looking primed for a fight. Havok stood off to the side, his mutation too dangerous for the narrow space, though Magneto was not above using it as a last resort. He cast a final glance in Charles' direction.

"I think you're about to get your wish, Rogue," he said, gesturing for Havok to open the bunker door.

Magneto stepped out into the hall first, electromagnetic shield springing into place, ready to deflect anything the enemy was foolish enough to send in his direction. It wasn't the full force of his power. That was reserved for maintaining structural integrity, Magneto unwilling to return and find Charles buried under a mountain of rubble.

The others were quick on his heel, Havok pausing only long enough to re-seal the door, locking Charles inside. This might not be a fight they could win, but he could sure as hell buy Charles some time.
They were halfway down the hall when the first mutant stepped out of the shadows, a woman Magneto recognized from before. She smirked when she saw them; lifting a hand, but before she could form another of those balls, Magneto reached out and grabbed her by her boot's eyelets. Clearly the Shadow King hadn't thought to send his minions without metal.

He considered simply throwing her, but he'd obviously been spending too much time with Charles, because the instinct to harm was stamped down by a strange need to preserve life. Magneto almost laughed: it had taken Charles scant days to undo years of Schmidt's training.

He turned the woman upside down instead and floated her towards them. It brought her too close to her target to safely use her mutation, the woman flailing instead. It did her little good.

Magneto tossed her in Rogue's direction. "Feel like generating plasma bombs?" he asked. Rogue smiled.

"Might come in handy," she said, already removing one of her gloves.

"Don't kill her," Magneto said, earning an arched eyebrow, though whether it was because Rogue generally disapproved of killing, or whether she was simply surprised he'd suggested as much, Magneto didn't care to ask.

"Sorry about this sugah," Rogue said, putting a bare hand to the woman's skin, the woman tipping her head back in a scream, Rogue doing the same. It lasted no more than a few seconds, and when it was over the woman slumped to the ground, Rogue stepping away, head cradled in her hands, breath coming in shallow gasps. She had such a beautiful mutation, and yet Magneto did not envy her this.

"Anything worth noting?" he asked when Rogue was once again collected. She shook herself, the power transfer bringing along with it the woman's memories, including any tactical information they might put to use.

Rogue scowled. She looked unimpressed. "Got myself a head full of crap I ain't never wanted to know, but if she knew it, I know it."

"And?" Magneto asked, barely restraining his frustration. Rogue rolled her eyes.

"Ain't you ever heard of patience?" When Magneto didn't answer, she held up her hands and continued. "They're not here to take us in. They just mean to distract us from Xavier long enough for her boss to do his mojo thing. I think he's worried we might disconnect him from Cerebro."

Magneto hesitated upon hearing that, already debating if he should return to the bunker and do exactly that. Clearly, whatever plan was in play, they'd abandoned Charles, and that meant it was working.

"You want the rest?" Rogue asked. Magneto nodded, more than a little put out that she hadn't given him everything the first time around. "They only left the city half an hour back, and the shields were still up, so whatever your boy's doing, it ain't what he's supposed to be doing."

Magneto cursed, snarl creeping across his face. What was taking Charles so long? Did the Shadow King already have him? Was that what this was all about? Did he head back into the bunker and tear apart Cerebro, piece by piece, or did he give Charles the chance to finish what he'd set out to do? He glanced to the unconscious mutant sprawled at their feet, and then back the way they had come.

"How many on the surface?" he asked, turning back to Rogue.
"She says five."

Magneto glanced to Wolverine then, Wolverine's face lighting up with a grin.

"Thought you'd never ask," he said, already moving down the hall. He got about halfway to the stairs before a scream shattered the silence of the hall. Magneto spun, terror coiling in his chest, his entire world narrowing to the bunker and Charles.

The screaming continued.

It was like nothing he'd heard before, the chill of it raising the hair on the back of his neck. He took a step forward, and then another, moving as though caught in a dream, the distance to Charles seeming insurmountably long.

"Mags?" Rogue called, practically unheard over the sound of Charles' screaming. Magneto glanced over his shoulder and waved her on.

"Take them out, by any means necessary," he said, anger bleeding into his tone. He turned back to Charles.

Time lurched forward, Magneto faltering as his slow progression turned into a run. He was panting fiercely by the time he got back to the bunker, skidding to a stop outside its door.

Charles was still screaming.

It took several fumbled tries before Magneto got the door open, and then he forced himself to pause and seal it shut. If the sound of Charles' screaming was loud in the hall, it was deafening inside. It echoed off the walls, reverberating against the concrete, the entire space acting like an amplifier. Magneto's first instinct was to recoil; instead he rushed to Charles' side.

"Charles!" he shouted, bringing up a tentative hand.

He could feel the metal of Cerebro--every single molecule vibrating under his power. He wanted to tear it to pieces; rip it from Charles and melt it into nothingness. He went so far as to grab hold of Cerebro's molecules, the device shimmering, losing cohesion as Magneto prepared to pull it apart. He thought better of it a second later, uncertainty of what that would do to Charles staying his hand.

Magneto fell to his knees, hands coming to rest on Charles' legs.

"Charles? Charles, please. Tell me you're all right. I don't know what to do," he said, Charles showing no signs of having heard.

He continued to scream, voice having grown hoarse. An explosion rumbled from outside, Rogue no doubt trying on her new powers. Magneto, caught in his panic, forgot entirely about the structure of the building. It shook violently, chunks of concrete cracking loose, falling around them to litter the floor. He tried reaching out to re-establish his hold, but he was tired and weak, too panicked by Charles' screaming to extend his powers that far beyond his reach. Instead he settled for shrouding them in a protective bubble, electromagnetic barrier springing up around them, the world outside falling away as they took refuge inside Magneto's created sanctuary.

He leaned forward then, pushing up on his knees so that he could lean his forehead against Charles. Their helmets clashed, Magneto pulling back, hesitating only briefly before tearing his away, letting it fall to the floor with a clatter. He thought again about removing Charles', hand coming up as if to do exactly that. Instead he pressed back into Charles' space, fitting his forehead into the space between Charles' helmet and his eyes.

"Whatever you need from me, take it," he said, silently pleading; for Charles and for them and for
a future without the Shadow King and for final, long-sought vengeance. There was no end to his need, Magneto pouring all of that into Charles, wordless begging that left him shaking and exhausting, tears pricking at his eyes.

Charles stopped screaming.

He slumped forward in his chair, Magneto only barely catching him, easing him back until he sat, head lolling to the side. Half terrified, Magneto set two fingers against the side of his neck, finding his pulse, relief flooding him when he found the steady thrumming of Charles' heartbeat.

His ears were still ringing, but he took solace in the silence. He cast about for his helmet; levitated it back into his hand, regret filling him as he set it back upon his head, but it was too dangerous—he was too dangerous—to go without. He'd half expected Charles to start screaming again, but he remained silent, Magneto reaching up to brush aside the smattering of dust covering Charles' cheek.

"Charles?" he asked, sounding smaller and more uncertain in that moment than he ever had as a child in Schmidt's custody. Charles didn't answer, but he was still breathing, and more importantly, the lines of distress that had marred his face had vanished. Magneto left his hand where it was, cupped against Charles' cheek, a vain attempt to lend Charles some of his strength, however fleeting.

Outside, the sounds of battle continued, Rogue and Havok and Wolverine the only thing standing between them and certain failure.

~*~

Charles became aware of the distant sound of screaming. It sounded suspiciously like his voice, yet when he opened his mouth, no sound came out. He felt paralyzed; incapable of moving, stuck where he was, kneeled at the Shadow King's feet, the Shadow King looming above him, his power beyond Charles' imagining.

The sight should have terrified him. Instead all Charles felt was throbbing numbness.

He could feel the severed bond. Like a gaping wound it bled, sapping Charles of his strength; life force seeping out to stain the snow beneath him. He could no longer sense Raven; only feel where she was, like a phantom limb, a strange echo he couldn't quite catch hold of. Charles gasped for air, lungs constricting, pain lancing through his chest.

"You're mine now," the Shadow King said, crooked smile voracious and condescending. Charles
remained unmoved.

He watched, detached, as the Shadow King swooped towards him, maw gaping open, forked black tongue snaking past jagged pillars of corpse-white teeth. His smile grew, eyes glowing bright in his delight, his form already transforming. The tips of his claws, stretched out as if to cup Charles’ chin, evaporated into mist: inky black that floated like oil on water. Charles knew to draw back; knew that the moment the Shadow King made contact he would lose himself entirely, but it was a distant thing, unimportant in the face of his loss.

He remembered then Raven as she was when he'd first met her. He'd thought himself so poised, so polished; prepared to face whatever the world threw in his direction. He was unprepared for her fire; for the vibrant strumming of her entire being. She'd torn his world apart and made it a new, a better creation than he was capable of alone.

He'd grown up alongside her, she the fiercest sister he could have asked for. She'd defended him and bullied him and encouraged him and challenged him. She'd pushed him harder and farther than anyone else could. He owed her his everything, and now she was gone.

The distant screaming continued.

The Shadow King's breath was hot upon his forehead, damp mist spreading like a cancer across his skin. He closed his eyes, waiting to be devoured—anything to end this misery—but it never came. Charles opened his eyes, disappointment and horror bleeding together as the Shadow King's expression shifted, his eyes growing wide even as his mouth fell open in a wordless scream. Charles blinked; glanced to the Shadow King's stomach where the end of a sword, thick with tar-like blood, caught and reflected the light. It blazed with energy, the Shadow King staggering.

Warmth enveloped him then, a distant sensation that felt so much like his bond his heart sang. He traced the thread through, but instead of Raven he found only the frayed remains of their bond. New ache took up lodging in his chest, but the warmth persisted, strength filling both his mind and his heart. The screaming faded to nothingness. Charles glanced up in time to see the Shadow King pitching forward.

He scrambled back, narrowly avoiding being crushed by the Shadow King's fall. Standing at his back, sword in hand, Psylocke radiated fierce determination, like she intended to personally hold the Shadow King accountable for his atrocities. The snarl that spread across her face was half feral, half intention, a dark goddess standing amidst the ruins. Charles looked at her and ached, the strength of her bond presence in her every gesture.

"Charles, move," she said, already backing away, the Shadow King rallying. Charles blinked; it was like emerging from a fog, the pain of Raven's absence like a festering wound, though his fever had broken. A strange warmth, like being shrouded in blankets, seeped into his skin. He stood on shaky legs, ankle giving way beneath him until Psylocke appeared at his side, wrapping an arm around his waist. She half dragged, half carried him to where Jean stood, still lost in her manipulation of the astral plane.

"It needs to be now, Jean," Psylocke said. Across the room, the Shadow King had risen to his feet; was turning back to face them, face a mask of fury. He tipped back his head and let out a tremendous roar, the sound of it shaking the hall, ice and snow falling in chunks now, the entire structure collapsing.

"Jean," Psylocke said.

Dimly, Charles registered that he should be doing something; that he should be helping in some
way. He glanced over his shoulder, movement slow and heavy, like he was caught in a dream. Cable was staggering to his feet, ice shard still sticking out of his shoulder. He reached for it, pulling it clean, the wound gaping; blood oozing from the site, though Cable now seemed oblivious to it. He crossed to their side, hobblingly slightly, his eyes widening when he took in Charles. Something that looked suspiciously like pity crossed his face. Charles glanced away.

"It is done," Jean said, opening her eyes then, arms splaying wide even as the Shadow King rushed towards them. He made it no more than a few feet before the ground began crumbling beneath him, snow and ice succumbing to the swirling vortex forming beneath their feet.

It was like being stuck on the edge of a tornado, the wind so powerful Psylocke staggered forward a few steps, even with Charles anchored at her side. Cable caught them both around the shoulder; dragged them back, Charles protesting the movement, wanting them only to succumb to the darkness; eternal torment alongside the Shadow King a better fate than the one that awaited him. The halo of warmth surrounding him flared, calming Charles' despair, the impulse lasting only a minute.

Jean's voice, loud and commanding, broke the rest of the fog. She stood with outstretched hands, facing down the Shadow King as he struggled on the cusp, fighting to remain in this plane. Charles shook his head, realizing then Jean was not strong enough to do this alone.

Breaking free from Cable's grip, Charles stepped forward, twisted ankle forgotten.

As soon as Cable and Psylocke realized what he was doing, they stepped forward too, until the four of them formed a line, their combined strength thrown against the Shadow King. The vortex grew in size, winds howling now; screaming their fury even as they threatened to consume the entire room.

The hall no longer resembled anything man-made. Its structure was in the process of collapsing, snow and ice crashing down around them, pillars dissolving into powder even as the floor continued to crack and crumble. Amidst the rolling chaos, Charles stood his ground, his attention focused entirely on the Shadow King.

The Shadow King knew it was over even before he gave in. Like a wounded beast bellowing its agony, he threw his head back and screamed, clawed feet scrapping against the snow and ice, even as he reached out with twisted hands, trying and failing to prevent his fall. A foot slipped, the ground cracking, fissure running up until it split the world in two, the Shadow King falling into the vortex, defiant scream torn from his lips. Jean lowered her hands.

Charles sagged against the sudden loss of power, Cable barely catching him around the waist. The vortex, once a swirling mass of black insanity, had been reduced to a mere pinprick. In time it would dissipate entirely, the Shadow King forever returned to his dimension.

The hall continued to collapse; in a few short moments it would be nothing more than a pile of snow. There was no longer a reason to linger, the Shadow King vanquished, though Charles felt no need to rush. Residual shock, he knew, but the urge to lie down and make this place his tomb was so strong Charles ached with it. He sank to his knees, ankle throbbing painfully. It was Jean who knelt before him.

"Find her, Charles. There may be some way to salvage the bond and until then you have been given a temporary one."

Charles glanced up at that, confusion settling across his features, but Jean merely smiled. She reached out and cupped Charles' cheek, the gesture oddly tactile. It lingered as she faded, Charles wanting to call out, to beg her to stay, but the others were fading as well, the astral plane slipping
away, Charles returning to his body. He came awake to a hand still pressed against his cheek, except, in place of Jean, Erik Lehnsherr was staring into his eyes.

"Charles," he said, fear and uncertainty bleeding into his tone. Charles caught his gaze, breath catching at the open worry and love he saw there. He offered a brief smile, relief flooding Erik’s features, his answering grin filled with pearl-white teeth. Charles shuddered, but did not look away.

Outside of the astral plane, the ache of his severed bond was nowhere near as strong, though he still felt as though someone had taken a limb. A sob lit in his throat, Charles choking on it even as tears sprang to his eyes. Erik’s eyes grew wide. He hesitated only briefly before drawing Charles into his arms, Charles pressing his face into the juncture between Erik’s neck and his shoulder, tasting Erik's scent as he gulped in air.

"Charles, please tell me you're all right," Erik said, hands playing around the edges of Cerebro's helmet.

Charles shook his head, body racked with hiccups as he tried to speak. When he finally got the words out, it was only to say, "Erik, they've taken my Raven from me."

~*~

The ground shook beneath him as though someone had generated an earthquake, its focal point the Great Hall. Hank staggered as he crossed the floor, narrowly avoiding being hit in the head by chunks of falling debris. A hunk of plaster shattered on the floor at his right, pieces of it clattering against Hank's calf, slicing the skin.

He made it to Banshee's side just as one of the dais' pillars fell. It shattered on impact, reduced to dust, though Hank couldn't for the life of him understand the physics. That would bother him tomorrow, after all of this was said and done. For now he concentrated on getting to the White Queen's side. He really couldn't believe he was doing this.

He crouched down beside her, catching Banshee's eye.

"We gonna do this or what?" Banshee asked. Hank gave a reluctant nod.

He slid a hand beneath the Queen's knees, slipping the other one around her back, lifting her delicately while Banshee cradled her head. She hung limply in his hands, unconscious, bleeding from a wound on her temple. It was marginally surprising to find her warm to the touch; he'd thought perhaps she was made of ice. Unconscious and injured she seemed strangely human.

Across the room, Raven was still sitting in a daze, Moira at her side. At least she'd stopped screaming. There was an emptiness to her that Hank couldn't trace, so he did his best to ignore it, getting the White Queen out of the hall while it continued to crumble. The Great Hall formed the centre point of the palace. If it fell, the entire complex's integrity would be compromised. Hank quickened his pace.

"We need to get her to a doctor," he said, gesturing with his chin to the pale lump in his hands. Moira glanced up, eyes wide, as if she too couldn't believe they were rescuing the White Queen. Hank gestured to Raven. "Probably her, too."

That seemed to decide Moira. She nodded, catching Raven around the shoulders and drawing her to her feet.

"Come on, honey, we need to get out of here," she said. Raven let herself be manhandled, but aside from that showed no signs of comprehension.
It was easy to get out of the palace. The people they passed were no longer crouched on the ground, heads held in hands. Instead they moved steady to the exits, as though someone had set off an alarm, forewarning of impending doom. No doubt the violent heaving of the ground had set them panicking, a mass exodus underway that Hank and the others merely got caught up in. No one paid any attention to the woman in Hank's arms; no one seeming to notice that she looked suspiciously like the woman who reigned over their existence.

That was probably for the best, Hank thought, letting Moira lead them out of the palace, Raven dragged in her wake.

Chapter End Notes

A thousand thank yous to the lovely Shaliara for the beautiful art in this chapter. I am both awed and humbled.
Storm stood perfectly still, waiting for the hum of Cerebro to fade before she rushed to Jean's side. She was not the only guardian eager to reach their telepath.

No longer powered, Cerebro had grown dark, the silence of the cavern far-reaching. Storm's boots rang against the grated floor, the sound carrying, echoing off Cerebro's concave walls. She reached Jean's side just as Jean began fumbling with Cerebro's interface. Storm batted aside her hands, slowly removing the helmet and setting it aside before taking Jean's face into her hands. Jean blinked, pupils narrowing as she focused on Storm's face.

Her expression crumbled a moment later, tears filling her eyes. She pitched forward, resting her forehead against Storm's shoulder. Panic surged in Storm's chest. She ran careful eyes over Jean's form, but found no sign of injury, so she brought her arms up to circle Jean's shoulders, Jean seeming impossibly frail in that moment.

"Tell me what has happened," Storm said, the words meant as a whisper, but they carried throughout the room, echoing alongside her footsteps. Across the circle, Cable held tight to Polaris' hand.

It took some coaxing, but Jean eventually pulled back, shoulders remaining slumped forward, her eyes red-rimmed and swollen. She looked gutted, and absolutely exhausted.

"Have we lost then?" Storm asked. Jean offered a faint smile and shook her head.

"We have won, but at a great cost. The Shadow King severed the bond between Charles Xavier and his guardian."

Storm felt her eyes grow wide, even as she projected a pillar of strength for Jean. It was a terrifying thing to consider, despite the talk of doing exactly that; talk of the bond having outlived its usefulness. She drew Jean close again, Jean coming willingly, sobbing into Storm's shoulder, Storm weathering the onslaught as best she could. Long minutes passed before Jean withdrew, her face mottled red, eyes damp and nose wet with snot. Storm gathered the edge of her cape and took to the task of wiping aside Jean's anguish. There was still work to do.

"Yes, we do have work," Jean said, following the line of Storm's thoughts, her smile as fond as it was grateful. She turned to address the group.

"The Oracle must be informed. Preparations must be made. We have defeated the Shadow King, but that does not guarantee us victory. We must secure the White Queen. We must send forth our armies and claim the Walled City for our own."

Her words held a note of finality that sent a chill down Storm's spine, but she straightened, rising gracefully to her feet before extending Jean a hand. Jean wobbled slightly as she rose.

Across the circle, Bobby helped Psylocke to her feet, Psylocke leaning heavily against him. Cable rose on his own, despite Polaris' protests. He held his shoulder stiffly, favouring one arm. Storm wanted to ask--wanted so desperately to know what Jean had endured in her absence--but when she floated the thought in Jean's direction, Jean merely shook her head; a tactile request to drop the matter. Storm relented.
It was a battle worn group she led out of Cerebro, Storm all but carrying Jean, her eyes fluttering closed, despite a valiant effort to remain conscious. The others were little better, Cable sagging the moment they made it onto the lift, as though crossing the few scant feet had sapped him of what little energy he had remaining. Polaris stood at his side, like a mother bear protecting her cub. Her green eyes flashed, concern warring with frustration. Storm understood the feeling well.

The lift returned them to the assembly hall, burnished sun fitting neatly into place. Destiny and her delegates stepped forward, casting a critical eye over the group. They'd been gone hours, and yet Storm had no doubt Destiny had stood in her exact spot, waiting the entire time.

"It is done," she said, not a question, but Jean still struggled forward, Storm reluctant to relinquish her grip. She nodded.

"It is done," she intoned.

Jean's words from earlier came back then, the heavy weight of the coming days stretching out before them. They had defeated an enemy, but they had yet to win a war. Jean was right; there was still so much work to do.

Beyond the lead-lined outer doors, rain continued to pelt the city, starting the island on its path to renewal. They would wash clean the Shadow King's domain, but like Mother Nature, the path was slow, time their greatest ally.

~*~

The rocking of the truck was strangely hypnotic. It pulled at Magneto's exhaustion, threatening to lull him into sleep. Only Charles' presence, strangely distant, strangely absent and yet tangibly solid kept him awake. He braced Charles' foot on his lap, eyes never once leaving Charles' face.

Charles sat, propped against the truck's door, legs stretched out before him, head tipped back against the window, his eyes closed. Over his shoulder, the wilderness had given way to sprawling farm-land, the first signs of civilization dotting the landscape. Ahead, the road curved, ascending from a valley to a high point in the land, where the Walled City loomed, impossibly large.

_They won't stop our coming_, Charles had said when Magneto expressed concern at their simply driving past the gates. As far as he was concerned the war was over, the Shadow King defeated.

Magneto only vaguely understood what had happened, Charles strangely tight-lipped on the subject. He had simply woken and the fighting had stopped, the Shadow King's mutants laying down their arms, allowing them to pass. Magneto had carried Charles into the truck, Cerebro once again packed away, Rogue nursing an injured shoulder and Havok a minor head wound. Wolverine's regeneration mutation had come in handy more than once.

And now here they were, en route for the Walled City, Cyclops already gathering the troops, preparing to march at first light. It didn't seem real, an entire lifetime spent caught in the Shadow King's grasp, or fighting the Shadow King's reign, and now he was gone. He'd expected to feel some sense of vindication, some sense of relief, but there was only the heavy weight of the coming days; the impossible task of putting something back together that might be irrevocably broken.

The truck rumbled ahead, bouncing over unkempt roads, Rogue slowing as they approached wide black gates, stood open as though they were expected.

"We are," Charles said, not opening his eyes. Magneto glanced back towards him. It still surprised
him whenever Charles inadvertently overheard one of his thoughts, though he could not call the sensation unpleasant.

"Is this your doing?" he asked.

Charles shook his head, a slight rolling side to side that drew attention to the crown of his head. Until now, Magneto had rather assumed a telepath's lack of hair was permanent, but Charles' head was covered in soft growth. The urge to reach out and touch it was somewhat overwhelming. Charles smiled and then opened his eyes. The look he shot Magneto said he'd overheard that thought as well. Magneto flushed.

"In addition to hiding the Walled City from view, Mastermind's shields also extended a low-level dampening field across the city. It kept its citizens relatively placid, made it easier for the Shadow King to exert his control. Tearing down the shields destroyed that field, and with the Shadow King gone the Walled City's citizens are coming awake for the first time in a very long time. They know we're coming, but they also know we're responsible for their liberation."

Magneto cocked his head. "How?"

Charles shrugged, an elegant movement that accentuated the lines of exhaustion slumping his posture. It was strange how aware of Charles he seemed.

"I battled the Shadow King on the astral plane and they, through him, were connected to it. They might not have the full details, but they will have enough of a sense of what happened to accept our presence."

"So we're just going to walk in. Then what?"

Charles face hardened. He caught Magneto's gaze, eyes flashing determination and something Magneto thought might be grief.

"We find Raven," he said.

He hadn't spoken of her since his first words upon waking, Magneto having no real idea what had happened to her. There was such sadness in Charles' eyes now, such despair that Magneto's first instinct was to reach out and draw Charles into his arms. Charles smiled, features softening. He reached forward and braced his leg, lifting it carefully off Magneto's lap.

"You shouldn't..." Magneto protested, but Charles waved him off, grunting slightly against the pain as he maneuvered it onto the ground, shifting so that he could slide across the seat to Magneto's side.

"I exacerbated the injury on the astral plane, so it's beyond healing now. I'm afraid regardless of what I do I've lost use of the foot." He held up a hand then, as though sensing Magneto's coming protest. "It's the least of my injuries. I'll adapt."

"Tell me what happened?" Magneto begged, pride vanishing in his desperation to know; in his desperation to see Charles well. Charles slid neatly against his side, body turning into a near embrace.

"The Shadow King severed my bond with Raven," he said, hesitating only briefly before placing a hand on Magneto's chest. "But I have faith it can be repaired, and then you and I have work to do."

Some of Magneto's confusion must have shown on his face, because Charles shook his head, letting out a little laugh as he played with the front clasp of Magneto's tunic. The base of his palm...
rested against Magneto's most recent scar, the newly healed flesh sensitive, shivers racing through
him at the contact. Charles' fingertip stroked at the bulge of Magneto's star, now alone on his
chest, the metal warm against his skin.

"Have you already forgotten what I told you? I mean to make right the wrongs committed in the
Shadow King's name. I mean to unite the world's populations, human and mutant. And I'd very
much like to do it with you at my side."

He glanced up then, catching Magneto's gaze, eyes impossibly wide; impossibly wise. Magneto's
breath caught, uncertainty warring with fear, the scope of Charles' future seeming impossibly
large. Would humanity even accept them after all that had been done? Or would they bide their
time and extract revenge, destroy mutantkind as soon as their backs were turned?

At his side, Charles shook his head, gentle sadness filling his gaze.

"Oh, my friend; don't think like that. Someone has to make the first overture, and we are long
overdue. Is it too much to ask, for a little faith?"

In all likelihood it was, Magneto's life a testament to the cruelty of prejudice, but he shook his
head, wanting so badly to believe in Charles' dream. At the very least, he decided, he would
remain by Charles' side, ensure he was kept safe, an optimistic fool in a world full of cynics.
Charles' smile turned bright.

"I suppose that's all I can ask for," he said, nestling against Magneto's chest, seeming in that
moment so impossibly small that new fear coiled in Magneto's stomach. A flutter of warmth
brushed it aside, Charles' mind sharp and bright against his own. He admonished Magneto his
pessimism, but his thoughts were coloured with fondness, his strength unmeasured. Something
very much like hope took seed. Magneto tempered the instinct to secure it behind a wall; let
Charles infuse it with warmth instead.

~*~

Hank paced the hall outside the treatment bay, the White Queen clearly visible through the wide
glass walls. An array of machines beeped steadily at her side, wires and tubes connected to her
body. They'd recognized her instantly; had given her priority treatment, lingering fear staying any
anger they might have felt towards her.

Banshee sat with her, expression resolved like he was prepared to wait an eternity if duty
demanded it. Hank understood the feeling well. He didn't dare leave her side. He was charged
with her safe keeping, so safe she would be kept.

The Walled City's medical complexes were state of the art, their methodologies cutting edge, and
yet no one could tell him what was wrong with her; no one seemed to know. The same could be
said for Raven, who sat on the adjacent cot, knees drawn to her chest, her expression vacant. She
stared ahead like the far wall was the most interesting thing in the world. Hank doubted she saw it.

She'd answered a few questions, but seemed uninterested in her surroundings. Twice now she'd
asked for Charles, Hank unable to give her an answer. Moira sat at her side, complexion pale in
the neon light of the bay. She glanced up, caught Hank's eye and beckoned him inside. Hank let
his shoulders fall, and then pushed through the glass doors, exchanging a brief glance with
Banshee before crossing to Moira's side.

"How is she?" he asked, coming to stand at Moira's side. Raven blinked but showed no signs of
acknowledging his presence.
"There's nothing physically wrong with her," Moira said. Hank nodded. Whatever had happened he had no doubt was related to the Shadow King's demise.

There was no confirmation of his defeat, only steady certainty that he was gone. The city's citizens walked as though waking from a strange dream. They stepped out into sunlight, blinking up at the sky, watching each other with wary but sympathetic eyes. Something was coming they said, a white knight in the distance; riding towards the city. He had handed them their salvation and he would see to their restoration.

They anticipated his coming with eager uncertainty.

Hank felt it, too. It grew in his breast until he ached with it. It took considerable effort to push the sensation aside; to turn his attention back to the task at hand.

He spared a final glance at Raven, and then crossed to Banshee's side.

"No change?" he asked. Banshee shook his head. No one seemed to know if she'd wake.

"I think she's dreaming. Every so often I get these flashes of colour that aren't my own." He gestured to his head, his helmet removed shortly after their arrival. Hank hadn't considered the possibility of the White Queen dreaming; at the very least he hadn't expected her to dream in colour.

He nodded his head, intending then to leave; to seek out Darwin in the hopes of finding Angel. She'd directed their every action until now. If anyone had planned for what came after, it would be her.

Except, when he turned to the door, he found their doctor filling the space, colour drained from his face, the orange of his skin faded to pale peach.

"There are orders from the palace," he said. Hank frowned, the palace a pile of rubble the last time he'd checked. "They intend to take control of her treatment."

He sounded apologetic, like the situation was beyond his control. He glanced over his shoulder then, Hank tensing, expecting a fight, but to his surprise Azazel strode into the room. He caught Hank's eye and nodded.

"Angel's orders," he said. Hank hesitated.

"The telepath wants her kept safe," he said. Azazel nodded.

"Da, those are also Angel's orders."

It was enough of a reassurance for Hank. He deflated, following on Azazel's heels as Azazel beckoned him from the room.

They didn't have far to go; around a corner and down a long hall, into one of the waiting rooms set aside for worrying families. To Hank's surprise both Angel and Darwin sat on the long bench of hard plastic seats. Angel rose to her feet, Azazel immediately coming to her side, tail curling protectively around her waist.

"Are you the palace now?" Hank asked. Angel inclined her head.

"We've taken control, yes," she said.

Hank wondered briefly what that made him. Instead of asking, he crossed to Angel's side and took
a grateful seat on the chair she'd vacated.

"What do you intend to do with her?" he asked, because they'd spent months working towards this goal, but no one had thought to tell him what came after. He supposed he hadn't thought to ask simply because he hadn't thought to succeed.

"Charles wants her kept safe," Angel answered.

"And he's on his way?"

Angel nodded. Hank released a breath. At least he hadn't lied to Raven when he'd said Charles was coming.

~*~

The sharp scent of antiseptic caught in his nose, Charles breathing it in, the feeling of civilization thrumming around him as soothing as it was overwhelming.

But it was not their arrival inside the Walled City—uncontested and unquestioned—that brightened his mood, but rather the steady presence of Raven's mind, just beyond a set a doors. The link wasn't the same, the bond no longer there, but Charles could still reach out and touch her, his telepathy forming a bridge, however temporary. It was coloured by the bond he'd formed with Erik, a strange point of warmth that felt more like awareness than a true bond. He had no idea if it would last, or if it was simply the temporary forging of a battle-worn connection. For now he embraced it, the two forming odd counterpoints inside his mind.

Charles brushed against Raven's mind now, felt her straighten, joy flooding back at him, a pale shadow of what it once was, but enough to ease some of the hurt.

"Through there," he told Erik, who was pushing his chair. Erik steered them through the doors.

No one had seen to them yet, Charles pushing aside curious eyes. There would be time enough to see to his foot later; for now there was only the burning desire to see his guardian.

Erik wheeled him around a corner, and there she was.

He caught sight of her through a set of glass walls, Raven springing to her feet; darting out the door and into the hall where she flung herself into his arms. The woman who'd sat at her side was wearing an expression of concern, but her features relaxed when she caught sight of what was no doubt joy written on Charles' face. It was marginally surprising to find a human here, but Charles spared her presence little thought, attention riveted on Raven. She clung to him.

"Charles, Charles, what did he do? What did he do?"

She was sobbing openly, tears falling to stain Charles' already ruined shirt. Charles placed a hand at the back of her head, fingers twining into her hair. He was dimly aware of others filling the hall. The woman who'd sat at her side was wearing an expression of concern, but her features relaxed when she caught sight of what was no doubt joy written on Charles' face. It was marginally surprising to find a human here, but Charles spared her presence little thought, attention riveted on Raven. She clung to him.

"We will fix this, Raven. I swear it," he said, but he was unable to stop hot tears from welling in his eyes; falling down his cheeks to soak Raven's hair. She sobbed all the harder. Charles tightened his grip and buried his face in her hair, inhaling her scent, the connection between them as strong as ever, if not grounded in reality. They could fix this he thought fiercely, projecting it
into her mind. She stilled almost immediately.

It was still several minutes before she pulled back, her sobs fading into hiccups that shook her shoulders and wrinkled her chin. Charles pressed a hand to her cheek, smiling then, getting one in return that did more to ease the hurt than he was expecting.

"We will fix this," he repeated, Raven nodding, only then seeming to realize he was injured.

She glanced over his shoulder to Erik, frantic worry flittering across her features.

"It's fine. Just a broken foot," he said, but she seemed unconvinced.

"You need to have this looked at," she said. Charles shook his head.

"First I need to see Emma Frost," he said, glancing back to the glass-walled room where he could see Emma Frost stretched out across a cot. Raven's expression hardened, but she nodded, rising to her feet, waving Erik off when he looked set to intervene. His expression fell, thoughts coloured with uncertainty and rejection. Charles could tell he was half a second away from making an excuse to leave.

"I want you at my side," Charles reminded him. Erik caught his eye, gaze searching, but he seemed to find what he was looking for, because he nodded, some of his uncertainty vanishing.

He turned then to address the others in the hall, one pair of eyes exceedingly familiar. Angel Salvadore stepped forward, wings fluttering excitedly behind her. Charles flashed back to the day they'd met, Angel falling on her knees before the Oracle, wing badly burnt, requesting asylum from the Shadow King. Charles had hated the decision to groom her and send her back, but he'd known she was strong enough; his faith in her unwavering.

"Angel," he said, smiling. Angel rushed forward to envelope him in a hug.

"You made it," she said, drawing back. She hadn't changed in the years since he'd found her, burnt wing in need of as much healing as her scarred mind. She'd fought being returned to the Shadow King, though it hadn't taken long to convince her. Without her, they wouldn't be here. Charles told her as much.

"You're a hero, you know, " he said, Angel flushing, dismissing him with a wave of her hand. Charles chuckled and then turned to her companions.

Darwin he recognized immediately, but the blue-furred mutant could only be Hank McCoy. Charles wheeled towards him, extending a hand.

"I can't tell you what a great pleasure it's been working with you," he said. Hank's eyes grew wide. He bowed his head, somewhat reverently, and then fumbled with Charles' hand, shaking it vigorously once he'd caught it.

"It's an honour, Sir," he said, Charles unable to keep from laughing.

"No, please. It's simply Charles. We wouldn't be here if it weren't for you. Angel told me she intended to recruit the best, and she did not lie."

Hank's cheeks flushed at the compliment, twin spots of lavender that he tried desperately to hide. Charles took pity, offering a brief nod before turning away; gaze drawn across the room to where Banshee was talking with Havok in a hushed whisper, Wolverine and Logan lounging against a wall.
He'd sensed Azazel's mind even before Azazel stepped around the corner, eyes darting first to Angel and then to Erik. Erik had tensed upon seeing him, mind flaring with hate and anger. Charles wheeled forward so that he was positioned between them. Erik hesitated. It was enough for Charles to follow their link--still so new and strange--and flood Erik's mind with everything he'd taken from Azazel's memories. He projected Azazel's regret, his loathing and his fierce desire for something better; the countless hours he'd devoted to making amends for a young mind easily brainwashed by the Shadow King's might. Erik relented, though he was still cautious, still torn between allowing Charles his request and tearing Azazel to pieces.

*Please, there has been enough violence,* Charles sent, Erik deflating completely. Charles turned his attention back to Hank.

"Has everyone been seen to?" Charles waited for Hank's nod before saying, "Then I'll see Emma Frost now."

Hank gestured over his shoulder, back to the glass-walled room, Raven automatically assuming her place behind Charles' chair. Charles paused only long enough to catch Erik's eye, extracting a silent promise for Erik to remain; a silent promise to finish their long delayed conversation.

Erik nodded, a brief, curt thing, but the weight of his thoughts told Charles he intended to remain; that he would wait an eternity if that was what Charles needed.

*Not that long, certainly,* he sent back, earning a breathless laugh that Erik quickly covered with a mock glare. Charles grinned and then gestured them forward.

The first thing he noticed when he was finally shown into Emma's room was a hollow emptiness that matched his own. Her severed bond, he realized, though the Shadow King had killed Emma's guardian, so there was no way for her to repair the damage. The thought of it made Charles' ache. He automatically reached out and strengthened the artificial link between him and Raven, using it as a proxy to keep from bursting into tears. She shifted closer, hand coming to curl around Charles' shoulder.

"We'll fix this, remember," she said. Charles nodded, and then wheeled himself to Emma's bedside.

He'd gathered the basics from Hank's mind, and from what he could tell they hadn't been able to do much for her. She was stable, though unconscious, and no one seemed to know if she would ever wake. Charles reached towards her, setting his hand on the back of hers, palm turned down, fingers slightly curled in her slumber. He wrapped his hand around hers and ran a thumb across the back of her wrist. She showed no signs of noticing.

He was still exhausted from earlier, his telepathy weakened, his body broken and bleeding, still covered in dust and debris. His foot throbbed painfully, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten or drank, but still he closed his eyes, cast his thoughts out and sought the depths of her mind.

When he opened his eyes he found he was standing inside a white-walled room, thickly padded, the nothingness of it painful to absorb. Emma sat at the room's centre, though as a small child, curled neatly into a ball. She tensed when she sensed him. Charles instinctively drew back. This wasn't beyond his skill, but it was beyond his present abilities. He sent a tendril of calm in her direction, and then retreated entirely.

"Charles?" Raven asked when he opened his eyes. She had crossed to the other side of the bed and was watching him intently.
"She's fine, but deeply traumatized. I'm afraid right now all she needs is time. We'll need to take her back to the Citadel before we can revive her."

It was not, perhaps, the answer he had hoped for, but all things considered, it was better than the alternative. Raven nodded, countenance shifting as resolved settled over her features. Charles knew what was coming even before she spoke.

"No more excuses. You're seeing a doctor," she said, gesturing to his foot. Charles relented, though only because there was little else he could do at the moment.

The road ahead was long, but he couldn't very well walk it in his current state. He nodded to Raven, and then let her wheel him from the room.

~*~

Epilogue

One month later

"You're just out of practice, but you have been using your telepathy, even if it was directed by another party. It's still there," Charles said, reforming the thought in his mind, watching as Emma squinted, staring into Charles' eyes like she could physically read it in the curve of his irises.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, I can't."

Charles inclined his head, more than willing to allow her the time. She'd only woken a fortnight ago and so far Charles was the only person she allowed in her presence. The sight of others left her skittish and nervous, though Charles knew it was all part of her healing. She would never be the woman she was before the Shadow King claimed her, but in time she would return to the Citadel's ranks.

"We'll try again tomorrow," Charles said, topping up her tea, adding two cubes of sugar at her nod. Her mouth pressed into a thin line, calling attention to the lines marring her face, her hair now washed through with grey. She brought the tea to her lips and sipped.

A knock startled them both, tea sloshing over the edge of Emma's cup; falling to stain the dove grey of her skirts. She winced, Charles handing her a napkin before glancing over his shoulder, the door to her sitting room firmly shut.

"Come," he called, Raven ducking her head inside. Her presence sang along their artificial bond, not as strong as before, and lacking so many of its previous intricacies, but it was enough to ease the pain of having lost her; enough to create a pale shadow of what they once had.

"It's time," Raven said.

Charles inclined his head. He turned back to Emma, Emma still in the midst of dabbing at her skirt. She seemed entirely preoccupied by the task, something he knew well enough not to interrupt. He set his cup down on the table and reached for his cane.

It still fit awkwardly in his hand, new callouses forming, though they had yet to take the shape of its wood. He could put some weight on the foot, though not enough to walk properly, even after having been seen by a healer. Without the cane, he might have limped a few paces, but these days getting around required a little more support. Charles crossed to Raven's side, taking in the pale flush of her cheeks; the excited glimmer in her eyes.

"You've been with Hank," he said. Raven narrowed her gaze, reprimand for snooping. Charles
laughed.

"He's working on the Mastermind project," she said as they set off down the corridor, Emma still lost to her tea stain, Charles closing her door firmly behind him.

Charles hummed. A terrifying project, and one he wanted nothing to do with, memories of Mastermind's consciousness still lingering in his mind. But it was important work, Mastermind too dangerous now that he was no longer under the Shadow King's control. Deconstructing a sentient program took time; and a level of genius few possessed, hence Hank.

"I think he plans on returning to the Walled City once he's done. They're busy rebuilding democracy, and I think he thinks he can help."

"He can," Charles said, enthusiastically before he sensed the source of Raven's distress. "But doing so will require almost constant travel between Genosha and the Walled City. It might not be ideal, but..." He very purposely did not mention that, technically, nothing was keeping her here now. Neither of them was ready to acknowledge the limitations of their artificial fix. Neither of them was ready to acknowledge that a more permanent, organic solution was unlikely to be found.

"Please, Charles. I'm not mooning over the guy," Raven said, smile spreading across her face as she added, "Unlike some people I could name."

Charles very purposely ignored the comment, but a tell-tale blush spread across his cheeks. It deepened considerably when they turned the corner, the object of Raven's comment standing against one of the hall's many windows. Charles had sensed him long before now, the strange link between them still present, nothing like his bond with Raven, but a connection all the same.

Erik was framed in slivers of overcast light. Charles paused in his steps, stumbling slightly as he took in the silver in Erik's hair. Raven snorted. Charles shook her off and crossed to Erik's side, Erik glancing over his shoulder at their approach. His smile was hesitant as it was fond.

"Are you ready?" Charles asked, taking up residence at Erik's side, staring out onto the city below. The morning had brought torrential rains, but the day seemed to be clearing, rare peeks of sunshine flitting through the clouds. The sea was still choppy, though, dark waves crashing against piers, lapping at the coastline like it intended to swallow the island whole.

"I've been ready for a long time," Erik said.

Charles flushed, unable to ignore the innuendo in Erik's tone. He'd refused Charles everything but a scant handful of stolen kisses--and the first still made Charles' toes curl to think about--insisting on removing the last remnants of Schmidt from his head before he pledged anything more. Charles respected the decision, but arranging something so delicate amidst all the other chaos had proven both difficult and inconvenient.

Turning to catch Erik's eye, Charles offered a smile and then extended his hand, delighting when Erik folded their fingers together.

He caught sight of Raven then, fighting a smirk, though Charles very purposely did not release Erik's hand. Raven shook her head and fell into step a pace behind, Charles leading them to the council chambers.

It was still new, walking these halls with Erik at his side. He'd spent the better part of a week inside the Walled City before returning to Genosha, Erik remaining behind to deal with the arrival of Genosha's army. Charles was half convinced he wouldn't come, whispered promises notwithstanding, but here he was, four days arrived, and Charles was not above taking advantage.
He kept Erik's hand, letting their shoulders brush as they walked, Charles lighter on his feet, not needing to rely on his cane quite so much. Erik had intentionally slowed his pace--he was conscious of it even now--matching Charles step for step. It might have been embarrassing were it not so thoroughly touching. Charles couldn't even find it in him to protest when Erik took Charles' elbow and helped him down the stairs.

The others were already seated around the council table when they came into the room, Raven closing the heavy oak doors behind them. A chair had been set up at the head of the table, adjacent Emma's empty chair. It would be a while before she returned to claim it. Destiny stood at the front of the room, silent witness, her powers not needed in this endeavour. She nodded first to Charles, and then to Raven, before stepping forward to block Erik's path.

"Erik Lehnsherr, Magneto," she said. Erik inclined his head. "We would not have succeeded without your assistance. The Citadel owes you a great debt. Allow us to repay it now."

"Any time you're ready," Erik said, offering her a lopsided grin before he took his proffered chair. Charles was unable to keep a smirk from tugging at his lips. Erik saw it, his grin widening.

"Then let us begin," Jean said, Destiny having retreated to the back of the room. Charles' smile slid off his face and he quickly sought his chair, Raven coming to stand at his back.

It marked the first time he had been in the same room with Jean, Psylocke and Cable, their battle a distant memory, and yet feeling their combined power brought it all back. Charles exchanged glances with each in turn, acknowledgment of what they'd accomplish; of the suffering they'd endured. Dark circles still framed each of their eyes, Charles well aware he sported a matching pair. They shared dreams occasionally, nightmares of ice palaces where the Shadow King devoured them one by one. Lingering damage from a battle hard won.

He turned back to Erik.

Erik ruled the head of the table like this meeting was his and his alone; his legs splayed wide, his expression fierce and determined. He sat in a room full of equals when others might have shied away, assigned deity status where gods did not exist. Charles offered him a smile, getting one in return before he let his eyes slide shut.

He was dimly aware of the others doing the same, their merging at once familiar and seamless. Erik's mind beckoned; a tangled mess of steel and mazes, black cancer at its centre poison from the Shadow King's well. Charles reached towards it, the others doing the same, time fading from existence as they met the task ahead.

It marked perhaps the easiest thing they would do in the coming months and years, and yet there was nothing easy about it, the process as exhausting as it was dangerous.

~*~

Magneto blinked up at an unfamiliar ceiling, squinting until a sea of blue resolved into the underside of a canopy. Several long minutes passed before it came back to him: the council chamber, the psionic implant; Charles.

He had few memories of what had happened in between, the council chamber having faded away, only to be replaced by the same large chamber Charles had led him to the last time. From there everything was a blur, Magneto straining to recall the points in between.

"I'm sorry, Erik," a voice called from across the room.

Magneto struggled to sit, getting caught in the blankets, panic surging in his chest until Charles
came into view, expression grave. Magneto blinked, catching Charles’ scent then, registering too late that the bed he occupied was Charles’.

"It didn't work?" he asked, stomach sinking, the thought of Schmidt returning--of the Shadow King having some lingering control, even from beyond this plane--too much to bear.

Charles expression softened and he shook his head.

"No, we've removed it, but it was buried deep inside your long term memory. Removing it brought a lot of memories to the surface. I've dampened them--that's why you can't remember what happened--but if I remove the dampening block, they will flood back. I'm afraid it won't be pleasant."

Magneto stared, blinking for several minutes. He became aware then of the soft light of morning trickling in through the window. How long, he wondered, had it taken?

"You've been unconscious two days," Charles answered, coming to perch on the edge of the bed. Magneto pushed himself off his elbows, shifting back so that he sat with his back pressed against the headboard.

"I kicked you out of your bed, I'm sorry," he said. Charles chuckled. At Magneto’s frown, he gestured to the other side of the bed, where Magneto found a sleep-dented pillow. Unbidden, a flush crept into his cheeks. Refusing to give in to his embarrassment, Magneto squared his shoulders and stared resolutely into Charles' eyes.

His head was cleanly shaved, the sight strangely ethereal, though Magneto missed the soft crop of fuzz he'd sported in the Walled City. He looked exhausted, and yet so incredibly beautiful it was hard for Magneto to tear his gaze away. Charles smiled.

"Do you want me to…?" He gestured, fingers held near his temple, waving uncertainly.

Magneto nodded, and then thought better of it and raised a hand. "But not today," he said, relief flooding Charles' face. He gave a curt nod and then moved from the bed, Magneto frowning, half a second away from calling Charles back when Charles paused by a dresser.

When he turned back, he was carrying a stack of books. Magneto's frown deepened. Charles returned to his place on the edge of the bed. He set the books between them. Magneto read the top book's spine.

"A Modern History of Judaism?" He glanced back up and caught Charles' eye.

"You're probably going to find you need more rest than usual, at least for a few days, especially after I remove the dampening block. I thought you might want something to do, so I stopped by the Great Library and took out some books."

Magneto was already flipping through the titles, all books on Judaism, his mother's star warm against his chest. He reached an absent hand towards it and found he wasn't wearing a shirt. He caught Charles' eye then, arching an eyebrow, Charles flushing slightly.

"The healers were here to see to your scars," he said, Magneto glancing down, finding the livid line across his chest faded to a thin streak of white. He brushed fingertips against it and then turned back to the pile of books.

"Thank you," he said, eyes caressing the spine of a book on the history of Judaism amongst mutant populations. He inhaled sharply and then very purposely set the books aside. Charles looked marginally disappointed, but before he had time to complain, Magneto was reaching out,
grabbing Charles by the shoulders and pulling him forward. Charles’ startled gasp sparked a wave of heat that travel straight to Magneto's groin. As soon as Charles realized what was happening he came willingly, fitting neatly into Magneto's arms.

"Are you sure you're..." was as far as Charles got before Magneto was kissing him, lips sliding together in messy glide, Charles melting against him, every look, every promise of the past few weeks coming together, Charles no longer the coy telepath who'd flirted with Magneto from across a chess board. He was Magneto's, completely and utterly, his equal in a world of inferiors.

"That's hardly a fair assessment," Charles said when they parted, tone scolding, but Magneto merely smiled, smile shifting into a grin when Charles relented and rolled his eyes. He set his cane against the nightstand and climbed fully into the bed, hesitating only briefly before swinging a leg over Magneto's thighs, coming to sit in Magneto's lap.

"And here I was beginning to think you were all talk," he said.

"I'm fairly certain you're the one who was doing the talking," Magneto countered, but he drew Charles to him all the same.

For the first time in a really long time Magneto's future was uncertain, but it was nice to have at least one point of consistency, Charles his, for however long Charles would have him.

"Forever," Charles breathed between kisses, Magneto smiling into their next kiss. Forever he could live with.

Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you again to Pookaseraph and Afrocurl, who helped shape this into what it is now. I couldn't have done this without their patience, understanding and advice. Another thank you to everyone who has listened to me ramble about this story for the past 2 months now. I'm glad I didn't scare you off.

Finally, my wasteland tag on my tumblr contains several sources of inspiration for this fic:
http://nekosmuse.tumblr.com/tagged/wasteland
For anyone who is interested.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!