The Road Not Taken

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Summary

Magneto is losing himself to his plans for domination and Charles is finding the balance between his personality and Onslaught after accepting the entity as part of himself. Their friendship has reached the proverbial fork in the road, but the question remains, can they find the road not taken?

The Onslaught saga concludes, roughly combining XMFC, X3 (mostly through the appearance of Phoenix plus a few other points), and the Onslaught comic arc. I'm not the best at summaries, but hopefully that's intriguing enough.

Notes

This is the final story of the series. Chapter updates are going up on ff.net before they go up here. If you haven't read A Spark Neglected, Two Roads Diverged in a Yellow Wood, or That Which Will Survive, I'd suggest you at least skim them. This is meant to combine comic storylines with X3 but since I pretend X3 didn't exist, I only have a few scenes that I vaguely remember to go off of and I'm not dedicated enough to put myself through it again just to work into this story (sorry to actual fans of X3).

Notes at the bottom of every chapter will tell what's taken from comics and movies. In a
nutshell, this story is going to be more based on stuff from my head than the other ones.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Two Years Gone

Prologue:

Charles Xavier sat in a darkened room, legs crossed and hands clasped prim and proper over his knee. His gaze followed the back and forth movement of the room's other occupant. Swallowed in the shadows, the occupant remained unseen. In fact, it had never been seen in any of their many meetings, something Charles wasn't particularly pleased with. Its glowing eyes betrayed it, though, so at least the professor could trace where the thing was.

"Are you going to answer my question?" he asked after enough time had passed that it was safe to assume he was being ignored.

"You continue to ask things to which you will not comprehend the answer, Charles Xavier."

"Humor me."

"You have asked the same question every time we have met and every time I have refused to answer. Why do you not pull it from my thoughts?" the creature taunted.

"I've learned where Miss Grey's boundaries lie. I won't risk her."

"You risk her every day you remain in ignorance of what I truly am. You build your shields to hold me, but they are failing, are they not? I can feel it when I push."

Charles could feel it too as the entity pressed against the barriers he'd meticulously constructed around it.

"See, little telepath? I am gaining ground. What will you do when you fail to protect your charge?"

"I'll ask you one last time. What are you?"

The creature laughed, mirth bright in its eyes. "One last time? You will continue to ask until the day I break free, until the day I destroy you for keeping me trapped."

Charles' eyes narrowed, taking on a faintly orange hue. A barely visible barrier rippled between the pair as the other entity took on a determined guise. The standoff continued until an ethereal gasp echoed through the room. Xavier jerked back, his motion mirrored by the creature.

"You will not get what you want from me," the entity sneered. "Not without sacrificing her."

"Then I see no reason for me to keep visiting. Goodbye, Phoenix."

The near invisible walls surrounding Phoenix became opaque in an instant. As Charles pulled back, he could feel the creature beating against them with renewed vigor.

He opened his eyes back in his study. Jean sat across from him, pale and massaging her temple. She looked unmistakably hopeful.

"I'm sorry, my dear," Charles said with a smile he hoped was comforting.

Jean deflated. "It was a long shot, wasn't it? It's not like it's been talkative or anything."
"We'll figure out a way to separate it from you. Until then, we'll keep working on your shielding and continue with your training as planned. Your telekinesis has been progressing in leaps and bounds. Take the day. Rest. We'll try some new techniques in our next meeting."

"Same time two weeks from now?"

"That's right."

The door shut behind Jean. Charles steepled his fingers and turned his gaze out the window. That had been more of a fight than it should have been. Phoenix was strong and only getting stronger. Whenever he tried to get information from it telepathically, it took advantage of the link and attempted to tear down the shields he'd long ago put in place to hold it. This time was far closer than he'd like to admit. They needed to take a step back and regroup. He couldn't risk telepathic connection with the being anymore. He'd talk to Hank again. Hopefully, the scientist would have another idea.

Chapter 1: Two Years Gone

Magneto and the Brotherhood had kept themselves busy in the two years since stopping Onslaught. Mystique walked into the room Magneto had claimed in their latest headquarters.

"Is it done?" the Brotherhood leader asked without looking up.

"We won't be hearing from Mr. Zane again."

"Very good. You're dismissed until the briefing."

His second in command left with a stiff nod and a quick glance at the man beside her leader. Magneto returned his attention to the engineer next to him once the door was shut.

"And this machine will do as I asked?"

"According to my calculations, it should magnify your power at least tenfold."

"Excellent. When can construction begin?"

"As soon as you give it the okay. We have a factory picked out in Nebraska. It's large enough that it should be able to house the machine at the center with plenty of space around it to set up defenses. There's enough rubble surrounding it that it won't be obvious when we bring in more supplies."

"Begin work immediately. Charles has had a monopoly on power-amplifying technology for long enough. It's time for a change."

"Happy Birthday, Jean!"

Jean Grey put a shocked hand to her chest. Recovering, she turned to Scott Summers, who was by her side after taking a two hour hike around the grounds, and smacked him on the shoulder. He smiled sheepishly at her. A grin spread over the redhead's face.

"How did you guys do all this? I mean-

"You mean how did we manage to surprise a telepath?" Sean cut in.
"That is where having an older, wiser telepath comes in handy," Alex said, putting a hand on Charles' shoulder.

Charles shrugged. "All I had to do was block one thought off in everyone's minds. I got permission and it wasn't invasive in the slightest. Now, I have been dying for some of this delicious cake that Nathan so graciously made, so might we jump to the cake cutting part of the celebration?"

An hour later, everyone was still talking and laughing. The younger students were enjoying their Saturday off with the added bonus of cake, which was now mostly gone. Hank and Charles had commandeered a corner and had been in deep discussion over some recent genetic discovery, it seemed. Scott passed them as he came back to where Jean, Ororo, Alex, Sean, Bobby, and Warren sat, setting a refilled cup of punch in front of the birthday girl.

"I got you more punch," he said needlessly.

Alex laughed and punched his younger brother in the shoulder. "She's got you whipped."

Ororo swallowed her cake and draped an arm around Jean. "Please. They've practically been together since she came to the mansion."

"Which is plenty of time for whipping," Bobby added.

Alex rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

"It's okay to be jealous," Scott teased, putting his arm around Jean's waist. "Just because I managed to get a girl while you haven't had a date in, what is it now, a year doesn't mean I'm whipped. Plus, I'm allowed to dote on my girlfriend. It's not every day a girl turns 23."

"I'll have you know I had a perfectly good date in- well- back-" Alex's eyes moved to the ceiling as he tried to recall his last date.

"Don't forget to carry the one," Sean mock-whispered forcing a glare from the other man.

"Face it, Alex," Warren said, putting a consoling hand on the blonde's shoulder. "Your brother has more game than you."

From their corner, Hank and Charles turned their attention to the revelry at the table as laughter broke through their conversation. Hank looked back to Charles, whose eyes remained on the table with a fond yet disquieted expression.

"You're worried about her."

Charles dragged his eyes back to Hank. "You know me too well."

"The Phoenix. Is it going to free itself?"

"It's fighting the blocks I put in her mind. I fear it might break through."

"But you can put in sturdier blocks, right? You're stronger than it is."

Charles flashed a grimace. "That's what I thought. But I haven't spoken with it in months. Not since it almost broke through. I'd thought without the foothold on the shields it gets when I go into Jean's mind, it would lose ground. Unfortunately, we both may be underestimating the power of the Phoenix."
The two glanced to the table again. Jean was leaning on Scott laughing while Sean did some sort of impression. Honestly, at least three of them were nearly 30. It looked like they would never act their age. Jean pulled away from Scott, still grinning, and surreptitiously massaged her temple. Her attention was fully on Sean. She probably didn't even notice she was doing it.

Charles bit the inside of his lip, a new habit he'd formed without noticing sometime since Alkali Lake, then plastered a smile on his face. "Perhaps we should worry about this another time. Nothing will happen in the immediate future. For now, let's enjoy the party."

The two fell into easy conversation over the latest edition of the American Journal of Human Genetics. Neither could keep from surreptitiously glancing at the revelry around them, wondering how long it could last.
They can't hold you down; you were born to rise

Chapter Notes

Title from Halestorm's "Freak Like Me"
italic = telepathy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Weeks passed and the frivolity of the party was forgotten far sooner than anyone had hoped. The Brotherhood was up to its usual tricks. Charles' weekly meetings with Jean transitioned into biweekly meetings.

Charles didn't want to admit it, but he was at a loss for what to do. They were containing the being that referred to itself as Phoenix. But that was all. Keeping her mental shields at full was taking its toll on Jean. The poor girl was showing increasing signs of exhaustion. Scott and Ororo were starting to notice and getting more and more curious about what exactly happened in Jean's one-on-one training sessions with the Professor. Charles and Hank's best efforts hadn't produced any notable results other than establishing that Phoenix gave off different readings than Onslaught had with Charles. They'd been quietly working on a defense against it for the past year and a half with varying results. With technology ever advancing, they were constantly trying new tests to see if anything new could be revealed. That was why Charles was paying a visit to Beast's lab before his next meeting with Jean.

"Anything new, Henry?"

"Nothing. Just like last time."

It was hard to be disappointed when they barely expected results in the first place. McCoy still managed to take every ineffective test as a personal failure.

"How much longer do you think she can do this?" Hank asked.

"You never know when a breakthrough will happen. We just have to keep trying."

"You haven't made any progress finding out its origins?"

"No luck there either, I'm afraid," Charles said with a sigh. "Now that I've stopped speaking with it telepathically, all I can do is pick up some rather disturbing emotions. It's old. I still think it's been with her for a long time though. The dreams she's mentioned from her childhood are too much of a coincidence to ignore."

"Then why did it wait until now?"

"Perhaps her power is its power," Charles said after a pause. "We've established that it's not like Onslaught, but that doesn't mean there aren't similarities between the two. It may be dependent upon Jean's physical and mental state. I think the advancement of her powers since Alkali Lake has had the unintended side effect of further awakening whatever it is we've been interacting with in her mind."
"That would make sense," Hank said as he pushed his glasses up his nose and skimmed a set of readings. "The only thing the tests have definitively demonstrated is that the Phoenix is gaining strength. There's no way for you to talk to it?"

"Not without risking its release."

Hank took off his glasses and ran a hand down his face as the Professor paused to take a glance at his watch. "I have a meeting with her now. Keep working, Hank. We're close to something. We cannot give up."

Charles' ever more frequent meetings with Jean were supposedly for Charles to train the burgeoning telepath on how to handle powers that easily matched Emma Frost's now (not that Miss Frost knew that, thankfully, Charles thought) and showed no signs of slowing. What they had turned into were check-ins to evaluate Jean's condition.

"I'm doing the best I can with my shields, Professor, but I can feel it. It's stronger than it was last week."

"You can tell a discernible difference from week to week? How so?" Xavier made sure to keep the urgency from his tone. But a difference from one week to the next…

Jean's gaze became distant. "I can feel it…clawing. Before, I'd feel waves of emotion, probably like what you say you feel from it. But now, I…"

"Yes?"

"I think I can hear its voice."

Well. That wasn't good at all. If her shields were thin enough that she could distinguish words...he had to physically hold himself back from running an agitated hand through his hair. "What does it say when you can hear it?"

The woman broke eye contact, but remained silent.

"Jean?"

Jean grimaced. "It says you're lying. That nothing can stop it. That it will eventually take over and there's nothing anyone can do."

As if it wasn't bad before. "You know it's trying to break you down. You mustn't believe what it tells you."

"I know," she replied in all but a whisper.

"You've been doing very well with your shields until now. Let me just check to see?"

After the customary (albeit shaky) nod of consent, Charles linked his mind to Jean's. His evaluation took only a few seconds.

"There are a few cracks. Places where it's a little thin. Nothing I can't repair," he added on at Jean's despairing look.

For the first time, his words didn't seem to reassure her. "But if it happened once…so soon after last time. You said they were fine at our last meeting. How is this happening?"
"You're doing exactly what you need to do. Leave the rest to Dr. McCoy and me."

"I think maybe I'm going to tell Scott and Ororo."

"If you feel comfortable with that, then you should."

"I just...if something happens, I want them to know."

"We're doing all we can to stop something from happening, Jean."

"I know. But we've been trying to fix this for over a year and it's only getting worse and I don't want to end up hurting people. I feel like they should know that. If you still had to worry about Onslaught, wouldn't you want your friends' support?"

Charles could almost hear the snicker in his head. Scratch that; he could definitely hear the snicker in his head. Before Jean could question him further, he cleared his throat and composed himself. "Of course. Of course, a good support system can make all the difference. Tell whoever you feel comfortable. Don't give up hope though, my dear. We won't surrender you that easily. We'll find a way to stop this. I was just telling Dr. McCoy that I feel we're close to a breakthrough."

For all his reassurances, the woman remained downcast. She left the room with a wane nod and a "Thank you, Professor".

He made it back to his desk before Onslaught piped up, a feat unto itself.

"Yes, Charles, tell the girl how much she should share the burden with her friends. Look at how much you trust yours, after all."

"Our situations are not the same. You aren't working against me anymore. And you agreed that keeping your continued existence a secret was for the best too. I don't see why you get to taunt me."

"Because I never wanted to reveal myself in the first place. I was perfectly happy taking over the world from behind the curtain. You're the one who lives for sharing and team building. But I digress. Can we really do what we're telling her?"

Charles sighed. "I have every confidence that between the two of us and Hank we will find a way to defeat Phoenix. All we have to do is isolate it and figure out how it got there in the first place."

"Then we can get it out in a similar fashion, yes, yes, we've discussed this. We've also discussed that it's easier said than done."

"We can do it, Charles snapped back somewhere between petulant and offended."

"Before it takes over Ms. Grey?"

..."Yes, I thought not. Although...your talk of a breakthrough...I have the same feeling. Why is that?"

"Because, as you've been so keen to point out in the past, we are the same person. We will defeat Phoenix. You're the one who spent so much time convincing me of how powerful we are together."

"Indeed. What do you plan to do when the creature takes over?"

"We can hold it back."

"Hmm, interesting. Where do you draw the line between your confidence and my arrogance?"
Does it matter?

Onslaught's eyebrow raise was palpable. *You're a changed man, aren't you?*

*As are you. I don't recall you being particularly hesitant while you were manipulating Stryker and his son.*

*I just want us to be prepared. Phoenix is…different. It isn't like us.*

*It's not. We need to figure out what it is. Until then, we can handle this. If Phoenix breaks free… we'll deal with it.*

*That we will.*

Despite their own troubles, Xavier and Magneto stubbornly continued to meet for chess, neither willing to concede that their values had strayed too far to salvage their already strained relationship. It didn't help that a government "research facility" had recently been ransacked with most of its occupants dead or injured.

"You seem distracted today, Charles. I haven't taken this many of your pieces this quickly in years."

"I apologize. My mind is elsewhere."

"Nowhere it shouldn't be, I hope."

Charles bit his tongue and narrowed his eyes. It seemed the only thing he could trust about Erik these days was his distrust of telepathy. "Nowhere you need to worry about."

Three more moves in less than amiable silence.

Frowning, Erik leaned forward. "Are you sure you're alright? You don't seem to be yourself."

"Careful, Erik, I might start to think you care."

"I'm just asking a question-"

"I think I'm more myself than I ever was before."

"What does that mean?" Erik asked, pulling back.

Charles glared, but cut himself off at a voice only he could hear.

*Careful, Charles. We've done so well. We wouldn't want to give ourselves away over something frivolous, would we?*

Erik watched as Charles closed his eyes, inhaled deeply and exhaled, then reopened them.

"I apologize again, my friend. I'm afraid you've caught me on an off day. The school has been growing. Making sure all the students are accommodated…well, let's just say Oxford prepared me for a number of things, but it was lacking in other areas."

That apparently didn't pacify Erik if his facial expression was any indication.

*He's planning something*, the ever present voice of Onslaught said.
Isn't he always? Charles sighed back.

It's bigger. I wish he wouldn't wear that damned helmet all the bloody time.

Welcome to the world of agreeing with me. We must do it more often.

Hmm, that would be boring. He's suspicious again. Best head him off the trail.

"Perhaps we should call today a draw," Charles said, out loud this time.

Erik's expression turned questioning. "But I'm beating you so handily."

So much for heading off suspicion. "For now. Who knows what strategy I have planned though."

"If we're going to play a game of what if, then let's suppose I see through your strategy."

"Oh, Erik," the telepath responded with a hint of the charisma he'd had back when the pair had first met, "people never see through my strategies unless I want them too. But, if it makes you happy, I shall concede this match. I have matters to attend to."

"Very well," Erik said, bowing his head ever so slightly. "Same time next month?"

"Same time next month."

As Charles' form disappeared towards the parking lot, Magneto let his face fall again. It had been a lie when Charles had said the school was bothering him. They may not be as close as they once were, but he could still tell. Well, it may have been partially true, but it wasn't the whole story or even a majority of it. He'd barely been able to hide his surprise at Charles conceding so easily. Of course, the two of them hid so many things from one another nowadays, from attack priorities to potential advantages to dinner plans, it was hard to tell what lies were strategy and which were personal. Let Charles have his secrets, Erik scoffed. It wasn't as if the great Magneto didn't have secrets of his own. His machine was coming along nicely. Soon, things would be changing.

Exactly one month later, an assortment of no less than twenty-two paper clips, pens, and tacks wove an intricate pattern in the air around Charles. The telepath watched the objects moving, each on its own trajectory, then glanced to his desk. Another pen began to journey towards its companions until-

Professor?

The room filled with series of carpeted thuds and a sigh of muffled annoyance. Thirteen of the objects managed to remain in the air, two more than last time he'd been interrupted, thank you very much.

Yes, Henry, how can I help you? You know I'm leaving to meet Erik in an hour.

You need to come down to the infirmary.

His annoyance dissipated in a flash. What's wrong?

It's Jean. She came in complaining of a headache, but I can't find any physical cause for it outside of a low-grade fever. She's showing signs of stress. I'm worried that it might be...

I'm on my way.
As he went, he probed Jean's mind. The woman was most definitely under stress. The shields he had just checked two days ago were pressed to their limit. The elevator doors opened on the medical floor. He was out as soon as his chair would fit through the doors, attempting to hold up the failing mental walls as he went. Something was different this time. Every time he secured one leak, another formed elsewhere. He made it halfway down the hall before was brought up short by a telepathic pulse.

"Oh no…"

The pulse was followed by a psionic wave. He tried to hold it back, but it was too much and Charles knew no more.

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Erik drummed his fingers across the table. With a sigh, he looked at his watch. Charles was half an hour late. A spark of worry lit in the pit of his stomach. He smothered it. He wasn't that person anymore. He didn't worry about Charles or his X-Men. They had certainly proven they could hold their own against the Brotherhood.

But what if they'd finally been attacked by the government? What if there was a sneak attack and they used gas before Charles could do anything and now the X-Men were giving away secrets about how to find mutants or how often Charles met with Magneto and where?

Erik snapped his head around. No. If that had happened, there would be agents all over the place. Something else must have happened. Perhaps Charles was ill. But then he would've sent one of his minions. Something bigger was going on. The only sensible plan was to go to Westchester. Just to make sure everything was as it should be. Not because he was worried about Charles. He was simply concerned about what the X-Men could give away if captured.

As he stood up, Azazel appeared with Emma. Odd, he hadn't summoned them. Emma strode to him, speaking before she got all the way there.

"I sensed a strong telepathic presence. Very strong."

"A spy. Here?" Magneto growled.

"Stop being paranoid," she replied. "Not here. Not a spy. Just a flash then it hid itself. I've felt it before…back when we were sifting through your Professor's head."

"Onslaught is dead," Magneto said, suddenly tense. Although, Charles had been acting oddly…

The White Queen shook her head. "I never said he wasn't."

Magneto's furrowed brow was barely visible under his helmet.

"Onslaught and Dr. Xavier weren't the only telepaths there, now were they?"

It took a moment until… "Jean? But she would never…though better safe than sorry. Charles never showed up for our match. You know where to go," Magneto said as he strode over to the red mutant. "Pick up Mystique and the others on the way."

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Chapter End Notes

When I go into detail about what the Phoenix Force is, it's going to be way different
from canon. I don't know much about it to begin with, but I know it's not terrestrial and I'm not doing anything alien in these stories. I might combine it with traits from another X-Men villain who I'll keep to myself for the time being. So it may end up being Phoenix in name only. Sorry if that disappoints anyone.
And you were caught at the turn, caught in the burning glow

Chapter Notes

Title taken from Linkin Park's "Burn It Down".

I wrote this entire chapter from Erik's POV then realized (with the help of my lovely friend aeskis) that it didn't work. So I rewrote the whole thing from scratch. I think this works a lot better. Hopefully you think so too :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Flames. Why did it sound like there were flames? Ever the scientist, Hank pulled himself back to consciousness to find the answer to his question.

Oh. Fire. That made sense. That probably meant he needed to get out. But his brain was still working slowly. He didn't feel that concussed. Possibly smoke inhalation. Or some kind of shock. Was anyone else in danger? A surge of protect swept through him before he remembered, no, there were protocols. Charles had trained them well. The others knew what to do and if they were all incapacitated...well there wasn't much of a chance anyway, was there? He could hear pretty well and he didn't hear any panicked screaming. Besides, he needed to get himself out before he could help anyone else.

But what had he been doing? He pulled himself up the wall to his feet. It wasn't a raging fire, but flames were licking the walls on the far side of the room leading out into the hall. He was in the East Wing's medical lab. When they had become big enough to have more than one medical lab, he didn't know, but he was thankful for the extra space. But that was beside the point. Focus, McCoy. Take stock of the situation. Smoke was obscuring the ceiling now. Paradoxically, his head was beginning to clear as he edged his way towards the door, careful to avoid smoldering bits of lab and destroyed instruments.

Back to the question at hand. What had he been doing? Why was there a fire?

Hypothesis 1: He had been running an experiment and something had gone wrong.

No. That wasn't right. All of his experiments were running in the other research labs. This one had been designated the primary medical facility. Even if he had decided to run an experiment, there's no way it would have progressed to fiery explosion so quickly...despite Alex's jibes about his lack of grace.

Hypothesis 2: The fire's origins could be found elsewhere. It had only spread to the medical lab.

That didn't seem right either. He couldn't put his finger on why, so he couldn't dismiss it though. Intuition never beat science. But perhaps if he could come up with a more logical hypothesis...

Hypothesis 3: Someone had knocked him out and started a fire.

That couldn't be right. Who would have done such a thing? Except...he couldn't shake the feeling that that was the correct conclusion. He needed more evidence.

Perhaps if he focused on his other question. What had he been doing? He'd come here for a
reason. Someone must have needed medical attention, which somehow meant him now because apparently a doctorate meant you could fix everything including sprained wrists and gashed legs. That was right though. There had been another person. Something important. Headaches. Stress. He'd...he'd called Charles down? Yes. He remembered that. Why? Charles wasn't a medical expert so why did he call the Professor?

Because it was Jean. JEAN! The memory hit him like a summer storm. Jean was showing considerable stress. Enough that Hank had postulated she might be having problems with her shields. He'd called Charles, then...Jean's eyes had flown open, but they were burning. Not unlike Charles' when Onslaught had first manifested, yet not exactly like it either. She seemed to be literally on fire except she wasn't burning so she couldn't have been. She'd flung him across the room with her telekinesis. The last thing he'd seen was the beginnings of fire and Jean's feet as she walked out of the room.

Conclusion: Phoenix had taken over Jean.

But Charles had said he could control the other being. If that was true, why hadn't someone come to find him? Jean would be in bad shape after an episode like that. And Ororo and Bobby would've put out the fire. So what was keeping them?

He made it to the hallway. The flames continued to the elevator, only on the walls, not the floor. It was surprisingly controlled. For the time being. The more pressing issue was that he wasn't alone.

"Charles!"

He galloped down the hall (he hated that "gallop" could be applied to the way he ran, but he'd seen video) and fell to Charles' side. The telepath was collapsed on the floor, his wheelchair uselessly tipped over behind him. Was he injured? A quick inventory told him there were no external injuries. If there were internal injuries, they weren't severe enough that he could feel them yet. No visible head injuries. Not even a bump. And smoke inhalation probably wasn't an issue. Hank had to have been unconscious longer than Charles and the fire was centered here. Once unconscious, he would've been on the ground, the best place to avoid smoke inhalation.

Although, now that he thought about it, it was getting a little bit harder to breath. The fire was less controlled than it had been before; it had spread to the ceiling. He could see flames licking out from the blanket of smoke covering it. Not good. He needed to get himself and Charles out. Except...the elevator wouldn't work. There were no windows on this floor. The escape route was on the other end of the hall. Normally, this wouldn't be a problem, but carrying Charles and dealing with the fact that he was already having difficulty controlling his coughing...he had to try though.

Creaking above them drew his attention to the ceiling once more. He barely had time to throw himself over Charles as a section of the ceiling collapsed not four feet from them. Now he was coughing on smoke AND debris. Oh, and his exit was blocked. What was he going to do? What could he-

A familiar pop sounded. Still hovering over Charles, he looked up to find Azazel. What in the hell was- It didn't matter. Azazel glanced from him to the unconscious professor, put his hand on Hank's shoulder, and they were gone before he could protest.

Only to reappear in another flaming location.

"What- why-" McCoy managed between coughs. It was difficult trying to sound authoritative when you were suffering from smoke inhalation.
"I am saving you and your friends. For some reason. Keep hold of your leader. I have only two hands."

The statement made sense when the teleporter repositioned himself, keeping one hand firmly on Hank's shoulder and reaching out to grab Alex's with the other. Hank barely registered that Alex was dragging an unconscious Bobby before they reappeared, thankfully in a place that wasn't burning. It was a different wing which, disturbingly, appeared to be crumbling around them.

"Grab his hand," the teleporter demanded.

Hank felt someone grab his hand and looked up to see Sean holding a sobbing Jubilee. The three-year-old was their youngest, an orphan they had found in Los Angeles. For some reason, the girl had taken a liking to Sean.

Then they were outside. His body was still trying to expel the smoke it had taken in, but he needed to make sure everyone was okay. Groups of children in varying states of distress were being maneuvered away by...the Brotherhood? A single figure stood perilously close to the burning section of the school. As his vision cleared, the figure resolved into Storm. Her head was bleeding heavily from a gash over her temple and she swayed on her feet. Most off-putting, the usually stoic woman was crying. Clouds churned over the fire, in part directed by Janos, who stood nearby.

Coughing beginning to subside, Hank positioned Charles in a comfortable position and stood.

"What happened?" Sean asked, wide eyes on the fallen professor.

"The same thing that happened to the rest of the school."

"Right. Damn."

Sean looked as if he might collapse, like maybe the fact that he was holding a child was the only thing keeping him together. There was no time for that though. "Is everyone accounted for?"

Sean cleared his throat. "Yeah. All the kids are out. Scott, he tried to stop...her. He's unconscious but okay. Warren, Alison, and Betsy tried to help, but she...it was too strong. Bobby was trying to ice the fire from the inside. I guess it didn't work." He glanced to Bobby, who was still unconscious, and Alex, who was in the process of coughing up a lung and didn't appear to be aware he was outside and next to Azazel of all people. "I went in after Jubilee. Once Je- once the building was attacked, she hid. Good thing I know all your hiding places, huh?"

The girl hiccupped when Sean tapped her nose, but stopped sobbing...until she looked past Hank, buried her face back in Sean's shoulder, and started wailing again. Sean winced as her hands sparked from where they were curled into his chest, but otherwise showed no discomfort. The way the usually flippant red-head held himself at sudden attention could only mean one thing.

"Magneto," Hank greeted before he fully turned around. Sure enough, he was greeted by the caped mutant.

He didn't expect Magneto to shout "Frost!", though the almost startled jump the leader of the Brotherhood gave when she answered with an annoyed "What?" directly behind him would have been comical in other circumstances.

"What are you doing here, Magneto?" Hank tried.

"What's wrong with Charles?" Magneto asked Frost, again ignoring Hank. The scientist felt his hackles starting to rise as his jaw clenched tight.
Emma raised an eyebrow. "I'm not a doctor." Magneto must have given her a look of some kind because she heaved a put upon sigh, moved to hover over Charles…and looked straight at Hank. "What's wrong with Dr. Xavier?"

"Um…" Oh, good. As soon as he got acknowledgement, he turned into the mousy teenager he'd been when Charles first met him. It was like all the work Charles had been doing with him to train him for ambassadorial duties (which even Hank had to admit was optimistic…mutant-human ambassador…that would be the day) had flown out the window. Of course, dealing with the government and dealing with the Brotherhood were two different things. He took a breath and pulled his chin up high.

"He has no physical injuries that I could find. Nothing internal that would be far enough along to cause unconsciousness. No head injuries. At most, as much smoke inhalation as I had. There's no reason for him to be unconscious."

Magneto's expression remained stony. "Frost said she sensed a psychic presence."

"I did," the woman answered. "I think the X-Men may be able to clear that up, but it looks like the answer to your question is that your professor is suffering from a psychic attack. Ask the right people, get the right answer," she finished with a wink to Hank.

By now, Mystique, who had been helping maneuver the students, was by her brother's side. Hank had only seen her a few times outside of battle since she had left them. She knelt by the Professor, a hand on his forehead like a mother checking for fever. For all the soldier she was with the Brotherhood, she became a totally different person with her brother. Shapeshifter indeed.

Magneto faced Hank for the first time. "Was it Onslaught?"

"Onslaught? Onslaught is dead." That was a name that hadn't come up…since the Alkali Lake debacle when Charles assured them the entity was gone. Which didn't fully make sense, but now wasn't the time.

"Stop being paranoid," Emma cut in. "I already told you Onslaught is dead. Unless you doubt your skill at stabbing things with rafters. This was something else. Something powerful if it was able to take out Xavier."

"Humans," Magneto growled. "They must have a telepath-"

"No," Alex grit out. The man had finally stopped coughing and looked like he was either going to attack the Brotherhood in a blaze of glory or collapse where he stood. "It was Jean."

There it was. The words finally said out loud. Hank spared a sideways glance at the school. Most of it was, thankfully, unharmed. The east wing was smoking, though not actively burning anymore thanks to Ororo's rainstorm. The other damaged section looked like it may very well have taken the brunt of the London Blitz. On cue, one of the doorways crumbled in a cloud of dust. Jean had done this. No, not Jean. Phoenix.

"Jean didn't do this," Hank corrected. It was time for the truth. He didn't know how many people Jean had told, but it certainly couldn't be kept secret any longer. "It was a being called Phoenix."

"Phoenix?" Mystique asked.

"I will explain later. We need to treat injuries and allow Charles to recover. Anything I tell you, Charles can give more detail. He interacted with it." He turned his attention to Magneto, who still stood stoic near the Professor. Hank hadn't missed the sideways glances the mutant kept giving the
telepath. His expression was unreadable, but he hoped he'd seen a flash of concern. It was comforting to imagine the man he'd once known as Erik Lehnsherr still existed somewhere beneath all the layers of Magneto.

"Can you tell if the south wing is still structurally sound?" It only made sense to go there. It housed the main lounge and the secondary medical lab. He could treat the injured and calm the students in one place. Then he'd deal with the presence of the Brotherhood.

Magneto paused, Hank assumed to scan the wing, then, "It's fine. I'll move the students-"

"Are you kidding me? They're terrified of you," Alex scoffed.

Magneto bristled as Hank ran a hand over his face. There wasn't time for this. "I'll gather the students and lead them to the lounge. Azazel, could you take Charles, Bobby and Scott to medical? Wait, take Charles to his room. There's nothing I can do for him. If anyone can help him, I suspect it's Miss Frost. She can show you where they are, assuming she remembers from her last time here?"

"You bet, sugar. I'd never forget a morning spent in Charles Xavier's bedroom."

Erik's jaw clenched hard while Sean and Alex stood open-mouthed. Mystique gave a snort and shook her head. Hank prided himself in having no reaction at all aside from meeting Emma's gaze head on.

"Alex, Sean, Mystique, help me with the children. Note which ones need medical attention. I'll take them with me when I go to check Scott and Bobby. Magneto…go with Azazel. Stay with Charles."

"I don't follow your orders," Erik said at the same time Alex said, "You trust him to-"

Hank held up a hand the way he'd seen Charles deal with an unruly classroom. "We don't have a choice," he said to Alex, then turned to Magneto. "And what else would you like to do? Would you prefer to calm the students? Or perhaps you could use your medical expertise to assist me with the injured."

Turns out was did have a little bit of a beef with Magneto. Interesting.

Magneto raised his eyebrows. Apparently the man hadn't expected Hank to take a stand. The beast in Hank flared at the victory.

"I'll settle Charles, then I'll check the perimeter."

"There's no reason. It was Phoenix, not some stealth group-"

"I'd prefer to confirm that myself. You may have infinite trust of those around you, but I prefer to be realistic."

Compromise. That was the first lesson of being an ambassador. "Very well. If you find anything, I'll look forward to hearing about it."

"But-"

"Alex, if they wanted to hurt us, they would have done so already. They wouldn't have gotten us out of a burning building in order to attack."

"Just…stay away from me and the garage," Alex muttered to Magneto. Oh, that's right. The last
time they'd fought, Magneto had hurled a car at Alex. Alex managed to duck and hit it with his power, but if anyone could hold a grudge…well, it was Magneto, but Alex was a close second.

Magneto seemed to smirk at that but gave a half nod. With that, Hank turned to take care of the children. It was time to recover. Then they'd deal with the fallout.

Chapter End Notes

The morning spent in Charles' bedroom that Emma refers to is her talk with Charles in *That Which Will Survive* after he lost his telepathy. I just feel like she'd be awesome at innuendo.

Movies: Charles is training Hank for the role he anticipates him to take in the future…ambassador between humans and mutants, the title Beast had in X3.

Comics: I significantly changed Jubilee's backstory. Her parents weren't killed until she was a teenager. She won't play a big part in the story, but I wanted to include her so there it is. Also, as a reminder, Alison is Dazzler and Betsy is Psylocke.
I took a walk around the world to ease my troubled mind

Chapter Notes

Title taken from Three Doors Down's "Kryptonite"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The weather was cloudy with wind just on the wrong side of comfortable. Charles would call it blustery if he was, well, conscious. It was the kind of day Magneto would much rather be spending indoors planning the Brotherhood's next move in the war. Instead, he was traipsing around the grounds of the school making sure Charles' little lambs were safe. Safe. Right. For now. Charles had made it abundantly clear that he wasn't going to take the necessary steps to ensure his students' wellbeing. If only Charles wouldn't make it so blasted difficult for Magneto to do it for him.

A patch of thorns managed to catch the end of his cape as he stalked through the woods on his final pass. Their refusal to relinquish the captured fabric resulted in a battle that lost Magneto the hem of the garment. Great. Now he'd have to find someone to mend it on top of everything else.

Safely past the thorny threat, he let the cape sweep the ground again. Enough time had gone by that he wouldn't have to deal with coddling frightened children. It would appear that the only impending risk to the people occupying the school was stubborn underbrush. There was no evidence of a human-run assault. Which meant the boys had been telling the truth when they'd mentioned Jean or, what had Hank called it, Phoenix?

And wasn't that interesting. Jean Grey, Charles' prize student, turning against him. The girl had always had potential. If he'd had the chance to train her…but events had transpired that had blocked that road.

What did Phoenix mean though? Was it like Onslaught? That could be taken care of easily enough. He'd beaten Onslaught, after all. Then again…if this Phoenix was powerful enough to take down Charles and she was a free agent…with that kind of power at the Brotherhood's disposal, he could turn the tide of the war once and for all. Onslaught never would've worked with him, but Phoenix…Phoenix just might, especially if Charles had done something to turn her against the X-Men. The telepath was certainly arrogant enough to have inadvertently (or not so inadvertently) offended a fellow mutant. It's not as if being with the Brotherhood and allowing Phoenix control would hurt Jean. Not if Phoenix was as powerful as she seemed. Charles was perfectly safe after the Onslaught debacle.

But was he willing to attempt to win over such a creature? Onslaught had been virtually insane by the end of things. And if it wasn't a situation like Onslaught, would Jean be damaged? Would finally getting to train the young telepath be worth subjugating part of the girl? What if it would win him his war? He firmly believed that the ends justified the means, but this was one of his fellow mutants. He needed more information on what the entity actually was.

Then there was Charles. How would him recruiting Phoenix hurt what was left of their friendship? With the way things had been as of late, it would probably be the end of whatever they had between them. He could win the war, defeat the humans once and for all, but it would almost assuredly cost him Charles. And then what would happen? Would Charles continue to fight against him? If his chess matches with Charles taught him anything, it was how to think
seven moves in advance. Perhaps taking Phoenix wouldn't be worth the sacrifice. It wasn't as if he didn't care for Charles. The man was still his best friend, which said something about the state of his friendships. But the telepath was blinded by his optimism. For all the horrible things Onslaught had done, at least the entity had vision.

Then again, maybe with the humans finally out of the way, Charles would see the benefit of helping Magneto. Without the issue of war versus peace between them, Charles might do what was best for mutants and work with Magneto in the new world he created. It would be a gamble, but if it paid off…

He couldn't act rashly in a situation that could result in losing Charles though. The feeling he'd had when they'd found the school on fire…the memory was still painfully fresh.

*Flames. For all the possibilities Magneto had been imagining, he didn't actually expect anything to be wrong when he got there. There never was. His preparedness (or paranoia as Emma annoyingly referred to it) had led his troops into situations far less dire than his speeches indicated they would be. On occasion. But for all his confidence in his instincts, he hadn't wanted to be right this time.*

*He'd managed to send Riptide to help Storm while Angel and Toad went to help Mystique (who had already run to corral the children). When he turned to face Emma, Azazel had just teleported away.*

"Where's Charles?"

*Emma halfway winced. Her eyes flashed to the burning building. Magneto whipped back around as part of the wing collapsed. For a second, it felt like his chest had gone with it.*

"I sent Azazel after the idiots who are still in there." Her gaze went distant. "He got to your professor just in time. He's picking up a few more passengers. He'll be back soon."

*More of the wing crumbled. Not uncontrolled, but still not pretty. He looked around for something to do. His Brotherhood was being too damn efficient, leaving him with no task to distract himself with. All he could think about was how Charles had been in the burning building…how if he hadn't come at the exact moment when he did, Charles might have-*

The telltale pop of Azazel's teleportation was a welcome distraction. Mystique dashed over from the children she and the other girl...what was her name...Dazzler?...had maneuvered to a large oak tree. Frost sauntered over to help in her place, which he was sure he'd have time to be surprised about later when everything wasn't such a mess.

*His relief at Azazel being back with his charges was short-lived. Beast had pulled himself to his feet and was saying something to Banshee. The move revealed a very unconscious Charles on the ground. Panic seized him for just a moment before he pushed the feeling aside, tucked it down into the old Erik Lehnsherr...the one he hadn't been for years now. It didn't fully let up until he'd been assured Charles wasn't in danger.*

Even now, as he headed into the school, he felt a tinge of worry for the telepath. As quickly as he could, he tamped it down. This was no place or time for worry. Not with everything that was going on. And it was just about time to figure out exactly what that everything was.

Angel intercepted him almost as soon as he entered the wing.

"Emma told me to tell you Professor X is waking up."

It seemed he'd be finding out what everything was sooner rather than later. With a stiff nod, he
headed towards Charles' room, pausing only to take off his cape and hand it to a terrified teenager in the hall with orders to mend it or else.

When Magneto strode in, he found that Charles wasn't quite as awake as he'd hoped. As in the telepath was still completely unconscious on the bed. At his disapproving look, Emma only shrugged. "I said he's getting ready to wake up, not that he was singing 'Hello, Dolly'! His mind is coming closer to consciousness. A non-telepath wouldn't be able to tell."

"Fine," Magneto grit out as he swept towards the bedside chair currently occupied by Banshee. "Move."

The boy didn't look nearly as intimidated as he should, but he got up with an overexaggerated eye roll. Magneto took his place. Beast was still fussing over the telepath, having gotten through all the injured who had been taken to medical.

"I'm going to go check on the kiddos," Sean said to Hank. "Will you be okay?"

"I'll be fine. I'll join you in a moment. I should check to make sure no one was hiding any injuries. Plus, Magneto will probably kick me out as soon as Charles wakes anyway." Magneto didn't miss the pointed glare, but made sure he gave it no acknowledgement. "I'm sure Emma will let us know as soon as we need to come back in."

"Inviting me into your heads?" Emma said with a sly grin. "How very trusting of you."

"This isn't an open invitation," Beast replied. "I most certainly do not trust you in my mind or in the minds of any of our students. I do, however, trust that you know that, even after whatever psychic trauma he went through, the Professor can still defeat you without batting an eye. If I haven't heard from you in half an hour, I'll come back to check on him again."

Charles' training had paid off. The kid had grown a backbone. Who would've guessed? Hank had left the room before Emma could respond. Magneto recognized the way she narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips.

"Leave it alone, Frost. I'm sure you'll have plenty of time to express your anger the next time the X-Men have a fit of morality and attempt to stop us from liberating mutantkind."

"That why you threw the car at the blond?" she snapped back.

"He needed to be taken down a notch. He's so angry, I'm almost surprised he hasn't joined us."

"He doesn't think like us. He's been too influenced by your Professor's teachings and taking care of his brother. Plus, let me reiterate that you threw a car at him. If you wanted him on our side, that probably wasn't the best recruitment strategy."

"I never said I wanted him on our side. Although his fire power wouldn't hurt. But while we're here, we might as well get a sense of others who may be more interested in our cause than dear Charles'."

"Recruiting under the Professor's nose? That's a…bold plan."

"Are you afraid Charles will catch you?" Magneto taunted.

"I'd rather not antagonize him. Us telepaths try to keep some level of mutual respect for one another."
"There is no place for hesitation in war. You felt out whether Alex was interested in joining us. Your fear didn't stop you then."

"Last time I checked, we weren't at war with your Professor or his X-Men. And, yes, I may have scanned the kid's mind before. I got a two week migraine for my efforts. That and a prim request to stay out of his students' minds."

"That was Charles' fault?" Emma had been out of commission a while back claiming she was ill. Erik had thought it odd, but they'd had nothing pressing at the moment so he hadn't pushed it. He'd thought if it had been anything more serious (like, say, a telepathic attack), she would've informed him. Then again, she was never one to admit when someone had bettered her. If it was Charles' doing…

"He has claws when he wants to," she replied. "I'm not going to risk my head checking on a few teenagers' philosophical leanings. Not when Jean or Phoenix or whatever she calls herself is out there. I dealt with it before, however briefly, at Alkali Lake. It's not something I need to go into handicapped. Recruit your own child army."

Magneto bristled at the last accusation (because there was nothing else it could've been), but found himself focusing more on what had come before it. If Charles' version of a warning was taking out the Brotherhood's telepath for half a month, he had to wonder what an actual attack would've been like. Emma didn't seem to think much of it, but the revelation had…implications. Did Xavier's pacifism only apply to humanity? He seemed so willing to attack his own brothers and sisters. The magnokinet's train of thought came to an abrupt halt when the bed shifted. Within moments of turning away from Emma, Charles was blinking back at him.

"Are- are you talking about recruiting my students?" the telepath asked in a broken voice. Smoke inhalation and unconsciousness had done his vocal cords no favors.

Of course Charles would pick the most inopportune of times to wake up. Magneto suppressed a groan, keeping his face perfectly blank, and held out the glass of water Hank had left next to the bed.

"No, Charles, you must have been dreaming," he said as Charles took the proffered beverage.

Xavier narrowed his eyes over the rim of the glass he was sipping from then glanced to Emma, who shrugged. The bed-ridden telepath sighed as he put the glass down and turned back Erik.

"We have to stop meeting like this."

The door clicked shut, leaving Erik and Charles alone. "What, with you injured and me waiting patiently by your bedside for you to regain consciousness? I must agree."

"If it helps, I'm getting rather tired of losing consciousness and regaining it with my supposed sworn enemy waiting at my sickbed."

That was humor in those words, Magneto thought to himself in shock. Charles was bantering with him. And it wasn't passive aggressive. That was a good sign…hopefully. "How many times does this make?"

"Hmm, at least four, though I may be counting wrong. I've been knocked on the head quite a few times, you know. My memory may not be at its best."

A smile spread across Magneto's face, a sensation he hadn't felt in…a while. It needed to stop. He needed Charles willing to work with him, not the other way around. He made a point of dropping his grin, only to find that Charles wasn't paying attention. He was instead staring out the window,
chewing the inside of his lip. Magneto's brow furrowed. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing. I'm...just surprised to see you here. After our last encounter, well..."

"You were rude, yes, but neither one of us has been particularly accommodating as of late. I've hoped that that fact hasn't changed our underlying friendship."

Charles hummed but gave no other response. He kept looking out the window as if the world outside could give him whatever answer he was looking for.

"Did you expect me to ignore you in your time of need?" the magnokinetic asked, trying to bring some of the humor that had evaporated as quickly as it had appeared back into the conversation. Said humor disappeared when Charles hesitated and realization struck. "You really thought I wouldn't come."

Xavier finally pulled his attention away from that blasted window to stare at Erik. "Well, how was I to know you'd be aware of what happened? And, honestly, I thought, if you did know, you'd either ignore us entirely or, more likely, take advantage and further your cause while we could do nothing to stop you."

Magneto clinched his fists, keeping his tone purposefully even. "You thought I would attack you?"

Charles seemed to recognize he was treading on dangerous ground, but, as usual, made no moves to stand down. "No, no, I know you wouldn't go that far. But you would attack a human target while we couldn't stand in your way."

"So I would choose to make an offensive strike rather than defending my mutant brothers and sisters?"

"I wasn't too far off the point, now was I? You were talking of recruiting my students in my own school. Don't lie to me," Charles finished when Magneto opened his mouth to defend himself. "How far gone are you, my friend?"

Any worry he had left in him morphed into frustration. "Obviously, not as far as you think. I defend us because you won't to see sense. Your refusal to acknowledge the danger that humanity poses to us does not mean I will blind myself to it as well. I've seen what they've done-"

"Your experiences in the camps were-"

"That's not what I'm talking about. I've seen what they are doing. While you've hidden away in your school, I've been freeing our kind from research facilities. You experienced them yourself with Onslaught, if I recall. He went and destroyed one while I was indisposed. " Charles' face shuttered. Whether it was from the reference to Onslaught or the memory of the facility proving he'd misplaced his ever-present faith, Magneto didn't know. "And if those so-called scientists weren't enough, I have spies who inform me that the government is constructing yet another bill to keep us in check. They are not our friends, Charles. They cannot be trusted. I will not stand by and watch while they move against us. By then, it will be too late to do anything to stop it."

Charles pinched the bridge of his nose, but offered nothing to further their debate.

"What, no rebuttal? Not going to defend your precious humans?"

Bleary-eyed, Charles looked up. "I have nothing to say that has not already been said and obviously ignored. Why are you still here then? You've seen that your mutant brothers and sisters are okay."
Hearty debate was off the table it seemed. Pity. "Forgive me for wanting to see if my friend was recovering."

"I'm touched, but that's not the only reason."

Damn him and his insight. What good was the helmet when Charles could apparently still read his mind on occasion? Why had Erik let him get close enough to be able to do that? "Jean. If she's going to be a potential threat to my Brotherhood, I need to know about her."

"A potential threat or a potential ally?"

"What happened, Charles? How did Phoenix get loose and destroy part of your school? Everyone is okay, by the way."

"I'm aware, thank you. I've been consulting with Hank since I awoke."

"Multi-tasking. Should I be offended?"

"I'm quite capable of holding two conversations at once. You want to know about Phoenix. It's a story I have no desire to tell twice. Get me my chair. We can go to the meeting room so all necessary parties can be present."

"Ah…about the chair, Azazel didn't bring it when he rescued you from the fire-"

"I have spares. One is in the closet if you would be so kind as to fetch it."

"You anticipated needing multiple wheelchairs?"

"You call me naïve, but I'm very aware that I'm fighting both you and the more radical humans. I like to be prepared."

Sure enough, there was another chair folded in the closet. Magneto put it next to the bed and moved to help the telepath only to get waved off. Charles deftly put himself where he needed to be. Apparently, he had recovered from whatever Phoenix had done to him. That was good. Probably.

"I've told everyone to meet us there. Mortimer and Alison are going to stay with the little ones in the lounge."

"His true name is Toad."

"That doesn't sound offensive at all. Shall we go?"

They went.

Chapter End Notes

Cultural references: "Hello, Dolly!" was a movie musical that came out in 1969. It was about a matchmaker who goes to New York to find a match for a rich man. It starred Barbra Streisand, Walter Matthau, and Michael Crawford. All this comes from Wikipedia seeing how I've never actually seen the movie.
Random: The four times Charles woke to Erik at (or near) his bedside were after defeating Onslaught in Cuba in *A Spark Neglected*, after his paralysis in India in *Two Roads...*, and when Onslaught separated himself from Charles in *That Which Will Survive*. This time makes four. I really like knocking Charles out apparently.
There's nothing wrong with just a taste of what you paid for

Chapter Notes

Title taken from Panic! at the Disco's "The Ballad of Mona Lisa".

Warning: Reference to death of a child (not graphic or anything...it's literally just a reference to it, but I figured better safe than sorry).

Remember when I mentioned I was combining Phoenix's origins with another X-Men villain? This is where that comes into play. More details on that in the end notes.

Also, there's a section where I drew heavily on a quote from one of the Star Trek trailers in here. More details on that in the end notes too.

In most of my chapters, italics means telepathy. There's a sizable chunk in here that's a flashback. It should be pretty apparent, but I wanted to throw the warning out there.

The room quieted as Professor X and Magneto swept in. Charles had no idea what they had been talking about, but the groups had kept themselves segregated, even Mystique, who was relatively friendly with the X-Men on occasion. At least she didn't actively antagonize her former teammates, which was more than could be said for the other members of the Brotherhood. Emma sat leaned back in her chair like she didn't have a care in the world. The other members of Magneto's illustrious group spanned from unreadable (Azazel, of course) to aggressive-due-to-feeling-threatened (Toad, as Erik referred to him...a young man Charles had not yet had extensive experience with outside of reports of skirmishes from his own team).

Charles took his place at the head of the table. Magneto made a show of pulling the chair that had been left open on the Brotherhood side to the head and sat himself down after some shuffling and possibly exertion of powers to move Charles over. Charles raised an eyebrow at the other man, who gave a half smirk in response. Of course Erik would refuse to relinquish a spot at the head of the table. How could Charles have expected any different?

With everyone situated and the room quiet, Charles cleared his throat. "Before we begin, I'd like to thank Magneto and his Brotherhood for coming to our aid. It's good to know that when circumstances call for it, we can all work together on something."

"Of course. You know we'd never abandon a mutant in need," Magneto responded smugly.

"Like the cat who caught the canary," Onslaught commented.

"But we aren't here to receive your thanks, Charles," the Brotherhood leader continued, unaware of Onslaught's interruption.

Charles plastered on a smile. "Yes, I believe you all have questions, so let's get straight to the point, shall we? The entity we encountered," he nodded to the X-Men, "and you saw the result of," he nodded to the Brotherhood, "is an entity called the Phoenix."

"Which you and Beast seem to know a lot about. You kept that to yourselves for quite a while. I
don't recall you mentioning anything about a phoenix over our chess games.

Charles threw a skeptical look Erik's way. It was as if the magnokinetic couldn't stop himself from challenging...well, anyone. "Emma knew. At least she knew Jean was capable of more. We encountered Phoenix back at Alkali Lake. I highly doubt she didn't mention anything to you."

Erik's lips tightened, barely visible to even Charles, who was sitting right next to him. "Continue."

The telepath would take his victories when he could. Apparently, annoying Magneto was a victory now. Anything that would show a less militaristic side of his friend was a victory these days. Just because they didn't have a chessboard in front of them didn't mean they weren't playing a game of strategy.

"As you all know, Jean's powers increased significantly during the Alkali Lake incident. Hank and I have been working since then to determine exactly why that was. That was how we met Phoenix. It was trapped in Jean's mind. I fortified the walls, but as Jean got stronger so did Phoenix."

"Is it like Onslaught?" Mystique asked, back in soldier mode.

"We discovered early on that, while it appeared to be similar to Onslaught at first glance, it was, in fact, very different. Phoenix is a separate entity completely from Jean. Its origins are outside of her mind. She is, in effect, being possessed by the creature. Despite our best efforts, we couldn't discover anything beyond those facts. That is, until it broke free. We had a bit of a...scuffle, shall we say?"

"You mean a telepathic fight that you didn't come out on top of?" Emma said.

Erik smirked beside him, no doubt adding a mental tally mark to his column. It was Charles' turn to purse his lips. "It caught me off-guard. It also revealed itself to me."

"You spoke with it again?" Hank asked, leaning forward with a gleam in his eye he only got in the lab.

"I did. And I know what it is now. Once I didn't have to hold back my telepathy, I could scan its mind easily. We were right," Charles said, speaking almost directly to Hank. "It's old. Not quite ancient, but very, very old. It appears we had mutant brothers and sisters at least three centuries ago, if not longer. Phoenix was born as an average telepath. She was a good person. She wanted to help others. Her powers advanced very quickly once they manifested. Unfortunately for her, it was far too fast for her time. Her village burned her for what they believed was witchcraft."

Erik scoffed. "Humanity. Always destroying what is different."

"And always finding that there are those who stand up for them and stop their suffering. As I was saying, she was burned for witchcraft. Her powers were beyond even our comprehension though. Her body died, but her mind survived. Ever since then, she has been taking hosts and surviving through them. But her power corrupted her. She has lost all hope in the world. She only strives for power now."

"And she found it with Jean," Hank finished.

"But how did it even get to her in the first place? How long has it been in her?" Scott asked. The poor boy had woken up just as devastated as he no doubt had been when the shell of his girlfriend knocked him out.

Charles glanced to the Brotherhood, but they all appeared just as intent on hearing the story as the
X-Men. Even Azazel was watching with interest. Charles turned back to his people. "Do you remember how her powers manifested?"

"She was ten years old," Erik answered. He had been part of the recruiting process when they got the girl, after all. He knew the story as well as the others. "Her friend had just died. She nearly lost her mind when she started hearing the entire hospital."

Charles nodded. "The Phoenix was possessing her friend. When the girl died, the Phoenix latched onto the closest mind, which happened to be Jean."

"So it found her completely by chance?" Scott asked, seemingly more devastated that it was happenstance.

"It would appear so. Jean's powers manifested as a reaction and protected her mind from the Phoenix's presence. So much so that it locked Phoenix away."

"How can something powerful enough to take you out get locked down by a 10-year-old girl?" Angel asked.

"It wasn't that strong when it found Jean. Most of its power went into separating mind from body when its first body died. If circumstances had been different, it likely would have died with one of its hosts once it lost the strength to leave. Unfortunately, while Jean's mind kept it at bay, it was able to form a connection to Jean's power. It's been slowly regenerating over the past 13 years. It regained enough strength to begin asserting itself the way Onslaught did with me. It's been with Jean for so long that it's formed a bond with her powers. The two are so intertwined that it's difficult to separate where Jean's powers end and Phoenix's begin."

Hank paused, then, "So when Jean's powers expanded at Alkali Lake, Phoenix's power expanded with them exponentially."

Charles nodded again. "It saw its opportunity and took it."

"That's a hell of a long con," Emma said.

"It's centuries old. I suppose it felt it was worth the wait."

"So what do we do about it now?" Alex asked, shooting his little brother a glance.

"I'll be able to find where she is. We'll be prepared this time. I'll incapacitate it and see if I can suppress it enough for Jean to take over again. Then we can to find a way to separate it from Jean."

"Which we never figured out how to do," Hank said. "You're making it sound much easier than it will actually be. And there's no guarantee you'll be able to suppress Phoenix now that it's taken control."

"All valid points, but now that I've seen Phoenix as itself, it may be easier. Before, I couldn't risk letting it take control and I couldn't determine what parts of it were Jean and what parts were Phoenix. Now that Jean is suppressed and Phoenix is at the forefront, I should be able to see what parts have remained active versus which are dormant. Phoenix will still be able to access Jean's powers, but as an entity, I think I'll be able to separate it from Jean now that I know Phoenix's mind," Charles added.

"And what if Jean doesn't want it gone?" Azazel asked.

Silence.
"Why on earth would she not want it gone?" Ororo said, voicing what everyone was thinking.

"She will have had a taste of power. Perhaps she likes it. Perhaps she and Phoenix can have a symbiotic relationship. Just because Xavier rid himself of Onslaught does not mean everyone would want to rid themselves of such an advantage."

Yes, Charles, tell them about how you got rid of such an advantage, Onslaught laughed.

Hush. "I don't think you understand what Phoenix truly is-" Charles began.

"No, Azazel has a point. Perhaps the pair of them will want to reevaluate their stance on where mutants stand in the world," Magneto said. "It's seen what humanity does. If Jean had access to that information too, she might be able to make a more informed decision about where she stands in the war."

"Jean would never switch sides! She believes in doing what's right!" Scott shouted.

The aggression in the room shot up, a wave of needles over Charles' mind. The telepath raised his hand before things could get out of control. "Sit down, Scott. Now is not the time to begin arguments with those we know will not listen. I do, however, want to speak to Erik alone again. If you all wouldn't mind leaving the room for a few moments. Maybe get some tea and biscuits in the kitchen?"

"Why do we always have to leave the room for you guys to have your 'talks'? It would be so much more fun if we could watch."

"Out, Sean," Charles said in his sternest professor voice.

Amidst grumbles, the other mutants filed out of the room and headed for the kitchen. Charles made a mental note to buy more biscuits. Right after he got in contact with the proper channels to rebuild the school's damaged wings. Priorities and all that.

"You have me alone now, Charles. What is it you want to discuss?"

"What do you think I want to discuss? You're suggesting we allow a hostile entity to remain in control of a young woman you helped recruit ten years ago."

"Not a hostile entity. One that may be able to help us."

"At Jean's expense?"

"What if Azazel is right? As much as you deny it, you haven't been the same since Onslaught. What's to say Jean will remain naïve after her experience with Phoenix? Perhaps she'll be more open to it than you were to Onslaught."

"Are you suggesting that I should have been more open with Onslaught?" Charles said, bristling. "I believe you were instrumental in suppressing him every time he reared his head in the world, not to mention you killing him rather brutally if I recall."

"That's not what I was saying and you know it. I know Phoenix is not Onslaught. You made that very clear. Which means that Phoenix has the potential to be a powerful ally. Jean could turn the tide of the war!"

A familiar pain bubbled in Charles' chest. Was the man he knew truly gone? If Erik thought he could control Phoenix...Phoenix wanted nothing but destruction. It would use Erik and his Brotherhood to achieve that goal and then-
"Listen to me very carefully," Charles said, making sure he was looking Magneto straight in the eye. "You have so much potential in you. But you don't have an ounce of compassion or humility. You think you cannot make mistakes, but I'm telling you there will come a moment when you realize you're wrong about that, and you will get yourself and everyone in your Brotherhood killed. If you think for one second that you can control Phoenix, if you think that you can trust it to help your cause…that will be your moment."

Magneto chuckled. "Don't be so dramatic, Charles. It doesn't become you."

For a moment, all the telepath could do was sit there, mouth agape. Then, the blatant dismissal of his warning hit. "You're blinded by your ambition," Charles spat.

"No more than you by your faith," Erik replied, still unfazed.

"That's arguable."

"Everything is with us."

Silence again. Neither man glared, but neither found themselves wearing particularly amiable expressions either. Charles relaxed his grip on the armrests when he realized his knuckles were turning white.

"You know about Phoenix now. I suggest you and your Brotherhood leave."

"We're not going anywhere. We will be helping you with your search."

"I allowed you the courtesy of staying because you helped us when we needed it and you wanted to be prepared if your people came across Phoenix. Are you testing my hospitality?"

"We're coming with you. It's apparent from your last encounter that you can't handle open confrontation with it. Whether you believe it or not, I do care about your wellbeing."

Actual expression of emotion wasn't something Charles had been expecting. Magneto apparently took Charles' silence as a negative response. "Charles, we can either work together or I can follow you to where Phoenix is. Either way, I will be a part of this."

"Well," Charles said, finding his voice again, "it seems I'm left with no choice."

"Excellent. I'm glad we could come to an understanding."

"If you attempt to pull anything, I guarantee it will not turn out well."

"Yes, yes, catastrophe that will end in the destruction of the Brotherhood, I remember your little speech from earlier," Magneto said as if he was humoring a child.

Charles felt his hackles raising again, but kept his strained smile. "I've informed our people of what we've discussed. I need to rest a bit more before we make a move. If you would excuse me."

"Of course."

Magneto moved out of the way to allow Charles out of the room. The telepath headed back to his room replaying the events of the past day (had it really only been a day?) as he went.

You didn't tell them the whole story, Onslaught said as Charles reached his bedroom door.
Obviously, I couldn't very well tell them about-

Yes, that would mean revealing you still have a dark side.

As it was, Charles' encounter with Phoenix had been a bit more...hostile than he'd let on in the meeting. He couldn't very well have shown weakness in front of the Brotherhood though. He'd had no choice but to strategically avoid certain parts of the story. It wasn't as if he'd kept vital information about Phoenix from them. It was just that the real encounter had been more...painful.

His head screamed at nearly unbearable levels. Onslaught screeched in pain, apparently more affected as a completely mental-based being. He had to stop what was happening. Where was Hank? Charles pulled himself up from where he'd slumped over in his chair halfway down the hall. Jean, ensconced in flames, strode into the hall from the infirmary. At the sight of Charles, she stopped short. The flames caught the walls and started moving towards the elevator.

"Hello, Professor."

Onslaught was still writhing, but Charles was able to push his own pain down to a (barely) manageable level. "Hello, Phoenix."

"You weren't wrong. You were close to a breakthrough. It just happened to be mine, not yours. I told you. I told you I would break free. And I told you I would destroy you when I did."

"And yet here we are. Where is Jean?"

"She's still up here," Phoenix said, tapping her head. "Completely unconscious. Exactly as she should be. You shouldn't be worrying about her. You're the one in danger."

"I can take care of myself."

"You're not doing a very good job of it. I have my claws in you now." With a twist of its head, another lance of pain shot through Charles' mind. He couldn't hide his wince. It was true. She had taken him by surprise, left him dazed with her initial attack, then pushed herself firmly into his mind before he could defend against her. His best chance at fighting her off was Onslaught, who was unresponsive at this point. He'd underestimated her. From her grin, he could tell she knew it.

"You wanted so badly to know what I was. Why don't I show you?"

Images flashed through Charles' mind. Images of pain and death, of Phoenix's life. The only good thing out of it was that the connection was apparently two ways. Charles surreptitiously delved deeper, pulling more of the entity's past than it meant to share.

Phoenix, high on power, didn't notice the mental breach. "Now that you've seen my life, it's only fair that you return the favor. After all, you spent so much time trying to get into my head. I think it's time I take a look at yours."

Forced back into his own mind, Charles cried out in pain as she dug in once again, talons of fire ripping through his mind. Just as quickly as it started, it stopped. Phoenix's laughing, which had started with Charles' screams, ceased as well.

"Oh, Professor, you've been hiding something from me."

She poked at Onslaught, who remained unaware. Charles tried once again to throw her out. It was futile.

"Let's see if there's anything else interesting up here."
She flipped through his mind like the index at a library.

"Ah, now there's something I like. I think I'll take it."

"No-" Charles protested, but it was weak even in his ears.

"You don't get a say, do you? Welcome to my life for the past 13 years. Now, I'm going to go and you won't be able to stop me. You'll be powerless to do anything to deter my plans. You'll watch while your world burns, knowing it was all your fault, then you'll burn with it."

Before Charles could protest, the pain became white-hot, then everything went black.

Back in the present, Charles massaged his now painless head. Onslaught had recovered more quickly than Charles had. But it didn't mean he was happy about it.

That hurt, Charles. It hurt a lot. And you know how I feel about being defeated.

I'm well aware. We weren't prepared. We will be next time.

Will we? You still aren't going to let me out to play.

Not fully, no. I'd still like to have an ace up my sleeve.

You don't trust Magneto.

No.

Good. Now, I think there's a bird whose wings need clipping.

Charles positioned himself on the bed. He'd be ready next time. If he wasn't...well...he'd rather not think about it.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry Scott is whiny but I really don't have much to do with him otherwise. Oh well. There are so many movies where the girls are whiny and dependent on their boyfriends. It's about time it happen with a guy.

Disclaimer: The mini-speech Charles gives that Magneto calls dramatic is adapted from a quote in one of the Star Trek trailers. The original quote is, "There's greatness in you, but there's not even an ounce of humility. You think that you can't make mistakes, but there's going to come a moment when you realize you're wrong about that, and you're going to get yourself and everyone under your command killed." I think it was also partially inspired by Erik and Charles' exchange the night before Cuba in XMFC. Since Charles was busy being captured by Shaw and possessed by Onslaught in my universe, that exchange never happened so here it is now.

Comics: Jean was 10 when her powers manifested for the first time in the comics. Charles put up mental blocks on her powers until she was old enough to handle them. The Phoenix Force didn't come in until after the formation of the X-Men, but I needed it to happen earlier so I went with when the comics had her powers manifest since that process involved mental blocks too.
Speaking of Phoenix, if you didn't notice, the story of Phoenix's origins is not the comic or the movie explanations of Phoenix's origins. It's based off of the origin of the Shadow King in the comics. I haven't actually read much of the Shadow King, but from what I can tell, one of his suspected origins was that he was a super powerful telepath whose mind continued to live after his body died. He moved from host to host and ended up controlling Phoenix (who was in Rachel Summers at the time) for a while. So Phoenix isn't so much Phoenix for me. It's more a combination of Phoenix and Shadow King and another version of Onslaught. Hopefully everyone is cool with that.
Once Charles and the other felled X-Men were recovered, it was hardly a challenge at all to find Phoenix. At least not with Onslaught's help. Charles even had to stay in Cerebro a few minutes longer than necessary so it wouldn't seem suspicious that he'd found her so quickly.

"She's at her old house," he announced, rather anti-climatically, to the combined mutant forces waiting behind him.

"Just like old times then," Erik said with a confident smile.

The first time Charles had traveled to Jean's house had been fairly early after the formation of the school. He and Erik had gone together, recruited Jean with an impressive spiel about community and developing talents, then gone out for drinks. Thinking about it, those first few recruiting trips had been strikingly similar to what had become known as Magneto and Professor X's Radical Road Trip (Sean's words, not surprisingly). They had been good times, times Charles thought back on fondly. He glanced to Erik, who rewarded him with a quirk of his lips. Maybe someday. But now wasn't the time to reminisce…or, for that matter, to maintain any hopes for the future, especially after their last conversation.

Everything came together quickly. Azazel dropped the members of the Brotherhood who wouldn't be accompanying them back at their headquarters. Someone had to look after Magneto's soldiers and Mystique was apparently the best candidate. Once he returned, Emma, Janos, and Erik linked hands. Erik offered a hand to Charles, who took it and completed the link with Hank, Ororo, and Alex.

The world disappeared. Darkness swirled for the blink of an eye before it reformed into the sunny landscape of suburban America.


The unspoken agreement had been to keep equal numbers. Thus, each mutant contingent had their four chosen representatives. Best to keep things smaller. It would be easier to manage the situation.

The mutants fanned out, but stopped after only a few steps to look around warily. It was easy to see why. They were right in front of Jean's childhood home in the middle of what should be a subdivision full of families bustling about, yet it was completely silent. No birds, no traffic, no children playing. It was as if everyone had cleared out and left. In fact…
"Everyone within an 7 block radius is gone," Charles said.

Emma, sparkling in her diamond form, looked to her fellow telepath. "Why did she send them away? Phoenix doesn't seem the type to care for the safety of others."

"No, but Jean would. Perhaps there is still hope."

They paused for a moment. A light breeze rustled the leaves of the maple tree in front of them. It seemed enough to break their eerie trance.

Erik stepped towards the house. "Emma, Riptide, Azazel, guard the perimeter. I want to know if any humans decide to come back." He looked to Charles with a gleam in his eye. "And keep an eye on the X-Men. We wouldn't want any incidents."

Charles offered his own tight-lipped smile. "Hank, Ororo, Alex, stay outside. You'll know if I need you."

"What about the Brotherhood?" Alex asked as Charles began wheeling himself forward with Magneto at his heels.

"Don't make the first move, but defend yourselves and any innocent humans in the event of an attack. If past incidents have shown us anything, it's that you're more than capable of defeating Erik's little army."

He couldn't see the affronted expressions of the Brotherhood or the barely-masked amusement on the faces of his own people, but Charles knew they were there. Onslaught chuckled from somewhere in his mind.

"Don't be too arrogant, Charles," Magneto said, approaching the door. Honestly, he could have been a politician in another life with a smarmy tone like that. "If I recall, your band of merry mutants took quite the beating last time we met."

"Perhaps we can discuss tallies in our respective victory columns later. I believe you mentioned old times. You were the one to knock when we were here last if I remember correctly."

"Oh, knocking is so mundane." The lock clicked and the door opened with a flick of Erik's wrist. He gave the universal gesture for "after you."

The house was the picture of suburbia. White lace curtains waved in a breeze coming through an open window. Fresh flowers decorated a pristine living room. It wasn't until they entered the kitchen that anything seemed amiss. The kettle was close to boiling if the beginnings of a whistling sound were anything to judge by. Pots and pans hanging from a pot rack were shaking. Water in a jug swirled so perfectly that it could easily be mistaken for Storm or Riptide's work.

Phoenix herself was seated in a wooden chair in the sitting room past the kitchen. Charles glanced to Magneto, who gave a short nod, before moving forward. All the furniture hovered a few inches off the ground. As soon as Charles crossed the threshold from the kitchen to the sitting room, the furniture dropped.

"I knew you'd come," Phoenix said, smirking as she looked up. She'd changed clothes at some point, though Charles could only guess where she found the time or the new apparel. Jean's usual khakis and fitted t-shirt left behind, the woman now wore a leather pants and a red satin contraption of a shirt that left little to the imagination. The being was apparently taking advantage of having a young, fit body again. She would appear the picture of relaxation if not for the firm grip on the armrests and the almost invisible pinching at the corner of her eyes. Jean was fighting back after all. Good.
"For all intents and purposes, you're holding one of my students hostage. I wasn't going to abandon her."

"Hostage?" Magneto said as he sidestepped into the room to Charles' right. "Let's not be too rash with our accusations. I'm sure Phoenix has a perfectly good reason for what she's doing." He gave a nod and a smile to the woman's direction. She gave a half smirk in return.

Charles managed to keep from turning to Erik to throw the man his patented 'What are you doing?!' glare.

Apparently, he didn't have to turn to give off an aura of disapproval though because Erik huffed out a laugh and continued. "You're always the one trying to get me to compromise, Charles. Besides, I don't think any of your mind games will work on this magnificent creature, do you?"

This was happening. Erik- no, Magneto- was trying to undermine Charles. After everything that Charles had told him, everything Erik must know to be true about Phoenix and her power, all the promises Erik had made to let Charles take the lead… and Charles found he wasn't actually surprised. That was almost more disappointing than Erik's actions themselves.

This time, he didn't hold himself back from sending Magneto a look he knew was equal parts pleading and warning. That seemed to silence the man for the time being.

"I'm here to help Jean. You and I have our differences, but I don't mean you any harm, Phoenix. I know what you are now. I know what you've gone through. I felt your pain, your suffering. It doesn't have to be this way."

Phoenix crossed her arms with an expression that screamed holier-than-thou. "Oh, I think it does. You say you've seen my pain and suffering. Yet seeing and experiencing are two very different things." She leaned forward to rest her elbows on her knees. "You see so many people's minds and you pretend that gives you the right to make decisions on their behalf, using their knowledge. You know nothing, Charles Xavier. Nothing. Jean has seen now. She has experienced it through me. She knows."

Charles let Phoenix talk, taking the opportunity to slip into her mind. He'd been right. It was much easier now that he knew the entity's mind. It also helped that she was distracted by her monologue. A solid wall stood between him and a section of her consciousness that no doubt held Jean. He tapped the walls trying to find a weakness. He could feel Jean stirring, attempting to exert control. He was so intent on his task that he almost missed when Phoenix stopped speaking and Erik started.

"I won't pretend to know what you've gone through, but I do know that the world is full of hardships and people who wish nothing but pain on those they see as different."

Charles jerked back to the present, keeping a finger in Phoenix's mental door. There was only so much he could take. "Erik, stop it."

*If he wasn't wearing that damn helmet, I'd stop him for you,* Onslaught griped. Charles found himself agreeing with his darker half. That should've scared him, but there were other things to worry about now. Like how he had to keep Phoenix at bay without utilizing (and thus revealing) his greatest asset while also fighting Magneto, who was wearing a helmet that kept Charles from being able to do anything but swat at him from his chair.

Magneto, who had moved to give a quick glance out the window, turned back, his cape rustling a few stray papers on the floor. "No, Charles. Not this time. It's obvious that you've been holding
Jean back. With Phoenix, she may be able to finally reach her potential."

"You don't know what you're saying," Charles replied with growing frustration. His hold was slipping, but Jean was fighting more. If only he could-

A lamp shot across the room.

"I am sitting right here, and I am not a being to be trifled with. I am older than generations of your families," Phoenix grit between her teeth. Her composure had deteriorated. She gripped the arms of the chair with iron fists. Her auburn hair was beginning to wave ethereally in a non-existent breeze, forming what could described either be the beginnings of a halo or the hood of a cobra about to strike.

Charles felt his grip slip. He tried to surreptitiously regain it when Phoenix's eyes shot to him. "Did you learn nothing from our last exchange? Stay out of my head, Professor," she spat. All the doors to the room slammed shut and the furniture started rising again. Distantly, Charles heard the front door crash open. Their companions had apparently decided they were in trouble. And it would appear they were right. Phoenix, however, was blocking the other mutants from taking action. Magneto, for his part, looked delighted at the show of power. This was getting out of hand. Fast. Giving up on stealth, he tried to pry open the crack in the wall keeping Jean at bay.

"I said stop it!" Phoenix shouted, sending Charles' wheelchair back a few inches.

"Perhaps you should listen to her, Charles." The delight was fading from the magnokinetic's face. He still sounded amused, but it was evident that the physical attack on Charles, however small, had roused him to the danger they were in if things went south.

*Don't push her unless you're willing to let me out*, Onslaught said.

"We can help you, Phoenix" Charles continued, ignoring both Erik and Onslaught. "It's not too late. You can let her go."

The burning of Phoenix's eyes dimmed a bit. The crack opened more. Then, of course, Erik decided to overcome whatever fear he'd had for Charles and speak up.

"Don't lie to her, Charles. You want to get rid of her. I would never give up such an asset. The humans will not stop trying to kill us." He turned to Phoenix. "You have the power to do something about that."

The telepath barely managed to contain Onslaught as he reared up, ready to attack.

*Let me out, Charles! He won't stop unless we make him.*

"They'll imprison us," Magneto continued to Phoenix. "You know this. You've seen it and much worse from what Charles told us."

"Not everyone feels that we're a threat!" Charles shouted. The everpresent hold he kept on his temper was loosening. It was a mistake to let Erik come. What had he been thinking? "For every person who wants to imprison us, there are scores who don't."

"Charles puts too much faith in the humans. We are the superior race. We deserve the planet, not them."

"Erik, please!" Charles yelled as wind started picking up in time with the growing flame in Phoenix's eyes.
"I'm sorry, Charles. Phoenix is too much of an advantage to abandon."

This was it, then. This was the moment where Charles saw his friend slip out of his reach. The Erik he knew was gone, lost to a needless war. It was a surprisingly quiet realization. Not with a bang but with a whimper, as Eliot put it. Of course, that may have been due to the continuing battle Charles was waging against Phoenix.

"You don't know what you're getting yourself into," Charles said in a last attempt to hold onto his friend. "She will betray you. Just like Onslaught. She works for no one but herself. That kind of power cannot be contained."

"At least you're right about one thing," Phoenix said. And in the blink of an eye, any progress Charles had made with Jean was gone. The wall was stronger than ever, reinforced beyond even his power. Phoenix had fully manifested. Wind billowing around it, the thing using Jean's body relinquished its grasp on the chair and stood.

The windows exploded, throwing Charles' wheelchair back another foot and hurling Magneto across the room. He hit the opposite wall and slid to the floor, dazed. Phoenix snapped her attention back to Charles and advanced towards him.

Charles spared a glance at Erik, assuring himself the other man was still conscious, before facing Phoenix once more. "Let Jean go."

Phoenix let out a humorless laugh and flicked Charles back another couple of inches for the fun of it. "I told you, Charles Xavier, your precious Jean can do nothing to act against me. Her energy is depleted. This body is mine now. I will no longer be controlled by that puny little girl or the walls you tried to build around me. You speak of freedom for mutants, yet you imprisoned me. You would have seen me tethered behind Jean Grey until the end of our existence. You are the biggest hypocrite of all."

The house was a war zone by now. The floors were barely visible under the broken household objects littering it. Magneto caught his breath, which had been solidly knocked out of him by the wall. His hand shot to his head. The helmet was still firmly in place. Magneto let out a small sigh of relief then turned back to the action unfurling before him.

Charles was saying something to Phoenix. He could barely catch the words over the whirlwind that would've made Janos jealous. She must not have liked what she heard though. Her eyes blazed brighter and Charles began lifting from his chair. The other telepath's eyes widened but quickly returned to normal. Magneto knew that face well. It was the one Charles wore during battle.

"Jean-"

The tornado Phoenix was creating kept Magneto pinned to the wall. He could do nothing as he watched Phoenix levitate Charles fully out of his chair and grab his throat. He wasn't sure what the feeling in the pit of his stomach was. He didn't wish harm upon Charles, but the man was stubborn as ever. If he'd just listen...if he had backed off when Phoenix had warned him, this wouldn't be an issue. Maybe Phoenix could knock some sense into the telepath.

The woman spoke, this time audibly. "I will make sure you never stand in our way again."

Just like that, the questioning thoughts he'd been having towards Charles were swept away. Now Magneto could pinpoint exactly how he felt. What he'd thought was fear when Charles had been missing and the school burning was but a pinprick compared to this. This was genuine terror. This wasn't just teaching the professor a lesson. Charles was in trouble, could be killed, and there was
nothing Magneto could do to help him. The woman was truly, magnificently powerful.

Charles was choking and something was happening…something that definitely wasn't good. A stray paper caught in the wind swept past, leaving a trail behind it. Was it on fire? Magneto followed it to find that, no, it wasn't on fire. What he'd taken for ash was actually the material disintegrating. As in literally disintegrating. Its atoms were falling apart. Now that he took in the rest of the room, he could see that the paper wasn't Phoenix's only victim.

The magnokinetic fought against the force holding him as he once again faced his friend…his friend whose hand was glittering like bits of wood in a flame…like the paper had.

"Charles!"

Charles could only twist a few inches towards Magneto, his resigned gaze meeting the shock and horror no doubt painted all over the magnokinetic's face. How was Charles so calm? Why wasn't he fighting? How could he keep himself together when all Erik could do was scream *He's going to die, she's going to kill him* over and over in his head?

Just as the sparks running up Charles' hand spread to his chest, the whole room shifted. Charles' body had snapped back towards Phoenix in what Erik had assumed was a last ditch effort to defend himself and go down fighting. Perhaps he was right. A new energy started building. Charles was encompassed in light, but not the one of Phoenix's creation. Where the light went, Phoenix's peaking power was driven back. The woman narrowed her eyes and pushed. Charles gasped and clinched his eyes shut against whatever had been done to him. When they shot open again a few seconds later, they were orange. A very familiar orange. What the-

A wave of power pulsed from the levitated telepath. The whirlwind ceased as Phoenix was flung into the wall behind her. Magneto found himself shoved against his wall again, forced to shut his eyes against the burning light. The chaos fell into silence. When Magneto opened his eyes again, the formerly airborne objects were scattered across the floor.

In the middle of everything was Charles, collapsed facedown on top of some painful looking bits of wall and books, panting. The telepath dragged his head up to meet Erik's gaze. He looked exhausted, more exhausted than any time Erik had seen him, including some marathon sessions in Cerebro. It would be a lot easier to pity the man if the bright aura of orange wasn't still receding back into him. His eyes shone the undeniable hue that betrayed Onslaught's presence.

The rage that had been Erik's constant companion in his adulthood roiled inside him, reaching levels he hadn't felt in years, sweeping away the terror that he was about to watch Charles be killed in front of him. Charles' gaze begged for understanding. Begging for understanding meant there was something to understand and forgive…which meant not only that Onslaught's existence wasn't a surprise to Charles, but also that the being hadn't forcibly taken over like he had in the past. They were working together.

Across the room, part of the bookcase on Phoenix's arm dislodged. Erik broke his stalemate with Charles to look at the wall where she was dragging herself upwards, anger and discomfort warring for dominance on her face. She glared at the telepath, who turned his head weakly to glare back at her. Erik thought she might make another run at Charles…Onslaught…whatever. The rage within him swelled again at the mere thought of the other entity. Everything was silent outside of the heavy breaths of the three people in the ransacked remains of the house. The woman dusted herself off, then turned to Erik.

"I've decided I will help you. Come."

She glided through the rubble of the room, ignoring the other telepath's presence. Doors flung
themselves open to reveal Hank and Ororo pushed against the far wall, kept there by Phoenix as she strolled by. The rest of the mutants waited outside in the yard, backing up and taking defensive stances as the creature approached.

Magneto turned back to Charles. Charles who refused to fight the humans, but wouldn't hesitate to attack his fellow mutants. Charles who had lied, let him and everyone else believe that Onslaught was dead. Charles who would apparently cooperate with Onslaught while he left the Brotherhood to fight for their freedom. How could he ever trust Charles to do what was right for their kind? And now he had his key to victory ready and willing to work with him. The only thing standing in his way was the tattered remains of his friendship with a man who clearly had no regard for said friendship.

He gave his head a quick shake to clear it, his helmet sending a beam of reflected light onto the wall from the sun shining through the open door. Then, he locked away the emotions rampaging about his mind, freeing himself of the remnants of guilt and fear he'd felt during Phoenix's attack, and threw away the key. He was done. Charles had made his decision and now Magneto had made his. It was time to end the war. He pulled himself to his feet and moved to follow Phoenix.

Charles clearly recognized what Erik was doing. The evidence of Onslaught's presence was gone, all except for the spark in the telepath's once-blue eyes. He appeared to lack the energy to speak, but his expression shifted from begging to a flash of disbelief and possibly hurt to anger. By the time Magneto paused at the door, Charles was glaring at him. There was a darkness behind the glare, a ferocity that Erik hadn't seen before even when Onslaught was in control. Magneto tucked away the last tinge of regret he felt before smirking and giving a mock salute. Then, striding past a gaping Storm and Beast, he left his friend – or rather ex-friend - behind.

Chapter End Notes

Movie Notes: This is the one scene from X3 that I knew from the start I was going to pull directly from. In X3, the X-Men and Brotherhood happen to converge upon Jean's house after Phoenix makes itself known. Erik and Charles go in. Things don't go well. Phoenix leaves with Magneto after killing Charles. I chose to have less dying happen. I directly quoted a few lines and pulled some of the imagery of them going through the kitchen from the movie. I also based what Phoenix was wearing on her outfit from X3 (to a degree)...I think. I googled that part cause I don't have the movie on me at the moment.

Cultural Notes: The passing reference Charles makes to T.S. Eliot is from The Hollow Men, where he said, "This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper".
Alex put up as much of a fight as he could once he realized what was happening, but there wasn't much he could do with Phoenix against them. Beast and Storm were pinned to the wall and the Professor was sprawled out on the floor. He was the last line of defense. Fat lot of good that was. She cut him off from his power before he could release more than a few wisps of plasma. And wasn't that a fun feeling. He'd always imagined not having his power would make him feel "normal" (whatever that meant), but in reality it just made him feel pointless.

As soon as Magneto disappeared with Jean and the other Brotherhood members, Alex felt his power rush back to him. Phoenix's hold on Storm and Beast dropped too, leaving the pair to slide to the ground. Hank scrabbled over to Charles, who had passed out as soon as Magneto had stepped out the door. Things had been perfectly in control not ten minutes earlier, Alex thought. Now…well, there was nothing he could do about the Brotherhood so he might as well see what was happening with the Prof. It wasn't until he was inside the house approaching the others that he realized he was panting. Whether it was from rage or exertion or stress or all of the above, he didn't know.

"Is he okay?" he asked as Hank felt for Charles' pulse.

Hank sighed. "It seems so. His pulse is strong and there are no injuries evident."

It felt like they'd been dealing with an unconscious leader and unfavorable circumstances just yesterday. Oh, wait, they had. Except this time they were dealing with something a little more serious too.

"Was that what I thought it was?" Alex continued.

"Yes."

Of course Onslaught being dead would've made life too easy. Hank was clearing a space next to the telepath, pointedly not looking at anyone. Not good. If McCoy was in neutral mode, it meant he was calculating or fuming.

"That was Onslaught?" Storm asked.

"Yeah." The scientist stopped and took a breath, pinching his nose where the glasses he'd left in the lab usually rested.

"He seemed…considerably less violent than last time."

"Well, it would be hard for him to have been more violent, wouldn't it?" Alex snapped back. Storm awarded him with a cool stare. She was the only person Alex had ever met who could raise a judgmental eyebrow at you without actually raising a judgmental eyebrow.

But now that she mentioned it, Onslaught had been considerably less violent than he could've
been. The entity had been destructive, had ripped Erik's mind from his body, had killed without a thought last time they'd met. This time, he kept Charles from meeting an untimely demise and nothing more. He acted only in defense. Sure, it had obviously taken a lot out of the telepath, but with the wave of power they'd felt out on the street, Onslaught could've taken an approach that was more…damaging.

"We need to get back," Hank said, breaking Alex's thought process.

"Whoa there, how do we know he isn't a threat? He was less violent, but that doesn't mean he's not violent at all." It was weird implying that the Professor was a threat, but with the safety of the team and the school on the line, he had to think of the bigger picture.

Hank shook his head. "I need to make sure he's not injured. He seemed to be in control from what I could tell."

Alex stared at Hank. At some point, you'd think they would've developed the ability to have silent conversations. They were around each other enough. But, no, that would be too easy. Plus, that would probably annoy Charles, which brought him back to-

"We have to take the chance," Beast said after breaking eye contact to look back at Charles.

"We thought he was in control last time and he managed to leave you and me catatonic and tore up Ororo's back pretty good."

"We don't have time to argue about this, Alex!" Beast raising his voice, it never failed to be just a little terrifying. "Magneto just took Phoenix. We have no idea what they can do together and Charles is our best hope at figuring it out. We may have to deal with the fact that Onslaught is our best chance at defeating them."

Alex ran a hand through his hair and turned, pacing a few steps away before coming back. "Fine. Storm, find a working phone line. Call the school and get Scott to pick us up with the jet. Don't tell him what happened. Just…tell him things didn't go according to plan."

Storm nodded and took off. Alex admired her ability to keep herself separate from events. He didn't know if it was her upbringing or just some innate ability she had, but the girl was better than any of them at paying attention to the greater good and doing what needed to be done without letting present circumstances phase her. Speaking of present circumstances…

Hank was back to studying Charles. He'd turned the professor over onto his back after clearing a space on the floor where the man could lie without pieces of house sticking in his back. Alex squatted next to him, then realized staying still wasn't going to cut it and pushed back up to pace.

"Alex, you need to stop," Hank murmured. McCoy was lifting one of the Charles' eyelids. The eye beneath was the same blue they all knew, all trace of the fiery orange that had been there before gone.

Alex was never one to follow orders. He paced a few more times before stopping by the staircase, resting his forehead on the railing, and closing his eyes. Now that things had calmed down a bit, everything he'd been holding back was hitting him at once. He hated when that happened.

"How am I going to tell Scott that we couldn't save the girl his life revolves around? How am I supposed to explain that we did nothing while she took off with our enemy?" He punched the railing. It splintered. Great. Now he was bleeding.

Heaving breaths with his eyes still closed, he didn't see Hank get up, but he heard a sigh followed by McCoy padding over. A paw grasped his now injured hand gently, feeling around for broken
bones. Alex hissed as the point of impact was hit and opened his eyes to look down at what the
scientist was doing. Hank pulled some fabric from the floor and wrapped the hand. It looked like it
had once been a curtain. He wondered if Scott would recognize it from when he'd met Jean’s
parents not too long ago.

McCoy finished tying the makeshift bandage off. "It's not broken, just bruised and it has a few
splinters that'll have to be pulled out by someone who doesn't have bear hands. As for Scott...he'll
be okay. He'll be upset and he'll be angry, but he'll have an awesome big brother there with him
all the way and a team of friends who are willing to do anything to get Jean back. We'll get
through this."

Alex cleared his throat and flexed his now wrapped hand. "Um, thanks, Bozo."

Beast rolled his eyes, but nodded and headed back to Charles.

"How are we going to deal with him?" Alex asked, nodding towards Charles.

"As we have to," said Storm from the doorway. "But for now there's no need." She looked to
Hank, their de facto second-in-command in non-battle situations. "They'll be here in a little while.
They gave me coordinates where we can meet them."

"Let's go," Alex said. Hank hoisted Charles into his arms and they moved out.

"The mission will continue as planned," Magneto confirmed to Angel and Azazel. "It's been in the
works for months. Our taking advantage of...recent events does not change that. You're
dismissed."

Angel flitted off with a curt nod. Azazel was gone before she could get out the door. The pair had
approached him as soon as the announcement about Phoenix's involvement with the Brotherhood
had made things official. Even though he had assured them prior to the announcement and during
the announcement itself, the pair somehow remained unconvinced. At least Mystique, the central
figure in the upcoming mission, hadn't questioned him about it (though she'd been vocal about
other issues since he'd returned with their new asset). The infiltration of Senate talks was
something Phoenix wouldn't be helpful with even if Magneto did want to include her at the last
minute. As he'd told the others, these plans had been in place for months, the long game Mystique
had become an expert at over the years. Did they think him desperate enough to employ a new
asset with no strategy just because he had it?

He supposed it had all happened rather quickly. They'd just returned with Phoenix not two hours
before, after all. But when chances presented themselves, they needed to be taken advantage of.

Now, he found himself pacing his quarters while Riptide and Emma took Phoenix to get settled in
her new quarters. His cape was thrown haphazard on a simple chair behind his desk, which he'd
managed to cover with plans for his machine and enemy research facilities. A draft of the most
recent anti-mutant bill was in there somewhere too, he was sure. He had far too much energy and
no way to spend it aside from uselessly rattling the metal in his training facility. At least it would
keep the recruits on their toes.

Mystique's voice rose to the window, dismissing the recruits for a break before their training with
Emma that afternoon. She had been less than pleased at the turn of events, particularly the part
where her brother had almost been disintegrated, but she had accepted the necessity of them. At
least someone else was as surprised as he was about the reemergence of Onslaught. Emma hadn't
been nearly as sympathetic as he'd expected her to be.
After a few more paces, he forced himself to sit down. He needed to evaluate what he knew about Phoenix and how she could fit in their plans. He took everything from Charles with a grain of salt. If the telepath was anything, he was manipulative and (not shockingly) tended to have a different perspective than Magneto on most topics of importance.

Leaning back, he stared at the desk, not focusing on anything in particular, and flipped a pen over his fingers.

He knew from Emma that the entity was a strong telepath. From his own experience, he could say she was also gifted in telekinesis, though that may have been utilization of Jean's abilities. She could easily defeat Charles when he was unprepared, but that advantage was untested against the newly emerged Onslaught. She was also not loyal to the X-Men, especially Charles, who she appeared to be actively antagonistic towards. He could probably trust Charles' evaluation of her previous lives and the persecutions she'd suffered. That boded well towards motivating her to legitimately take up their cause.

Charles had also said she couldn't be controlled, that she was dangerous. He was sure that was true as well, but how true remained murkier. Dangerous to other mutants, including his Brotherhood? Possibly, but, again, he didn't have enough information to make a definitive judgment. As for control, that wasn't an issue. He wasn't trying to control Phoenix. Why would he? How could Charles have tried to control such a powerful being? Mutants and their mutations shouldn't be controlled; they should be encouraged, set free.

But none of this answered the question at hand: could he trust Phoenix as a member of the Brotherhood?

No, obviously not, if only because he didn't have enough information. Trust had to be earned. But she would certainly be on their side if push came to shove. Even if she was working towards her own ends, her ends appeared parallel his own for the time being. He'd already told Emma to keep an eye on her. The woman may not be able to defeat Phoenix one-on-one, but she could give her a run for her money and she'd be able to tell if Phoenix was doing anything untoward like trying to burn down their facilities.

Which reminded him that Phoenix joining him hadn't been the only development that day. As arduous a task as trust was to gain, it could be lost as easily a child dropping an ice cream cone. He and Charles had been on opposite sides of a ravine, connected by the bridge of their friendship. Through the years, the secrets festering between them had eaten away at the ropes uniting the two sides and one too many had finally snapped the ties binding them together. It was bound to happen eventually. Their beliefs were too discordant.

Much to his chagrin, that didn't make it any easier. Despite all the facts circling his head about Phoenix and Onslaught and Charles, trying to convince himself he'd done the right thing, a part of him still regretted leaving Charles behind like that. The man had just survived an attack on his life. The telepath could've been injured worse than he appeared. Erik had been proud of how he'd left and the look of defeat on Charles' face. The indignation and rage on Alex's as he tried to stop him had only fanned the fire. He knew he'd kept his mask of victorious indifference on tight and let his anger once again fuel him as he left. But now that things had settled...

No. There was no going back. Gripping the pen he'd been flipping, he sat up. The plans for his machine were on top, covering all but a corner of the bill Mystique had procured for him. Thank goodness. If he'd lost it, she would've been furious. He needed to go through the most recent machine blueprints. It was coming along nicely, but an annoying glitch had come up, throwing an unforeseen wrench into his plans.
There was so much happening, so much more than him and Charles. Peace was not an option, no matter what Charles preached.

And that settled it. He had made his decision and he was going to follow through. He was going to be the leader the Brotherhood needed, the one all mutants needed whether they knew it or not. That leader could have no regrets and no emotional attachments. Especially not to a hypocritical telepath leading the charge for the other side.

With Phoenix's influence, they would win their war. After that, Charles and his X-Men would join them to rebuild the world as it should be…and if they didn't, they wouldn't be worth worrying about. Until then, he had other things that deserved his attention. Phoenix was due to meet him any second now. He had plans to make.

Charles had woken in his own bed with Hank hovering over him. Last he'd remembered, Erik had just left with Jean after finding out about Onslaught. Things hadn't exactly gone to plan.

That's putting it lightly. You should've let me out earlier. If I hadn't had to force myself past your silly shields, I could've done more good.

Onslaught's internal voice was angry. Seething, actually. And he wasn't the only one. Of the four minds he sensed in the room, all were emanating varying degrees of anger. It was hot. Ororo's was the least, hovering somewhere between lukewarm and uncomfortable. It seemed she was more concerned for Scott, whose chaotic mind was off somewhere with Bobby and Warren working off the pain of their failure. Sean was full of confused anger, a hot tickling sensation, while Hank's anger tipped more towards resigned disappointment. The scientist had had his suspicions about Onslaught's continued existence. He was a smart boy. It still hurt to have a mentor's betrayal confirmed. Alex's anger was scalding, though whether it was directed at Charles, himself, Phoenix, or Erik, Charles couldn't say for sure.

"How do you feel, Professor?" Hank asked with the neutrality of a man in medical mode.

"Tired. I have a headache." He hadn't realized either was true until he said it. His whole body was weak and his mind was sore from overexertion.

"Your heart rate and blood pressure are inconsistent but stabilizing. From what I can tell, you're going to be okay."

Charles closed his eyes and gave a weak nod. It was all he could do for now. He'd almost drifted back to sleep when Alex pushed off the wall where he's been stewing and approached to lean against the bed with clenched fists on either side of Charles' feet. One of them was bandaged, something Charles would have to inquire about later. For now, it appeared they were going to have it out on another issue.

"How can you trust that thing? How can we trust you?"

"That thing is me. Onslaught is a part of me. He always has been. The problem was that I did not accept him. Now that we're working together."

He paused to let Alex scoff, push off the bed, and cross his arms over his chest. Taking the time to muster his energy, he kept silent until the man settled down.

"As I was saying, he's far less likely to feel the need to go off on his own. The issue wasn't that he existed. It was that I refused to accept that he did."
"But why can't you get rid of him?" a more level-headed Sean asked. "Why didn't you let Magneto kill him?"

"You don't understand," he said, frustration growing. Fatigue never did good things for his mood, not to mention all the other developments flashing in the back of his mind. "Loath as I am to admit it, there will always be a part of me that wants to do unspeakable things and I will always tamp down those desires, which means that, unfortunately, Onslaught will always exist."

**Unfortunately? You offend me, Charles! I thought we'd made progress,** the entity teased with a hint of the anger still simmering in the undertones.

"Even if we had killed Onslaught, he would've been created again," Charles continued. "The only way to kill him would be to..."

From the confusion on the faces of the other mutants, it was clear they didn't get the implication. All but Hank, who had been continuing to monitor Charles' vitals throughout their conversation. He paused in his ministrations and met Charles' gaze.

"The only way to kill him would be to kill you," McCoy finished.

Charles nodded, ignoring Sean's dropped jaw, Alex's startled stance, and Ororo's widened eyes. "I made a decision two years ago. I accepted that Onslaught was, is, and always shall be a part of me. I took a calculated risk that our tentative armistice would be beneficial to all involved parties. So far, that risk has paid off. We keep each other in check and we've grown more powerful in doing so."

"More powerful?" Storm asked.

With the flick of his wrist, metallic decorations of all sizes began to waltz around the room. Compared to what he could do, it was a small task, but it tired him more than he'd like to admit. Still, it was worth it to feel their surprise.

"Is there anything else we should know?" Hank asked. He'd been the least impressed by Charles' show. Disappointment was still heavy in his mind.

"I apologize for keeping this from you. I needed to be sure Magneto would remain unaware of Onslaught's continued existence. It was the ace up our sleeve, if you will."

"And you didn't trust us not to let it slip?" Alex asked.

"I didn't trust Emma Frost not to pull it out of one of your minds on the off chance that I couldn't protect you."

"And you thought if we knew Onslaught was still around right after Alkali Lake, we'd question your judgment. Now that we know he's been around for two years and everything is okay, you think we'll accept it."

The Summers brothers were more perceptive than they let on. "Do you?"

"We don't have much of a choice, do we? Were you ever going to tell us?"

Charles paused. "Magneto must be stopped. Phoenix must be contained so that we can get Jean back. Together, we can do that."

Defending himself was taking its toll and even Charles, an expert on concealing emotion and
weakness, couldn't keep his weakening constitution hidden.

"The Professor needs to rest," Hank said. "Gather the others. We can decide where to go from here. I'll join you after I finish checking Charles."

"But-"

"We aren't going to get any more information right now, Alex. He's exhausted. It won't do any of us good if he isn't allowed to recover."

The three filed reluctantly out of the room. Once the door closed, Charles let his shields fall, all but melting back into the mattress.

"Thank you, Henry. I suspected you knew."

"I don't like it. I don't trust Onslaught any more than they do."

"But?"

McCoy took a settling breath. "You're right. Magneto and Phoenix need to be the priority. If Onslaught can help, then so be it. We'll deal with the rest when the time comes."

Charles tried to nod. He didn't know if he was successful. "I apologize for keeping it from you. Truly."

"I know," the scientist sighed, pinching his nose. "Rest, Charles. You need to recover. If you were anyone else..."

"I'd be dead, yes. Well aware."

The scientist made sure Charles drank a proffered glass of juice before heading out of the room, pausing just before shutting the door. "Are you really going to be able to stop Magneto...no matter what that may entail?"

Whether it was the fatigue or the impact of Erik's decision, the question dealt the final blow to Charles' mask. The facade he hadn't known he'd been holding dropped, leaving flaming blue eyes in their wake. For the first time, he actually looked angry. "The man we knew is clearly gone. I'm done trying to find him. This madness must be stopped."

With a stiff nod, Beast was gone. Charles felt echoes of discomfort from Hank at his mentor's coldness towards a man he had been so close with. The thought was quashed quickly. Magneto hadn't seemed to care that Phoenix had very nearly killed Charles. A faded scene Charles was unfamiliar with faded in. It was Erik's face, probably just after Azazel had saved them from Phoenix's first attack, a flash of concern popping up before disappearing just as quickly. It was almost physically painful to feel the hope Hank had been holding, the hope that Magneto still had a modicum of humanity in him, turn to ash.

The last thought Charles heard before sleep dragged him under was in Hank's voice, wondering if the man they'd met all those years ago, the man who lead them in their first struggle against Onslaught, who had, in fact, saved Charles on more than one occasion and who Charles had deemed worth saving every now and then too, was truly gone. Perhaps that question had been answered long ago. They'd just been ignoring it because it wasn't the one they wanted to hear.

Miles away in the park old men went to play chess, a little girl sat staring at an empty table wondering where its usual inhabitants had gone.
In time, all foul things come forth

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is a quote from Thranduil in the trailer for "The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug" trailer

I change POV in this chapter a fair amount. I marked it with ** when I do so it'll hopefully not be confusing.

Three months since Phoenix and Magneto's abrupt disappearance from their lives, and there had been no definitive move on the Brotherhood's part. It frustrated Charles to no end. Then again, it shouldn't be all that surprising. Phoenix had proved patience was a virtue she possessed plenty of. And if Erik could challenge Charles in chess, Magneto was certain to use those skills to his advantage militarily. The wait between one's own move and that of one's opponent was always the most nerve-wracking.

No definitive moves didn't mean no moves at all, though. Attacks on "research facilities" had escalated and were leaving the facilities obliterated in Phoenix's signature disintegration technique.

The media was, of course, scrambling to find an explanation. The Brotherhood had made quite a name for itself. A change in tactics was newsworthy nowadays. Magneto had gotten a nationally-televised speech out of it. It had given new life to the mutant rights protests that had been popping up around the country.

But, as Charles feared (and expected), anti-mutant politicians were using it to their advantage, touting the danger mutants posed to society based on their ability to leave an empty field where a three-acre facility once stood with no sign of the inhabitants. A few even flat-out lied, making statements about how the mutant subjects they were trying their utmost to help had lost control and somehow managed to take everything with them. The only thing more dangerous than a purposely violent mutant was an accidentally violent one. After all, if they couldn't control themselves, what was to say they wouldn't sneeze and destroy a school or a park or a hospital?

Onslaught was livid. Charles had to work harder than ever to keep his temper in check. It was difficult to put an optimistic spin on events. He'd been fielding calls for interviews since the first of the new waves of attacks. He'd refused to do anything but give general statements of reassurance with his usual spiel about genetics. Despite numerous offers, he didn't think he could handle going on live television. Not with Onslaught rearing to go and Phoenix at the back of his mind. The debacle with Donovan Zane had been bad enough on its own.

Thankfully, human proponents of mutant equality seemed to be speaking out in his place. At least Charles wouldn't have to worry about that. Let the humans fight among themselves. He had enough to worry about on his own.

He knew what Phoenix was going to do. He just wasn't sure how she was going to do it. Clearly, she'd seen something in the minds of Magneto's people to lead her to believe she could achieve her goals through them. She wouldn't have gone with them if she wasn't absolutely positive she could get her way and he doubted she had any qualms about rummaging through their heads to evaluate her options. The questions now were what they had and how far along they were. He
could only hope the situation wasn’t beyond his control to repair. If she got too far along in her plans, the only way to stop her would be to-

\textit{Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Onslaught interrupted. It’s not too late. We don’t know what she has. Until we do, there’s nothing we can do about it.}

Charles took a cleansing breath. \textit{Of course. Plan for what we need to. The rest will come when it comes.}

Despite the words, he couldn't help the wave of anger that crashed over him when he saw yet another picture of Magneto on the news that night. What a mess things had become.

Training the recruits was a necessary duty as a senior member of the Brotherhood. That didn't mean Emma had to like it. With a roll of her eyes, she approached one of their newer recruits. He was trying to throw fire at his sparring partner. Trying being the operative word.

"You won't stand a chance in a fight with that posture," she said as she jerked his shoulders back from their hunched position. "You have to favor your strengths. Be confident in your power. Pitching fire at someone is not done effectively from a slouch."

The boy, who had chosen the ever so creative name "Burner", corrected himself as she backed off. The next shot, he hit his target, a girl who could deflect energy, straight on. The girl, Unas, dropped her smoking hand and shook it before throwing an energy field back at the smirking boy.

"And never gloat," Emma said as the boy fell. "It gives your enemy time to regroup."

She sauntered off to assess another pair. It was simultaneously rewarding and incredibly frustrating to deal with training. She spent more time than she'd like to admit planning her sessions with their growing group. It wasn't her favorite activity, but if she was going to do it, she was going to do it well.

Right on schedule, the recruits lined up for their next assignment. Emma moved to pace in front of them. It would all be very army general if not for the pristine white skirt and blouse she was donning.

"You need to be ready at the drop of a hat to fight for your life," Emma said as she paced. "We may be attacked tomorrow. We may need to defend ourselves against humans and the X-Men. You need to be able to take care of yourself well enough to obtain the mission objective, whatever that may be. Understood?"

Most of them shot back a muttered "understood", though some were looking around with disinterest. They would learn their lesson in discipline eventually. If not here, then in battle.

"Good. Toad, watch your tongue. You got sloppy at the end and nearly took out Peeper." Emma held back a sigh. Magneto had stuck to allowing members of the Brotherhood pick out their own 'true' names, but, honestly, Peeper? It certainly wasn't very threatening. His power wasn't the ability to perform misdemeanor crimes, which, let's face it, is what a person called "Peeper" would be expected to do. The element of surprise was on his side at least. "Burner, keep your shoulders back. You aren't hunchback living in a bell tower."

The boy and most of his comrades gave a puzzled stare in return. Right. A lot of these kids had dropped out, been disinterested, and/or been persecuted in school. She kept forgetting this was a no literary references zone. Xavier would’ve appreciated the comment. Hell, \textit{Hunchback of Notre Dame} was probably on his little school's reading list.
"Go on, then," she said, shooing them to their fight positions. She didn't like having to give explicit instructions, not when her instructions should be obvious.

Figures appeared before each of the now maliciously grinning recruits. Rumor had it training with Emma was a favorite among the new kids. They got to fight as violently as they wanted. Not that they would hold back most of the time. They just wouldn't get punished when they injured one of their compatriots.

The novelty of training an army had been fun for all of a week and a half. As with most experiences in her life, she found herself disillusioned rather quickly. She didn't agree with the way lessons were run. By lessons, of course, she meant various battle training sessions and simulations. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do about it. The Brotherhood wasn't her show to run. She knew her place and that place was as the token telepath. Thinking herself anything more than that would be a joke. Charles was exactly right when he said Erik's helmet spoke for itself. In Magneto's world, telepaths had no place beyond their ability, as weapons to be wielded and distrusted. Then again, they didn't have much of a place beyond that in the world at present. At least in a mutant-controlled world all the telepaths could stand together instead of being separated by pointless lines based on favoring or disfavoring humanity.

She began walking among the fighters, making minuscule adjustments to her projections when need be. Something caught her eye from Magneto's second story office window. Phoenix was there. Emma's mind prickled. In the weeks since Phoenix joined them, she'd had many meetings with their leader. Something wasn't right with the girl. There was nothing Emma could pinpoint, nothing that would confirm the (this time justifiable) paranoia Magneto had, but she couldn't help the sense that somewhere a spark had set a forest on fire; it just hadn't reached them yet.

Still, Magneto had begun increasing Phoenix's presence on missions they'd planned since her appearance. And there had been a lot of missions with the info Mystique was gathering from her post in the Senate. The shapeshifter had returned yesterday with even more intel, including details on a rally the Friends of Humanity would be holding with the help of a few anonymous senatorial benefactors.

None of this even touched the fact that their illustrious leader was colder than ever. Not that he hadn't been cold before. He was a military leader if ever there was one, but as of late, he'd been as emotionless as the metal he manipulated.

He hadn't mentioned Charles or Onslaught once since they'd gained their new ally. Emma wasn't going to pretend Magneto's personality shift and that fact weren't related. She supposed she could see why. She'd been just as surprised as they had when Onslaught had made his grand reentrance. Even though she wasn't physically present when it happened, she could sure as hell feel it. The psychic repercussions of the wave he'd sent out had nearly brought her to her knees.

Once she thought about it, though, it made sense that the entity still existed. It was a part of the telepath. Despite Magneto's grand ideas, the professor hadn't been possessed. Not in the true sense of the word. Onslaught was a result of Xavier's telepathy and Xavier's telepathy hadn't gone away.

The more she thought about it, the more obvious it became. Magneto had killed a projection. Charles had let it happen because he had no protege who could step up to both take over the school and defend against the Brotherhood. It was perfectly logical. But her comrades were somehow blind to that, unwilling or incapable of putting the puzzle together. She wasn't going to waste her breath trying to explain it to them. Magneto had an idea in his head and had dug his heels in. There'd be no convincing him through words.

Emma sighed and tweaked another projection. Perhaps it took a telepath to truly grasp the
situation. They did have a different way of seeing the world. A better way, if you asked her. That was why Xavier was so interesting and Phoenix so terrifying.

Phoenix chipped away at the last bits of fingernail polish on her index finger. The girl, Jean Grey, favored a very different color scheme than Phoenix would if she put thought into such trivial matters. Still, her fingernail was fascinating compared to the (rather one-sided) conversation Magneto was having with her during the "meeting". For how often the man called her into his office, she ended up with surprisingly little information.

She tuned him out, instead peeking out the window. The woman in white was training the young ones again. The woman glanced towards the room and frowned. Phoenix gave a half smile. Other telepaths were amusing. Both Xavier and Frost had the ability to see the world from her perspective, yet neither chose to. Xavier was devious, but somehow remained optimistic. The White Queen, while realistic, was surprisingly neutral on what humanity's fate should be, despite her group affiliation.

"We've made more newscasts in the past 6 weeks than the entirety of last year," Magneto was saying as he glanced through his papers. She didn't miss the quick glance he shot her way before putting some of the papers in a drawer surreptitiously. As if he could hide anything from her. That made it all the more frustrating to wait. She had tried her hand at patience, thinking if she demonstrated her worth, he would take her where she wanted to go willingly. But patience only went so far. She'd been relishing the chance to stretch in her new body. Now she was growing bored. She had goals after all.

"Your role will be much the same in our attack on the Friends of Humanity-"

"I have demonstrated my worth as a member of the Brotherhood, have I not?"

Magneto paused, looking up from his papers and narrowing his eyes. "You have," he replied.

"Yet you refuse to trust me."

Another pause. "Not fully."

"After all I've done for your cause?"

"It's because you refer to it as 'your cause' rather than 'our cause' that I cannot trust you." Not as easily manipulated as she'd hoped. The man had a mind. Bad luck for him. If he wasn't going to let his guard down, she'd have to take it down for him.

"You're hiding something from me," she continued. "Something important. Your teleporter's mind is more easily breeched than yours. He does not know exactly what your machine does, but he's seen enough that I can figure it out."

"How?" Alarm. Well hidden behind an even tone and calm façade, but still there.

She shrugged, leaning back in her chair. "Like your teleporter's mind, your desk drawer isn't impregnable. I may have been trapped in this little girl for a decade and a half, but I was around a long time before that. I've occupied countless minds. And you forget that I had time to browse the mind of one who has spent considerable time with you."

"Charles…" the magnokinet seethed.

"Yes."

"And what could he tell you about me?" he spat back. Still angry with the other telepath then. Sometimes mutants confused her more than humans did, caught up in their petty squabbles. She
certainly wouldn't point out to either of them the damage their little spat would cause them and the world they were so desperately trying to save. The men being mad at each other played to her favor.

"Nothing willingly, I assure you," she replied, preening at the flash of discomfort behind the man's eyes. "He had ideas about what you might be up to. Not the right ones, but still. He knew enough about your strategies to satisfy me. With his knowledge and the information I've pulled from the minds of your Brotherhood, it wasn't too difficult to deduce the purpose of your machine."

"It will do you little good-"

"I've been very patient. I've waited for you to share your information with me. Yet you choose to remain annoyingly vigilant. It would be so much easier if I could pull everything I need from your head." She paused to look pointedly at the helmet, making a perfect imitation of Xavier. "But I suppose I'll just have to make do."

Magneto was on his feet with his arm thrown out before Phoenix could continue. She flew back into the wall and hit it with a resounding crash.

"Are you challenging me?" he began, calm but with a roiling undertone of danger. "After all the opportunities I've given you? After allowing you to be free?"

Magneto circled the table, not bothering to put his arm down. The situation needed to be contained as quickly as possible. Rebellion had been building since she'd arrived. He hadn't wanted to see it, but he certainly wasn't blind. It hadn't taken long to notice her passive questions, trying to get more information than he was willing to give. Yet he couldn't give up on using her. She had been helpful for their cause. They'd made leaps it would've taken months or even years to make otherwise.

But if Charles was manipulative, Phoenix was outright Machiavellian. He had hoped that he'd get his machine up and running and that they'd have San Francisco under their belt before he had to worry about establishing Phoenix's continued loyalty. He'd thought they'd have her more convincingly on their side by now. Acceptance and the promise of power were persuasive (they were how he got most of his recruits), yet Phoenix had remained aloof, appearing to work with them yet clearly playing her own game. It would appear he'd underestimated how much of her game she had in play.

He should've known he couldn't keep the machine a secret from her like he had most of the others. He had no idea what plans she had for it, but if they weren't his plans, he didn't want them coming to fruition. Pulling the metal from the now destroyed chair, he formed a bar across the woman's chest. She was gasping as he approached. But, wait, no, that wasn't gasping. That was laughter.

The bar dissipated and Phoenix rose. "Allowing me to be free? Freedom isn't an allowance given to humor a child. It is taken through bloodshed and sacrifice. I will never be free. Not until every one of the people who have tried to oppress me is dead."

That was something he could understand and work with. "If revenge is what you want-

"I don't want revenge. I want justice. Your mind is too small. You cannot comprehend what was done to me."

Magneto ducked the blur Phoenix threw at him and threw the closest metal he could back at her. It was easily countered.

Authority could not be lost. They were in a battle for power right now. She was testing her
boundaries. She needed to be shown he would not back down. Focusing his rage, he grasped the iron in the woman's blood and used it to hold her in place. It was as good as the telepathic freezing he'd seen Charles perform on occasion. She was far less threatening when she was completely immobile, her life his to control with the twitch of his fingers. Triumph swelled closer, until-

"Do you really think you, a non-telepath, can defeat me, the most powerful telepath in existence?" she spat. "Even with that helmet of yours, I can beat you with one hand tied behind my back. I don't need hands, after all."

Erik stumbled back at the wave of power that threw his influence from her. How had she- it didn't matter. She was powerful. That was why he had wanted her in the first place.

Phoenix had taken advantage of his mistake. The remaining pieces of the chair were hurtling towards him. Without pause, Magneto pulled the metal from the window, shattering it, and formed a shield before the shrapnel reached him.

"You aren't the most powerful telepath in existence," he said, not stupid enough to discard his shield. It was the first time he'd referred to Charles, even in passing, since their confrontation. He found it wasn't quite as painful to think about him now that he could be used as an advantage. And there went another shock of guilt he'd have to deal with after he put Phoenix in her place.

"You fancy your professor is stronger than me?" Phoenix scoffed. "Even with that show of power those months ago, he could not defeat me. You're no better than he was, trying to use me for your own gain. You brought me here to turn the tides in your favor and that I will do. I will destroy humanity before Xavier's powerless eyes and then I will destroy you and him together as you both deserve."

With a sweep of her arm, Magneto found himself being tossed out the broken window.

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The window shattering inwards had been the only sign Emma could see or sense that anything was amiss. Still, it was a pretty strong indicator that things were not going as planned. The recruits had all stopped their bouts. Their partners evaporated into the air as Emma turned her focus to Magneto's office. Nothing. She could feel the void of his helmet and the walls Phoenix had were so strong they would take years to break down. She had just enough time to summon the rest of the Brotherhood and turn to diamond before her illustrious leader was sailing out the window.

Phoenix followed, stepping onto the window frame before jumping. She hit the ground two stories later with nothing more than an exaggerated knee bend. The recruits scattered as Magneto threw his arms out and slowed his descent. He came to a stop just before crashing into the grass and pushed himself upright with grace before setting himself on the ground.

The others were spilling from the building now, Mystique leading the charge. Phoenix's eyes lit up. Alarm bells sounded in Emma's mind. Why would Phoenix be so pleased by reinforcements?

Alkali Lake. Onslaught had forced their own people to attack them. The more bodies came, the more people that could be used against them. Emma dropped her diamond form and erected a wall in every mind she could touch.

Just in the nick of time it seemed. She felt Phoenix sweep in almost as soon as she'd fortified her creations. It would've been impossible to kick Phoenix out of a mind she'd gotten her claws into, but keeping her out of a protected one was...doable. It would take all of her considerable strength to do it though. She winced and pushed her palm into her temple as Phoenix scraped her talons down the wall in her own mind.
Phoenix pursed her lips. Frost knew she could break through the shields with enough concentration. But with her focus split between the members of the Brotherhood on the offense, Emma was betting they'd hold.

As Phoenix dug her talons in again, deeper this time, it seemed like it might be a bet she would lose. Then, Magneto grabbed hold of all the metal on Phoenix's person and lifted her. A gust of wind whipped towards her, sending her flying backwards. She somehow managed to land on her feet. Anger radiated off her. With a sweeping gesture, the battling Brotherhood members were tossed towards the building. Magneto pulled at the magnetic fields that were always at the edge of his consciousness and was able to counteract the move. Azazel teleported before he could receive injury and Mystique used the momentum to turn herself so her feet hit the rapidly approaching wall before flipping back to the ground. Riptide and Angel were less lucky. They hit the wall with a resounding crack and fell.

Magneto dropped to the ground again from where he hovered. He didn't waste time checking on Riptide and Angel. They were down for the count; dead or alive, it didn't matter at the moment. They weren't testing boundaries anymore. This was an all out rebellion.

"You shouldn't have turned on me," he said, holding out his arm to send a wave of metal towards Phoenix. "We could do great things for the mutant cause."

Phoenix flicked away the projectiles with a smirk. "Great things? I've seen your plans. You think too small."

Small? Please. "We've destroyed mutant internment camps. We've made examples of those who oppose us. We've shown the humans that we won't play by their rules and our mutant brothers and sisters that they don't have to. We won't be rounded up and used. San Francisco-"

"-is still thinking too small. You've done well, I admit that. Your enemy paints you as a terrorist. They fear you. You have shown them you will fight back. I don't disagree with you. But I have broader goals in mind and I've grown bored of passing the time."

"Bored," Magneto repeated. Why did apparently psychopathic telepathic entities possessing powerful telepaths always get bored? "What are you planning that's so superior to my own machinations?" he said with sweeping arms. "Enlighten me."

Phoenix gave a knowing smile. They were circling each other now, the sheriff and the outlaw in the Old West. Mystique had managed to sneak to Phoenix's back. Emma was audibly panting. Hiding Mystique's approach must be a trying task.

Phoenix continued, unaware. "I'll not orate my plans to you. I know your engineer is coming tomorrow. He will take me to your machine."

"What good will it do you to have a machine that amplifies my ability?" He consciously avoided following his second in command as she closed in. Years of working together had ingrained the ability to ignore Mystique's movements as she snuck up on an enemy. Instead, he let his rage at being betrayed once again take over, focusing everything on the telepath in front of him.

"It's not its ability to amplify your ability that I'm after. Machines can be altered. It's the base that's important."

He'd hoped to get more information from her, but Mystique took the moment to pounce. Azazel appeared at Phoenix's back, pulling her into a chokehold, while the shapeshifter swept to the front and swung one of the knives she'd taken to carrying towards Phoenix's stomach.
The screech the followed echoed in Magneto's helmet. The inhuman volume faded, melting into a much more recognizable sound—the pained screams of a young woman. He remembered then that it wasn't just Phoenix they were fighting. This was Jean. The girl who he had recruited with Charles. The girl who showed so much promise. The girl who he'd chosen to use, wanted to train to defeat the humans. The girl who was all but officially named Charles' telepathic protégé.

The fiery-haired woman went limp in Azazel's grasp as Mystique dropped her knife. The only thing breaking the sudden silence was Emma's continued labored breathing. The White Queen had her eyes tightly shut. Magneto moved towards Jean. He was within a few feet when-

"No, stop!" Emma shouted, eyes open wide now. Emma continued, "She's not-

She was cut off by Azazel and Mystique flying backwards, tossed in the air with a force he'd seen matched only by landmines during the war. Magneto looked to the knife on the ground to see that only an inch was discolored, not nearly as bloody as it should be. Then he found himself caught in the aftershock. He could see Phoenix standing afame. Her stomach was bloody, though only from a gash, not from a fatal stab wound. They hadn't defeated her. They'd just made her angrier. That was all he had time for before he hit the wall, unable to regain his senses in time to slow himself down.

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Mystique hit the ground hard. Not hard enough to take her out, though with enough force that she regretted not deciding to wear some sort of armor. Tiger's stripes were exotic, but they didn't stop bullets.

She shook her head, dazed, and struggled to regain the breath that had been knocked out of her. Coughing, she managed to push her bruised body up. Just in time to see Magneto go sailing into the wall and the knife she had tried to use on Phoenix go hurtling into Emma's stomach. Frost fell with a strangled cry. Neither her nor Magneto got up. Phoenix inhaled with closed eyes, savoring something...oh, it must be the feeling of not being blocked anymore.

The edges of fire licked at her mind. She braced herself...but the attack was stopped by a diamond wall. Emma was still with them then. Thank God. They still stood a chance.

They had to act quickly though. Mystique slunk over to Emma. The telepath was still conscious, but barely. It was obvious she was using the last of her energy to continue to block Phoenix from the few minds she could. The wound didn't look good, but she didn't dare pull the knife out. Emma was deliberately avoiding looking at it.

"How much longer can you keep her out?"

"Not long," Emma forced, choking off a sob. She was never one for physical pain.

Mystique looked around. Riptide and Angel were nowhere in sight. A number of the Brotherhood had run off, not loyal enough to risk a fight with Phoenix after seeing what she was capable of on more than one occasion. There was nothing.

Phoenix was seething, stalking towards the unconscious Magneto with a vengeance. Mystique watched in horror as the creature let of a wave of fire towards their leader...her friend.

It stopped short, caught by what appeared to be a shield. One of their newer recruits, a girl named Unas, hovered barely visible around a corner, arm outstretched. So there was such a thing as loyalty. A boy was with her, the one she'd seen training with Emma earlier...Burner. They moved from the corner to stand in front of Magneto. The fire dissipated and Unas let the shield fall,
panting with a sheen of sweat on her face that hadn't been there before.

Enraged, Phoenix threw another column of fire towards them. This time Burner put his arm up and shot a matching column to meet Phoenix's. He glanced to Mystique, fear in his eyes. He wouldn't be able to hold it for long.

Decision time. Azazel was beginning to pull himself from the ground where he'd landed insensate. Mystique whistled. In a flash, a still dazed Azazel was by her side. They didn't have many choices, not with two injured members in their party. She put both hands on Emma's cheeks, forcing eye contact.

"You know where I'm going to have him take us?"

Emma closed her eyes to search out the answer. "Yes," she managed, wincing and reopening her eyes.

"Show the Brotherhood members you can reach where to go." The shapeshifter felt horrible asking it of the woman after she'd done so much already, but they needed a place to go. She waited to see Emma's weak nod before turning to the teleporter. "Azazel, get us behind Burner and Unas."

Mystique grabbed Emma's hand, then Azazel's. They were behind two teenagers and a wall of fire a second later. Phoenix's column was almost upon a sweating Burner while Unas reinforced it with a shield.

"Let go and grab us on the count of three," Mystique said. The teens startled at the voiced behind them but nodded. Azazel put a hand on Magneto's back.

"Where am I going next?" Azazel asked. Mystique looked to the now unconscious Emma then glanced at Magneto. He would not be happy when he woke up. For more than one reason. But she had to make a call and this was the best one she could make.

"Westchester."

If Azazel was surprised, he said nothing. On the count of three, the teens let go and grabbed onto Emma and Mystique just as Azazel disappeared, fire engulfing the place they'd been standing milliseconds before.

Chapter End Notes

Forgive any typos. I've reread this so many times I mentally correct errors without noticing I didn't correct it in the story. Also, I realize Magneto is a little one-dimensional at this point. I'm having a hard time with his mindset, but I want to get this chapter out. I'll correct it later if I can.

I don't know whether Phoenix can work with fire, but since she's a Phoenix, I'm making it happen now. The debacle with Donovan Zane is a reference to the events of That Which Will Survive in case anyone forgot.

Comics: Some of the recruits were loosely based on comic characters. As in I took their names and a basic description of their powers and paid no attention to their personalities. Peeper is in there because he was added the same decade as Burner (the
late 1970s). My parents feed a stray cat that they named Peeper (because he peeps around the corner of the garage at them), which is why I can't take the name seriously. Unus the Untouchable first popped up in the early 1970s. He's a guy and I wanted a girl, but I liked his power so I gender swapped him, thus the name adjustment.

Movies: The plan for San Francisco is a reference to the attack the Brotherhood launches in stripes is a reference to Magneto asking Mystique if a tiger should cover its stripes in First Class.
You think you have the best of intentions, I can't shake the taste of blood in my mouth

Chapter Notes

Title from Seether's "Country Song"

Special thanks to my dear friend aeskis, who's helping me get through some major creativity issues. She's awesome and this chapter (and story) wouldn't be what it is without her!

Charles sat up with a start. It took a moment to silence the voices babbling in his head. He'd been sleeping more than usual since his encounter with Phoenix. It had gotten better the more he worked with Onslaught. Hank postulated that his body and mind were adjusting to two mental presences sharing them equally rather than one maintaining dominance. As it turned out, he'd still been suppressing Onslaught to a degree even after their deal at Alkali Lake. Not even Onslaught had realized, something the entity hadn't hesitated to voice his displeasure about.

More interesting was that the less tired Charles got, and presumably the more adjusted he became to sharing resources with Onslaught, the easier it was to control his telekinesis. His telepathic reach without Cerebro had also increased significantly (with the annoying side effect of the voices when he woke up), but that too was becoming easier to accommodate and control.

This time, something specific had woken him: the rather sudden appearance of a gaggle of minds, two familiar, two unfamiliar, and two unconscious. It took him less than a second to pull what he needed from one of the unfamiliars.

Not even a moment of hesitation before diving in. I'd say I was proud if I wasn't oddly concerned,

Onslaught said.

We don't have time to waste debating the ethics of using our power. If Magneto wants mutant freedom, he shouldn't expect me to hold back.

Onslaught remained silent, but Charles could feel his disquiet, whether it was for the situation, Charles' opinion, or the fact that Onslaught disagreed with an opinion he wouldn't usually disagree with, neither one could say.

PROFESSOR! Sean's voice boomed across Charles' mind. Xavier winced. In all the years Sean had been with them, the boy had never learned volume control, even in telepathic communication. Especially in telepathic communication.

Yes, Sean, I'm aware of our guests. I'm informing Hank to prepare for the arrival of the injured parties as we speak.

From his mental scan, he was able to tell McCoy to prep for a stab wound and blunt force trauma. He pulled back quickly. The boy's mind was hot. Nothing he couldn't handle, but he was never a fan of saunas. The vision Sean was pushing towards him was of four mutants walking towards the front door. Azazel strode forward with halting steps. The teleporter wasn't used to long walks, especially not with a grown man tossed over his shoulder. No doubt Mystique, who has carrying
Miss Frost with ease, had told him not to teleport straight into the school. No need to risk being mentally eviscerated by startling the wildcard telepath. Charles had to smirk at that. After living with Emma for so many years and battling Phoenix, his sister saw him as the wildcard telepath. A boy and girl, young, who looked dazed, but not physically injured trailed behind them.

Professor? Sean said, this time in a loud whisper.

_Have Magneto and Miss Frost taken down to Hank. I want the senior members of the X-Men to stay with our visitors who don't require medical attention until I can get there. I'll be down as soon as possible._

It was the first time Mystique had been back to the house that didn't involve an emergency on the X-Men's part. She hadn't come back for holidays (despite the invitations that must have started to get lost in the mail after Alkali Lake) nor had she set up any sort of regular visits. Magneto had, of course, kept up his monthly chess matches no matter how angry he was at Charles or vice versa (until everything came to a head recently). Yet she had kept her distance, determined to make herself her own woman. She'd reverted back to sister mode during their last encounter with Onslaught. Since then, though, they'd grown distant. Well, that was biting her in ass now, wasn't it? She was counting on the bonds of (adopted) family remaining strong. If it was Charles alone, she wouldn't be worried, but there was no guarantee with Onslaught in the picture. So it was with hesitation and a tinge of anxiety that she approached the front door.

She had her hand raised to knock when it opened. Before she could put it down, Warren Worthington and Colossus had taken Emma and Magneto from her and Azazel, then disappeared down the hall.

"Wait a minute, where are you taking them?" she shouted. She'd grown up in the house, but the X-Men had changed it so much with the school that she had no idea where they were keeping the injured nowadays, especially after Phoenix made a mess of the East Wing. That had mostly been cleaned up (Charles' money tended to make things happen fast), but the renovation didn't mean Hank had moved back over there. She took a step towards the threshold only to be blocked by Sean, who she could only guess had been lying in wait behind the door.

"You guys are going to wait in the Professor's library," he said. His shoulders were thrown back so he took up as much of the doorway as possible. How cute.

"Don't test me, Banshee. I'm not in any mood and I'm pretty sure we can take you." Azazel stepped forward. She could feel Burner and Unus tense behind her. The recruits weren't their newest but they had only participated in minor roles in a couple of skirmishes at labs; certainly nothing close to a fight with the fabled X-Men. It said a lot that they were willing to fight on the home turf of the group they'd been trained to see as the enemy.

Sean raised both eyebrows with a skeptical upturn of his lips. "Do you really want to start a fight in the place you're seeking asylum? He's already angry enough that you took Jean. If you ask me, the Brotherhood deserves to be ripped apart."

"Plus, you aren't just taking him on." Havok. Of course. Looking past Banshee, she could see the mutant in question standing a little ways down the hall along with a stoic Storm and Cyclops.

Her hands were itching for a fight like they always did after a loss (and Phoenix was a more spectacular loss than most) but Magneto had trained her well. They would not be at a strategic advantage. Not after an exhausting battle they'd barely escaped from minutes before. Plus, as much as it pained her to admit, Sean was right. They were seeking asylum here. Picking a fight when they'd barely arrived wouldn't make Charles any more amenable to keeping them as guests.
Turning her head without losing sight of the X-Men, she gave the stand-down signal. That seemed to calm things down to a degree, though everyone remained on edge.

Sean stood aside, putting an arm out like a butler with a sarcastic bow, she assumed to escort them to Charles' library. As if she didn't know where it was. Charles' library was his father's before it was his. No matter what else in the house changed, it would always stay the same.

Pushing past Banshee, she made for the kitchen. Not just to see a sputtering Sean try to reassert his dominance (though that was a bonus), but because her people needed something to eat. Sean and the rest of the X-Men got in just as she walked back out with food and drink in hand to take the Brotherhood contingent to the library. They settled themselves in the room as their chaperones positioned themselves on the walls, a frustrated air about them. Sean sat directly across from her, scowling at the smirk she knew she was throwing at him. Then there was silence. Burner and Unus were getting antsy. Sean gave a purposeful cough after the silence went on a little too long. Alex suppressed a half smile. They were making a power play, like children having a staring contest.

"You could say something, you know," Mystique said with an eye roll.

Sean shrugged. "Or you could. You're the ones who dropped in."

Fine. She could let them have this (miniscule) victory if it meant getting information about the situation she'd just brought her people into. "How's Charles? I assume he's the one who heralded our arrival. Or was it Onslaught?"

She made sure to put as much disdain as possible into the question. Maybe it would ruffle a few feathers. Besides, she needed to know whether she should be nervous about seeing her brother or terrified about dealing with Onslaught.

Sean and Alex shared a meaningful glance. Sean shrugged. "The Professor always knows what's happening in the school. I don't know if he can help it. You know how powerful Onslaught is. With their powers combined, it's been…" He trailed off and caught Alex's eye again. Alex looked down. "But it's getting better now."

"Much better," a voice said from the doorway. Of course as soon as she was getting Sean to open up, Charles had to come in. The man in question was sitting at the threshold of the room, hands crossed in his lap. She gave him a hard look for the first time since the news that Onslaught still existed. The signs were obvious now that she knew. The mischievous glint in his eye that wasn't there before, the upturned corner of his lips like he was holding back an arrogant smile, the posture that toed the edge between polite and uncaring. Charles was always concerned about his posture; Onslaught had a casual air about him that said he didn't care what anyone thought of him. Even Charles' hair was a bit wilder, not combed and parted to perfection like she'd been conditioned to expect. It was a wonder the others had missed it. Then again, she was always the best at recognizing the subtleties that separated Charles from Onslaught, and it was admittedly a bit harder now. The lines were melting together like candle wax in a flame.

"Professor," Sean said, standing as Charles moved further into the room. He sounded relieved to have his superior in the room yet his shoulders were tighter than ever and his eyes were flitting from Charles to his comrades, never really meeting his leader's eye.

"Thank you, Sean. I appreciate you escorting our guests here. I see you made a stop in the kitchen first."

"They, um, well-" Sean stuttered, twisting his hands.
"It's alright," Charles said with a serene smile. He shot a sideways smirk her way. "My sister has always done whatever pleases her."

He turned to face the Brotherhood fully as Sean maneuvered himself off to the side with his comrades. Whatever scrap of leadership had possessed him had disappeared without a trace as soon as Charles came within visual range. Though, in his defense, Magneto seemed to be the only one immune to that particular effect.

Charles had positioned himself across from her. She could feel Azazel hovering over her shoulder. The way he was holding himself (tight as a crossbow wire with his arms over his chest as close to his swords as he could get without making physical contact with them), it seemed as if he was actively stopping himself from teleporting away. Maybe he was actively stopping himself from teleporting away. The last time he'd been in close quarters with Onslaught, he'd lost his free will for over six months. Burner and Unus hovered at her other shoulder, unsure what to do with themselves but unwilling to go far enough to sit on the couch.

Charles was still looking at her. Actually, everyone was looking at her. Crap, she was supposed to say something. How did the head of the Brotherhood talk to Charles Xavier? Did she approach him as the leader of an opposing organization or as her brother? Hell, she could lead a team into and out of perilous missions any day of the week, but put her across from Charles and she was lost. Maybe he sensed her discomfort (hopefully reading it from her face rather than her mind, though at this point, who knew) because he was the one to open their talks.

"You'll be happy to hear that Dr. McCoy has stopped Miss Frost from bleeding out. The wound missed her vital organs somehow. She's still unconscious for the time being.

"Magneto is suffering from deep bruising on his back over his shoulder and ribs. None of the ribs are broken, though a few may be cracked. He has a rather severe concussion. He's been coming in and out of consciousness since he arrived, probably since Phoenix tossed him into the wall."

Mystique shook her head. "We didn't notice him regain consciousness."

"You wouldn't. He's lacked coherence to say anything. I assure you, he has though." He tapped a finger to his forehead.

That wouldn't please Magneto, but she'd take it. One of the many knots that had developed in her stomach since the attack loosened. No brain damage…that was good. But as soon as the one knot disappeared, another formed. Charles, still sitting with a perfectly pleasant smile plastered on his face, had delivered the information with clinical neutrality, as a go-between conveying information supplied from Beast rather than a friend awaiting news on the condition of an injured comrade. She caught his eye, tried to find the concern that seemed everpresent in the Charles she'd grown up with. It was gone.

"What happened to you, Charles?"

He was quiet a moment, then, "I made a choice."

"Not the right one."

Finally, a physical response, even if it was just a slight pursing of his lips. "I beg your pardon, but you didn't hear me telling you you'd made the wrong decision when you ran off with Erik or when you started killing people. I trusted your ability to make your own choices."

That tone was unmistakable. It was the way he talked to politicians or adversaries on the field or people he'd just met. Over-politeness was both a mask and a weapon for Charles. Where she'd
been unsure, he'd been decisive. He was speaking to her as the leader of a hostile force, not as his sister.

"I'm not here to antagonize you, brother. I brought us here because we needed help and we had nowhere else to go. Believe me, if there had been anywhere else, I'd be there instead."

"So eager to keep away from me?"

"Eager to keep away from Onslaught."

He tipped his head to the side. "Even if he could be your salvation?"

Did he really think that? How far gone was he? Even the X-Men looked unsettled. Thinking about it, everyone had been a bit on edge since Charles had arrived. Sean was antsy... just a smidge more than usual (the boy could never keep still) but enough to notice. Alex and Scott had their hands grasped tightly behind their backs. Ororo was watching Charles like a hawk.

"Is our salvation worth losing yourself?"

"Quite the opposite actually. Before I was denying myself. A whole part of me remained hidden away, a secret to be ashamed of."

"For good reason!"

Charles shook his head. "Onslaught was the way he was because I refused to accept him. The real question is whether you all accept me as the imperfect being that I am. Can you live with the fact that I have desires I have to smother, thoughts that I have to suppress? Only when I allow myself to be whole can I reach my full potential. Mutant and proud, as you're so fond of saying. Does your creed apply to everyone but me?"

The curious gleam in his eye betrayed nothing, but the slight smirk gave away his manipulation.

"Let's say I accept that, which I'm not. Why should I trust a being that has taken over your body and tried to enslave the world twice?"

"We're well in control of matters now. Don't you think I would've made a move by now? With Phoenix in your hands, there was no better time for Onslaught to have his way with the world. We could get sympathy by blaming any of his deeds on her. Yet here we sit. Besides, who's to say you haven't come here under the guise of seeking asylum as a part of some secret mission? You clearly sustained injuries, but that doesn't mean you won't take the opportunity while you have it."

"We plan things out a little more than that, Charles, and you know it. We're not just some group of imbeciles picking targets at random. Stop trying to make us look incompetent in front of your minions. If it makes you feel better though, my plan wasn't to come here to hurt you or your students." Despite the fact that there were seven ways she could from where she was sitting. Charles shook his head with a fond smile. Damn. "Are you listening in?"

"As Sean said, I can't quite help it at the moment and even if I could, why should I not ensure the safety of my students, who you've tried to maim or kill on at least eight separate occasions? I hate to be a broken record, but you certainly are finicky in your application of your 'mutant and proud' motto."

"Onslaught doesn't count. That used to be something we could all agree upon."

"As I've told my students, Onslaught is not the being he used to be. He's tempered himself. They understand that it's for everyone's benefit that he exists."
"And they look so reassured." She glanced back to the other X-Men. None of them would meet her eye, but none of them would meet Charles' either, so there was that.

Charles sighed. "It's an adjustment, I admit. An adjustment I'm sure you will also make assuming you wish to work together to stop Phoenix. That's why you came, yes?"

Changing the subject. She narrowed her eyes and projected as best she could, *We'll finish that conversation later.* After Charles gave a half nod of acknowledgement, she continued out loud.

"It is. She's been working with us successfully since we recruited her." One of the X-Men scoffed. Probably Alex. "Plenty of missions went off without a hitch," she argued. "It seemed like she was running her own game though. We were all aware of that option from the start."

"I'd expect nothing less from Magneto's paranoia."

She gave Charles a look before continuing. "I'm not sure what happened today, but Emma called us all outside after Phoenix threw Magneto out his window. We fought, Phoenix got the upper hand, and we made a tactical retreat here."

"Because you knew we'd be so ready to help you after the last time worked out so well."

Definitely Alex this time.

"Look," she said, turning to face the blonde, "I know last time didn't turn out exactly how we'd planned-"

"As we'd planned? You're right! I sure as hell hadn't planned on you guys manipulating an entity to take over one of ours to join you. I definitely didn't think you'd stoop low enough to abandon us after a powerful, unknown telepath had nearly killed the Professor. You destroyed any chance of working together the second you accepted Phoenix as a member of your team!" Alex had taken a few steps away from the wall. His chest was edged with red, a threat matched by Azazel making physical contact with his swords.

"There's more at stake here-

"That's enough!" Charles had his hand raised and a dire expression on his face. For the split second, their eyes locked. There was…pain. He'd been tossed aside not only by Magneto but by her when she had accepted Phoenix without question (at least to them it looked without question…the reality was far different). It was gone in a flash as he looked away, but there was no denying it had existed.

"Charles," she began carefully, "I'm sorry about what happened. You know if I had been at the Grey's house, things would've been different."

"Would they?" Mostly sarcasm and hurt, but a touch a hope. She could work with hope.

"Of course! We're not as close as we used to be and we sure as hell don't agree with each other most of the time, but that doesn't mean I want to see you dead. It wasn't easy accepting her. And accepting is a strong word, by the way. We all knew what she was. I didn't like it any more than you, but Magneto was adamant."

"And you always listen to Magneto?"

"That's neither here nor there. You say you made the choice to work with Onslaught for the greater good? He made the choices he did because he thinks it will be for the betterment of mutantkind. I couldn't say no to that any more than your X-Men could say no to you."
Charles was silent, contemplating. An echo flitted across her vision, Charles on the floor while Magneto smirked and gave a mock salute before leaving. Then it was gone; the wall was back up. Charles may as well have Emma's diamond form for how readable he was at the moment. Then, "As you say, he's made his choices and I've made mine. I know where he stands now at least. What I want to know is why Phoenix came with you in the first place? What do you have that she can use to her advantage?"

That…was a good question. She'd had her suspicions. Maybe…maybe trusting Charles with the information would be the olive branch they needed. He could probably do more with it than she could. "She mentioned a machine. Magneto has been working on something. He's kept it very hush-hush. None of us know for sure what it was, but…he's had an eye on Cerebro for a while."

"He wants to put Frost in his own version of Cerebro?" Sean asked. "Is Phoenix going to try to do what Onslaught did?"

"No," Charles said, resting his chin on his fingertips as he stared off into space. "He wouldn't want to give anyone else more power, even a telepath on his side. My bet would be that he's making a machine that will amplify his own power. In which case…"

The flutter of emotions over Charles' face was impressive. Realization, uncertainty, fear, anger, resignation, then blankness as he put up his customary mask.

"In which case what?" she asked.

He shook himself from wherever his mind had gone. "We may be in far more trouble than I had imagined. I need to check on a few matters and think this over."

Well that hadn't gone as planned. "Charles, you can't just say that and then leave us hanging. We're in this as much as you. Just because you're all broody and Onslaught-y now doesn't mean you can just ignore us!"

Charles stopped halfway to the door with the same dangerous neutrality that Onslaught so often exuded.

"We've both decided to align ourselves with hostile telepathic entities. Your alliance with Phoenix backfired; mine with Onslaught hasn't. I think that means I have the upper hand in decision-making at the moment. Sean, Alex, Ororo, escort our visitors to the guest quarters. If they wish to see Miss Frost and Magneto, they are welcome to do so with someone to show them the way. I'll know if you sneak off anywhere. My hospitality has been betrayed once. I will not allow it to happen again. I'll be in my office working out the best way to fix the mess you've made of things."

Mystique was on her feet before Charles could move more than two meters. "I know you're angry about what's happened, but that doesn't give you the right to yell at us like children. We've all made mistakes. What matters now is the future. You don't agree with the path Magneto and I have decided to take, fine, but we need you to have faith in us again, if only until we've gotten Phoenix out of the way."

"Oh, darling," Charles said, barely pausing to give her a sympathetic look as he reached the door, "I think you're forgetting who lost faith in whom."

With that he was gone. She'd thought the days of Charles making her feel like a child were long since past. She was wrong. Still, they weren't as at fault as Charles was framing it. The other X-Men seemed to be aware of this, hesitant sympathy mixing in with the antagonism they were projecting at the Brotherhood. Just another variable to throw into the hellish mix that was brewing. She stood up.
"We may have more people coming. Show us where we're supposed to be so we can settle down."

With that, they were escorted from the room, whether as guests or prisoners of war, she couldn't say. Hopefully, Magneto could deal with her brother better than she could.
The satellite dish looked the same as it had since Erik had moved it all those years ago...back when Erik was Erik not Magneto. This used to be Charles' mental retreat, the place he'd go when the world and Onslaught got to be too much for him. Now, grass had grown up around the wall and weeds defaced the property in a way the Xavier estate outside of Charles' mindscape would never be allowed to reach. The sepia sky cast an eerie glow over the land, transforming the greenery to an odd shade bordering gold and brown.

While Charles stood at the crumbling wall, Onslaught meandered amongst the weeds, occasionally picking through them or kicking a piece of litter he found...litter that looked remarkably similar to the machine Magneto had tried to use to turn humans into mutants. Onslaught paused to give Charles a wary look. The scowl marring Charles' face didn't budge as he continued to glare at the satellite dish.

"Charles," Onslaught tried, skirting a perimeter around the other man.

"He's ruined everything," Charles said. "Everything that we worked for. I trained him, taught him how to harness his power. I let him go when he wanted to leave. I stayed out of his mind because he asked it of me. I kept you at bay when we could have snuffed him and his Brotherhood out like a match. And this is where it's brought us."

"You couldn't have known-"

"But I did know!" Charles' sharp sapphire eyes shifted to meet Onslaught's topaz ones. "You told me he would turn on us. You knew this would happen, which means I did too. I chose not to listen. I pushed my doubt and concern on you."

"As painful as it is for me to admit, neither of us knew he would go this far. He was our friend. We gave him the benefit of the doubt because...well...because he was Erik."

"And look where it got us," Charles scoffed, throwing an arm out over the overgrown field before them. "He doesn't know what he's done."

"That should make it better-"
"Yet somehow, it doesn't. That machine…if Phoenix commandeers it, which she will, and we can't get her to turn it off, we'll…" Charles trailed off.

"You know what we'll have to do. It's the only way."

Charles closed his eyes and dropped his head, defeat tumbling in the breeze that ruffled through his hair. Onslaught let the same breeze wash over him and picked up a tarnished gasket. As he turned it over in his hands, the wind ceased, leaving an eerie quiet in its wake. Charles' eyes were open again. He was the epitome of stoic determination outside of the glare he'd turned upon the rusting satellite.

"Yes, I suppose so. What's done is done. We cannot change the past. We can only face the future and try to make it better. Even if it means…"

He stalled out again. Onslaught didn't blame him. Sacrifices are so poignant and inspiring until you have to make them yourself. Copper clouds drifted in front of the sun.

"What about Erik?"

"What about him?" Charles responded, jaw tensed and eyes flashing. "Erik is gone. Magneto is all that's left and we have no room in our mind for concern for him. I have preparations to make if we are indeed to stop Phoenix."

Onslaught blinked and Charles was gone, leaving Onslaught to kick another metal shard. How rude. Guess the conversation hadn't suited him. The breeze picked up again. He stood in almost the exact spot Lehnsherr had stood to move the satellite, sorrow weighing the corners of his mouth. He'd never been sad before. He didn't like it. Even with the freedom Charles allowed him, he was still a slave to the things Charles didn't want to feel. He'd never be free of that. But it was worth the power it allowed them both, and power was surely what they would need if they were to put an end to Phoenix's plans.

And what glorious plans they were. Anger bubbled to the surface to mix with the sorrow. With a yell, he hurled the gasket as far as he could. It did nothing. He stood panting in frustration, leaning against the crumbling wall.

There was a tugging somewhere in his abdomen. That was odd. Before he could reach out to Charles, he was pulled away, his last vision the satellite that had somehow become a crumpled shadow of its former self.

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Erik awoke in Westchester. He knew immediately that he hadn't woken at all. There was no other explanation for why else he was sitting upright in Charles' study. First, the last he remembered he'd been hurdling towards a wall, so the chances he was sitting up without pain weren't good. Second, and somehow more convincing, no way would Charles allow him access to his precious school after their last interaction.

But why had his mind taken him to Charles' office of all places? Moving slowly (he may not be in pain, but that didn't mean his brain wasn't telling him he should be), he began to stand. That was when he felt it. Freezing where he was, he looked towards the desk. He wasn't alone. The desk chair Charles' wheelchair usually replaced creaked as it turned to reveal the other occupant.

"Charles?"

The man, who had been conducting an intense exploration of the room, whipped his head towards the voice. The wave of brown hair that fell over his forehead wasn't nearly long enough to hide
the flame obscuring his pupils. Erik felt his chest give a couple of inches. The telepath abandoned his observation of the office and offered an apologetic smile.

"Not quite."

The office rippled and expanded. Books shimmered into sleek metal. Keys and levers popped up on the desk. Wild-eyed, Onslaught jumped to his feet with a quick inhale as the chair dropped a few inches and shrunk down to an innocuous, low-backed silver one.

Wide eyes flashing, Onslaught began, "Oh no, not-"

Before he could finish, a metal rafter slammed into his back, dropping him to his knees. The entity screamed (in Charles' voice, which still left a residual of panic in Erik's head), hand automatically going where the rafter had punched out the other side of his shoulder. He would've collapsed further forward if the rafter hadn't jammed itself into the floor, keeping him propped up like a grotesque crutch. The scream ended with a cough that left blood dribbling down his chin.

So distracted by Onslaught's predicament, Magneto only realized after the room had settled that he was standing with his arm outstretched. Just like he had been last time he'd met Onslaught back at Alkali Lake. And the Cerebro at Alkali Lake was undoubtedly where they were now.

"Was that really necessary?" Onslaught grit out through blood-stained teeth.

"Completely," Magneto said, pushing his wonder at the past two minutes behind his customary wall. "You should be dead."

"Yes, well, you know what they say, what doesn't kill you and all that." He tried to pull himself back, only to wince and fall forward again. "Really, though, I think this is a bit of an overreaction."

"I disagree," Magneto said, looking up to find the structure just as he remembered. "In fact, perhaps I should add another." Another rafter began shaking.

"You aren't going to kill me here if that's what you're trying to do," Onslaught said quickly, eyeing the rafter as best he could from his kneeling position. "And, at the risk of being skewered again, I feel obligated to note that you didn't kill me last time either."

"Maybe not, but it looks like I can cause you considerable pain." The rafter shook harder.

"Okay, okay, calm down," the entity said, raising an appeasing hand. "What do you want from me?"

That…was a good question. Now that he had Onslaught at his mercy, knelt before him (as he should be), his mind rushed to organize his questions. He had Onslaught at bay, but there was no guarantee he'd have the advantage for long.

"How are you here? How is it that you didn't die last time?"

"If I answer you, can you take us back to my office? I much prefer it to our current setting."

"Your office?"

Onslaught rolled his eyes. "That's what you took from that statement? Fine, Charles' office."

"What makes you think I can take us back? You're the telepath."
"Because this is clearly your doing. Why on earth would I bring us back here and stick myself through the shoulder? Unless you want me to violate your precious mind, which I believe you prefer to avoid, you need to control yourself and get us out of here."

Not violating his mind? That didn't sound like Onslaught at all. Come to think of it, he hadn't felt anyone pawing around at his thoughts (though with a telepath as powerful as Onslaught, that might not mean anything). Still, he did prefer Charles' office to the cold memory of Alkali Lake.

"How do I get us back?" he asked, a bit more hesitantly than he'd have liked.

"Think about it. It didn't take much to get us here, after all."

Glowering at Onslaught one last time for good measure, he closed his eyes and pictured Charles' office. He felt a wave of warmth and sensed the more enclosed space of a room. Huh, guess it was exactly as easy as Charles' other half made it out to be.

Onslaught screamed again. With a smirk, Erik opened his eyes and sat down, casually crossing his legs.

"Better?"

They were back in the exact positions they'd been in before the shift to Alkali Lake. The only difference was the rafter that now projected through the Queen Anne chair, anchored to the wall and sticking out a solid three feet over the desk from Onslaught's shoulder.

"Oh, you bastard," Onslaught said, eyes squeezed shut as he panted in pain. "You make yourself really hard to like, you know?"

"Good thing I'm not trying to earn your friendship. I did as you asked. Now answer my question. How are you here?"

Onslaught let out a sharp laugh and took a few deep breaths, his gaze danced around again. Odd. Another couple of breaths and a wet cough to clear his throat and Onslaught smoothed over whatever he'd been feeling.

"The remnants of your team brought you to the only safe haven they could think of. That's Westchester, if you didn't guess," he said briefly pausing to meet Magneto's gaze before shifting and returning to his surreptitious appraisal of the room, poking at the papers at the desk. "Your helmet is presently," a calculating pause, "ten feet from the bed you're occupying in our infirmary. Your head is perfectly open to telepathic attack. It's a miracle some unsavory character hasn't found his or her way in yet." He finished with a smirk, but avoided eye contact.

Magneto waited for more, but that appeared to be as much as he was going to get on that topic. "How do you exist? We've established that I didn't kill you, but that doesn't change the fact that you should be dead."

Onslaught winced again then finally gave up on trying to make himself comfortable on the rafter impaling him. "It's really not that difficult to put together. Emma did rather quickly and the rest of the X-Men accepted it...eventually. You account for every detail in your missions; are you telling me you've put no thought at all into how I might still exist?" The glint of superiority was back in his eye.

As a matter of fact, Magneto had put some thought into it. Between Phoenix and the Brotherhood's increased presence in the media, though, he hadn't had much time to devote to the entity's continued existence. And, if Magneto was completely honest with himself, it was easier to be angry with Charles. Anger was always the easier option. So, yes, he had thought about it.
however briefly, but, no, he hadn't come up with a solution despite the fact that Frost had apparently had the solution all along.

With a flick of his wrist, the rafter began twisting. Just a smidge, but enough for Onslaught's hands to shoot back up to it with a wince.

"Enlighten me."

"Ah, ah, fine!" The pressure on the rafter lifted and Onslaught relaxed again, catching his breath. "As long as Charles exists, so do I. If you want to kill me, you have to kill him as well and I think we both know you want to avoid that, despite your actions as of late."

That was unexpected. No wonder Charles had kept the information to himself. Though the fact that he did was just another sign of the distrust that had grown between them. As if Erik would do anything to endanger Charles…other than allow Phoenix to gain enough power to nearly disintegrate him.

"So at Alkali Lake…"

"When you thought you'd killed me, I went back into his head. He kept me a secret, rightly so it seems judging by your penchant for using powerful mutants for your own means. We've come to an understanding of sorts and we've been working together ever since."

That sounded right, but it didn't make sense. Not for Charles. "He wouldn't just accept you. You killed all those people-"

"And he was very cross with me for it, but it seems that there are more immediate problems than dealing with my homicidal tendencies. I think he lobs those off on the part of me that's you anyway. He tends to blame you for a great many things nowadays."

Ah, yes, the part of Onslaught that was Magneto. Wasn't that a nice little reminder that Charles' darker half was made up in part by his mind. He tainted Charles even when they were apart, just as Charles tainted him by giving him a conscience.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, suddenly tired of the game they were playing.

Onslaught shrugged with his good shoulder. "You tell me. This is your creation."

There was that unease again, except now Erik could pinpoint the subtleties of the telepath's behavior that he'd been having difficulty identifying before. He was…bewildered. Erik marveled at that for a moment. The look of smug confidence that usually graced the entity's features was stained with hints of the disquiet Erik had noticed earlier as he took in the familiar-yet-not surroundings. For what must have been only the third time in his existence (behind his defeats in Cuba and Alkali Lake), Onslaught looked to be taken off guard.

Taken off guard because he hadn't come into Erik's mind on purpose.

"You're telling me that I pulled you into my head?"

"That is exactly what I'm telling you," Onslaught replied. "Now that we've determined that I'm here by no fault of my own, could we get rid of this?" He gestured at the rafter. "I've been very, very cooperative. I'm not going to fight you."

It was true. Onslaught had been very cooperative and Magneto could always put it right back where it had been before. With a thought and a swish of his hand for effect, the rafter was gone. Onslaught slumped forward, holding the now healed area where he'd been stabbed.
"Oh, that's so much better." He sat up again, still massaging his shoulder. Now that the pain was fading, Charles' natural curiosity was peeking through his eyes. "How did you do it? How did you manage to get me here? Neither Charles nor I were reaching out for you."

"I have no idea," Erik said with a shake of his head. But now that he thought about it-

"Oh, come now, you're a smart boy," Onslaught said. Funny how much more haughty the being was now that he wasn't impaled on a piece of metal. "Surely, you've thought of something."

Erik glared. He should've kept the rafter in. Could he trust this…creature enough to tell him what was going through his mind?

Onslaught raised an eyebrow. "You can tell me. I won't tell a soul. Cross my heart and hope to die." He made a cross symbol over his heart.

"Fine. You said yourself that I have more psionic energy than the average non-telepath. Beast said we were bonded somehow when you first manifested, which I'm sure you're aware of from Charles. You were able to use my powers until Charles' telekinesis took over. Why shouldn't I be able to use yours, if we truly do share some type of bond and I have the psionic energy to do so?"

Onslaught sat forward, expression hazy with thought, before nodding. "I suppose that makes sense," he said to himself. His gaze grew distant again. Then he snapped back to the present, sitting up straight as a pin. "That's very interesting indeed. This certainly..." he stopped and gave Erik an appraising once over, the look Mystique gave when he was deciding whether to trust someone. "Well, it makes a difference."

Erik frowned. There was a beat where he felt like he should ask for clarification, but the words to do so remained frustratingly out of reach.

"Really, though," Onslaught started, "why did you bring me here? It's a bit unsettling being pulled out of my head."

"Welcome to the club," Magneto retorted, earning a wry smile. Seeing Charles' visage in front of him and Onslaught being virtually amiable…it was making the guilt he felt for having abandoned the man resurface again full force. Speaking of which...

"Charles is alright, I presume." He hadn't actually seen or heard from his friend since the telepath had nearly been killed. He was still angry, but now that he'd actually met Onslaught…something was different.

"He's fine. Deep in thought for the time being." The bewilderment was gone, replaced by confidence once more as Onslaught apparently gained his sea legs. Or mind legs. Whatever. "But he's furious with you," he continued, leaning back in the chair as he propped his legs up on the edge of the desk. "And this time he didn't put it on me. He kept it all for himself. Didn't even leave me a little bit of a grudge to hold. I want to forgive you. It's very annoying, especially after that little show." He gestured to where the rafter had stabbed him.

"What are you talking about?" Magneto asked, making his annoyance clear in his tone.

"I didn't notice it until you made your triumphant return," Onslaught said with a flourish at the end.

And now his annoyance was rapidly turning back into anger. "Notice what?"

"We're switching places, Erik." The name was sneered though there was no real malice behind it.
Most startling was that it was the first time Erik could recall that the entity hadn't referred to him as 'Magneto'. "But not because I'm taking over him. Not this time. This time, he's choosing to become me." Onslaught's face dropped somewhat, like he was realizing the meaning behind what he was saying for the first time. "He's accepting all the negative feelings he used to push off on me and giving me all the forgiveness he usually keeps for himself."

That…wasn't good. That sounded like Charles was losing himself to anger and hatred. That was Erik's job, Onslaught's job. It was never meant for Charles. "What does that mean for Charles?"

"Charles?! What does that mean for me? Am I going to be…nice? Civil? What kind of a life is that?" Comical horror spread on Onslaught's face.

"You could stand to be a bit less sociopathic."

"Of course you'd think that, but, as you said, what does that mean for dear Charles? If I'm less sociopathic, it's got to go somewhere." Onslaught's eyes glittered in amusement. "And let me tell you, you do not want me to stay the way I am now. I am everything Charles doesn't want to be. And right now, that includes being your friend.

"What?" Erik had always always always been the one to reject Charles. He was the one to leave. Charles was the first to make moves to reconcile after their break and after most of their fights since. Magneto was a result of Erik's rejection of his friend. But all through that, Charles had kept a modicum of hope, something that kept him coming back to Erik, forgiving him, and offering him the friendship Erik had come to value. Erik was certainly still angry at Charles, but the thought that Charles would be the one to give up, that Charles would be the one to reject him, was unacceptable.

"You heard me. He's not letting it go. He's pushed all his desire to seek forgiveness to me and kept all his anger for himself. You left him after he almost died, took his student, who is for all intents and purposes Alex Summers' sister-in-law by the way so be wary of him and Scott, and created a machine Phoenix is probably about to use to end the world. You've destroyed everything we've worked for and nearly destroyed us in the process without even blinking. Did you really think he'd just putter about writing lesson plans, preparing to accept your apology after Phoenix's inevitable betrayal? You and I have had far too much of an influence on him to let that happen, thank you very much."

"This wasn't part of the plan. She could've changed things once and for all if she hadn't betrayed me. Charles could have."

The chair squeaked as Onslaught leaned across the desk.

"She is going to change things once and for all, just not the way you planned it. At some point, you're going to have to take responsibility for your failed plans. You've started something, Erik. Something we don't know if we can fix. Even if we can...the price may be higher than you'd like. If you want to prove to him that you aren't the character you've been playing for the past few months, you need to be prepared to use whatever power you have when the time comes."

Metal slammed Onslaught back into the chair as Erik rose to his feet. "And what does that mean?"

"Whatever you make of it," the entity said, unphased. "This ability to connect with our mind...as I said, it's an interesting development. Ah, there," Onslaught grinned while Erik felt a jolt that faded to a tingle in his head, "I knew I'd be able to find the little pathway you followed to get me here. I'll be going back to my own head now. Be careful not to let Charles hurt you when you come crawling back to us. I'm sure he'd be ever so upset later on if he does and I don't like dealing with the headaches that gives us."
With that, Onslaught was gone and Erik was alone.

He snapped his eyes shut, feeling out his mental surroundings. It was surprisingly easy to find the pathway between himself and Charles that he'd unknowingly created, followed, used, whatever. It was still intact, sparkling bright gold in a mire of grey. Erik had an open invitation into Charles' head it seemed. He tried to follow it only to hit a wall. So Onslaught had closed the door, but left the pathway up to it unimpeded. Erik knew Onslaught and Charles well enough by now to know that they didn’t do anything without reason. Either they couldn't destroy the link or they wanted to use it later.

Erik felt himself shiver, then a twinge of pain in his side. He was starting to wake up. He committed the gold line to memory. It should scare him, the fact that Charles had a link to his mind that he could open any time he wanted. It should, but somehow it didn't. In fact, it almost made him feel...hopeful. Interesting. Very interesting indeed.

Chapter End Notes

References: Nothing from the movies or comics that I'm aware of putting in there. A couple of references to previous stories in the series (Onslaught telling Erik he had more psionic energy than most non-telepaths being the biggest).
Losing My Religion

Chapter Notes

Title from REM's "Losing My Religion"

I'm not thrilled with this, but I want to get it out there and move on. If I get re-inspired, I'll come back and revise it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Warren had been nervous for a while now that the government might have the school on its watch list. Logically, he knew Charles would know if someone was watching them, but he supposed in the absence of Magneto's paranoia that his own moved in to make up the difference.

So at least one good thing came out of all this and that was that he knew for sure that Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters wasn't under surveillance because, if it was, half the military would probably be storming the halls by now with all the Brotherhood associates who were popping up at their front door. Mystique had warned them it might happen, that she had given the address as a safe house (which she had gotten chewed out for by almost everyone over the age of 16), so at least they were prepared. So far, the ones that had made appearances weren't the most dangerous of the bunch. They had been rude and snide, but not openly antagonistic so, shockingly, it appeared that the two mutant teams had called a truce for the time being, if only because Magneto and Mystique had ordered it with Emma and Charles mentally keeping an eye on things. That and everyone was terrified of Charles since he very cordially told them (read: politely threatened) that if they did anything he didn't approve of, he would have to ensure the safety of his students above all else.

Over the four days since Mystique had shown up with her contingent and Magneto had regained consciousness, Charles' office had been busier than the mall before Christmas. Mystique was first. She made it a whole five minutes before leaving in a huff. Magneto followed, going against Hank's explicit instruction to stay in bed. He'd staggered his way to the room only to stumble out after a wall rattling GET OUT sounded from behind the door.

Magneto was blinking like there may have been some psychic push behind his quick exit. Warren almost felt bad for him with how shocked he looked at his reception. A second later, the man's face hardened back to stone and he stalked (slowly) back to his bed. Things went on like that for a while. Eventually Mystique got a whole conversation in. At least she looked satisfied when she left so Warren assumed she had. Magneto's luck wasn't so good, but his time in Charles office increased with each attempt. By the fourth day, he was recovered and furious enough to steel himself and enter without knocking. Sean had followed along this time. He offered the closed door a solemn salute, gave Warren a shrug, and walked off.

Erik hated having to lean against the wall for support those first few trips he'd made over to Charles' study, but his injuries had required it. He certainly wasn't going to let McCoy keep him in a bed. He needed to talk to Charles. After Mystique had informed him of her conversation with her brother that first day, he'd known the situation needed to be handled and it needed to be handled now. Otherwise, they would get nowhere.

Except nowhere was exactly where he'd gotten every time he struggled his way to wherever the
metal of the professor's wheelchair led him. The first time, he'd barely gotten in before he was out again, "get out" echoing through his mind like a church bell at a funeral. He would've fought his way in again if he was at 100 percent, but he wasn't sure he could duck anything Charles might throw at him and Onslaught had warned him off pushing the telepath too far too fast. Plus, Emma was only able to keep McCoy at bay for so long. His trips after that had mostly comprised of getting to Charles' study, the two of them spewing vitriol at each other, and Erik getting kicked out or storming out in a huff.

Since that first day, the pain had settled to a bearable level. The dizziness of the concussion had abated and he'd stopped having to balance on the wall two days ago. He shoved the door open with his power, stopping it just short of slamming against the wall behind it, and stalked in. Charles remained unperturbed looking through papers on physics, which was unusual, but not important for the time being.

"You were expecting me, I presume?"

"You're nothing if not persistent," Charles replied, scratching some notes on a pad before putting his pen down and looking up. "Shall we continue where we left off? I believe you were telling me how wrong I am for using a powerful mutation to my advantage."

"We're going to finish this here and now, Charles. Through discussion like adults." Like Charles would usually have insisted they do from the beginning if this was the Charles he knew.

"You don't know me like you thought you did," Charles said with a humorless chuckle. Erik had stopped yelling at the telepath for reading thoughts out of his head the day before. There was no point to it and there were more important things to be angry about.

"I know you exactly as well as I always have. You're the one who lost himself along the way."

"Says the man willing to maim and kill men, women, and children to achieve his goal, the man who has become so paranoid he won't even share his plans with his most trusted advisers, the man who will abandon any and all loyalties to gain the slightest advantage. I may have lost who I was, but I'm not the only one." He had rolled out from behind the desk, gesturing along the way. His telekinesis had grown enough to use it subconsciously then.

Despite knowing Charles was trying to rile him up, his temper flared almost out of his control. Charles sat perfectly composed, the only indication anything was awry being the now constant fire lingering behind his eyes. This was going to end up exactly how it had every time he'd tried to talk to Charles since he'd arrived: with him sitting on his metaphorical ass out in the hall and Charles slamming the door like a petulant teenager. They were going to keep spinning their wheels if someone didn't give a little. And that someone was not going to be Charles this time. Erik took a deep breath.

"I admit that Phoenix was a misstep."

There. That was hard, but not too devastating. Now if Charles would just accept his concession-

"A misstep? You didn't accidentally set her off then trip and fall out that door with her."

Or not.

"It wasn't as if it was my goal for her to try to kill you," he gritted out. How had Charles managed to be the collected one all these years? "I did accidentally set her off, but you're right. After that, I walked out the door with her and it was a mistake. A mistake I intend to correct if we can put all of this behind us."
"You want me to ignore the fact that you betrayed me and my people, endangered not only my life and the life of my student but the lives of all those around us and, as it turns out, the world, before remorselessly releasing an almost omnipotent telepathic entity on the world because YOU made a mistake?"

"It wasn't remorseless!" The yelling did nothing good for his ribs, but it was worth it to see how Charles startled at the outburst. "I regret some of the things I did, Charles," he said, quieter. "Not all of it, but...New York, Phoenix, leaving you there. I shouldn't have done that. Will you please accept my apology and move on?"

Charles stared at him, gnawing on the inside of his lip. The fire was still there, but it had faded. Erik wondered (not for the first time) if Charles was having more than one argument, if Onslaught was arguing his case for some reason and trying to break Charles from within. The entity had seemed as eager to stop whatever was happening to Charles as everyone else was.

Whatever he'd been contemplating, he finished with a roll of his shoulders.

"I understand it isn't easy for you to admit what you have. You've never been one to make mistakes, only create learning opportunities." He paused and offered a small smile, the most genuine expression other than anger Erik had gotten since the Grey's house, maybe earlier.

"I've spent a lot of time being angry at you over the past few months. You rejected us, not just me, but mutants who disagreed with you. Emma mentioned your attack on her-"

"Because she was attacking one of mine."

"And you could have pushed her out. Your idea of compromise is far more favorable for humans than it is mutants."

"It's better than no compromise at all," Charles replied, tone rising again. "You've made it impossible to work together. I don't think you could have made it any harder if you'd done it on purpose."

"Why would I make it easier for you? It's always been a game of strategy for us, Charles."

Charles paused, brow furrowing as he gave that soul-searching gaze Erik had come to despise. Usually, Magneto would turn away (his now missing cape gave it a flare of drama that covered any perceived retreat), but this time he forced himself to stare right back, chin raised in defiance. Let him look. What could he possibly see that could make things worse than they already were?

Charles abruptly sat back, his eyes widening in surprise. "And I stopped playing by the rules. How could I have missed it?"

"Missed what?" Magneto asked. Count on Charles to throw him off-balance just when they were getting somewhere in the conversation.

"We were playing chess and I had a hidden king on the board."

"What are you talking about?"

"We're passive aggressive. We talk around our strategies. We deny accusations with a wink and a nod. But we've never outright lied to one another until I decided to keep Onslaught to myself. How is that possible with all the secrets we've managed to keep?" He looked up, not begging but definitely questioning in earnest.

Surely that wasn't true. Try as he might, though, he couldn't think of one time he'd lied to Charles
or vice versa before Alkali Lake. But why would that matter? What they were doing before was just as good as lying.

"We've gone so wrong, Erik. Both of us. Even with our ideological differences, we could do great things for our people. But once we began distrusting each other…"

The gears clicked into place. "We lost our anchors. I suppose neither of us realized how far towards middle we pulled one other."

"And once we cut ties completely, you became even more paranoid and obsessive in achieving your goals-"

"Let's not overstate things too much-"

"And I began favoring humanity far more heavily than before while seeing you as an enemy…so much so that Onslaught seemed to be the only logical option."

It made sense, actually. Charles was the only one who made him argue his strategies and rationalize his actions. Even his seconds in command couldn't do that. Mystique put so much faith in him and their cause that even if she questioned him, she'd give him the benefit of the doubt. Emma knew her place as the team telepath and she stayed there. She spoke her mind, yes, but rarely when it came to strategy. He was broken from his thoughts when Charles winced and put a hand to his temple.

"Charles?"

"Onslaught didn't much care for the implication that I was forced into working with him. I don't regret that decision. He is as much a part of me as your power is of you. I think Raven and I have finally come to that understanding. I hope you can as well."

How he'd managed to get Mystique on his side, Erik would never know. Perhaps their familial bond was stronger than either of them suspected. Still… "He's a threat. He tried to enslave the world. Twice. I'll admit he was more tempered when we spoke, but how can I know that it's not a trick?"

"You talked to him?"

"You didn't know?"

"I've been a bit occupied."

"Clearly." He shot a pointed glance at the mess of papers on the desk. "He needs to be locked away. I can't agree with your decision."

Charles stiffened, just slightly, but it was noticeable. "Mystique told me that everything you'd done, you'd done because you felt it was what mutants needed…for the greater good. You need to understand that the things I've done, most notably ensuring Onslaught's survival, have been for the same reason."

"We don't need you to sacrifice yourself for the cause."

"And we don't need you to sacrifice your soul for it either. Yet here we sit in the shambles of who we used to be trying to feel our way back to how things were while somehow still pushing forward."

Magneto ran a hand through his hair, wincing as he came into contact with the annoyingly
persistent bruise, and sat down on the couch across from Charles. "How do we fix it? We can’t go back, but we can't keep going like we have been."

"I think that's an issue we'll have to address after Phoenix is defeated. If we fail in that, it won't matter what we do to reconcile our differences."

"You know what she's going to do?"

Charles shot him a wan smile. "Unfortunately, I was wrong when I told you your mistake would cost you and your Brotherhood their lives. It's the world that will suffer for our mistakes."

Chapter End Notes

Kinda sorta cliffhanger? Sorry. I'll do what I can to be fast with the next update but no promises.

Is it blatantly obvious I'm on Charles' side? I feel like it's pretty blatantly obvious. If my brain wasn't so shot from trying to write a qualifying paper, I'd totally try to get into Erik's mindset and fix that.

I don't usually give explanation for my titles, but I wanted to explain this one. I rewrote a lot of it from when I originally titled it (it initially had LOTS more angry Charles), but I still love the title and the song and it still makes sense to me. I picked it because Erik and Charles are starting to question their beliefs to a degree and Charles is losing his temper (which what 'losing my religion' means in the American South). It's a great song and I mostly just wanted to find a way to use it as a title and this seemed like the most appropriate one, especially since I only have 5 to 8 chapters left in which to use it.
It had been ages since he'd last spent more than three nights at Westchester without mortal peril being involved. Old habits die hard, though, and Erik found himself waking before dawn every day to go for a run. His ribs still hurt, but it had been long enough that McCoy had grudgingly told him it wouldn't jar them out of place again and he needed to be in top form when they confronted Phoenix in a few days.

As he ran, his mind wandered. He'd thought they'd be sitting on their hands, but as it turned out Charles had known far more about Phoenix's plan than he'd let on.

The groups had gathered together in one of the bigger studies that Charles used for school-wide lectures. It wasn't as awkward as they'd thought it would be. Over the past few weeks, they'd eaten together, shared living quarters, and trained as a unit. Things were still tense and arguments were still frequent, but no violence had broken out, which seemed to be a good sign.

Everyone silenced as Charles cleared his throat.

"I know we've found ourselves meeting together far more often than we'd prefer, but explanations must be given and it's easier to give them all at once. We have a formidable enemy to face in the coming days and working together is the only way we will be able to defeat her."

"How can we defeat her if we do not know her plan?" Azazel asked.

"Ah, but we do know her plan."

"Do enlighten us then, Charles," Erik said. He'd been trying to pry it from Charles since their talk, but the telepath was as stubborn as ever.

Charles cleared his throat again and glanced around the room before checking the brakes on his chair.

"You're stalling," Erik said, giving his best unimpressed stare.

"I'm not," Charles shot back a little too fast before grimacing when he realized he'd given himself away. "Very well," he continued with a sigh. "Phoenix intends to utilize the electromagnetic potential of your machine and add a vast amount of psionic energy to it."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Sean said.
"The result will be the formation of a self-sustaining sun that will grow to encompass the planet within hours. All life will be burned away allowing Phoenix to create a new world and populate it with creatures of her own making, assuming she survives."

Silence fell, broken only by Sean's small "Oh". Even Magneto found himself taken off-guard, playing the fish out of water opening and shutting its mouth desperately trying to find air (or in this case words) yet coming up empty.

"H- How do we stop it?" Hank asked.

"That's what I've been trying to figure out. Unfortunately, my knowledge of physics and engineering is rather limited and without knowing what the machine actually looks like, I don't know how to disable it. All I can do is predict the modifications she's making to it."

"What if I could recreate the plans?" Magneto cut in.

Charles blinked. "Could you?"

"Try not to look so shocked. It was my idea to make the damn thing. I looked at the plans for long enough and I helped design it. I'm not an engineer, but I know my way around the mechanics of it."

Hank brightened. "Together, we may be able to put together a replica of the blueprint and determine the modifications. Charles, what progress have you made there?"

"I know what functions she needs it to have; I just don't know how she'll make it perform them."

"With the blueprints and Magneto's knowledge of the machine, we can figure that out."

"That's all well and good," Toad cut in, "but how exactly are we going to get to where we need to be to execute the ever so specific sabotage-the-machine plan? It's not like Phoenix is going to let us waltz in without a fight. She took on the entirety of the Brotherhood and won. What do you think she'll do to us especially with the additional reinforcements of the people she has working for her? It's not like she's building doing this by herself."

"Her workers we can handle," Mystique said. "It's her we need to keep occupied." Eyebrow raised, she turned to Charles. Charles, surprisingly, looked to Emma. The White Queen startled, looking between the adoptive siblings like a rabbit caught between a fox and a wolf before schooling her features with a disbelieving laugh.

"I can't take on Phoenix," she said, her frown betraying the bitter aftertaste the words left in her mouth. "I could barely hold out against her last time. If you recall, that ended with a stab wound and a ruined shirt. I liked that shirt."

"You weren't only facing Phoenix then, though, were you?" Charles asked. "You were protecting everyone's minds."

Emma's eyes narrowed. "What are you thinking?"

"Onslaught and I will take on Phoenix. We'll need the assurance that she won't pull her favorite trick while we're doing it."

"You want me to block her ability to pull people apart?"

"Precisely. If you can restrain certain of her abilities-"
"-you'll be able to fight her more easily. Plus she'll be distracted by me-"

"-making it easier for me to defeat her."

The back and forth of telepaths conversing orally was dizzying. Erik had never considered what it would be like for the two to strategize together, unconsciously reading each other's minds while speaking aloud, keeping just far enough ahead of each other to make it hard for any non-telepath to follow. They reveled in it. Emma looked brighter than she had since her injury and Charles had a gleam in his eye Erik rarely saw outside of their chess games. He tamped down on the surge of jealousy.

"Can you do it?" Charles asked. "If you knew the mechanism and could concentrate all your energy on the one task?"

"Of course," she sniffed. "Her mind is strong, but if I only have one thing to do…can you really handle the rest of her?"

"If anyone can do it, it's Chonslaught," Sean chimed in.

Charles winced and pinched the bridge of his nose as the room silenced. A gleeful grin spread over Mystique's face as she turned towards her brother.

"Chonslaught?"

Everyone else oscillated between skeptical raised brows and held back laughter. Even Magneto found his stoic façade breaking with a touch of withheld laughter on his lips.

"What have we said about naming things, Mr. Cassidy?" Charles said.

"But it's such a good name!"

"Yes, Charles," Erik said. "Why would you have kept such a fine moniker to yourself?"

"It's neither here nor there. Onslaught and I will be able to handle Phoenix."

The much needed break from the gravity of the situation dissolved, bringing back the issue at hand.

"We've heard that before, Charles. More than once," Hank said. The challenge seemed to physically pain him, but he held his ground.

"With Onslaught-"

Hank shook his head. "We've seen Onslaught. He's powerful, but even he doesn't have that kind of power."

Charles smiled, one of those endearing, arrogant smiles that he pulled off so well. "You've seen Onslaught while I was fighting against him and you've seen him when I was unknowingly suppressing him. You've never seen us work together. I can assure you, it's quite impressive."

"Okay then," Mystique said, giving her brother a wary look, "do we have a plan?"

"It would appear we do. Shall we disperse-"

"Wait." Everybody froze at Magneto's booming voice. He'd been quiet, surprisingly so for a strategy session. Letting the others take the reins had given him the much needed opportunity to observe his friend, though, and there was still something amiss. "How do you know this is her
plan? We're all taking a leap here and you have disturbingly specific details for someone who hasn't been able to penetrate her mind."

"Ah, I'd...hoped that might not come up." The telepath was fidgeting again.

"It has. How did you know?"

Charles glanced around the room then visibly steeled himself. "I know because...she- she took it from my mind. It was originally Onslaught's idea."

"You're not serious," Bobby said, breaking the second stunned silence of their meeting. They were on a roll.

Charles winced. "I'm afraid so."

"I thought he wanted peace!" Mystique said, voice raised. "Back in Cuba and Alkali Lake, he did all that to control everyone for peace. As messed up as that is...I mean...how do you go from peace to destroying everything?"

"I suspect the same way Phoenix did. Telepaths see everyone's minds, the good and the bad. Why do you think I cling so tightly to the good? If I didn't, I'd lose my mind. My hopelessness and disdain towards humanity...it's all part of Onslaught. He needed a Plan B and destruction was it. Once he had his own body...without my influence, those ideas had time to grow. By the time we reintegrated at Alkali Lake, he had solid plans about destroying all life and starting over. Phoenix has been around for far longer. It's not surprising she'd have no hope left to fall back on."

All these years as Charles' friend (or enemy depending on the day) and still there were new things to learn. Charles looked broken open at the admission. His voice had the desperation that only came with honesty. Erik should feel disturbed. Instead, he felt...relief? All his years of trying to talk sense into the telepath, attempting to get him to see the worst in humanity, and it turned out he already had. His hope wasn't naïve. It was a defense mechanism, protecting the world from destruction. One mutant bent on humanity's demise was plenty.

Hank looked at Charles, the hesitant scientist once more. "Do you- since he's part of you again, you don't want-"

"I'm not going to go on a rampage of world destruction, if that's what you're asking, Hank. We aren't two separate entities anymore. His radicalism is tempered by my moderation. Is that all? If so, I believe we have work to do."

And that had been that. They'd fleshed out the plans a little more. Mystique was training a team to protect Charles and Emma while they fought on whatever psychic plane they fought on. Azazel and Alex were working with the mutants who would be coming with Magneto and Beast into the facility itself. Since the meeting, Magneto had spent hours on end with McCoy trying recreate the machine so the scientist could figure out what modifications would be made. Only then would Hank be able to decide what he'd need to do to deactivate the machine.

There was no doubt the machine would be up and running. It was just a matter of how functional it was. Charles assured them that they had time. He could ascertain that much from waves of feeling he could sense from Phoenix. He didn't dare enter her mind and risk exposing how much they knew of her plan though. Knowing what they knew, they could estimate when they needed to be ready. They'd cut it closer than Magneto liked, but at least they'd be prepared.

The sun was just rising when he got back from his run, breathing a little harder than he was accustomed to and wiping sweat from his brow despite the chill that came with early spring. He
slowed as he approached. Charles was sitting out on the patio that had been added to his office sipping tea with a blanket over his lap. The telepath was watching the pinks and oranges of the morning sky. The sun wasn't yet over the treeline, but it would be soon. Charles shot a sideways glance his way as he approached and offered a tentative smile. That was enough invitation for Erik.

"You're up early," Erik said as he approached.

Despite their breakthrough, Charles had very obviously been avoiding Erik. It wasn't difficult with Charles continuing his continued obsession with figuring out the machine modifications and Erik spending a majority of his time training or with McCoy. They'd played a few stilted games of chess, but one or both of them usually begged off citing fatigue from the day's activities. It was a step in the right direction. That didn't mean Erik wouldn't rather be sprinting.

"I had trouble sleeping. I thought since I was up I might as well enjoy the sunrise. It's good to see you returning to your old routine."

Erik sat on the ground next to Charles' chair, knees to his chest. Only with Charles would he take the lower position. "I'd forgotten how peaceful it could be here. Back at the Brotherhood facilities, there was always training to be done or guard shifts to be taken. We never got to truly appreciate the simple things."

"You should never waste a sunrise," Charles said, his voice distant. "You never know which will be your last."

A frown broke on Erik's face and he looked up at Charles, whose eyes never left the horizon. "It's going to be alright, Charles. We're going to get through this. Waiting is the most difficult part."

Charles smiled softly. It had been far too long since they'd been this open with each other. "Perhaps. But one never knows how much time one has left. Time is the last thing that should be taken for granted, yet so many neglect it. If we fail, the world will die in the blink of an eye. How many will have truly appreciated their time here? How many will remember the last day they saw begin?"

"Charles-" Erik said warily. A pit was forming deep in his stomach. Charles looked resigned… almost pained as his drained the last of his tea. Flipping through his index of Charles' expressions, he couldn't find a match. "What aren't you telling me?"

Charles took a breath, snapped out of whatever place his mind had gone to, and plastered a smile on his face. "I'm sorry, my friend. I didn't mean to be overly philosophical. Everything will turn out as it should. I simply came out to appreciate the sunrise. You know how rarely I'm awake for them. Feel free to stay. I need to get back to work."

The man had gotten good at maneuvering his chair. He was gone before Erik could protest. Erik sighed and turned back around. The sun was just peaking over the trees now, the bright pinks cascading into blue. It wasn't until Charles was out of sight that he realized the telepath had never answered his question. That left him far more shaken than Phoenix ever had.

Chapter End Notes

Remember back when Phoenix broke free and set a bunch of stuff on fire and she took something from Charles' head? I know, it was months ago, but think hard. Well,
that thing that she took was this plan.

I've been calling Charles and Onslaught "Chonslaught" in my head since I started "A Spark Neglected". I had to include it somewhere.

I have exactly no knowledge of physics and engineering. I have no idea how Magneto's machine would work. I took a leap and hoped for the best. I don't know how it would create a sun, but Onslaught did it in the comics, so clearly it can be done. Speaking of which...

Comic references: When Onslaught first popped up, his big plan was to create a second sun. No way could I have come up with that plan myself. I've had this in my back pocket since 2011 when I couldn't work it into "A Spark Neglected" and had the idea for the trilogy that followed. I'm glad it's finally off my chest.
Interlude

Charles got all the way to the kitchen before Onslaught made his presence known. His toast had just popped up and he'd turned to get the milk from the refrigerator for his newly refilled cup of tea. When he turned back, Onslaught sat on the counter in all his orange-auraed glory, swinging his legs back and forth like a five year old. Charles shot a bitter look to the swinging legs before raising his gaze with an unamused frown.

"Really?"

"Oh, don't be so touchy. One of us should be able to move our legs."

"A bit risky, manifesting in the kitchen. Anyone could walk in. They know you're still around, but I doubt they'd be thrilled to see you."

Onslaught waved the comment off as Charles returned the milk to the fridge. "We'd know well before they made their way down here. Besides, everyone except Erik is still in bed and he's right where we left him wondering what you're not telling him. He's assuming the worst, obviously."

"I would expect nothing less."

Onslaught hopped down from the counter and leaned over the island where Charles was putting the finishing touches on his toast. Resting his chin on his hands, he stared at Charles until the telepath sighed and met his gaze.

"You felt it, didn't you? The machine?"

_A rush of power_

_A fiery grin_

_The whir of a gears shifting_

_The hum of energy stabilizing_

_A flare of victory_

"Why else would I be awake before sunrise? With that spike in psionic energy, I'm surprised Ms. Frost didn't wake as well."

"She didn't know what she was looking for. You've been on edge about it since you figured out Phoenix's plan."

Charles stirred his tea and stared at nothing.

"We have time yet," Onslaught continued. "It will be days before it reaches full capacity and even then we have a chance. We knew this was how it would happen. We were never going to get there before she started the machine."

"Yes, but knowing isn't the same as having confirmation. It's different when there's no turning back."

"Don't be so dire, Professor. Like I said, it won't reach critical for days yet. We'll cut it close, but we'll get there. We'll go into Phoenix's mind and, with luck, get her to shut it off."
"And what will we do when she refuses?" Charles looked up again, his stony face contrasting the matching one that held a melancholy smile. "What will we do when it reaches the point of no return and even Hank and Erik's sabotage will do no good?"

"We'll do what needs to be done."

"I've looked everywhere for some way around it-

"You know as well as I that you won't find anything in those papers to prevent what's coming. Research on using psionic energy to start and end cataclysmic events is sadly lacking."

Charles stared at Onslaught morosely. He kept up his front of positivity in front of everyone else, but that wasn't an option with Onslaught. One benefit to having a sentient other half of yourself was that you didn't have to hide all the time.

Onslaught snorted.

And one of the negatives was that said other half wasn't always sympathetic to your emotional plight.

"Don't give me those watery puppy eyes," Onslaught said. "There's still time. And, remember, at least one good thing came out of all of this."

"And what would that be?" Charles sniped back.

"We know that you were right about Erik. Even after horrible things he did, he still cares. The good you sensed in him all those years ago that I dismissed…it's still there. Which is a good thing because we need him. More than you know."

Charles narrowed his eyes. "What do you know that I don't?"

"I know plenty of things you don't," Onslaught said, standing up straight and brushing some non-existent dust off his shoulder. "I've always been the brains of the operation. Just know that Erik has the means to be a great help to us. Everything will work out in the end."

Charles scoffed, but smiled. "Since when have you been the optimistic one?"

"Since you became the realistic one."

Charles sighed. "Fine. I believe there's more preparation to be done. Shall we?"

He put his tea and toast on a tray in his lap. As he left, the kitchen was empty, but as he rolled down the hallway he felt the sensation of walking and couldn't help but smile to himself.
A seven nation army couldn't hold me back

Chapter Notes

Title comes from The White Stripes' "Seven Nation Army"

One last set-up chapter (which I hadn't been intending, but turns out it was needed) before the big battle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It didn't take them long to prepare themselves, which was good because they were working on a deadline. With the machine gaining power every passing second, their window for sabotaging it was closing. Tensions rose. Hank growled at Erik for challenging his ideas (which in itself wasn't bad except that Erik's challenging tone didn't differ too greatly from Erik’s I-know-more-than-you tone, which led to problems); Erik ripped up more than one of the plans they were working on, which only made Hank growl more.

Emma and Charles had withdrawn to prepare for their own fight. That didn't stop Charles from putting Colossus and Quill in their place when their combat exercise became a bit more than an exercise. It had escalated to an all out brawl with the other mutants trying to pull them apart in vain. Nobody wanted to come into contact with Quill's quills and Colossus, well, the man was huge and made of steel...if he didn't want to be held back, he wouldn't be held back. Just when Mystique was about to call Magneto, the pair had frozen where they stood. No one knew what Charles had said to them, but when they could move again they were significantly paler and couldn't shake hands and declare their goodwill fast enough.

How did Mystique know it was Charles and not Emma who scared the bejeezus about of them? His raised eyebrow and Emma's impressed-and-approving aura when they joined the group for dinner, plus Colossus' refusal to make eye contact with the professor and the fact that she was pretty sure she'd heard Quill mutter something about an alter ego and being a "scary son of a-" before cutting himself off at a disturbingly pleasant look from Charles as the telepaths exited. She didn't know whether to be thankful or worried that the pair had obviously met Onslaught. She'd come to terms with what her brother had become. She hadn't had much of a choice. Her only other option seemed to be losing him.

Her less than satisfying talk with Charles had left her antsy. Her people were settling in and she'd been escorted down to check that Magneto and Emma were receiving proper care (they were though they were both still unconscious), but their conversation kept repeating itself in her head. After analyzing what they'd said to one another for a solid hour, she had marched into Charles' study feeling she had a pretty good idea of what Charles' responses would be and what she could argue against them. She had been wrong.

"He's dangerous, Charles. Remember when we were kids and he showed up? You were terrified of him. He's killed who knows how many people and, I can't stress this enough, tried to take over the world twice."

"I'm well aware of our-" Mystique cringed at the pronoun, "past indiscretions. But I wonder, Mystique, how many people have you killed since you joined Magneto's Brotherhood? And is your ultimate goal not to rid the world of humans to allow mutants free reign, a task that, if successful, will conveniently put Magneto, Emma, and you at the top of the list for leading the
survivors? That sounds suspiciously like trying to take over the world."

"Oh, come on, Charles, that's stretching it."

"Is it? You judge me for working with Onslaught, yet I know for a fact you've killed as well. I wonder, is there an acceptable number of murders one is allowed before that person is beyond salvation? Where do you draw your line in the sand? Does it keep moving, always one more than you've killed yourself?"

"It's different! Those people were acting against mutantkind! They would have done the same to us!"

"Ah, preemptive killing. I'm so proud of my little despot."

"Why are you doing this? This isn't you. This is him."

"This isn't me or him," Charles snapped. "This is us." He calmed in a flash. "As I've said before, he and I are one in the same. If you haven't noticed, we've been working together for years now. No murders. No plots for world domination. Just us making sure you lot don't make a mess of things. I've had no choice but to accept what I am. If you can't, I think it best that we stop this charade of siblinghood and admit that we're too different to reconcile our opposing views."

It felt like her chest had frozen. Never, even when she'd first killed in from of him, had she predicted Charles would be the one to the cut ties between them. There were a few times, times she wasn't proud of, when she thought that maybe it would be better if she didn't have to worry about Charles' approval...maybe if she didn't think of Charles as her brother, it would be easier to fully commit to the Brotherhood without anything holding her back. But she'd always found a reason not to. To her, Charles was and would forever be her brother, for better or worse. She'd always assumed Charles felt the same. Maybe she'd been wrong.

They stared at each other in silence, trying to see past each other's poker faces. Neither succeeded.

"You don't mean that," she said finally, if only to break the stale silence.

"I do," Charles replied, though his voice seemed halfway to cracking. He covered it with a cough. "You call part of me a monster, you say I've changed, but you refuse to recognize that you have too. My sister never would have done half the things you have."

"Time changes people. I've seen what the world does to people like us."

"And I've seen what the Brotherhood does to people who get in their way. I refuse to drop my greatest defense when I have no idea when you'll finally decide I'm too much of a problem. What separates you and Onslaught? If you had his power, what would you do with it? Can you tell me without a shadow of a doubt that you wouldn't use it to your advantage?"

"We're not Onslaught."

"You're right. You're not. You don't have nearly as much power as he does. Be my sister and accept who I am or don't. Either way, kindly get out of my office."

And that had been the end of it. It had gone no better than their first talk in the library; in fact, it had gone far worse. She'd spent the rest of the day training, trying to hide how rattled she was by the encounter. Charles had always been the rock. To witness how much he had changed knocked her off kilter, and she wasn't easily knocked off kilter nowadays. She wouldn't lose him that easily though. She'd gone in the next day with her shields high ready to wage battle. In the days after,
they finally came to a partial understanding. They were still on shaky ground, but they were brother and sister again.

And now here they were getting ready to head off into battle as a united front, not knowing whether all or even any of them would come back. Not nerve-wracking. Not nerve-wracking at all.

"We break up into two squads," Mystique said in the meeting room. A blueprint of the facility was posted on a board at the front. Everyone else sat at attention with Charles, Emma, Erik, and Hank at the back. "My team is going to be protecting Charles and Emma. We've chosen this outdoor area here to make our stand." She pointed to a yard at the entrance of the facility.

"Isn't that a little open?" Kitty asked. "How are we going to protect them with so much space? They'll be an easy shot."

Mystique shook her head. "Better to have open space between them and her. If we were confined, she'd be able to trap us. Plus, we're just as likely to take a shot at her as she is to take one at us. We know she has an army of mind-controlled humans and mutants."

She glanced at Charles, who had shifted his gaze to the side. Finding that tidbit of information had been...difficult. The telepaths used Cerebro to skim the area where the machine was to evaluate whether Phoenix had gathered (or coerced) followers. She had. An impressive number. Mostly factory and construction workers. Who knows where she got them from. The core of them had been on the project before Phoenix commandeered it, but their numbers were far greater now. It was a force intended to defend. Charles had been shaky when he revealed that none of them besides the core engineers had a mind of their own. Phoenix wasn't just controlling them; she had mind-wiped them to do her will. It was a smart move. She didn't have to exert energy to control them, so she could devote her mind to other tasks...like fending off an attack from a pair of telepaths. Charles had reassured everyone that the men and women may not be lost, that their minds may be returned to them once Phoenix was defeated, but the smile as he did so was feigned and brittle and he'd excused himself as soon as he could.

She shook herself back to the present. "Chances are, she'll keep herself as far away from us as possible and send her people to the middle ground. That's where we'll meet them."

"Are we certain that's what she'll do?" Storm asked.

"Very nearly," Charles said. All eyes shifted to him in the back. "Strategically, it makes sense and Phoenix is nothing if not strategic. With us attacking her telepathically, she'll have no energy to spare for any other tasks. None of us will without giving the other the upper hand."

"Azazel will stay back with them," Mystique cut back in. "If things start going sideways, he'll get them out and back to the jet so they're in range and can keep fighting Phoenix. That is not ideal. I don't want anyone to think that's anything other than a last option. The greater the distance, the harder it is for them to fight and the teleportation will give Phoenix at least two seconds of advantage over them that could be the difference between winning and losing. But, if worse comes to worse and Azazel has to get them out, the rest of us will take out as many of her soldiers as we can so they can't attack the others. We'll fall back to the jet and make our stand there. If we lose Emma and Charles before they can take out Phoenix..." she paused, trying not to imagine actually witnessing the loss of the pair. "If our telepaths go down and Phoenix is still active, it won't matter how far back we fall. There is no Plan C. Make sure Plan A works."

"It will," Charles said. "I will not allow her to succeed."
"We won't allow her to succeed," Emma said pointedly.

"Yes, and we have every faith in all of you to protect us," Charles replied.

Erik leaned over to Charles once everyone had turned their attention back to Mystique. "Nice save, Charles. You almost sounded modest."

"Hmm, maybe you should take notes," Charles returned with a smirk.

"No talking in class," Emma mock-whispered, leaning between them.

"With any luck," Mystique was saying, "Phoenix will split her army half and half between us and the reactor. Which leads us to-"

She handed the pointer to Alex as he walked in from the side. "My team," the blond picked up. "We're running defense for Magneto and Beast. We get them to the room with the main reactor here," he circled a room with the pointer, "via this entrance," he pointed to a door then traced the path to the reactor room. "If, by chance, we're blocked, Piotr, Scott, and I will blast our way in. Once we're in the reactor room, we fan out. Six of you will sweep the perimeter. The rest head to the middle of the room and head towards the edges. Push anyone already in the room out. Beast and Magneto will head straight for the main panel here," he said, drawing another circle. "We keep them out of the line of fire while they do what they need to do. Scott and I are on guard at the panel in case anyone gets by the rest of you."

"Beast and I will be able to handle almost anything that comes our way, but we'll be distracted" Magneto said. "You are our backup. I will let nothing stop us from our goal. We will have one chance and one chance only. If we fall back, we likely won't get back in without wasting considerable energy and resources."

"Kitty will be on Mystique's team," Alex said. "If anything goes wrong on their end, she'll phase through the building and tell us."

The silence that falls before battle slunk through the room. The younger ones were twiddling their thumbs and fidgeting; a few were putting on a brave front, but Alex knew there had been more calls home over the past 48 hours than there had been in the entire previous week. The veteran team members presented a more stoic image. They were by no means battle-worn, but they'd seen enough. Alex himself kept a distance from upcoming fights. He knew some of the others did too. He'd learned early to focus on objectives and let his preparation support him. He'd done everything that he could do. Now it was time to use it.

Magneto stepped forward. "You all know what teams you're on. You've been strategizing and training for days. It may not seem like enough. It is. You all know what to do when we get to our drop point. It's just a matter of doing it now. Failure is not an option."

"We believe in all of you," Charles picked up. "As Magneto said, you've prepared. You know one another. We are one team. Emma and I can defeat Phoenix. Magneto and Hank can stop the reactor. All we need you to do is give us the time to do that, something you're all more than capable of. Now, everyone needs to prepare themselves. We leave tomorrow morning."

The mutants started filing out of the room, many of them trailing after Sean who had declared some type of game night to try to keep people's minds off what was to come. Nothing hurt a battle strategy more than overthinking it.

Erik once more leaned over to Charles. "That was surprisingly optimistic for how resigned you look when they aren't watching."
"It's what they needed to hear," Charles replied, stubbornly watching the last of them trickle out the door. "And I do trust them to do what they need to. It's Phoenix who holds the trump card."

"And you and Onslaught will defeat her."

"Most assuredly. That's not what concerns me."

Brow furrowed, Erik was halfway to asking what that meant when Scott came over.

"Professor, I should be on the team that's fighting Phoenix."

Charles shot a knowing smile to Erik, who pursed his lips at the interruption. He was never going to figure out what Charles was keeping to himself. Not until it was too late.

Charles took the opportunity to move out of the room with Scott at his side. "And you've already asked Mystique and your brother so you're coming to me in hopes that I'll override their well thought out reasons for keeping you away from the entity possessing your love? I'm sorry, Scott, I'm not…"

The voices faded as they moved down the hall. Emma moved to stand beside him, watching the door the pair had exited.

"He's not telling me everything," Magneto said.

"He never does. You don't either. That's the problem with you two. You expect the other to trust you completely when you've done everything in your power to destroy any trust you ever had in one another. Honestly, it's exhausting."

With that, Frost swept from the room, leaving Erik on his own. He could confront Charles after dinner, but it would only lead to an argument and they'd been doing so well lately. There was nothing to do about it but to prepare as best as he could for what was to come.

Chapter End Notes

Battle is upcoming. Finally.
Yield not to evils, but attack all the more boldly

Chapter Notes

Title is a line spoken by the Sibyl in Virgil's "Aeneid" (Book VI Line 95). The original Latin is "Tu ne cede malis, sed contra audentior ito." Forgive the translation if it's off. I haven't taken Latin for a while so I googled it.

There are a lot of page breaks. Let me know if it seems like I missed one. It should be pretty obvious.

All those days of training and it still didn't seem like it would ever be enough. Every other battle, even the ones with Magneto, a guy he'd looked up to, Sean had never felt this sense of foreboding. Maybe it was that they'd be fighting something wearing Jean's face (though fighting Onslaught wearing Charles' face hadn't felt this way either). Maybe it was that the world would be destroyed if they failed. Not just changed or enslaved. Destroyed. But, hey, at least they'd all die together, right?

He knocked on the door. "Professor?"

No response. Trying not to twiddle his thumbs, he cracked the door and peeked in. "Professor?"

The telepath in question raised his head from where it had been hunkered over his desk. He had been writing something.

"I think after all these years you can probably call me Charles."

"It's time, Charles."

The words tasted weird. It must have shown judging by the fond chuckle from across the room. The paper the telepath been writing was folded and put in an envelope then placed in the left drawer. Funny, Charles had specially requested that someone get him personally. With his Chonslaught power, he easily could've been paged from afar. Hell, they probably could've driven to California and mind-whispered (something Sean was still trying to get a grip on) and Charles would've heard it. It was almost like Charles wanted him to see where he'd put that envelope, he'd done it so purposefully…

Charles patted him on the arm as he rolled by, heading for the door.

"You always were smarter than the others gave you credit for, Mr. Cassidy."

Sean stared as Charles left the room then glanced back to the desk. It sat empty, everything stacked up and organized, ready to be gone through upon their return. Something was odd about it. Sean just couldn't put his finger on what…

We're on a bit of a timeline, Sean.

Coming, Professor.

It was true. They were on a timeline. He'd worry about it later. If the world didn't end, of course.
The flight to the facility was quiet. The two teams went over their strategies again, which meant Sean couldn't ask the Professor anything. He did notice Mystique hovering closer to her brother than she had in, well, since the last Onslaught debacle when she went full-on protective sister. Magneto was shooting glances his way too. Maybe he thought the helmet was hiding it or maybe he just didn't care that everyone could see him openly…concerned? No, not concerned. Openly something for the Prof. Yes, 'something' perfectly described the level of emotion Magneto exuded.

Five minutes out, Emma and Charles exchanged short glances before Emma took a deep breath and closed her eyes. It was an anti-climactic start to their fight, but they needed to negate Phoenix's power as soon as possible, which meant Emma's part started when they were safely within her range. Most of the others had supported an all out assault on Phoenix's mind. Shockingly, it was Magneto who was the first to object to that plan. "I spent weeks with her. The second she feels she's under attack, she'll lash out. If Charles and Frost aren't entrenched in her mind at that point, she'll throw them out." Charles agreed, albeit with a touch of astonishment coloring his tone. "Magneto is right. As much as it would benefit us to have surprise on our side, we can't risk Phoenix blocking us long enough to de-atomize anyone." No one could argue against that so it was settled.

"Got it," Emma murmured after a few seconds. "Has she sensed you?" Magneto asked. He was sitting straight-backed on the bench in the same place he'd been when they'd flown to Cuba, a far more imposing figure than he had been as their anxious mentor unsure whether he'd be able to lead them to victory. "Unsure" hadn't been a word that could describe Magneto for years now. Neither was "their mentor".

"Not that I can tell. She's prepared for an assault, not focused on fending off more subtle attacks. She knows we're coming though." Charles' eyes went distant. "She's anticipated our approach. Half her people are positioned with the main reactor. She's taken up position in the yard with the other half. Odd, most of the mutants are with her."

"Not at all," Magneto said. His helmet reflected a stray ray of sunlight as he shook his head at Charles' furrowed brow. "A machine can be rebuilt. You will stand in her way as long as you live. She'd rather risk the destruction of the machine if it means killing you. It's the strategy I'd take."

"You've never used that strategy against us," Charles said. "I've never wanted to kill you."

Sean looked back and forth at the pair as they stared at one another. He'd think they were talking telepathically if it weren't for the helmet.

"So we know what we're up against," Mystique said, pointedly. "Anything else we should know?"

"No," Charles said, dropping Magneto's gaze. "Although her team in the yard will make Alex's team approach more difficult. Azazel, can you teleport them inside?"

"Not together without risk of them appearing in a wall."

As one of those who could end up in the wall, Sean found the image disturbing, but Charles didn't even wince. "How many maximum?"
Azazel scanned the crowd. "One third at a time."

"Very well. Azazel will have to teleport Alex's team inside. It's better than having to fight your way to the entrance. Otherwise, our plan remains the same."

The rest of the group seemed relieved. There had been talk of what tactic Phoenix would take and how it would affect their plans. Sean may be the unofficial morale leader, but there was nothing he could do the night before but distract them for this particular battle. Phoenix was unlike anything else they'd faced and the stakes were high. What could he say that hadn't been said before?

Hank landed farther away than they'd mapped out simply to put distance between them and the opposing forces. They could still see the facility though and, personally, Sean thought, it was creepy. If it weren't for the eerily silent force awaiting them, he'd think the whole place was abandoned. There was this one amusement park near his house growing up that had been closed. His brother had shown him pictures of it when they were kids to freak him out. They'd snuck in one night and walked around and his brother had snuck off and hidden then scared him. It was probably the most terrifying thing he'd ever experienced. Well, until he'd seen the Prof's eyes glowing orange behind Sebastian Shaw all those years ago. Still, areas that shouldn't be abandoned but were ranked pretty high on his list of places he'd rather not be. With the weeds growing over the sidewalks and the broken windows and rusted walls...let's just say it wasn't a pleasant picture.

Magneto held up an arm from the front of the group well before the proper entrance to the yard. Everyone stopped and gathered facing the facility and Phoenix's forces.

"Half of Mystique's team will engage the front lines. Azazel will transport a third of Havok's team to the building as close to the reactor room as possible. You will move out of the way but do not engage the enemy until we are all present unless you're forced. When Azazel returns, the second half of Mystique's team will move out. Charles and Emma will stay here-

"No, we will be as close as we can be to the rest of the team without risking our safety. The closer we are, the easier the mental contact. Even with Onslaught, we need every advantage we can get. It's been difficult enough on Emma without the added strain of distance."

It was true. Though she had hidden it for the most part, Emma's breathing was faster than it should be from the walk, even if she was doing it with her eyes closed.

Erik bristled, but appeared to make a conscious effort to hold himself back. "Very well. Get as close as is safe and no closer. Kitty and Mystique will stay with you until Azazel comes back from his last trip. Hank will accompany the first group. I will be with the last."

A third of Alex's team had already split off and was linking hands. Sean made sure to position himself near Magneto.

"Best of luck everyone," Charles said.

With a puff of sulphuric smoke and a battle cry from one of Magneto's more aggressive mutants, the fighting began. Phoenix's militaristic lines broke as half of her minions ran forward to meet their opposition. Sean strained his neck taking a few steps to try to get a glance of Phoenix. He caught a few wisps of unnatural red before a renegade bolt of energy nearly caught his shoulder. He moved back to Magneto and Charles after that. Azazel returned and took the second group as he did. It wouldn't be long now.

Magneto stood firm by the professor's side. "Do try not to get yourself mentally eviscerated, Charles."
"And you try not to let that machine create a sun that will burn through the planet."

It was fond, but there was concern behind it…fear even…like he wanted to say more but couldn't. Oh, right, this might be the last time they saw each other. That wasn't terrifying at all. Magneto was trying to say goodbye without saying goodbye. Seriously? All these years and NOW is the moment the Master of freaking Magnetism decides to show some heart?

He would've rolled his eyes, but Azazel had returned again, faster with the knowledge of where in the building he was going, Sean supposed. That didn't stop Magneto from shooting Sean a look that probably would've killed him if the cliché held true. Hey, maybe if they all lived through this they could find a mutant whose looks could literally kill.

*Let's get through the next few hours before worrying about that, Sean.* Charles' voice sounded. Keep everyone in check.

Sean glanced at Charles one last time before the darkness of teleportation overwhelmed him. He couldn't make out facial features but he was sure he saw orange within the blue of his eyes and wondered if it had always been there and he'd just been missing it.

Everyone was holding their own, given it had only been a few minutes. Azazel had just disappeared with the final wave of Alex's group. There was nothing else to do for them but wait. Mystique stood by Charles, giving his shoulder a squeeze. She was watching her team fight with an expression halfway between longing to fight alongside them and enduring will to protect Charles and Emma. He saw very little of the girl he'd befriended in his kitchen in their childhood. Every now and again there was a flash…the shoulder squeeze, a shared look where they both knew what the other was saying without telepathy. Maybe there would be more of those if they survived.

Azazel came back with a swoosh.

"Should I move us closer?" he asked.

Charles opened his mouth, but Raven's voice sounded before he could say anything. "Closer, but not too close."

*Like we aren't even here,* Onslaught tsked.

With a short nod, the teleporter put a hand on Emma's shoulder (she remained nobly concentrated on her task…Charles wouldn't be able to leave her on her own for much longer) and another on Charles' shoulder. Kitty grabbed Mystique and they were off.

They reappeared a safe distance from the battle. For all the trouble he gave Erik, the man had trained his people well. Azazel had placed them close enough to be defended but far enough that it would be a challenge for Phoenix's people to get to them. Kitty ran forward almost immediately and engaged one of the closer fighters, diverting her away from the telepaths' position.

*Here we meet again,* Phoenix's voice boomed in his head…in everyone's head judging by the color of Raven's face and the collective stutter in the mutants' fighting.

*You cannot stop what you've started without sacrifices. Are you prepared?*

*Are you?* Charles answered, making sure to broadcast it to everyone.

The woman was barely visible through the pairs of fighters, but Charles could see an occasional
A flash of a blood red aura and hair that seemed to ignore the laws of gravity. She was smiling maniacally. Even from a distance, it was clear her focus was on him.

Azazel paced behind him, tail sweeping behind ruffling Charles' hair. Mystique gave Charles' shoulder another squeeze. It was time.

Before he could join Frost in Phoenix's mind, a painfully familiar but long absent voice sounded in his own. He looked up to find Mystique looking down at him from the corner of her eye, impatience and worry flitting across the stoic countenance he'd grown accustomed to from her before battle.

*Be careful in there.*

*I always am, love.*

She gave no further indication of having heard him, but her shoulders relaxed into their usual stance and she let go of his shoulder. Eight strides later, she was swept into the brawl. A fireball launched dangerously close to Emma. Not two seconds later, the culprit's arm was turning blue in Iceman's grasp. The clock was ticking.

Charles gave a salute to Phoenix before diving forward, letting the world disappear around him.

As soon as Azazel disappeared the final time, Erik stalked to the front of the group. They'd lined up neatly on either side of the wall. The teleporter hadn't put them directly at the reactor room, but he'd put them a lot closer than they would've been starting from the door.

"Let's move out," he said.

Hiking over rubble of a long abandoned facility was made easier by the path cleared by the comings and goings of Phoenix's workers. No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than Hank stepped on a rock with a muffled curse. Clearish path, then. Good thing Charles' wheelchair didn't have to make it over here. Hmm, maybe he'd work on a hover function for the Professor when they got back. If they got back.

"This is it," Magneto said as they approached a heavy metal door. He pushed it open like it was nothing and waltzed in.

"Magneto, wait-"

As soon as he'd entered, a surge of mindless men and women ran at him. Hank cringed as the magnokinetic threw them away with the flick of his wrist.

"Would you care to do your jobs or will I need to do everything myself?" he shot at the contingent behind him.

"Could've given us more than two seconds of warning," Alex griped before he moved in. With three quick hand gestures, he directed the rest of the team to spread out. Hank let them all get inside before following himself.

Phoenix's mind was a post-apocalyptic wasteland if Charles had ever seen one. A giant red sun took up at least a third of the sky, tinting everything the same blood red of the creature's aura. There was no discernible ground, but the area beneath the sun was vaguely hill-shaped and rippled in scarlet waves from a non-existent wind. Ruins spanning from Roman columns to the top of the Empire State Building littered the space. To his left, the Tower of London. Next to that, a
Charles whipped around to find Phoenix. Her expression shifted with unseen memories as it moved from ruin to ruin, but an underlying bitterness remained constant. The creature itself still looked like Jean, but only just. Other faces, the faces Phoenix had taken in the past, were imposed on top of the girl he knew, creating a distorted visage that wasn't quite human. The entity walked around him, facing the carnage.

"All the civilizations I've seen rise and fall…they've made me who I am now."

"You're too lost in the past to see the future."

"The past is the future. It just keeps repeating," she said sharply. A flash of the red sun reflected in the gleam of her eye as she looked towards it. "The bones of the past will be the foundation for a new future…one that humanity cannot contaminate."

"There are always other options. Stop the reactor and we can discuss them."

A wry smile. "A weak argument. The only option you'll accept is my death. The machine is already started. I won't stop it. You know you won't convince me otherwise and you aren't powerful enough to stop it yourself."

"I had to give you the chance."

Charles struck first, the flame he'd shot at her landing solidly on her shoulder. She used the momentum to twist herself around and throw her own return volley that sent Charles stumbling back. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Emma hidden near the Asian temple, eyes closed in concentration, arm outstretched towards an asymmetric diamond structure that could only be encasing Phoenix's de-atomizing ability. Best to keep the fight away from her, defenseless as she was at the moment. It seemed Phoenix somehow hadn't realized her favored ability was no longer at her disposal. The longer Emma remained hidden the better.

Magneto was a man on a mission. People were swept out of his way without a second thought as he moved to the panel at front and center. Hank followed, glancing around the room as he went. It was different from the blueprints the same way all experimental plans differed from their realizations.

The room was massive. It looked like it could've housed a nuclear reactor at some point. Maybe it had. The space was so big he couldn't see the back from where he was, though the huge cylinders holding the energy Phoenix had no doubt poured into them may be blocking his view a bit. The sounds of Alex's shouted orders and skirmishes initiating echoed off the walls and a ceiling that was at least three stories above them. The mechanism that would allow the formation of the sun sat at the top. A few sparks already flared within it.

"McCoy, whenever you're done gawking we can get started."

Beast hit a man who escaped Toad's grasp, knocking him out cold as he made his way over to the panel Lehnsherr was devoting his attention to. Sure, he could fight, but this, science and problem-solving, this was his forte.
"We need to shut down everything slowly. If we don't do it properly, it could destabilize."

"I was there when you said it the first fifteen times with the blueprints if you recall," Magneto said a little too amiably to be serious. Best to ignore that.

"Do you have a sense of the grid?"

A pause. Magneto's focus followed lines visible only to him, then, "I know where everything is going."

"Make sure it all stays stable. If any of the connections flare up, I'll have to counterbalance for it."

"Do it. I've got your back covered."

Phoenix deflected another burst of energy to the side and glanced to what would be the sky. "Your people are trying to stop my machine. How heroic."

Eyes not leaving the sky, Phoenix tilted her head. A hole opened up beneath Charles. He dropped a couple of inches before flexing his hands downwards, hovering, then stepped to the side and skirted it neatly. "They have come together rather well."

That had gotten her attention. "You and the Onslaught demon have admirable control. Your shields are better than last time we met. How much of yourself have you sacrificed for that power?"

"Nothing that I miss terribly, I assure you."

"I thought the same when I was your age." The statement, whether a warning, a threat, or both, hovered in the air before dissipating. She hummed. "No doubt with your extended power you can sense what's happening in the skirmishes outside. I wonder how their deaths would feel in your mind." It only took a second for her eyes to narrow. Looking around, she finally caught sight of Emma.

"You."

"Me," Emma responded with a strained shrug, eyes never leaving the diamond case she guarded.

"I thought I felt someone scampering around up here."

"That's a relief. I thought maybe I'd let myself get stabbed by an inept excuse for a psychopath. It's nice to know you're just so cocky you can't keep track of whether you have access to your own abilities."

"I have to admit I thought you'd learnt your lesson. I'd assumed the boy was trying and failing to assert his will over me again. It wouldn't be the first time," Phoenix said. Haughtiness had worked its way back into her tone. The sky flashed with the rage it covered. "You won't be able to block me forever."

"Maybe not, but I don't have to block you forever, do I?"

Phoenix went flying, smashing into a pyramid stone and landing on the crags at its base. Charles stepped forward, throwing another bolt of energy. "No, you don't."

The bolt slowed down. Laughter rose from the dust, echoing across the mindscape in a maniacal
round.

"You truly believe you have the power to defeat me."

Phoenix rolled to the side and swung back to her feet. The bolt returned to full speed only to hit the spot Phoenix had been by moments before. As dust and debris rained down on her unblinking form, she whipped them towards Charles with a flick of her hand. The dust forced him to shield his face.

When he pulled his arm down, the flame burning in his eyes had flickered from orange to blue. The change rippled out into the aura surrounding him until he was encircled with blue fire. A shard aimed at his heart froze inches from its target before bursting into pieces.

"I do."

"You think calling on your demon will save you."

"You're as simple-minded as the rest of them. I don't call on him. We are one another. I've accepted who I am and the power that comes with it."

"You're nothing but a posturing, frightened child."

"You underestimate me."

"You overestimate yourself."

Between one blink and the next, Charles was at Phoenix's throat, grasping it with one hand. Wide-eyed, Phoenix struggled, wheezing in his hold. She was reaching for him, trying to get her hand to his chest. What she planned to do if it got there, he didn't know but it wouldn't be good. He grabbed her hand with his free one and held it. She was trying to dig her talons into his mind but, unlike their first meeting, this time they could find no leverage, slipping off like razors on glass.

Her visage shifted. The other faces disappeared so that only Jean's was left.

"Please, Professor, stop! You're hurting me!"

Charles squeezed tighter, face remaining passive. "I won't fall for that."

With a growl, the other faces reappeared. Phoenix's eyes were rolling behind closed lids. A surge of power left her. The wave itself had no effect on Charles. For a moment, he thought it was meant to startle him. Then the area around them flexed. It wasn't devastating, but it threw him off balance enough that he lost his grip on her hand. Her eyes shot open and the now free appendage landed on his chest. In a scarlet flash, he was thrown backwards. The ground may not be discernible, but it certainly existed judging by how hard he hit it. Coughing, he put a hand to his chest to catch his breath as he sat up. It seemed the only damage was that he had the air knocked out of him.

Phoenix was crouched low, one hand on her knee, the other massaging her neck.

"What happened to the professor little Jean knew?" she mocked in a surprisingly steady voice. "Your care for your students-"

"Extends only to the actual students, not entities wearing their faces. I used that trick often enough with the X-Men and Brotherhood to know when I'm being manipulated."

"I'm talking to the demon now, am I?"
Onslaught tilted his head in acknowledgment. "If you must phrase it that way. You've always been talking to me. We're equally aware at all times."

Phoenix scoffed. "He will always hold power over you as surely as he did when he imprisoned me. Behind all his pretty words, he's the most manipulative of all of us. You should be fighting against him…working with me. Strike preemptively. After all, this is what you wanted," she said spreading her arms across the mindscape.

"I was a bit out of my head when I came up with this plan," he responded, gesturing at the sun. "And why should I work with you? If I recall, last time we met you attacked me rather ruthlessly."

"As you would have me given the chance."

Onslaught hummed. "No matter. Charles' manipulative nature does not preclude yours or mine. You're also assuming Charles was the one who initiated our accord. I'm the one who convinced him to work with me. I worked hard to do it. Besides, if I join you, your sun will eat up the world. Why should I strike preemptively against my other half if I only have hours to live?"

She scoffed again. "Are you going to try to convince me to stop the machine as well?"

Onslaught huffed a humorless laugh. "No. You and I both know you'll never do that. Charles will try and fail because that's what he does. Regardless, we will stop your plan. I finally have Charles on my side and a body to work with when I so choose. I'm not giving that up because you're disenchanted with humanity."

"Arrogance."

"Pot, kettle. I'm bored. Shall we continue?"

A burst of flame was answer enough.

Beast's fingers were flying across the panel. They'd stopped a couple of flare ups, but nothing major. The psionic energy kept licking out of the containers into the contraption hanging from the ceiling. It had a ball-like shape to it.

"Far left is spiking."

"Got it."

Hank pressed a few more buttons.

"Better?"

"Yes."

Alex and his team had taken care of the majority of the minions. Occasionally one would wake up and make a run at someone, but for the most part it had quieted down. The team had set up a perimeter to guard against any others who tried to come inside.

Another wisp of energy slipped from a container to the forming ball.

"McCoy?"

"Almost there."
The room shook. Magneto glanced up.

"What is going on out there?" he murmured before turning back to the containers.

Mystique knocked a woman out only to have to bodily tackle a man who was advancing a little too close to Charles and Emma. They were doing well for the most part. Phoenix's numbers were waning, but so were theirs. Phoenix’s minions were falling faster, but not fast enough. Of course, Colossus chose that moment to go flying through a wall, the crash shaking the whole facility.

"Come on, Charles. Any day now."

The man she'd tackled finally fell unconscious courtesy of a chokehold. She held on a bit longer. Not enough to kill, but hopefully to ensure he wouldn't be up again before they could handle him. If he was brain-damaged when he got up…well, he might be brain-damaged by Phoenix anyway, so it was a risk she was willing to take.

The mindscape shook, probably one of the strength-related mutants attacking.

"Can you feel them tiring, our followers squabbling to keep us safe?" Phoenix said. They were circling each other now. Onslaught had returned to his self-proclaimed task of maintaining their shields after his talk with the entity. Phoenix still hadn't given up trying to find a weak spot in them. It was difficult to take each other on physically (well, as physically as one could in a mindscape), so they'd resorted to prodding each other's mental defenses. And, apparently, talking.

"They're doing a good job of staying alive, but it's only a matter of time before one of yours is more than unconscious. Will you sacrifice their lives to defeat me?"

"If we don't defeat you, they'll all die anyway."

"Nice words. I wonder if you can follow through."

How she'd sensed it before he had, he didn't know, but Charles felt it a second before it happened. The man fighting Bobby had gotten the upper hand. He was going to snap the boy's neck. There was no one else around to stop it.

No, don't! Onslaught yelled.

Too late.

He'd been trained better than Pavlov's dogs. If one of his students was in danger, he reacted. Without thought, he reached out and stopped the attacker, tossing them into unconsciousness he wouldn't recover from for hours.

He realized his mistake immediately. Phoenix tore through before he could close the window his stretched mind opened. Onslaught's mental walls protected him from most of the assault (and probably saved Charles from being mentally eviscerated which Erik would be pleased about), but she ripped her claws across his mind deep enough to bring him to his knees. The ground disappeared as the creature hurled him into the degraded north wall of the Tower of London. He hit with a satisfying crack and fell in a heap. He didn't get up.

Phoenix swept over to her opponent and nudged him with her foot. No response. A leer split her face. One down.

A wind howled in victory as she stalked over to where Emma stood.
"You've been a thorn in my side for too long."

Emma didn't stand a chance and she knew it. If she released her charge to defend herself, Phoenix would kill her; if she didn't, she couldn't defend herself and Phoenix would attack her and probably kill her. What choice did she have? Better to keep hold as long as she could. At least that would give the others a chance. Maybe Charles would recover. Hopefully, becoming another of Phoenix's victims would be worth it. Steeling herself, she stood with her head high as Phoenix approached.

Self-sacrifice was the last way she'd thought she'd go out. If they won, stories had better be told about her. Good stories. Phoenix was breathing on her neck now. She squeezed her eyes shut as the entity brushed a lock of hair off her shoulder. The psychopath was drawing it out. Involuntary tears gathering behind her eyes didn't fall. Good. She wasn't going to go out crying. The touch left only to return as a shockingly heavy hand smashing into the side of her head.

Something had happened. Mystique had just caught a glimpse of Charles, watching Azazel take out a man who was attempting to take them from behind, when the telepath had slumped to the side. Less than five seconds later, Emma was a heap on the ground beside him. A flare of red from the other side of the yard proved they weren't collapsing from exhaustion after winning their battle. If Phoenix was gaining power and Charles had collapsed…Charles would never have given up. He knew the stakes. Defeat Phoenix or die trying.

He hadn't defeated Phoenix. Which meant…

Phoenix had killed him. She had killed them both.

Eyes burning, she turned towards the red flame.

"That's it!" Beast said, stepping back.

Everyone stopped. The sound of the machine had degraded then quieted after Hank had pressed the last button and the panel powered down. The room was eerily silent aside from a couple of pairs still fighting. Every one of the mutants was looking at the now definitive ball of psionic energy. Another wisp of energy fed into it.

Then another.

Then another.

"Uh, it's still happening," Sean said.

"I don't understand," McCoy said, looking back down at the darkened panel. "I've- I've done everything." He was staring at the mainframe, eyes raking across the buttons desperate to find something he'd missed.

Magneto swept the last of Phoenix's minions away by his ill-advised belt. "Are you sure?"

"There's nothing- The reactor isn't running anymore. I did everything right." He looked up, fear etched on his face for the first time. "It's self-sustaining."

"We can't stop it," Magneto said. Beast turned to him wide-eyed. Magneto shook his head. "No, there must be a way. I'll crush the containment-"

"No!" Hank pulled down the arm he'd raised. "If you destroy the containment the energy will go
free. Unchecked, the rest of the energy will be drawn towards the highest concentration of itself."

He glanced to the ball at the ceiling.

Magneto followed his gaze. The sinking feeling in his chest wasn't how this was supposed to end. Charles and the others were counting on them. "I won't accept failure."

"Well, it's happening whether you accept it or not," Hank snapped, paws raking across his head. "If it's self-sustaining…the only way to contain the psionic energy is with more psionic energy."

For an entity as old as she was, watching Emma Frost collapse and flicker out of her mindscape had been entirely too satisfying. Phoenix took a moment to savor her victory before moving forward. The diamond case confining her ability had disintegrated as soon as Emma had disappeared and the power had flooded back. Perhaps the telepath had been right; she'd grown complacent in her arrogance. No matter now. She reached out, ready to test it on the mutants trying to stop her, when heat lanced across her back. She stumbled and turned to find Xavier staggering to his feet again, arm outstretched and forming another ball of blue light.

"Your partner is gone."

"I suppose I'll just have to keep you fully occupied then."

Blue flame shot from his hand. Phoenix had just enough time to shoot her own red flame. The forces met halfway in an explosion of purple before stabilizing. Both telepaths stood arms outstretched pushing their flames towards one another. The final standoff.

A path of men and women lay prostrate on the ground. Another joined them after a swift kick to his head courtesy of Mystique. She was only five guards away from Phoenix, but they were big and she'd been fighting constantly. Still, her brother was dead. She didn't care what body the creature who killed him was wearing; she was going to avenge him or die trying. Half of her own team was injured or unconscious. Someone had to do something. She'd just engaged the next fighter when Phoenix's red aura receded back to its normal level. The woman slumped as if... as if she was fighting again. The shapeshifter ducked a hit and took three steps to back to avoid another before skidding to a halt. Good thing too. A knife flew exactly where she would've been if she hadn't. To her left, Ororo struck down a man with one arm outstretched and the other reaching for a second knife.

The guard hadn't moved to pursue. Apparently, his only job was to protect his master when attacked directly. She had time.

"Azazel?" she shouted.

The awkward sight of a demon squatted by her brother pressing two massive fingers to his neck greeted her.

"He lives."

Her legs nearly gave out in relief.

"Emma?"

Azazel moved to the felled telepath and turned her over. No visible injuries, but that wasn't surprising. It took longer but a nod confirmed she too was alive. Clearly in bad shape, but alive. Maybe they still stood a chance after all. With a laugh, she threw herself back towards the guards. Charles could use all the help he could get.
"This world will receive the destruction it deserves," Phoenix grit out, strained. The purple convergence was almost upon her. "They've earned nothing less."

"You don't get to decide that," Charles replied, slouched forward, panting, but not as much as Phoenix.

"Neither do you. We have power. Why should we not use it? I know you've seen what they've done to me. You've felt the prejudice of both humans and mutants. If humans are destroyed, the mutants will turn on those like us. Your demon understands. That pain is why he exists."

Beneath her fury and arrogance, Charles sensed a trace of frustration and annoyance. She truly did not understand how he could want the world to continue.

"I'm not on anyone's side but my own," he corrected. "Destroying everything loses everyone their chance. I'm not ready to give up."

"Your hope is misplaced."

"The past is the past. No matter how many times it's happened, the chances of any given outcome reset with each new beginning. Circumstances may be the same, but the players change. We'll make it different this time. Let us try. Stop this."

A wave a frustration and fear that belonged to neither of them rippled across the mindscape. They both knew what that meant. The sun was self-sustaining. Phoenix grinned despite the blue flame inching closer to her.

"If you want the machine off, you'll do it yourself or you'll watch your world burn. I win."

Stomach dropping, Charles was so distracted that he had no chance to pull back when Phoenix let go of her defense and threw her arms out to her side, welcoming the flame that consumed her.

"No!" Charles stumbled forward a step but it was too late. Despite the fact that she was burning, Phoenix smiled to the last. The flames licked at the ground around her feet, the landscape burning and fading with her. A hole burned through the sky, filling in with the cloudy grey the sky outside of Phoenix's mind had been. As the flame moved down, the factory came into view as well as the people fighting around them. All at once the fighters dropped, puppets whose master was lost. Charles shot one last look to the leering Phoenix burning her last. Then the mindscape disappeared, Jean fell unconscious, and Phoenix was no more. The silence didn't last long. A roar could be heard from the heart of the factory and Phoenix's final words echoed across the field.

You have lost, Charles Xavier.

Chapter End Notes

There is no basis in the comics for the abandoned amusement park Sean grew up near. I just saw pictures of a bunch of abandoned amusement parks while I was writing this and thought their creepiness matched what I was going for and Sean seems like the type who would've gone somewhere to be scared as a kid.

Comic references: There are references to the Shadow King and Phoenix in the post-apocalyptic wasteland of Phoenix's mind. I'm not assuming any of these things
actually occurred as is in the comics with my version of Phoenix. I'm just saying something happened there. Hopefully that makes sense. Here goes...

(1) Egyptian pyramid = Shadow King was born in Cairo

(2) Vaguely German remnants Charles was standing on = Shadow King worked with the Nazis

(3) Crumbling Scottish castle = Shadow King was in Edinburgh for a while after his work with the Nazis failed

(4) The Tower of London = Shadow King tried to destroy the monarchy at some point

(5) A temple that looked to be from Southeast Asia = Shadow King was involved with the fictional southeast Asian island of Madripoor.

(6) Phoenix's distorted visage not looking quite human is a vague reference to the fact that she was alien in the comics.
Let us go then, you and I (Part 1)

Chapter Notes

Title comes from T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The quiet that followed Phoenix's fall was jarring. The sharp exhales of the mutants still recovering from the abruptly ended battle was all that could be heard. Mystique stood frozen a few feet from the now collapsed Jean Grey. She'd been two guards away from killing the girl. Her muscles ached as she turned back to her brother. He was no longer terrifyingly slumped to the side, but the way he leaned forward spoke to his exhaustion. He heaved a deep sigh, one that she'd seen in men who knew their options were limited, those burdened with far more responsibility than they should be. It was a sigh she'd never wanted to see from her brother, yet always somehow expected she would.

He straightened when he saw her looking.

"We should go to Magneto," Azazel said. "He may need our help."

"He doesn't," Charles responded. "He and his team will join us momentarily."

His eyes skittered between Jean (who had Ororo by her side now), the building, and the recovering mutants. His sight hovered on Bobby a second longer than the others. The man had deep bruising on his neck. There had been a moment when she was sure he was a goner. Phoenix's woman had collapsed at the last second. Mystique made her way over to Charles.

"I told you I'd be careful," the telepath said with an underlying brittleness that didn't make sense.

Distraction might as well have been blinking in bright neon letters over his head. "What did she mean? She said you'd lost, but you obviously beat her. What did she mean?"

She sounded manic even to herself. Azazel was looking her way carefully. He was still hovering near Emma, unsure what to do now that there was no battle and nothing to do but wait. The others (the conscious ones) were gathering themselves, checking on their comrades (regardless of whether they were Brotherhood or X-Men, which should make Charles happy…why wasn't Charles happy?)

"Calm your mind, love." He reached out and took her hand, gave it a squeeze. Last time he'd done that had been...she thought back...after the Cuba debacle. She'd yelled at Erik for avoiding Charles then spent a solid two hours in the gym working off her frustration and the residual terror of almost losing her brother. She'd gone to visit him afterwards, sore but more serene than she'd been in days. Erik was just leaving. He'd offered her a stiff nod before he was gone. As soon as she'd sat down, he'd grabbed her hand and given it a squeeze and thanked her for staying strong. He'd said how proud he was to have her as a sister and reassured her it was over, that everything was okay. It hadn't been, of course. It had just been the beginning.

She took a deep breath, let it out, opened her eyes.

"You need to tell me what she meant."
The melancholy smile sealed the deal. Something was wrong. They'd beaten Phoenix but they hadn't won. She'd had something up her sleeve.

"Wait for the others to get here. It won't be long."

The last sentence had more meaning behind it than she could make out.

"I thought you were dead, Charles. You were slumped over and she was gaining power and Emma was down. I thought-"

She gave into an impulse she'd been suppressing for years and threw her arms around her brother. He gasped, hands flailing at her shoulders like he'd forgotten what a hug was before he returned the gesture with just as much ferocity. They stayed like that for a few seconds before he gave her two consoling pats.

"Now, now, darling, let's not make a spectacle."

And just like that, he was back to how he'd been at Westchester. Smug, aloof, knowing something no one else did. Charles with a touch of Onslaught. It was her signal. She pulled away, cleared her throat, and gave her head a shake before turning around to face the others straight shoulder and a blank face. The door to the facility opened. Not with a slam, but an anticlimactic knock after it drifted into the wall behind it. There was no desperate rush forward to brainstorm a solution to a problem, just a flock of dazed and dejected mutants. That is until Hank and Magneto exited with Alex and Sean at their heels. They made a beeline for Charles.

Scott wasn't far behind. He zeroed in on Jean and ran for her as soon as he was out the door. Ororo put a comforting hand on his shoulder while he brushed over the fallen telepath looking for injuries. Mystique realized she didn't even know if the girl was alive. It had been a battle and the enemy had been defeated, then they needed to determine their losses.

"She's alive. Her mind needs time to recover. It was a shock being locked up then having the creature imprisoning you burn up in your mind."

She glanced at Charles, but his focus was elsewhere. Ah, of course. He only had eyes for Magneto.

Scott was saying something to Storm while he stroked dirt from Jean's face. Whatever it was wasn't good. The woman had taken her hand from his shoulder and put it over her mouth, her usually serene face marred with horror, as she turned towards the building.

Magneto was thunderous, as angry as she'd ever seen him. Erik and Hank were still several strides away when Hank started talking. "It's self-sustaining, Charles. We can't stop it."

"I know," the telepath responded with a calm nod.

Mystique didn't. "What are you talking about?"

Close up, she could see that Beast looked as panicked as she'd felt when Charles had gone down. The scientist took a deep breath. "The sun. We did everything right. The machine is no longer functional, but the psionic energy Phoenix infused the containers with is still feeding the sun. It's still growing. It's self-sustaining."

"Wait, so, that's it? We did all that and- and- she still won?" Mystique said. The hysteria she'd calmed earlier was bubbling up again.

Hank shook his head, looking a bit hysterical himself. "There's nothing we can do."
"Nothing you can do, no," Charles said.

The others had all moved closer into a semicircle. They'd all heard. Scott had carried Jean over and placed her by the side of Charles' wheelchair not occupied by Emma.

Magneto stepped around Hank. He spared Emma a quick glance. Charles gave a short reassuring nod. He must have checked that she was okay at some point. She certainly didn't look okay. She was bleeding from the ear. Then again, if there was a self-sustaining sun growing, it didn't much matter whether she was okay. Funny, Mystique had never considered that they'd lose. It didn't matter what she'd done with the Brotherhood now. It didn't matter how "mutant and proud" she was. They were all going to die. She'd spent over six years away from half her family just to be killed by one of her own kind. Wasn't that the cruelest ending?

All those thoughts hit in the space of a second before it struck her what Charles had said. Magneto was a step ahead of her.

"What do you know, Charles? What can we do to stop this?"

"Nothing. As I said, you can do nothing." He reached down and brushed Jean's temple, eyes fluttering closed for a moment. "I, however, can." He turned to Scott, lowering his voice. "She'll be okay. Her mind is rebuilding itself. It's been a long time since she's been on her own in there."

Orange flashed in his own eyes.

"Charles," Magneto said, "if you know how to stop this, you need to tell us how."

The telepath sat back, chin raised, voice back to its normal level. "Psionic energy can be stopped by psionic energy. I'll destroy the containment then use my own to keep it all in check and disperse it safely."

"You- you can do that?" Alex asked. "Why wasn't that our strategy in the first place?!"

"Because it will kill you," Hank said, horrified eyes stuck to his mentor.

Mystique's own shocked exclamation was lost in the chorus of "what"s that echoed off the walls of the factory, the loudest of which belonged to Magneto himself.

Charles gave a melancholysmile. "We don't know that. I'm quite powerful."

"No, it- the levels of psionic energy contained in those units exceeds the levels you need to survive. If you use it to contain Phoenix's sun, it will take everything you have. Even if you succeed, you won't have enough to draw it back to you. Your own psionic energy would be drawn to the higher concentrations, to the residual of Phoenix's, however small it is because you'll have nothing left."

"That just means he wouldn't be a telepath anymore, right? Psionic energy is a telepath thing," Toad said. He looked surprisingly concerned.

"We all have psionic energy," Erik said with an absence that came with deep thought.

Hank's forehead creased (How did he know that?), then, "Magneto is right. It's nothing significant. It doesn't even register on machines. But we need it to retain brain function."

"Charles, you can't do this. There must be another way." Magneto was practically shaking. He'd been surprisingly quiet through the exchange. Silent the way he was when his mind was working
on a problem trying to figure out a solution where there was none to be found. He'd always succeeded. He'd gotten them out of numerous apparent Catch-22s with minimal losses. Judging by his increasingly stony expression and the desperate lilt to his declaration, he wasn't having as much luck this time.

"I'm sorry, Erik. If it's to be done, this is the only avenue we have left. I tried to convince Phoenix," he paused, glanced down at the unresponsive Emma, "but she would rather die to ensure her plan's success." The smug smile was back. Nobody who had just revealed he was going to his death should look that smug. "She underestimated my power. I have far more than she could imagine. I may yet survive. And I can't not take the chance. Not if the only other option is assured death."

Mystique knew her brother. She'd lost some of her ability to read him (she'd been gone a long time, after all) and he was far better at masking himself, but she'd spent years perfecting her imitation of him before she left. She knew false bravado when she saw it. And she saw it when he said he'd survive.

The telepath met Hank's gaze. "Should the worst happen, take care of the school."

The scientist opened and shut his mouth a few times before regaining his voice, though it was rougher than usual. "You knew this would happen. You haven't just been training me to be an ambassador. You've been training me to take over the school."

Charles gave a small smile. "It's always good to be prepared. And, in fairness I was training you to do both. Come, now, have some faith. I've said before you've rarely seen me and Onslaught working in tandem. With our energy combined, we could survive."

Magneto pulled himself from his thoughts. "Is that true?"

McCoy looked to be taken off guard by Magneto's sudden attention. "It…it's possible that combined, the two of them could perform the task. But I don't know! I don't have the data to back that up!"

"It's alright," Charles said calmly. "I know what I'm doing. Everyone else needs to get away from here though. Take care of Jean."

Erik stepped forward. "I'm coming with you."

Charles rolled his eyes. "Really, Erik, now isn't the time—"

"-for either of us to waste time arguing. We're both far too stubborn to give in. I can save you the energy of destroying the infrastructure of the machine. You'll need everything you can spare to put into harnessing the energy and dispersing it, particularly after what appears to have been an exhausting battle with Phoenix. Plus, there's rubble in there. Not ideal wheelchair terrain. You could lift it yourself, I suspect, with Onslaught's power, but why should you when I could easily do it for you?"

Charles narrowed his eyes at the magnokinetic, though he obviously hadn't thought that far ahead. Erik stood his ground.

"Fine. Erik comes with me. But everyone else needs to get out of here. I don't know what will happen when I turn the machine off, but I need to know you're all safe."

A collective reluctance rose. About half of the Brotherhood was already moving to leave, but the others were glancing at each other, unsure what to say but not wanting to abandon their leaders. Hank was the first to approach the telepath.
"I'll be keeping an eye on the readouts. As soon as they die down, we're coming back for you."

"Thank you, Hank. You've been exemplary throughout all of this…mess. I'm very proud."

The professor turned to Alex and Sean, who had approached from the side. "As I am of you. You've grown into strong young men, great leaders. A long way from a prison cell and an aquarium."

Alex scoffed a laugh. "Not without your help." He gave Charles a firm handshake. Neither acknowledged the tears behind Havok's eyes.

Sean leaned down and hugged him as Alex stepped back. Before Charles could pull back, the man leaned into his ear and whispered, "That thing you were writing when I came to get you this morning, what was it?"

"You saw where I put it. If I'm not there when we get back, check for yourself."

Charles let him go, grasping both shoulders and giving him a fond smile. Banshee shook his head. "You're always two steps ahead of us. I wish…I wish you'd let us keep up with you."

Charles opened and closed his mouth. There wasn't really anything he could say to that, was there? Sean joined Alex and Hank a few feet away.

Most of the other mutants hung back, but a few more made their way up. Erik was getting antsy, Mystique could tell, but Charles wouldn't spare time he knew he didn't have. Ororo, Warren, and Bobby had wished him luck, said they'd see him when he got back, but nevertheless thanked him for everything he'd done for them. Scott did the same with Jean in his arms; "everything" for him was weighted with the fact that Charles had rid Jean of Phoenix.

Everyone was pulling back. Mystique watched as Azazel hoisted Emma into his arms and took the initiative to lead the group away. Hank, Alex, and Sean looked gutted. Magneto was stoic as ever, probably still convinced he was going to keep Charles from killing himself. Charles…his serene stare was on her. She was the last. After this…whatever was going to happen, whatever his plan had been, he'd set it in motion. She squatted so they would be on the same eye level.

"Charles," she choked out. She hadn't noticed when the tears had come, but there they were.

"It's okay, my dear. It will all be okay."

She shook back her tears, let her eyes bore into his, searching, searching, then enveloped him in another hug.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" he asked.

"No."

They pulled back and Charles laid a hand on her cheek. "I hope you do someday."

"I will if you're around. Promise me you'll be around."

"I'm far too good at lying now for you to believe me," he said with a glint in his eye.

She couldn't help the snort of laughter. "Just make sure you come back, brother mine. I need to learn how to read you again."

With that, she resolutely turned and joined the exiting party. Hank, Alex, and Sean, who had
stood steadfast by Charles, began to move away as well. It was all rather anti-climactic, the exodus of the mutants. With a nod to Erik, Charles began making his way to the building. Erik moved to follow him, passing Alex as he went. The blond grabbed his shoulder.

"Don't let him die."

It might have been considered a threat if not for the pleading on the man's face. Erik put a reassuring hand on Alex's shoulder, something he never thought he'd do again.

"I'll do everything in my power."

The moment was interrupted by Charles' yell. "Erik, if you're coming, you'd better hurry. I'm not waiting and I'd really hate for you to find out I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself and am not, in fact, the damsel in distress you seem to think I am."

Alex and Erik looked at one another before Alex gave a "You'd better go after him" gesture. Erik slapped Alex on the back and the blond ran to catch up to the others.

Charles was waiting for him, holding the door open with the impatient look he always got on when people didn't do what he wanted them to. The building rumbled. Enough time had passed that the sun (the real one) had dipped behind the back of the facility. It threw an ominous shadow over the ground.

He reached Charles and levitated the man's chair a few inches over the ground. "Are you ready?"

Charles looked like he wanted to thank him, but a flare behind his eyes stopped him. He straightened and gave a professional nod. "I am."

They moved inside. The room with the sun was still a ways away, but he could feel the energy swirling around them. Phoenix's sun was growing. They would make it to the room in ten minutes. He glanced to Charles' determined form at his side. He had that long to figure out how to keep Charles from getting himself killed.

Chapter End Notes

A bit of an abrupt (and unintentional) end to this chapter. I was 100% sure I was going to get through the big thing I had planned for this story...the bit I've had written for ages...but it turns out when you write something two and a half years before you write the rest of the story, sometimes the part you've written doesn't work with the way your characters have evolved. Imagine that! So I'm working on that and, in the meantime, I leave you this.
Let us go then, you and I (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

Title is once again from T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

There are quotes towards the end in italics. They're quotes from earlier in this series. See the note after the chapter for where exactly they come from. You know, those who haven't memorized all of my stories in their entirety.

I listened to "Flight from Edoras" from LotR: The Return of the King soundtrack a lot while writing the climax of this. Don't know if that's worth noting or not, so I'm noting it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Silence had always been Erik's forte. He could hold it in interrogations until his captors gave up or his prisoners gave in. He thrived on quiet dinners looking over his plans, ignoring the stilted conversation Toad tried to initiate. He'd sat for hours playing chess with Charles, though it didn't seem like silence…it was more companionable.

The silence permeating the air now as he made his way back to the reactor room he'd abandoned not half an hour earlier was the worst he'd ever experienced. Charles floated beside him sitting straight-backed, prim and proper as ever as he stared ahead. The telepath wasn't going to change his mind and, despite Erik's best efforts, he could come up with no better solutions. He'd just have to hope Charles was telling the truth when he said he could survive.

Hope. That had always been Charles' specialty. Erik stuck to realism.

"Are you sure this will work, Charles?"

"We're out of other options. It must work."

"You truly have enough power to extinguish the beginnings of a sun?"

Charles inhaled, then paused, breath caught in his chest, before saying, "I do."

Not a lie, despite the obvious tell. Yet not the whole truth. "Let me rephrase. Do you have enough power to extinguish the beginnings of a sun without killing yourself in the process?"

The telepath hesitated again, mouth open to respond, searching for the right words until he gave up. "…Not likely."

There it was. The lie Charles had been hiding since they'd reunited. The man had to grab the armrests of the chair to steady himself as it dropped to the ground with far less grace than it had risen with.

"You knew. You knew since Mystique dragged our wounded to you that this would be how it ended."

"That's not true," Charles said, jaw tight at the accusation. "I thought perhaps I could convince Phoenix-"
Erik scoffed so hard his head moved back with the force of it. "Unbelievable. You knew you would never convince her of anything. If not you, Onslaught certainly wouldn't be that naïve. You didn't think that you should mention your imminent demise at any point before now?"

"There was never an opportunity-"

"We sat on your patio watching the sunrise and I asked you 'What aren't you telling me?' point blank. What more opportunity could you ask for?"

Charles pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled. "We've come a long way since the Grey's house…since before that, really. But we still have a long way to go."

Charles had him there. If their positions had been reversed, Erik had no idea if he would've told Charles his plans. Probably not. As close as they'd been to what they'd had sitting on that patio, it was still a far cry from where they'd been.

The telepath apparently took his silence as disagreement, probably since silence usually meant formulating an argument as of late, and offered a placating smile. "Erik, my fate was sealed as soon as the machine was turned on. That was the morning you caught me watching the sunrise. Phoenix and I both knew what it meant when she initiated it."

"We could have gone earlier-"

"We wouldn't have been ready."

"How does Onslaught feel about you sacrificing his life for this?"

"Are you concerned about him? Don't tell me you've grown to like him. He'd be ever so upset."

"I'm just surprised he isn't putting up a fight."

"We know our chances. We die now or we die in a few hours. The choice should be obvious, even for some as obstinate as…” Charles raised an eyebrow at Erik “…Onslaught."

Erik couldn't help but let out a short laugh. "You'll let me stay in the room with you."

A frustrated turn of his head. "It would be too dangerous."

"I'm going to be there with you. You can be in my mind. If you can draw from my power as well, you may survive."

"Or you could die too. I'll not let you risk your life for something I'm perfectly capable of doing. There's still a chance I'll survive. I'm quite stubborn."

"So am I. I won't let you do this alone. Promise me that you'll let me in that room with you."

Charles hesitated, looked down the hall towards their goal, then back at Erik. "I promise. Now, if you will,” he said with a gesture to the wheels of his chair, "we have a schedule to keep."

A stiff nod and they were on their way again. At least he'd gotten Charles to agree to keep him in the room. That would buy him a few minutes more. Because Charles was right. They weren't back to where they'd been before. Not by a long shot. And he fully intended to have the time to rebuild what they'd lost. The arguments were too good to give up.

The room was warmer now. Not as warm as one would expect with a forming sun, but then again
it wasn't really a sun yet…just a ball of energy waiting to fulfill its potential. They were stopped just inside the heavy door that opened into the room. And it was a heavy door. He'd put on a show, made it look easy in front of his troops, but the door was only partially made of magnetic metals and it was meant to contain whatever had been the original material in those bins that now held Phoenix's psionic energy.

The sun threw a shadow over Charles' face. His as well, he was sure.

"Do you see now where your hatred of mankind will lead?" Charles said as he stared the ball of energy.

Count on Charles to use what he thought were his last moments to try to convince Erik of the error in his ways. "I see what mankind's treatment of mutants leads other mutants to." A modicum of victory flared as Charles ground his jaw. He stomped it out. If they couldn't recognize their flaws with a sun made of psionic energy threatening their existence, they never would. "But," he could feel Charles' shock at the continuation. "I also see that some actions won't benefit our cause. I'll never agree with you, Charles. But I've lost sight of myself and what the Brotherhood's cause should be. A chess match is won through a balance of force and strategy. I've overbalanced, used too much force."

"And I used too much strategy," Charles admitted. "I tried to stay ten steps ahead of you. I kept Onslaught in anticipation of needing his power to stop you one day. I told no one because I knew I was the only one who could and I didn't trust that they'd continue to trust me with him. We may have been able to extend our powers to their greatest potential when we opposed each other, but we provided more strength for our causes when we kept each other in check." He paused, then, "Onslaught would like to remind us that there's a psionic sun growing in front of us and we have work to do and that we can mend our bridges later."

It struck Erik that that meant Onslaught thought they'd be alive to mend said bridges, meaning Onslaught was either back to his arrogant self (possible, but he'd been different since Charles had fully accepted him, so questionable) or he had something up his sleeve. What he could possibly be planning, Erik didn't know, but he had approximately five minutes to figure it out.

The pair moved into the room fully and took position a few meters back from the powered down main panel. Energy continued to feed into the sun. It was nearing two of the containment structures. The material was already starting to crack.

"I crush the containment, you stop the energy."

Charles nodded, "It's as simple as that."

Erik shot a raised eyebrow at Charles, who returned a shrug. "You're sure you want to stay in the room with me? The energy could be quite…strong."

"I'm staying."

"Very well. Once the containment is gone, we have about three minutes until it fully fuses with the sun."

"If you have another suggestion, I'm happy to hear it."

"I don't. Just…survive, Charles."

Charles offered his brightest smile. "I'll do my very best. If you would…"

Erik put his hand in front of him and reached out with his power. It wrapped around each of the
structures at the floor and secured a grip at the rims at the top where the energy was being released. His eyes were closed, he knew, but he could feel every bit of metal within his range from Charles' chair to the belt Azazel used to secure his swords. The teleporter was pacing near the jet at the moment.

"Now, Erik."

He pulled. The containers resisted, but he fought back until finally they gave way, ripping in half from top to bottom. The air electrified. He opened his eyes, winded, to find the room on fire. No, not on fire. The released energy was hovering, tendrils reaching towards the sun like a stream towards the ocean. Yet already the tendrils were thickening. The energy was recognizing the bigger source and moving towards it. And Charles, Charles sat with his arm outstretched, eyes glowing orange, surrounded by a halo of fiery blue.

"You should leave," Charles said, eyes glued to the sun. "Go wait outside and don't open the door until I'm finished."

"No. I said I would stay with you. I can help."

Charles shook his head. "I can't let you. I'm sorry."

He'd overexerted himself, he could tell, and that was the only reason he couldn't stop himself when Charles swept his other arm in the direction of the door. Only after he'd stumbled back into the hallway could he use the piping in the walls to counter the force pushing him. The force dropped. The glow from the room was intensifying. In slow motion, the door began shutting. He had to get back. Regaining his balance, he ran at the door, but it had picked up too much speed. It slammed in his face just as he got to it. There was a window in the middle of the door he hadn't noticed before. It was barely big enough for a face, but it allowed Erik to look in.

He hadn't stood a chance, really. Charles with Onslaught at full power had complete control of anything metal within the facility plus his telekinesis. No matter how much Magneto beat at the door, physically and with his abilities, it wouldn't budge. And he beat at it. The sound echoed down the hall. He wasn't sure whether Charles could hear it over the roar of the psionic energy, but he had to know Erik wouldn't give up. Sparks of blue and orange were beginning to dance around Charles' arms.

Magneto slammed his fist against the door again with a yell. The metal dented, but the door didn't budge.

"Charles, you gave me your word!" he shouted. No way the telepath could hear him from behind the door, but without a doubt he could hear him.

Sure enough, Charles looked towards the window with a remorseful smile. "I promised I'd let you in. I never promised I'd let you stay."

Damn him and his lies of omission! "Don't do this! Let me help you!"

The smile stayed, but Charles turned his attention back to the sun, inhaled deeply and exhaled. An orange and blue aura was pulsating around him, growing larger with each pulse. Erik's banging increased. There was nothing he could do. Here he was, within throwing distance of Charles, and he was powerless. The door wouldn't budge. He had no other way of getting in. His knuckles were starting to bleed and the sides of his hands were probably fractured from hitting the door so hard (he couldn't tell for sure because they were numb).

Power was sparking around the room. The tendrils were starting to accelerate towards the sun.
They were at the tipping point...the point of no return. The aura must have reached critical mass because it had stopped growing. Everything froze. Energy hung heavy in the air. Erik realized even he had stopped his desperate attempts to get inside.

Charles was looking at Erik. When he'd turned back, Erik didn't know, but their eyes met somehow through the thick fog of energy. Tears filled the telepath's eyes, but he still had a smile etched on his face. Yet, Erik couldn't help but notice, it was one hundred percent Charles. No trace of Onslaught.

One of the tendrils flared and the stalemate was broken. Charles returned his determined gaze to the energy. Onslaught was back in his eyes and the smile melted into a barely-there upturn at the corners of his mouth. Anticipation.

He didn't have to wait long. A wave of bright orange emanated from the telepath, illuminating the aura around him before shooting out into the room. It streaked around the remnants of the machine, spiraling around the stock hold of Phoenix's power and honing in on the growing sun. Despite the startling display of power, Erik's attention remained on Charles. His posture had slipped some. He was leaned ever so slightly forward now. A residual tear escaped and slid down the telepath's cheek, the reflected light making it a drop of topaz. The two energies fought, becoming brighter and brighter until Erik had to shield his eyes.

There was a sort of boom, less a sound and more a feeling in his bones. Glass shattered somewhere. Then, traitorous silence. When Erik opened his eyes, the room was dark, lit only by the natural sunlight coming through the tall, now blown out windows in the reactor room. The second sun was gone, though residual energy continued to flicker as it dissipated around the room. A band of sun fell onto a figure sprawled on the floor. Charles.

"No," Erik murmured as he stared through the door. Then, "NO!"

The door burst off his hinges and landed somewhere inside the room. Erik didn't care where. He was by Charles' side before the metal stopped clanging. The telepath was facedown one arm thrown above his head, the other beside his ear. His legs were an awkward tangle that Erik took the time to straighten out before pulling the other man into his lap.

It was rare for him to show emotion, especially since he'd left Westchester, so the tears that smeared his face were wholly unexpected. He put shaking fingers over Charles' pulse. He was rewarded with a beat...then another, slow. Still alive. But fading far too fast. The glimmer of hope that had risen with Charles pulse extinguished. The others wouldn't get here in time. There was nothing Erik could do. He would have to sit here while Charles died in his lap.

Slits of blue opened. Charles inhaled, coughed, his voice barely audible. "My friend."

Erik hiked him up a bit more so he could breathe easier. "Just hold on a few more minutes. Hank and the others will get here as soon as they confirm the readings and Azazel can get us back to Westchester."

"There's nothing he can do," Charles whispered. "It's alright. I stopped the end of the world. That's not a terrible way to die."

"Not terrible, but I hear living many long years and dying an old man in your sleep isn't too bad either."

Charles' responding laugh morphed into a cough. His eyes closed.

"No, Charles! I need to know what to do until Hank can get here. Charles!"
He shook he telepath in his grasp. No response. Each breath was slower than the last. Where the hell was Hank?! The mighty Magneto had no idea what to do. Onslaught had been so sure they'd survive. Erik’s mind raced.

What did Onslaught know that they hadn't?

He'd known he and Charles would be out of commission. He'd known Hank and the others would be on their way, but he couldn't count on them getting there in time. He'd known Erik would be the only person that would undoubtedly be there to help them. So what was it that Onslaught was expecting him to do?

Light flashed behind his eyes that had nothing to do with the energy in the room. Old memories resurfaced. Oddly specific memories. Puzzle pieces he hadn't even known were in his head started fitting together.

So Charles and I have some type of bond

But I can certainly drop in and say hi to the one he's so bonded to.

You, my dear friend, have more psionic energy than the average non-telepath.

You were able to use my powers until Charles' telekinesis took over. Why shouldn't I be able to use yours?

You need to be prepared to use whatever power you have when the time comes.

The flash dissipated and Erik knew exactly what to do. What Onslaught had known he could do. He closed his eyes and sought out the path he'd felt as Onslaught left his head after their talk during his recovery from Phoenix's attack. It was still there. And now the door was cracked.

Charles' breaths were nearly imperceptible now. Help wasn't coming. It was now or never. Erik steadied himself and opened his mind. He didn't know exactly how to go about doing what he needed to, but Charles' life depended on it. If there was any time to experiment, it was now.

The physical world dropped away. He envisioned his own psionic energy gathering the same way he'd transformed his mindscape during his talk with Onslaught. When he'd gotten as much as he could, he pushed it down the path to Charles. The door opened more as the energy shoved past. Through his faded, fuzzy perception of the outside world, he felt the man in his arms shudder, breath hitching. A triumphant smile spread across his face. He continued pushing as much energy as he could through the door. He was dizzy, floating away like he had been the night Charles had jumped into the ocean after him. Then the door slammed shut. He was back in his own head without even realizing he'd left it and his comrade, Silence, returned now accompanied by its new friend, Darkness.

Chapter End Notes

I sincerely apologize for leaving you with a cliffhanger. As always, I'll do my best to update quickly. I only have what I wrote two years ago and nothing else plus I'm having to do serious work on class papers and my qualifying paper. BUT I love writing this story so I'll give you a new chapter as soon as I'm satisfied with what I write.
No intentional comic or movie references, but all the lines Erik remembers are from my previous stories. I've been copying and pasting them in here as I wrote them. Admittedly, some of them could've been phrased better. This is my first big story where I planned out quotes in earlier stories so I could have them in a later one. Forgive me if it's not the best.

So Charles and I have some type of bond (A Spark Neglected, Chapter 5)

But I can certainly drop in and say hi to the one he's so bonded to. (Two Roads Diverged in a Yellow Wood, Chapter 6)

You, my dear friend, have more psionic energy than the average non-telepath (Two Roads Diverged in a Yellow Wood, Chapter 6)

You were able to use my powers until Charles' telekinesis took over. Why shouldn't I be able to use yours? (The Road Not Taken, Chapter 10)

You need to be prepared to use whatever power you have when the time comes. (The Road Not Taken, Chapter 10)

Hopefully it was relatively clear what Erik did. I've been building to it for a long time. I've known what was going to happen in this scene since July of 2011, so it makes perfect sense to me.

Thanks for reading!
How did we get here? When I used to know you so well

Chapter Notes

Title taken from Paramore's "Decode"

I am so so sorry for the wait. School was crazy and then I got sick and I wanted to include two more scenes in this chapter, but they're still not quite ready to be revealed to the world. I was going to try to rewrite them, then I realized how long it's been since I've updated, so I figured I should put out what I have and just put my other scenes in another chapter. Until then, I hope some Mystique angst will hold you over.

Mystique padded down the hall towards the infirmary, white skirt billowing behind her. She could finally see why Magneto favored his cape. It was rather empowering. She'd acquired quite the cache of clothes since they'd returned to her brother's school. The children were experiencing enough chaos as it was, what with their supposed enemies having taken up residence and their headmaster being- well, there was more than enough upheaval for now and if wearing clothes helped alleviate some of the stress, then so be it. Who would've thought she'd take a page out of Emma Frost's book, though? All white was difficult to pull off with so many children about, but for as good as it looked with Emma's skin tone, it looked even more fabulous with blue.

She pushed open the door to find Hank flipping through his charges' latest readings. The lights were turned down, the only way to tell it was nearing midnight. It left the room bathed in an ethereal glow given off by the machines humming around the room.

"Any change?" she asked as she walked over to them.

The man shook his head, comparing a page of squiggled lines to another. "No. They're the same as before."

She looked to her bare feet to hide a sigh. Hope sucked sometimes. Especially when it wasn't answered. "Well, at least they're stable now, right?"

"Yes." Hank offered a small smile as he adjusted one of the wires connecting his patient to a machine. "The fluctuations haven't shown up for 12 hours now."

"Does that mean-"

"I have no idea what it means, Raven. I don't...I have no idea what happened back there. I won't raise anyone's hopes unnecessarily. They aren't dying anymore. That's all I can say definitely."

"It's okay, Hank. You're doing what you can. You've kept them alive so far."

"I hope it's enough. I have to go check on Emma and make sure the paperwork for next year is ready for the school board. I presume you'll be here for a while?"

"I'm here for the night. I'll call you if anything changes. But you should get some sleep. Real sleep, not slumped over a table."
She'd come in the day before to find him face-planted into a pile of medical gibberish. It was the only time she'd seem him sleep since before Phoenix. Hopefully that was a function of his mutation and not him refusing to take a break.

Beast gave a humorless huff. "As if I have the time."

With that, he was out the door. He'd been going non-stop. Not only did he have to oversee medical care for all the parties injured in the Phoenix showdown, but he was also effectively running the school, which had to keep up the charade that they hadn't just stopped the world from imploding and stick to business as usual to stay under the radar. It was a lot for a boy who had been a government engineer scared of his own mutation less than a decade before. He'd come a long way. They all had.

But he was going to run himself into the ground at this pace and who would be left to pick up the pieces then? Emma was still recovering, albeit from a bedroom now, but certainly nowhere near close enough to recovered to do anything other than lie around. The older X-Men were in just as much disarray as the core of the Brotherhood. She'd just have to figure something out with Alex and Sean if the need arose. Until then…

Mystique looked to her charges. Charles and Erik lay in identical positions of repose. Each had what looked to be four suction cups attached to their temples and foreheads that led to a machine giving the squiggly-lined readouts Hank was always studying with a frown when she visited. Another monitor gave a steady heartbeat for each man, though the beats were notably in sync and had been since they'd been hooked up five days ago. She fingered the suction cup at Erik's left temple and gave his shoulder a squeeze before dragging a chair to sit beside Charles' bed. The chair was comfortable. She'd made sure of that with all the time she spent there.

What right did she have now to be the worried sister? Not too long ago Charles was threatening to disown her, for all intents and purposes. Or was that Onslaught? Did that distinction even matter at this point? Whenever Hank opened Charles' eyes, the burned bright blue…not the orange of Onslaught, but not Charles either. Charles might be lost…or at the very least irrevocably changed, though who knows when that happened. It might've been years since her Charles had been lost to her. It had certainly been years since his Raven disappeared.

She lifted her hand, hesitated, dropped it and smoothed out her skirt. The hesitation in itself proved the old Raven and her insecurities weren't as far in the past as she thought they were. Shaking away the doubt, she finished her aborted motion. With Charles' hand gripped in both of her own, she rested her elbows on the bed.

"I've been thinking a lot about what I'd say to you when you woke up, but who knows when that will be. Honestly, Charles, this is as bad as the day after our first night at Oxford. Who knew I'd be the better drinker of the two of us?" A picture of Charles, young and vibrant and laughing, etched itself onto the man laying in the bed before the memory flitted away.

"You did it, if you hadn't guessed by the fact that we're all still alive and the world hasn't ended. I don't know what happened in there, but you did it and you lived…or at least you have so far. I suspect Erik might have been at least partially responsible for that. Sorry to burst your bubble.

"The thing is…you asked me before you went in there if I found what I was looking for. You said everything was going to be okay, but when I looked into your eyes, I couldn't tell if you were lying to me. I could always tell if you were lying. You were a terrible liar, Charles. You got better at it, I'll give you that, but no matter what, I always knew when you were lying to me. Back there, at that factory, I couldn't tell. That's what I was looking for. It's not what you meant when you asked me, but I was looking to see if you were telling me the truth and I didn't know anymore."
"How did we get here? Have we really spent so much time apart? I've done things, Charles. Terrible things that you wouldn't be proud of. Sean found the letters you left in your desk. I can't believe-

The machines kept beeping as her words caught in her throat. Charles' chest rose and fell softly. Mystique felt two tears trickle down her cheeks. She didn't let go of Charles' hand to wipe them away.

"I can't believe you knew this whole time. It was always a suicide mission for you. Leaving all of us letters so you don't have to say goodbye? We're having words about that when you wake up."

She stopped again, glanced to Erik. How much had he known? Obviously not about Charles plan going in or else Charles wouldn't have left him a letter. Did he suspect? How much had he kept from her? They'd gotten back to the reactor as soon as they could. Hank had basically stared at his handheld and said "Go" the second the readings got below the cut-off. They'd been too late to do anything, teleporting in to find Erik slumped unconscious with Charles equally unconscious in his lap. Both their vitals were sketchy, Charles was touch and go for a while, but Hank had somehow managed to stabilize them at Westchester...with the exception of some off-the-charts psionic activity from both men. Hank was still dumbfounded by the levels Erik was putting out, visibly annoyed that he couldn't figure out what was happening. Charles' had been low, but rising until they hit his normal level, even exceeded it a bit. She'd not been able to do anything but sit around and try to help out with the school. She wasn't good with sitting around. Whatever patience she'd had with children before had disappeared sometime during her time with the Brotherhood.

With a sigh, she turned away from Magneto back to her brother, pushing Charles' greasy hair (that he would've been appalled by) away from his forehead.

"When we were kids, it was always you and me against the world. We'd live and die together. And then you got stubborn and I left and...the thing is I was going to die first. You'd be giving me a look if you could, but it's true. I was out in the field. I was attacking people and facing down enemies and dealing with explosives and you were sitting in your school being the professor I always knew you would be. I called you naive and I did things just to spite you because I truly thought I was doing what was best for us. I didn't notice how far apart we'd grown...how both of us - all of us - had let our beliefs become so distant from one another.

"That's not the point though. The point is that we were going down together or I was going down first. You dying before me was never part of the deal. So you fight. You don't leave me alone as soon as I realize how much I miss having a big brother. You're going to pull through and scold me about being naked all the time and we'll argue and I'll call you idealistic and you'll call me cynical while your eye does that twitchy thing...though I haven't seen that in a while, you bite the inside of your lip now, don't think I haven't noticed.

"But you have to wake up so we can have our arguments, okay? You don't get to leave us alone. Hank is freaking out about the school. He's doing a brilliant job, obviously, and he's hiding it well, but he's trying to run the school AND save your life and it's hard, even with everyone helping him. So you need to wake up and take your school back and knock some sense into the rest of the world now that you worked so hard to save it."

She paused, watched Charles' face. It's not that she expected her confessions to miraculously rouse him from his mysterious state of unconsciousness, but that would've been nice. A good story at least. A good story that she wasn't going to get to tell because Charles wasn't waking up. Again, hope sucked sometimes.

"I believe in my cause, Charles. I really do. But I believe in you too. I don't want to be Raven anymore, but I don't know if I can be Mystique either. I – I need to talk to my big brother. Please
Hank came in just as dawn was breaking. He'd managed to catch three hours of decent sleep and had two cups of the strong coffee Alex had surreptitiously picked up from the store when they'd run out of food after Phoenix. He found Mystique sitting by Charles bed with her head laid the professor's hand, turned so she could easily look back and forth between him and Erik.

"You could use sleep too."

Mystique didn't flinch. She'd probably heard him coming as soon as the elevator doors opened. "I can sleep during the day. I know for a fact you don't. I have spies."

She turned his way and offered an exhausted smile. He returned it and handed her one of the coffee cups. "Please don't tell Sean you call him a spy. He'll sing the James Bond theme wherever he goes and then I'll have to do something unbefitting of a school headmaster."

Raven snorted into her coffee. Hank set his own cup down and went to Erik's side, checking pupil reactivity before pulling the night's readouts and trying to ignore the hopeful glint behind Mystique's eyes that he had to snuff out every time there he couldn't report a change.

Chapter End Notes

I have two papers to finish and a conference to prep for, but the papers will be finished by Saturday night, so maybe I can get what I intended to be in this chapter edited and published within a week. No promises, but I'll try because I desperately want to finish this before Days of Future Past comes out. I suspect I'll have an Onslaught rewrite of that as well. We'll see.
Chapter Notes

Title from Alice in Chains' "Rooster"

I am currently a passenger on the struggle bus and it is not stopping to let me off. Ugh. I thought this would be an easy chapter to wrap up and get out within a week then BAM writer's block and MAJOR characterization issues. Hopefully I got it right. And thanks (again!) to the lovely aeskis for pointing out some of the issues despite being busy dealing with your own stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Erik woke to the echoes of Schubert's "Serenade" which was decidedly not was he was expecting. Given, he wasn't quite sure what he'd been expecting. This was not what death would feel like, so surely he was in the infirmary in Westchester. He didn't remember there being giant melting clocks at Charles' school though. He blinked. The clock remained dripping across the ceiling. It read 3:30, but maybe that was just the point when it had melted and it wasn't actually 3:30. Why would Charles not replace a melted clock at his school? It seemed cruel to force students to school and give them no way to tell how long they had left in class or-

Wait. Erik blinked again, shook his head. The most logical explanation for a melting ceiling clock was not that Charles hadn't had it replaced. It was that he hadn't woken up. The area where he was had the distinctive feel he'd come to know as a mindscape, wavy like a waterbed with a silent crackling the air had after a soundless firework explodes. Yes, this was someone's mindscape…his guess would be Charles' based on the last events he could recall.

Embarrassingly drawn out realization made, Erik pushed himself up. The melting clocks decorated the space sporadically. Splotches of color, vibrant orange melting into blues and greens that morphed into goldenrod, didn't form a discernible room of any kind, but rather an abstract landscape. Finally making it to his feet, he set his sights on the Penrose staircase a ways away. The landscape as a whole reminded him of the MC Escher works he'd come across in his years hunting Shaw, at first glance perfectly geometric and safe but, under further examination, confusing and illogical. As if one wrong step could send him hurtling into an unseen abyss never to find where he'd fallen from again. He wasn't sure how long he walked or why he was drawn to the staircase until he heard an accented voice just beyond it.

"Check."

Ducking under one of the sides of the staircase, he found what he was looking for. Charles and Onslaught, perfect twins images of one another discernible only by eye color, sat across from one other in the middle of what appeared to be a fierce game of chess. The deep blue wall behind them held only a mirror that reflected nothing back, as if it recognized the futility of the action when Charles and Onslaught were sat before each other and didn't want to waste its energy. A clock was slung across the top of the wall, half the numbers slipping out of sight over the edge.

Charles caught his eye, began to stand as Erik strode over to him.

"Ah, Erik-"
He was cut off by a solid punch to the jaw. Charles stumbled back and caught himself on the table; a loud "ow" came from Onslaught, who had stood up himself and was now massaging his jaw. Probably not the best way to approach a man he was on uncertain ground with, but it was certainly satisfying to release the pent up emotion. Charles righted himself looking half offended, half repentant. The fact that he obviously knew exactly what Erik was reacting half offended, the magnokinetic's anger.

"You were on a suicide mission and you thought it best not to tell anybody?"

"Yes, but there's no reason to resort to violence over it," the telepath said as he stretched his mouth. "I thought we'd settled all this during our journey to the reactor."

"You were going off to die and I was trying to figure out how to stop that happening. Now that we've both survived, I have plenty of time to consider your complete disregard for those who care about you."

"Not disregard-"

"Then what? Distrust?"

"I didn't know how to say goodbye." He paused, shifting his weight. It took Erik a moment to recognize the tell. Charles hadn't been able to express his discomfort that way since his paralysis. "Besides, if I'd told you, you would've diverted your attention to trying to save me or you would've gotten a martyr complex-"

Erik snorted.

"-yes, yes, I see the hypocrisy, but it's true. Everyone needed to be focused on their tasks. Knowing what was to be my fate…it would've done nothing but distract from the task at hand."

"We could have come up with a better plan."

"No, we couldn't."

Melted clocks ticked far fewer seconds by than felt appropriate for the silence. Then again, they were ticking irregularly so their reliability was questionable.

"Just…don't do it again. There are issues that need to be resolved and we have a great deal of time to make up for. Your side needs you, Charles."

"And your only concern is with my side, is it? No personal investment?"

"Of course," Erik replied. The scoff that accompanied the statement hopefully wasn't too overexaggerated. Charles' wry smile said it probably was.

"Excellent," Onslaught said, clapping his hands together. "Perhaps you'd be so kind as to allow Charles and me to continue our game."

The look Charles graced Erik with was so similar to the old days that Erik couldn't help but hold out a bit of hope for the future. For now, though, he needed more information about their situation. The game continued as Erik evaluated his surroundings.

"Your head isn't what I expected it to be," Erik said.

Charles smiled, fingers steepled, without looking up from the game. "Didn't fancy me a Schubert fan? I do prefer Mozart if that's any consolation, but I was in a mood."
Charles made his move then looked up. Erik quirked an eyebrow.

"Oh, you mean the never-ending staircase and melting clocks."

"Yes, Charles, they did stand out a bit. I was expecting something more along the lines of the Oxford library."

Onslaught huffed. "Too boring. Charles and I are an ever-evolving being, our mind an impossible place," he said with the flourish of one reciting a rehearsed line. "Did you truly expect our mind wouldn't evolve with us?"

Charles rolled his eyes. "We have more control over what our mind looks like than most. Is this better?"

The abstract landscape faded to grey outlines, the lines morphing and shifting before they solidified, then colored themselves in, reforming around itself until the library where they'd had their first debates back in 1962 took shape.

"Or maybe this?" Onslaught said.

The landscape changed again, this time to the beach in Cuba where they'd defeated Shaw…where Onslaught had defeated Shaw.

Charles took to the unspoken challenge. "Or would you prefer something along these lines?"

The room in the Brotherhood headquarters where they planned their attacks. How Charles knew what it looked like, he didn't know. Hopefully, he'd pulled it from someone's mind, though he had reservations about that being his favored option. It was still better than the alternative. He couldn't picture Charles heading a secret raid on his headquarters, one that nobody in the Brotherhood detected, though he couldn't picture Charles doing a lot of the things he'd done over the past few years.

"Or perhaps he'd prefer something with more pleasant memories?" Onslaught said with a flick of his wrist.

The room in the club where they'd found Angel formed around them, thumping music and all.

Before Charles could volley, Onslaught shook his head. "No, he doesn't deserve pleasant," he finished with the malicious flare Erik had come to expect from Onslaught. A good sign, at least. It meant Charles wasn't keeping it for himself.

The mindscape reformed into the Grey's home, ripped apart the way it had been after Charles had nearly been killed. Erik caught a flash of shock and betrayal in Charles' eyes that matched what he was feeling himself. A flare of heat accompanied it that Erik was, for some inexplicable reason, certain resulted from anger. The scene was still a powerful reminder to both of them what they had to recover from.

"Let's not be vindictive," Charles said. But the landscape didn't change, so Erik wasn't sure how much Charles meant it and how much he was still holding onto the anger from what he considered a betrayal.

"Enough," Erik said. Closing his eyes, he pictured a scene the way he had back when he'd pulled Onslaught into his own mind. When he opened them, they were surrounded by green grass, happily chirping birds, and a number of empty tables and benches. A few stray clouds floated across the sky and a wind that might be the forerunner of an afternoon storm rustled through the trees. Neither hurt the sense of springtime presiding over the park where he and Charles used to
meet. Charles and Onslaught were staring at him, Charles with barely concealed surprise and Onslaught with narrow-eyed delight. "I prefer this," Erik said with a stiff nod.

"So it would seem," Charles said, glancing to Onslaught.

"Don't look at me," the entity said. The park faded back into the abstract landscape Erik had woken up to, though Charles almost looked sorry to see it go. "It's not my fault we're still sharing psionic energy with him."

"Actually, it rather is." Charles replied.

"In that case, forgive me for saving our lives."

"I saved your lives," Erik cut in.

"With the idea I gave you. Same as I taught you that little trick."

"I would've come up with it on my own."

"Please," Onslaught scoffed. "You don't even know what you did."

"I used the mental link between us to push some of my psionic energy to you until you had enough to survive. I saved your life." He made sure to say the last sentence slowly. A surefire way to get Charles riled up was to talk down to him, a trait he suspected Onslaught shared.

"You certainly took your time doing it. I thought perhaps I'd held my cards too close to my chest."

"You-"

"Shall we not fight?" Charles cut in. He'd seemed to be enjoying watching his visage argue with Erik from the sidelines, but now his face was pinched. "You're giving me a headache, which is counterproductive since we're all sharing my head at the moment."

Erik felt a dull pounding making itself known just above his consciousness. Which brought up another issue he wanted addressed enough to give up his argument with Onslaught.

"Why are we all sharing your head?"

"Because of how you saved us. I don't think I need to explain; you seem to have a decent understanding of it yourself. It was rather ingenious."

"Thank you," Onslaught said with a bright smile.

Charles made no move to explain more, a dead give-away that there was, in fact, more to explain. Charles liked knowing more than people and he rarely hesitated to show it when he did. Even with the distance that had grown between them, the telepath wouldn't have passed up the opportunity to "educate" Erik. So why wasn't he now, unless…

"You're still not alright. If we stopped sharing psionic energy, you'd still be at risk of death."

Charles' head didn't move from where he sat watching the chessboard, but he glanced sideways without actually looking at Erik before zipping back to Onslaught like he didn't want Erik to notice his attention had been diverted. He proceeded to ignore the statement. That was all the affirmation Erik needed. Onslaught met the telepath's gaze without reserve as he moved a pawn.

He could press the issue. But what kind of mental guest would he be if he did that? Since Charles apparently had no choice but to share his mind, Erik generously decided to let it go. Perhaps
Charles and Onslaught would learn a little something about privacy from his example.

A lesson they could use judging by Onslaught's attempt to conceal laughter behind the hands he had clasped over his mouth...probably a mock attempt since it was so ineffective.

"It's adorable that he thinks I care for others' privacy," the entity said. Charles didn't respond and Erik bit his tongue. Onslaught was looking for a reaction and Erik certainly wouldn't give it to him.

"What are the stakes?" Erik asked as he stalked to the table. Another chair appeared. He sat without breaking stride. Charles gave an impressed nod.

"Only pride this time," the telepath replied. "We work together now. There's nothing else to wager."

Schubert's "Serenade" faded and Tchaikovsky's First Concerto began as Charles made his move. Erik looked around the fantastical landscape. It alone would've been fine, but the music accompanying it was enough to throw him off kilter.

"Ah, yes, it is a bit of a contrast, isn't it? I choose the music, Onslaught chooses the venue. He does like the absurd."

"What does that say about you, Charles?" Erik quipped.

"What does that say about you, Erik?" Charles returned. "Part of him is made up of your consciousness, after all. He has been since that machine in New York and I can tell you, this," he paused to wave his hand around at the Penrose staircase, "never happened before then."

"To be fair," Onslaught said, "I didn't have much opportunity to flex my muscles, shall we say, before then."

Erik shrugged. "A miniscule part, perhaps. I see far more of you than me, Charles. I'm not the one who hides."

Charles narrowed his gaze, but didn't take the bait. At least they were learning to choose their battles. Tchaikovsky continued his concerto uninterrupted for a few minutes while identical Xavier visages continued to play. Knowing the stakes were low had loosened a ball of anxiety that had formed in his stomach as soon as he saw the board. The vestiges of it spread in a familiar antsy feeling Erik got the night before missions...the feeling when you've done everything you can and all that's left is the waiting. The best way to alleviate said feeling was to vent excess energy.

On his third lap around the staircase, restlessness was still winning out. There was nothing metal that he could feel (whether that was purposeful or not, he wasn't sure) and, despite his ability to manipulate the mindscape, he couldn't make any appear. Charles was ignoring him to interact with Onslaught of all people. He stalked back over to the chess table.

"You're a grown man, Erik," Charles said before Erik could open his mouth. "You can find ways to entertain yourself that don't involve your ability."

Erik narrowed his eyes and the chess table disappeared. Charles sighed.

"Really, I think perhaps Onslaught gets his childish tendencies from you."

Erik ignored the jibe. "How much longer will we be unconscious? How long have we been this way?"
"Hmmm, I'm not sure, let's check." Charles looked pointedly at the stretched clock slung over the top of the wall then back at Erik with eyebrows raised.

"Fine, so we have no concept of time. What about place? Do you have any idea what's happening? We succeeded obviously, but..."

The telepath's gaze went distant then returned. "I'm still recovering. I can get flashes, mostly from Hank and Raven. From what I can tell, we sustained losses, but they were negligible. You damn near broke your hand banging on that door like you were, by the way. Oh, and Miss Frost pulled through."

"We'll wake up when you're recovered, then?"

"Erik, I'm not the only one recovering. You did the rough equivalent of siphoning me pints of your blood. We've both stabilized, but our minds are nowhere near well enough to sustain consciousness. You were right about me being at risk if our minds separated, but you're linked as well. Judging by your presence, I'd say neither of us would survive were our minds separated now. Surely you've felt the weakness."

He had.

"Though you probably won't admit it."

He wouldn't.

"We'll wake up when we – both of us – have enough energy to do so. If it helps, it seems to be happening quickly. Once everything balances out, I promise to throw you out of my head and you can be on your merry way."

The thought sent an inexplicable wave of sorrow through Erik. He tamped it down. Change the subject. He allowed the chess table to reappear.

"You said Emma pulled through?"

"Yes. Her telepathy is out of commission for the time being from what I can tell. Hank has been waiting for her to recover to try to figure out what's wrong with us, but she likely won't be until after we've woken. Phoenix didn't hold back. Miss Frost is lucky to be alive, much less mentally whole."

"And...she doesn't have any suppressed personalities waiting in the wings, does she?" He knew three telepaths and two of them had tried to take over or destroy the world three times in the last decade. It was a fair question.

"Two out of three is pretty damning, I suppose," Charles said, effortless and shameless in reading the thought from Erik's mind. "I explained before, though, Phoenix was something different, a being that took over Jean, not a coalescence of her suppressed desires like Onslaught is. Jean herself has no counterpart to Onslaught. So it would seem there's only one of us you need to truly be concerned about."

He paused, moved a piece, and said "Check" to Onslaught before reclining again.

"Besides, the beginnings of Onslaught were created because I held myself back from taking actions I considered to be wrong. Have you ever known Emma to hold herself back from something considered morally reprehensible? If anything, I'd wager her version of Onslaught would perform the good deeds she suppresses to maintain her well-earned "Ice Queen" moniker.
Let's be honest, a conscientious Emma Frost would be far more a problem for you than it would me."

Erik had to snicker at that. Onslaught made his move. Without hesitation, Charles made one of his own.

"Checkmate."

"Verdammt!"

Erik felt a flicker of frustration, though Onslaught still smiled, not nearly as angry as he was putting himself on to be. The choice of curse word, however, was somewhat surprising.

"What did you say?"

"Miniscule, hmm?" Charles radiated amusement. Erik couldn't help but let out a surprised laugh. Whether it was that they were sharing a head or just giddy at being alive, Erik didn't know, but he would take any semblance of friendship from Charles for the time being.

Erik shook his head and looked at Onslaught. "I must say, when you said he had taken on part of my consciousness, I wasn't expecting that to include the finer points of German cursing."

"You should see me when I'm actually angry," Onslaught said. "You may know the words, but I make them art."

With a wave of his hand, the chess board reset. Onslaught leaned back, propping his heels up on the edge of the table.

"Would you care for a game, Erik?" the entity asked, orange eyes aglow with a mischievous light that said the stakes would be somewhat higher than they were in the previous game. What those stakes would be, Erik didn't know and Onslaught likely wouldn't tell until it suited him.

"I'd prefer to play Charles."

"Suit yourself," he said, standing up. "I'll find another way to occupy myself."

Erik took Onslaught's vacated seat as the entity disappeared behind the wall. "Where is he going?"

"To see if there's anything he can do to speed up our recovery. I suspect he's as ready to get you out of our mind as you are."

"Is there anything that can be done?"

"No, but that doesn't suit our impatience very well, now does it?" The telepath paused, staring at the board without making a move. "When we do get out...things won't go back to the way they were before. Everything we discussed while heading to the reactor, that still holds, right?"

"I meant what I said and I agree with you. We're better for our cause when we balance each other. Opposition has led to nothing but destruction."

"It will be difficult."

"If it weren't, it likely wouldn't be worth working towards."

Charles didn't smile. Not like he used to. But the corners of his mouth twitched upward in a semblance of approval that he gave when a student caught onto a trick question. He moved his first pawn forward and looked to Erik, issuing a silent challenge. Erik accepted.
I might go back and make some revisions. We shall see.

Only one or two chapters left (depending on whether I can manage to get off the struggle bus). As of now, I have two planned. We'll see how that turns out.
Charles appreciated the chance to get to know his friend again. He hadn't realized how long it had been since he'd truly considered Erik his friend...since he'd considered Erik anything other than Magneto really. They were both accountable for actions they shouldn't be proud of (which, unfortunately, didn't preclude that they weren't).

Onslaught, at least, seemed as willing as ever to compromise (possibly because he was getting exactly what he wanted), and Erik appeared open to accepting the same (however grudgingly). Perhaps their collaboration had helped the magnokinetic finally see that there was more to Onslaught than domination and death. There was also the issue that they had done this behind Charles' back...that Charles was unaware of what Onslaught had known. Onslaught had long been developing opinions of his own, which brought into question how dependent his alter ego truly was upon his personality. Yet, it seemed whenever one of them got too "out of whack" as Sean would say, as had occurred over the past few months, the other pulled them back. He'd need to discuss the issue with Hank. Checks and balances and what not. Speaking of-

The scientist was looking better than he had when Charles had first woken 12 hours earlier. To Charles' misfortune, both Hank and Raven had been in the lab when he'd first blinked back to consciousness with a strangled cough. The first sounds he'd heard were papers fluttering to the floor and the harsh scrape of a chair rocketing backwards before it hit the floor, casualties of Raven's haste to get to his side. The fact that Hank didn't Spare the chain of papers snaking off the desk a second glance before he joined her spoke to how serious the situation had been.

After a thorough check-up that involved much more prodding than Charles had thought strictly necessary, Hank had moved to Erik. Raven had stayed by his side. To throw off the world's most powerful telepath (*It's a fact. Why should we be modest about it? Onslaught had asked one day and Charles couldn't find an argument against him*) was quite a feat, but here Raven was, doing just that. The woman didn't quite have tears in her eyes, though that might have been sheer force of will. Mystique doesn't cry after all. She'd barely hugged him since before Alkali Lake and he certainly couldn't imagine that his threatening to disown her had endeared him to her. Yes, they'd resolved their differences to a degree, but this?

Mystique kept her distance.

Mystique didn't allow herself to show emotion.

Mystique certainly didn't show open affection for the brother who had accepted a being she considered psychopathic.

Yet here she was, leaned over him, cupping his face with both her hands and touching their foreheads together, carefully avoiding jarring the sensors still attached to him.
"R-Raven?"

"You have no idea how good it is to hear your voice again." Her breath smelled like she'd drunk all the coffee Colombia had to offer. He almost commented on it, but the barely noticeable tremor in her voice stopped him. She pulled back, barely, just enough to look him in the eye. "Are you alright?"

"I think so. How long has it been?"

"Eight days. Eight days, Charles." She stood up. "I'm going to slap you as soon as I know your brain is healthy enough to take it."

Charles chuckled. There was the girl he'd grown up with. "I'm sorry if I worried you."

"Worried us? Worried us?! You nearly died! You-" The tears made a second surge. She stood, staring resolutely at the corner of the ceiling until they receded. "Where were you?" she finished, quieter with a touch of desperation.

He dragged a hand up and tapped his temple, the difficulty telling him that, yes, he had probably been bedridden for eight days. "Up here."

Raven scoffed and grabbed the hand at his side. The gesture, once again, startled him. He stared at the hand for a good two seconds. "I should nearly die more often."

"Don't you dare. That's not funny," she said though her smile betrayed her. The laugh that accompanied it was halfway to a sob.

They sat like that for a moment, Raven perched on the edge of his bed holding his hand, not daring to meet his gaze while he took in the emotions flickering off her. For the first time, he thought about what the past few weeks had been for her. Dealing with an attack by Phoenix, taking over as leader of the Brotherhood while Erik was out of commission, making the decision to come to her brother then being faced with the person he had become while her back was turned. Reconciling, training, leading a battle to stop the apocalypse, stopping the apocalypse but losing the brother she'd just reconciled with and her leader, dealing with the fallout and taking over the Brotherhood again while simultaneously helping run the school.

Far more than she ever should've had to deal with.

She'd handled the situation with grace. Almost anyone else would've been a blubbering mess on the floor. An overwhelming sense of pride grew in his chest. Possibly he projected it because she finally looked up at him again, puzzled.

He lugged his other hand across his stomach to put over hers. "I am truly sorry, Raven. It seems…it seems we have a lot of talking to do."

He wasn't sure it was the right thing to say. Even with his telepathy, he never knew with her. Apparently, he'd chosen wisely though because she gave a relieved exhalation accompanied by a genuine smile. "You bet we do."

Hank shuffled a few of Erik's readouts, reminding them that they weren't, in fact, the only two people in the room.

"How is he? Is he waking up too?" Raven asked.

"Not from anything I can tell. His vitals aren't in sync with Charles' anymore though."
"Our vital signs were in sync? How fascinating! All vital signs? Was there ever a point where one of us was stressed and the other counterbalanced? Did you make notes?"

"Slow down, Charles, you've barely regained consciousness," Hank said, pressing down on Charles' shoulder where he'd started to rise. "Science can wait. Right now, I just need you to tell me what you know about his condition then get some more rest."

Explaining what had happened took much less time than he thought it might. Hank nodded along, scribbling a few notes and Raven stood to the side passing glances between the two bedridden men.

"He'll wake in his own time," Charles finished. "He spent quite a while in my head after a very taxing rescue. He's situating to being in his own mind again."

Hank gave a short nod. "I know you just woke up, but you're still recovering. No leaving the bed, no strenuous telepathy. Get some more rest."

"I'll rest if you rest. You look exhausted."

"Running a school isn't easy."

"It isn't, but it helps considerably to have a full night's sleep. We're both okay. You've done a fine job with the school. Rest. Both of you."

Charles hadn't realized how much waking up and interacting with Raven and Hank had exhausted him until he woke up ten hours later. Erik still wasn't conscious. Stretching his mind, he could tell Hank and Raven weren't either, both thankfully getting the rest they deserved.

They weren't the only ones worried. It seems all of our X-Men need a good rest.

He was standing at the satellite dish with Onslaught at his side. The sky was bright blue and the trees budding and blooming, though the ground was still littered with pieces of Erik's machine and Onslaught's Cerebro as it had been last time he and Onslaught had met here. Onslaught paid no attention to the rubble now, instead focusing his hard stare on the satellite dish.

"It seems we made quite a mess of things," Charles said.

"Possibly, but it was worth it at the end. We saved the world."

"Yet it was partially our fault it was nearly destroyed in the first place and our students…they've gone through so much these past few months. How did I let myself get so wrapped up in Erik and Phoenix and you that I forgot the effect this would have on the others? They're exhausted. They're having to run a school-"

"And they're doing it. They'll face far more strenuous circumstances in the future if Erik's predictions about mankind are even halfway correct. Consider this training."

"Strenuous circumstances are acceptable. It's when they're a direct result of my actions that I take issue."

"Change is never easy, Charles. You and I both know that. We're mutants, though. We're adaptable. They may be exhausted, but they're still managing."

"It can't happen again. I can't…become you."

Onslaught turned from the dish and sat on the wall that separated them from it. "And I have no
desire to become you. It's about balance. Before, when I was first created up until Stryker, you put
everything you hated about yourself in me and shut it away. We ended up with Cuba and Alkali
Lake. After that, you kept too much for yourself and we started to change places. Just because you
accept that you have the thoughts doesn't mean you have to become them. So long as you don't
deny me and what I represent of you, the balance will be maintained and we will remain in our
proper places."

"And if I don't? If I lock you away again and throw away the key?"

Onslaught nudged a piece of what appeared to be Cerebro's helmet with his foot, a haughty smile
unfolding across his face. "Keys are never thrown away and you've allowed me to grow far too
much to lock me away. If you try, perhaps I'll turn the tables again. Come out to play."

"Let's try to avoid that, shall we?"

"Let's."

A storm cloud floated in front of the sun while Onslaught peered at the rubble in the grass. The
cloud drifted a while longer then dissipated.

"We lived through our battle with Phoenix," the entity said, squinting orange eyes in the sunlight.
"Now what?"

"Now, you and I continue to coexist and we hope Erik doesn't decide to return to his old ways."

"Yes, I'd hate to have to do something about him. I feel we've made such progress. He didn't try to
stab me with a rafter last time we talked. It's almost as if we're friends."

Onslaught seemed pleased with himself, but the thought gave Charles pause. Now that the danger
was past and the two of them weren't at imminent risk of death, everything that had driven them
apart was coming back. He'd wager the same would happen with Erik when he woke. Onslaught
offered him a reassuring smile, which in itself was disturbing…that Onslaught needed to be the
reassuring one of the pair of them.

"It's different now," the entity said, standing again and returning to his previous observance of the
dish. "You agreed to work with me in order to keep Erik in check before. Now you've accepted
me in my own right. It's not just a reflection of your acceptance of yourself. You believe in Erik
enough that you've taken your finger off the trigger. You've done your part. It's up to him to keep
his side of the bargain."

There was nothing Charles could say to that. Charles felt he was compromising and it was up to
Erik uphold their truce. Erik would feel he was compromising and that the task of upholding the
truce was up to Charles. Yet the mindset that they were categorically different, always opposing
one another, would do him no good. If they were to move forward, Charles would need to regain
the hope that he'd once held about his relationship with Erik.

"Hank is awake and he'll be down soon. I should-"

"Yes, yes," Onslaught waved, "go talk. I'll be here."

It was both a statement of fact and a threat. I'll be here. Always waiting in the wings. They both
liked the power that working together provided. Possibly too much. It was addicting…addicting
enough that Charles had to push away concerns that the greater threat now wasn't Onslaught, but
rather himself accepting too much of what Onslaught represented, Onslaught becoming his
conscience and him becoming a monster. Balance had never been more important and, to maintain
it, he would likely need Onslaught, Erik, and his X-Men to keep him aware of where he stood. No
doubt his life would be difficult. Then again, he was never one to back down from a challenge.

Hank had nodded to Charles when he'd come in, then gone straight to Erik's bedside.

"It won't be long now," Charles said.

The scientist looked at the readouts again, confirming, then put them down and came to Charles' bedside, checking reflexes and his own mental readouts in silence.

"There's something else bothering you."

McCoy avoided looking at his face, instead focusing on making a few notes on his chart. "I need to see how your powers are recovering."

"Very well."

Everything that wasn't bolted down rose a foot in the air, including the beds and Hank. Hank looked decidedly unimpressed.

"You know as well as I do that it's the smaller tasks that cause you the most trouble." Everything set back in its proper place. Hank brushed off his lab coat and glanced at the equipment by Erik's bed to make sure it was still functioning properly. "Show me your control of fine detail and we'll go from there."

Paperclips and tacks shot from a table to Charles' outstretched hand, stopping a few inches from his palm before starting to weave a pattern in the air. A few wavered and shook, but they remained on their path.

"Good. Keep doing that for ten minutes."

"You're angry with me."

Hank paused then took the seat beside Charles' bed. "Not angry. Just- You gave me the school, Charles."

"I did."

"You gave me the school and then you went to your death after lying to us for two years. Magneto... he isn't the only one who feels betrayed."

One of the tacks wavered, dropped a few inches. Charles winced. It took far more effort than it should to get it back in alignment. "Loath as I am to admit it, I'm not perfect, Henry."

"I know-"

"You knew, but you didn't believe. The final step to becoming a true leader is recognizing that your mentors are as flawed as you are. I'm a powerful telepath who has been able to run a school and lead a group of talented young mutants into adulthood. That doesn't mean I don't misstep. Leaders aren't perfect. Erik and I certainly aren't. Yet here we are leading our respective groups. Perfection is not what makes leaders great. Learning from their mistakes and trying to be better is."

"I- why me?"

Puzzled amusement crossed Charles' face. "Why not? You were the obvious choice."

"It's just- I'm always in the lab. Alex is the one who leads the team."
"Which is closer to a military venture than anything else. He commands the respect and has the charisma a commander must, but those are not what one needs to run the school."

"Ororo-"

"Is much too young and inexperienced for now, though she'd be a fine second-in-command. You know how to reach out to those who don't understand mutants. Science and knowledge…that's how we will win this war, as Erik insists on calling it."

"After you two reconciled, I thought maybe…"

"Aside from the fact that I'm certain the entirety of the X-Men would have staged a mutiny had Erik taken over the school, did you really think after everything that's happened that I would choose Erik as my successor just because we came to a tentative understanding a few days beforehand? An understanding that, you should know, is very tenuous at present."

Hank remained silent, fidgeting like he had back in the early days of their acquaintance.

Charles continued, "Above all, the school is to be a place of peace and learning where we teach co-existence and cooperation. As much as I value Erik and his friendship, he could never lead the school the way it is meant to be led. You are the perfect candidate. You've grown so much over the years, gained the respect of all your peers, and you have the scientific mind to make the arguments for mutants in my stead. Honestly, I wouldn't want to see the school in anyone else's hands but yours."

Hank sat dumbstruck, jaw working a few times, before he finally stuttered out a "Thank you, Charles. That means a lot."

"I should thank you for taking such good care of the school in my absence."

"I'll need to- oh-"

The man was no longer looking at Charles, but rather the items he'd been tasked with moving. Two remained obediently following their pattern. The others were orbiting at varying widths with a majority on the blanket covering Charles' legs.

"Damn," Charles said. "I suppose I still have a bit of recovering to do. Do you mind holding onto the school for a few more days?"

"It's my pleasure."

Hank had left him with the stack of genetics journals he'd been meaning to catch up on, so at least he had entertainment. He was almost halfway through the third one, jotting notes in the margins, when he felt a twinge of awareness from the bed beside him. Putting the pen in the pages, he set the journal on his lap and turned his attention to the magnokinetic, whose brow was furrowing as he blinked and took in his surroundings.

The moment he realized he was in the infirmary rather than Charles' or his own head, he shot up. Or he would have if he weren't recovering from a days-long coma. Instead, he got halfway up before falling back to his pillow with a groan. The chuckle Charles couldn't smother was enough to draw Erik's attention. At least his keen sense of hearing wasn't damaged.

"Charles," he said, relief evident. Then, with a wry smile, "We have to stop meeting like this."
"At least it was me awaiting your return to consciousness this time. As I said, it was becoming
tiresome to always be the one indisposed. It's rather refreshing being on the other side of it."

Erik scoffed. "You act as if you weren't injured as well."

He reached for the glass of water Hank had left by his bed in the event that he woke. It was too far
and he pulled back with another groan as it stretched ribs that were still barely healed from his first
engagement with Phoenix and had probably been reinjured during the excitement of the battle. He
lifed the blanket to find his side freshly wrapped. Charles could feel his mind performing a
methodical check of his body, assessing his other injuries.

*Bandaged hand. Charles had said he'd nearly broken it in his attempt to break down the door, so
that was no surprise. Ribs sore, bruising but no more than what was usual following battle. His
head felt…open. Like a jagged wound half healed that still stung in the air-

The glass of water he'd been reaching for floated into his view. Erik stared at it, giving it the
evaluating stare Charles had seen him give enemies when he judged whether they were a threat.

"Showing off, are we, Charles?"

"Just practicing my fine motor skills. They're still recovering and Hank said it would do me good.
You'd better grab it. I could lose control at any second and you'd get a face full of water."

"Completely accidentally, I'm sure," Erik said as he grabbed the water and took a sip. "Are you
otherwise recovered?"

"I am. My head feels much as I imagine yours does, but that will get better with time. You
performed quite a feat. Any other non-telepath would have died."

"I'm stubborn."

"As am I." They paused to offer hesitant conciliatory looks that they broke almost immediately.
Still, progress. "I've alerted Hank that you're awake. He'll be here in approximately 90 seconds."

"Fantastic. You know how I love being poked and prodded by doctors."

"You trust Hank, as loath as you are to admit it."

Erik withheld his smile and took another drink of water. Charles could feel an air of giddiness
about him though. He knew the feeling. They had both survived. Now that they weren't trapped in
his mind, they'd have to face the differences they'd been avoiding: Charles' lies, the continued (and
permanent) existence of Onslaught that they had acknowledged but somehow had yet to discuss in
detail, and the fact that Erik's ambition and Charles' stubbornness had nearly gotten all of them
killed. Their smiles and the residual giddiness faded, stifled by reality.

"We've made progress, but…we aren't going to be alright for a long time, Erik."

Hank's footsteps could be heard down the hall. Erik nodded, his usual stoic countenance back in
place. "But we must start somewhere."

Charles inclined his head. "We must."

Hank entered and made a beeline to Erik. Raven joined them soon after, threatening Erik with the
same slap she'd threatened Charles with before hugging the visibly shocked man, who flailed like
he didn't know what a hug was before hesitantly patting her back. Then she was pulling back and
yelling again. Between Raven's yelling and Hank's prodding, Erik was nearing previously
unknown levels of impatience. The impatience in the air dissipated every time Charles snorted at Erik’s frustration or they shared a look that said more than any snide comment could. They had a great deal of things to fix, yes, but for now they would celebrate their victory and the truce that seemed to be becoming less and less tentative by the second.

Chapter End Notes

I hope that wasn't too boring and the ending wasn't too similar to the last chapter. I realized after the action finished that I needed to wrap a lot of stuff up and my main characters are bedridden, so conversation is really what we have left. Oh well. I hope it was tolerable. Just the epilogue left now. I wanted to get it out before Days of Future Past opened, but I think I'll miss my goal by a couple of days. I'll try to get it done by Sunday night. At least the completion of this series can coincide with opening weekend.

Previous story references: "We've got to stop meeting like this" is a reference to what Erik told Charles when he woke up in Chapter 4 (I took a walk around the world to ease my troubled mind). The last time Onslaught and Charles met at the satellite dish version of their mindscape was back in chapter 10 (You think you have the best of intentions, I can't shake the taste of blood in my mouth (Part II))

Movie references: Hank mentions Ororo as a possible successor to Charles. In X3, she takes over the school after Charles "dies".
Chapter Notes

There's a quote that I found but never got to use. "True friendship is when two friends can walk in opposite directions, yet remain side by side." I wanted to throw it here because it seems so perfect for Charles and Erik, but it never fit in the story. So there you go.

Also, I should have mentioned this ages ago, but someone made a video for "A Spark Neglected". The title is "Dark!Charles/Onslaught A Spark Neglected (Fanfic Inspired AU)". It's on youtube. Check it out. It's only 0:39.

This is it. The last chapter. I don't know whether to have a party or sob in a corner. Probably sob and be sad I'm losing all my reviewer friends. I have a note at the end after the comic references and other author's notes with my thoughts. Thanks so much for reading! It's been real.

Oh, and the title is from Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken".

Two months after Phoenix's defeat, seven weeks after Charles and Erik awoke, everyone was fully recovered from the debacle. As far as reconciliations went, Charles and Erik's was going well. Ground-shaking arguments (literally, now Charles had full control over the power Onslaught gave him) had dwindled over the weeks, much to everyone's relief. On the surface, their interactions now dealt with debate and strategizing for the future. Those who knew how to look deeper could see more...the efforts at rebuilding the friendship they had lost over the years.

That didn't mean the two men didn't recognize what had to happen. Erik, while tempered to a degree, still had militant tendencies. Charles, while willing to fight, was not willing to allow the Brotherhood to be traced to his school and endanger his students. They could recover there, they could visit, but it would never be their home base. Not like it was those first years of the two leaders' acquaintance.

Sometimes, Charles wished it were different, would stare after Erik as he left their chess matches, would feel Erik's mind stray back towards him, and wish they could live like they had in the beginning again. But, as Onslaught was always quick to point out, things change and mutants adapt. The past was the past and attempts to recreate it always ended in disappointment. All they could do was move forward.

The afternoon before the Brotherhood was to depart, everyone was out on the lawn taking in the bright summer. The children were playing while the older students, the X-Men, and the Brotherhood, taking the example of their leaders' cooperation, sparred and ate. Jean and Scott sat curled around each other under one of the nearby oak trees. Ororo and Janos had formed an unlikely friendship and could be found experimenting with their powers in the form of a faux battle some of the children split off to watch.

Alex, Hank, Sean, and Raven sat on the front stoop of the mansion. Hank kept peeking at a set of reports he'd brought out with him. His task was made especially challenging by Sean, who insisted on trying to smack the papers out of his hands whenever he became too distracted.
Anyone else, McCoy probably would've gotten fed up with, but the grin on Sean's face made it impossible and all the beast could do was laugh and occasionally get revenge by hitting him with the papers.

The fifth time Sean managed to knock the papers to the ground, Hank gave him a good whack over the head with them once he'd regathered them.

"Watch it!" Sean said, chortled. "You're going to give me a paper cut!"

"You'll deserve it."

"Never get between a scientist and his science," Raven said. "Something I learned the hard way while Charles was finishing his dissertation."

"That's a story I'd like to hear."

Raven leaned back on her elbows, taking in the scene. "Next time I'm back." She nudged Alex. He'd gone quiet a few minutes ago, staring solemnly through the crowds on the lawn. "What's up with you?"

He kept staring, elbows resting on the knees he'd pulled to his chest. "Scott is going to propose to Jean."

Sean sat up from where he'd tipped over in his attempts to escape Hank's scientific wrath. "So? We've known that since about a month after they met."

"They're too young."

"You're just saying that because he's younger than you."

"They're actually above the median age of marriage," Hank added. "They've gone through more than most couples endure in a lifetime. If anyone can handle marriage, I'd bet on them."

"Since when do you know so much about love, Bozo?" Alex scoffed.

"Since students started coming to talk to me about their relationship problems while I was headmaster," Hank said with a grimace. "Also, love is simply a complex set of chemical reactions-"

"Please don't start," Sean said, collapsing dramatically onto his back. "The Prof tried to teach me more physics yesterday. I can't take any more science."

"Speaking of," Alex said. "Wonder what that conversation is like." His gaze was on Erik and Charles, who were moving around the side of the mansion towards the wall overlooking the satellite dish.

"They're probably talking about chess or reaching a point between rage and serenity or something," Raven said. "They've reconciled."

"Yeah, for now. How long will it last? Until Erik decides to do something crazy? Until Charles decides that Onslaught is more fun than the rest of us?"

"We'll just have to make sure that doesn't happen," Sean finished.

"That may be easier said than done," Hank said, picking up his papers again.

"Then we'll do the best that we can. We don't have much of a choice, do we?" Raven answered.
They sat, watching the place where they two men had disappeared around the corner for another few minutes, before Sean, eyes never leaving the corner, reached over and smacked the papers out of Hank's hand.

"Damn it, Sean!" Hank yelled.

"Ha! I got him to curse! You owe me five dollars, Havok!"

They'd have plenty of time to worry about the future later. For now, well, Havok owed Banshee five dollars.

Erik and Charles stopped in front of the satellite dish. Charles was looking around at the ground as if he expected to see something there. What he was expecting, Erik wasn't sure. Maybe he saw something the magnokinetic couldn't. His eyes hadn't lost the supernatural tone they'd acquired during the Phoenix incident. A reminder that Onslaught was ever-present.

"You know what he calls himself, right?"

"I don't."

"That Which Will Survive."

Erik huffed. "That's not at all arrogant."

"Yet surprisingly accurate. As long as I am alive, he will be also." Charles' gaze became distant. Erik couldn't help but recall his time in Charles' mind, Onslaught watching Charles as they sat across from one another playing chess, excitement at the challenge to best Charles once again.

They'd talked a lot over the past weeks, some of it unpleasant, but nothing as unwanted as Charles' admission that Onslaught might still cause problems. Charles was important for their cause. He could do great things for mutants and humans alike. If Onslaught were to manifest again, all of that could be ruined. Not only that, but the only one powerful enough to stop him might very well be Erik and he needed to be prepared to do what needed to be done should that occur. Even Onslaught agreed that, should his mind become corrupted again, an intervention would be needed.

"If I ever forget, if I try to repress him again...we may have to deal with that some day."

"We may, but the Brotherhood and the X-Men, will do everything in our power to avoid that. My people have become surprisingly fond of you."

"It's my charisma and my hair."

"If I start feeling threatened, I'll just have to hope you go bald, then. Or make it so," Erik deadpanned.

"You will not touch my hair," Charles said, lifting a stern finger.

They sat in fond silence. Children were laughing in the background.

Charles glanced around. The look in his eye told Erik he was seeing far more than the present. "Everything started here."

"Yes, I have fond memories of tossing Sean off the top of that satellite dish."
Charles snorted. "He's never quite forgiven you for that. Won't go anywhere near you if you're higher than the second story even though he learnt to fly a decade ago." They paused, taking in the environment again. "If we hadn't met, if we hadn't come here, who knows where our cause would be today."

"There's no use in wondering. We're here now, leading our people into the future."

"A future that's considerably brighter with Phoenix gone and Onslaught as an ally. We saved the world from certain destruction."

"Again," Erik cut in with the toothy grin that intimidated everyone but Charles, Emma, and Raven.

"We've saved the world from destruction, again, the Brotherhood and the X-Men have a tentative truce. Two of our first students are getting married."

"Scott asked Jean?"

"Not yet, but he will."

"Will they invite me, do you think? I'm fairly certain they've both tried to kill me an equal number of times despite the fact that I helped recruit them."

"Don't be ridiculous. They were only trying to maim you. If they'd been trying to kill you, Scott would have blasted your helmet off and Jean would have killed you with her mind. They work quite well together as a team. It bodes well for their marriage."

"Comforting."

"We'd better get back. If we want to eat something other than junk food, someone will need to start cooking."

Charles gave the satellite dish one more good look, a small smile forming, before he turned and headed back. Erik stood a moment longer. The past had been filled with trials...far more trials than a decade should hold. The future...he wished he could be as optimistic as Charles. He turned to leave, but as he did, something caught his eye. When he looked again it was gone, but he knew what he'd seen. A faint outline of Charles leaning against a tree, there but not there, with eyes like burning coals.

A parting reminder that Onslaught was always watching.

"I don't know why we have to leave at the break of dawn," Mystique grumbled on the front lawn, arms crossed over her chest.

"We have work to do and we need to get back into a schedule," Erik replied. "We've become complacent. We wake at dawn every day from now on."

"I changed my mind. I'm staying with Charles."

Charles shook his head with a chuckle. "I'm afraid you'd be bored, my dear. We don't do nearly enough gymnastics for your taste."

Raven heaved a put upon sigh. "Fine. I'm coming back every week though. Every meeting you have with Magneto. You're my brother and I'm not letting you go again. Besides, I want to talk strategy with Alex. We may not live together, but I expect we'll be working together far more
"Of course." Charles kept a straight face, but Raven could read through him now with the practice the past few months had given her. He was happy. Happier than she’d seen him in a long time. The bags under his eyes were gone and, while the worry lines remained, a weight seemed to have been lifted from his shoulders. She hoped it would stay that way.

The rest of the Brotherhood approached, all preparing for Azazel to teleport them. Emma hung back close to Charles' side with the rest of the send-off party. It didn't go unnoticed.

"Come, Emma," Erik said. "It's time we leave."

She inhaled, paused, then, "I'm not coming with you."

"You wish to stay here?" Charles' shock was about as well-masked as Erik's, which was to say not masked at all.

"You wish, sugar. I'm a telepath who can turn to diamond. I didn't sign up for getting thrown around and stabbed. If you need me, Magneto, I am happy to help, but my days of waltzing into battle are done."

Charles' brow furrowed. "If you aren't staying with the Brotherhood and you won't be here, then what will you do, Miss Frost?"

"Actually, I was thinking I might start a school."

Reactions ranged from raised eyebrows to dropped jaws to a choked laugh that got Alex a steely glare.

"What? I like what you're doing here. We disagree on a few issues, though, and I think young mutants should have options."

"That…actually sounds very good of you," Erik stuttered.

"Another school for mutants. How wonderful!" Charles said, grinning, just as Erik leaned to Charles' ear.

"What were you saying about Emma's Onslaught being uncharacteristically nice?"

Emma glared at Charles' cough, which sounded suspiciously like a smothered laugh.

"I think that's a lovely idea, Miss Frost. Where will you go?"

"I was thinking the Boston area. I have connections there. Family and land. I may not be as well off as you, but I can certainly hold my own. Perhaps you and I can discuss the finer details of the process, Dr. Xavier."

Raven threw her arms in the air. "Will you two ever start calling each other by your first names?"

They looked at each other and frowned. "That just wouldn't seem right, now would it," said Charles.

"Not at all," Emma deadpanned back.

"Well, now that that's settled, it's time we take our leave. I'll see you next week."

"Yes," Charles replied, "I believe we have a facility to liberate."
They shook hands, offering each other professional smiles. Raven could see their eyes though. They were more at ease with one another than they had been in ages. As awful as the Phoenix debacle had been, it had led them here. To Erik and Charles shaking hands as friends not acquaintances or leaders. To her knowing her brother as her brother and having her family back. To a future where mutants could work together towards their cause in different ways without fighting one another…at least not all the time.

Charles, ever poetic, had told her early on in his quest for non-violence that he was taking the path less traveled. Erik had told her the same once they'd become the Brotherhood, saying that standing up for their people and making a name for themselves was the unbeaten path. Looking at them now, she couldn't help but think that maybe both of them were wrong. The path less traveled was actually the path walked together.

Compromise.

The past certainly seemed to dictate that was, in fact, the path less traveled. Charles would like that. She'd have to tell him next time they saw one another.

Yes, two roads diverged in a yellow wood. But one never knows where the road will lead. It may come together again, it may split apart from time to time, but in the end, you cannot know where it will go until you take it.

Chapter End Notes

Random: Median age of marriage was 23 for men and 21 for women in the early 1970s. I googled it. In this universe, Scott is about 25 and Jean about 24. I have a timeline and everything to make sure I counted right.

Comic references: Emma is the headmistress of a school (Massachusetts Academy) in the comics. I can totally picture her being smart with Charles about picking a name that's not crazy long and obvious ("Well, I don't want draw attention, so I thought I'd pick a name that fits in with other schools and didn't have the word 'Youngsters' in it").

Also, in the comics, my understanding is that Erik definitely works with the X-Men on occasion and the two groups cooperate with each other when they need to. So I ran with that to make my moderately happy ending. No, Erik and Charles can't stay together, but they stay friendly. Was it a little kumbaya? Maybe. Oh well.

**DoFP rewrite:** I mentioned doing a rewrite of DoFP in the notes of a previous chapter. I'm going to give that a shot. I actually really like what they did in the movie, so I'm trying not to lose that essence and just make it Onslaught for the sake of Onslaught, but I definitely have some ideas I've been jotting down since I've seen it. I'll need to run it by a beta to make sure it's all legit and not me trying to force it too much. Keep an eye out, though. It'll probably be called "The Good Fight". I'll add a chapter to this story with a teaser if/when I start posting.

Well, that's all folks. It's been a journey. Thank you all so much for reading! See you in the fandom!
Forgive any mistakes. This is pretty much unbeta-ed for grammar.

Thanks to the lovely aeskis for reading over the occasional chapter for characterization and plot-related purposes!

Chapter 1 Notes:

The Nathan who made the cake is Nate Grey. Haven't decided if he'll play into things later, but he's around helping out and training since he's old enough to be done with school. If my calculations are correct (based on ages I made Jean, Scott, and Ororo in Two Roads...), Jean is turning 23 in 1971. That makes it two years after the events of That Which Will Survive.

If you recall, Donovan Zane was the man Charles/Onslaught was debating in chapter 4 of That Which Will Survive. In the comics, he headed Friends of Humanity after Graydon Creed. I don't actually know what happens to him in the comics so I killed him here. Maybe he should've been more understanding to the mutant cause. Then he wouldn't have been so expendable.

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