Nine Eleven Ten

by Subtilior

Summary

Years later, Charles would remember that day. Sometimes he would wonder if he could have changed anything; other times he would despair over what he had since become. But he would always hold the image in his mind: Raven, laughing, and his thoughts flying alongside her on strong wings, silver-gold through the winter air. Once upon a time.

More details, if desired, here. (Spoilers.)

Notes

This is a fill from the X-Men: First Class kink!meme. For the prompt, & as this is being posted at lj, please see the following:
http://1stclass-kink.livejournal.com/3390.html?thread=17984062#t17984062

For: aleapandfly
Re: Dark!Beauty and the Beast AU/themes, dubcon

NB: I AU'd the shit out of this thing. Mai dystopia, I showz u it. (Also, there's a bigger age difference b/w Charles and Raven. And it's possible that Raven is OOC. Also - oh, you know what? just read.)

PS: I have been known to be a wee bit pretentious, and extra-heavy on italics, the em-dash, and Symbolism. :P Just thought you should know. Also: v. v. slow buildup. Epic slow.
The days were getting shorter, the nights becoming even colder, when the time of the Chosen came round again.

Charles Xavier, youngest ever admitted to Oxford Before, head teacher-in-residence After, cast his thoughts across the frozen field. Pale gold leavings of hay, silver frost, a cold cloudless sky and the waning moon only just visible in the growing daylight. His mind flew like a bird. Bright needle in a haystack; where was she? It was almost seven, and well past time for them to start walking.

*Come home, come home. Raven, Raven fly away home* – and then ...

“There you are.” He smiled at the feather-light touch, the flashes of *hello* – *love* – and the flickering image of a creek bed flashing by. “Hurry up please - it’s time. If we’re late, they’ll notice. You know that.”

It didn’t take long for him to hear the crunch of boots across the field. His sister was laughing - her hair streamed out behind her as she ran toward him. She thumped the fence as she came through the gate and a row of birds scattered into flight, calling and croaking in protest.

“Ravens! How many, Charles? Quick – count!”

It was easy enough to see them spiraling skyward, black against pale blue. It was far easier, though, to brush them with his mind. Crystal stone skipping over water: “Seven – eight? No. Seven.”

“Seven is a journey.” She caught her breath, grinned, and then put one gloved hand into his. They started walking.

“Don’t tell me you still teach that rhyme.” Charles watched his words puff white in the air. “The children take the silliest things quite seriously indeed.”

“One for bad news, two for mirth, three is a wedding, four is a birth,” Raven chanted. Then she shrugged. “I like it, and so do they. And with classes just starting, I have to cheer them up somehow.”

“Why not the story of the ravens at the Tower?”

“Fine.” Her smile was wide, crinkling her eyes up at the corners. “That’ll be next week.”

“Next week,” Charles agreed.

He had tried to keep his voice light, but of course she noticed. He felt her hand squeeze his, hard.

“It’ll work, Charles. We’ve planned it, we’ve practiced it, we’ve gone over it a hundred times. It worked already. It’ll work again.”

He squeezed her hand back. *It worked already.* The Takers came once every three years. His powers, even kept dampened - *every hour, every day, always* - had been enough to shield her from their notice. They had come to the school, they had performed their tests, and they had gone. Just his luck that she didn’t turn twenty-one for two more weeks. Why the hell couldn’t they have started with Cambridge this time?

He, of course, was exempt, being well over twenty-one. The standard assumption was that anyone
over twenty-one and not Chosen was not strong enough to be of any ... what? Account? Importance? Use? He shoved the last thought aside; he knew his own use, teaching. Those not Chosen were either not strong enough or already in the grave. Life had grown exponentially more difficult since the war, and even leaving aside the first generation of deaths, there just weren’t that many people anymore.

Which meant fewer for the Takers, of course. Which was just as well, since ... once chosen, no Chosen was ever seen again.

None came back, from wherever they had gone. Almost nine years, now, of pouring drinks down strangers at the bar, winding strands of thought out of their minds with his, and he still hadn’t the slightest idea of what the hell the Chosen were chosen for –

“How.” Raven dropped his hand and cuffed him on the shoulder. “Snap out of it.”

“Beg pardon.” Charles held out his arm for her. As she took it, he began the ritual that led off every hour of the day – check, dampen, veil – the image of veil after silken veil, gossamer-thin, floating down to shroud his mind. There would be no trace remaining of his call to Raven by the time they returned to Oxford.

Oxford. He had been a freak of nature, a wunderkind: devouring mathematics before he could read; reading the classics before he could ride a bicycle; memorizing Mendel by ten, Darwin by eleven. His parents had been overwhelmed with pride when Oxford had made a covert offer to have him start reading sciences there. The war had started not a year later. After, Oxford had tried to rebuild – in the neighboring villages, then gradually further afield. He taught a mix of everything, now; too much material for too few students.

He had found Raven on the first Oxford mission to London. He had been seventeen; she had been six. Charles had taught her to read, taught her maths. He had taught her to hide what she was, and to hide it extremely well.

And it was just as well that he had. The Takers had first come just before her twelfth birthday. He had been twenty-two. And now ...

One more Trial, and she would never need worry about them again.

Raven dropped his arm. “Bloody hell, Charles, you’ve a face as long as a wet week. Race you back!”

He couldn’t help the smile as he watched her run, her boots kicking up the gravel of the road. Twenty years old. One more Trial, and then they would be safe. Once more - and, speaking of which, it couldn't hurt to remind her of her name one last time that morning.

“Mallory!” he shouted. “Wait!”

Even with the veils, he could feel her laughing at the name, as she always did. This time with the image of a bird, flying bright and clear at the front of her mind.

Years later, Charles would remember that day. Sometimes he would wonder if he could have changed anything; other times he would despair over what he had since become.

But he would always hold the image in his mind: Raven, laughing, and his thoughts soaring alongside her on strong wings, silver-gold through the winter air. Once upon a time.
One for bad news,
Two for mirth,
Three is a wedding,
Four is a birth,
Five is for riches,
Six is a thief,
Seven, a journey,
Eight is for grief.
Nine is a secret,
Ten is for sorrow.
Eleven is for love,
Twelve – joy for tomorrow.

- Old English Rhyme -
Classes began at nine o’clock, precisely. Charles gazed out the window at the clock tower, waiting.

The Takers had arrived, he knew. *Seven is a journey*, Raven had said.

"Raven ..."

He had not spoken loudly; merely to the glazed window. Charles stared out across the quad. The pale green grass was already fading to brown, less and less of a contrast with the tan stone of pillar and pediment. The graveled walkways were empty, as befit the hour; except ...

He squinted. A fellow professor, in academicals, was running - and tripping, and there went a cascade of paper. White hair frizzed out, for there went her cap. Benson, then, the Poet Laureate. Charles smiled. Raven liked Benson. He made a mental note to ask her to their house for tea - it had been too long since they had spoken.

And there went Benson's briefcase. For tea, yes; but perhaps with the second-best china ...

Charles blinked away from his woolgathering as he heard the first peal of bells.

He always set his father’s old pocket watch by that clock tower. But that morning, as Charles flipped open the steel cover, a distant part of him noticed that his hands were sweating.

“Settle down.”

The milling students took their seats quickly – he had made his voice sharper than usual. *Not my fault*, because … *already*? … there was a tiny needle of pain jabbing at his temple.

*It worked before. It will work again.*

The intervening three years had made him forget the stress of it, though: keeping his own mental signature muted while eluding the chattering minds of most of the students and focusing on his sister, wrapping her in the gossamer veils. He sent *calm and love you* to her, even as he caught brief flashes of the hall the Takers had chosen, and the other students there ...

Then he dragged his mind back to his duties. *You're a teacher. Buck up and teach.* Charles surveyed the lecture hall, cataloguing and calculating, as was his mind's instinct. So few students, in Oxford After ... that what would ordinarily have been a speaker holding forth in majesty, and dozens of listeners frantically scribbling had turned into a forlorn cross between lecture and tutorial.

Well. Perhaps not so forlorn in actual number. A score ... no. Nineteen, today. Charles made a note to inquire after MacLeod. Forlorn in the number that were determinedly not meeting his eye. *Ha.* There was a disadvantage to having even a covert telepath for a teacher - namely: one could not get away with failing to prepare - but he didn't even have to use a flicker of power to catch the *don't-call-on-me* coming off his students. He could almost smell it.

Well. Even if it was a Monday, even if this wasn't his specialty, even if this wasn't a private tutorial ... the pain had increased into a prickle of white-hot pins at the base of his skull, and he would take it out on -

"Avery Major." The boy gave a guilty start, eyes wide. Charles sighed. “Everyone, please open your texts to page two hundred three. Mr. Avery, read aloud and translate.”
Avery cleared his throat and started in on Plutarch.

Charles felt his head throb at the first sweep of ... whatever the Takers were using. He had never dared focus in on it when he had shielded Raven before. It was something crystalline, though.

Something powerful.

He corrected mispronunciations and mistranslations as Avery stumbled his way through the story of Theseus and the Minotaur. Made a note to himself: take Avery Major aside after class, order him to prepare a good portion of the Life of Lycurgus individually, and lay a bet with his fellow professors on whether or not the next tutorial would be a rout. Carthago delenda est.

The second sweep, half an hour later, was more powerful – Charles broke into a sweat. It prickled beneath his jacket and shirt; his undress gown felt suddenly heavier. Seven hours to go. It worked before. It will work today. But then another sweep, and another ... with less time between them ...

Six sweeps later, it was crystal clear that something was different. He was not panicking – don’t panic don’t panic – but there was a pressure there that hadn’t been there three, six, nine years ago. He didn’t know how it was done, not completely. Raven had been tight-lipped about the whole experience, and Charles had always refrained from deeper forays into her mind if he didn’t have her permission. In any case, it was probably because she just didn’t want to hurt him.

- hurt -

Charles staggered, and grabbed the side of his desk.

“Professor!”

He righted himself, waving off the few students who had risen in their seats. “It’s fine. It’s fine – go back to –”

But then he felt another wave of it – a white-hot bloom in his head, unfolding petals edged in pain – and he heard Raven screaming – my sister screaming -

“One moment,” he choked to the class. “Continue reading; I’ll return momentarily.”

“Professor, are you –”

“Sit down!” Charles snapped. Had he stayed in the room, he would have seen Avery’s younger brother instantly obey; as it was, he was running down the hall, gown flapping round him, before he could think better of it.

It had worked before. He had taken the brunt of whatever was being done to Raven before, but it had never been this bad, never – and why were they doing it? What were they doing? The whirlwind of his thoughts propelled him through a labyrinth of corridors almost without his notice.

But then he faced the immense set of double doors leading to the refectory, their handles chased in iron. Raven was was on the other side. Charles flung out a thought. She was not close by, no, since the hall was so large. On a trestle table on the other side of the hall: the high table; students could sit there only on the Feast of Fools - but she was chained down. And there was something being done to her.

He placed one palm flat on the door, and the other against the side of his face. There could be no hesitation. Instead, he allowed his power to uncoil and brush past one of the veils – only one – the rest in place would shield him … but his sister was screaming, and before he knew it he had found
her mind and wrapped her in a blanket of calm and it’s all right – and he found her pain receptors and shut them all down.

Her crying stopped. Thank God – but it was difficult, to keep his feet on the floor, when so much pain from her was still echoing through his own mind, when his power was bubbling like mercury. Charles focused on the door, the intricate wrought iron patterns. Calm, he sent to his sister. Calm.

By the time her heart rate had gone back to normal, he himself was calm.

So calm, in fact, that when the door opened in front of him, he didn’t even think to step back from the woman standing there.

She was of middling height, dressed conservatively, and with an icy blonde beauty that would have launched a thousand ships, three thousand years ago. As it was, all that she launched was a wave of –

– my God that’s cold –

- ice at the threshold of his mind, in his mind, and he gasped and dragged his power back to himself as quickly as he could –

But the ice had turned into delicate shards, probing and inquiring. Then the shards whirled and refracted into a diamond. The diamond multiplied into a strand, a strand that flared with something …

Joy didn’t convey its sharp, icy edge.

Charles might have felt joy himself, at the touch of another telepath’s mind, if the woman had not said:

“This one.” The diamond blazed, a blinding crystal light. “Take him.”

Both doors were thrown open and people seized him - and Charles almost staggered from the pain and fear that crashed into the hallway. He saw students that he knew, staring at him - he caught sight of his sister, sitting up on the table, eyes wide with shock.

This shouldn’t be happening, he thought, and – Raven – before someone jabbed a needle into his neck and everything went black.
Chapter 3

Darkness covered his thoughts, with the occasional flash, like bursts of fire over a black river.

– the woman’s eyes, diamond-bright and glittering, and the taut line of her throat as she turned to look to the side – she was saying something, but he didn’t understand –

– a man’s skin – a man? a devil? but devils don’t exist - bright red, and blood-red mist tangling around him – he said something and squinted, but Charles still didn’t understand –

– and another man’s face, pale and spare, cheekbones prominent beneath green eyes. Or were they blue? Green or blue, they were remote and he was expressionless, and he didn’t say a single word.

Then darkness again, and nothingness.

When Charles next opened his eyes, his first thought was of how his entire body ached. He cautiously eased his head from side to side; wiggled his fingers and his toes. An attempt at flexing one arm sent pain lancing up through his biceps; he winced and hissed out a breath despite himself –

“The drugs do tend to have that effect.”

Charles felt his heart jump into his mouth as he whipped his head to the side. It was that woman from the doorway, in Oxford. She had the same immaculate features and calculating eyes – she was a telepath, he remembered, and – telepathy – I didn’t sense her here -

That new fear joined in the torrent centered on his sister, a torrent now whirlpooling out of control. He felt light-headed. Had his powers been taken away? And what would he do, if they –

“Ah.” The woman smiled. “You've noticed.”

Charles stared at her. "Noticed what?" he croaked.

One manicured finger traced a circle in the air. “We take precautions with telepaths and empaths.”

Charles could not stop staring. She knew. Obviously, since she had caught his mind in a net - caught him - where had she taken him? What was -

"I'm sure you have questions. Well, Professor Charles Xavier, I have answers. And since I was the one to recruit you – shall we say, past your time – the duty of explaining things to you belongs to me.”

His head was still spinning as he cautiously stretched out a thread of thought. She was telling the truth, Charles realized, the panic in him widening into a yawning chasm of fear. Except – wait – he knew she was telling the truth, because he could sense it, the faintest sound of truth echoing from her. It felt as though the mercury in him was torpid and sluggish, cold in the chill of the room and not quicksilver as usual – but he could feel her thoughts – hear the truth of them – and there was not even a flicker of diamond to defend her mind …

Charles reeled back his thoughts as quickly as he could. He swept them under all the veils, and, acting on sudden instinct, groaned and put a hand to one temple.

“IT will hurt if you try.” Her smile had not yet touched her eyes.
“You – too?”

“Yes, actually. The only reason I am here is – as I said before – to explain to you the situation in which you currently find yourself.”

She rose from her chair. Before he knew it her hands were on his shoulders, pushing, and pain throbbed as she made him sit up. She placed a pillow behind him, but so clinical was the motion, compared to when he had been sick with the flu the previous year, and Raven had taken care of him … Charles felt tears sting his eyes.

“Hm.” She sat back down. “You are rather an open book, aren’t you?”

“Situation,” he replied, ignoring her jab. “The situation in which I currently find myself. That’s a very dispassionate way to convey the fact that I have been kidnapped and tortured –”

“Tortured? Oh, Professor Xavier –” and it was her mocking emphasis on his title that made him lash out.

“You don’t think it’s torture to be deprived of your power? You don’t feel tortured right now?”

Silence fell.

“Tortured?” Her voice was light. “Hardly.”

Charles concentrated on his own breathing. He felt it hitch as she continued, casually, “I don’t think you know what torture is, Xavier. Not yet.”

She opened a leather dossier and took out a sheaf of paper, started flicking through pages. The leather had been dyed a beautiful shade of red; it practically glowed against the white linen of her skirt and jacket, the pale silk of her blouse, the platinum-blonde fall of her hair. Charles looked around. The room was stark and bare, with gleaming metal walls and not a single window. He tried shoving his feet against the steel frame of his cot, flexing his toes. Where were his shoes? And where was the light coming from? Electricity in Oxford was rationed to such an extent that he hardly remembered what a light bulb looked like – perhaps it was gas light? He twisted to try and find its source.

Then he looked back. She was watching him, comfortable in her chair of plain metal, her head tipped to one side. “My, we are curious today, aren’t we?”

Charles felt like a specimen on a slide. He grabbed at the first topic that came to mind. “What day is it? How long –” he swallowed. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Long enough.”

“But what day –”

“Now, Xavier, you are going to listen to me, and I will permit you to ask questions later.” She straightened the papers. Charles saw light gleam off the bracelet on her left hand – diamond-studded steel.

“You have been recruited –”

“Chosen,” he corrected automatically.

Her stare could cut glass. “I know the rubric of academia must be rather ingrained by now, Xavier …
but you do not interrupt me. Not here. Not ever.”

“Or what?” Misery made him reckless. “Your powers are gone in here – too,” he almost fumbled before remembering – yours are too, you idiot – veil veil veil – “So what can you do to me?”

She sighed, then slid a syringe out of her jacket sleeve. “Another long sleep, Professor? Perhaps a nap will make you more cooperative?”

“No.” His throat felt thick as he swallowed. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Good.” She slid a paper to the top of the pile and scanned it. “Charles Xavier, professor at what was formerly the University of Oxford. Thirty-one years old. Parents, dead in the Third World War; siblings – siblings?” She looked up at him. “We left in rather a rush, I’m afraid, and the records from the registrar’s office did not contain many personal details.”

Every instinct in his mind rang like a bell. They’ll take her if they know. Lie.

“No siblings – well – I mean, I had a sister. She died during the war – she was visiting London with relatives …”

Charles met her gaze. He pulled up the memory of his cousin, black-haired and brown-eyed, five years old forever since she and his uncle and aunt had been living in London when the bombs fell. He made a mental note: she’s your sister now, and wrapped the memory in a silver cloth, easily noticeable and easily tugged loose. When he got out of this room, after all – and I will, I will – this other telepath would be able to read his mind again.

At the same time, he wrapped Raven round and round in a silk shroud and watched her sink through his mind, down into the deep – burial at sea. He would protect her at all costs.

You already have, his mind whispered, and he felt his eyes prickle with tears again.

“I’m very sorry.” It was a murmur; she was looking at the next paper. And she didn’t sound sorry at all. She sounded bored.

“You have taught at Oxford since you were sixteen years old. Recruitment began there, by treaty between Great Britain and the EBS, when you were twenty-two – a pity. Off by one year. We could have been working with you for quite some time. You must understand: I would have found you immediately, if you had been interviewed.”

Charles opened his mouth to speak; remembered. Then he met her eyes, lifted his eyebrows, and raised one hand with a sardonic little flourish.

Her mouth twitched. “Ask away.”

“You said the EBS – what is that, exactly?”

“The Eastern Brethren and Sistren.”

Charles blinked. Then he put two and two together – his mind froze, as he said: “Is that – is that the same as,” he fumbled, “the Brotherhood?”

An exasperated sigh. “It’s still called that, is it? Yes, Xavier: they are one and the same, and as you may have noticed –” she gestured at herself – “it contains women. Thus, the Sistren.”

He hardly heard her. The Brotherhood rebounded through his mind, a whirlwind of fear howling louder and louder. The Brotherhood - the Brotherhood -
The Brotherhood held power in the eastern half of what had been the United States of America, before – and most of Canada as well – his mind flashed to his own map, sketched on a chalkboard – control stretching from the Atlantic to the Mississippi, and edging past the river in fits and starts. Engaged in an all-out war with the Free West – leader: President Stryker, capitol: Denver, model: democracy; the Brotherhood, leader: unknown, capitol: unknown, model: absolute dictatorship – the stories his students had repeated, and his own words, strong and stern: fear will get you nowhere.

Fear. Fear would do him no good, if the Brotherhood had him. He straightened his shoulders and met the other telepath’s gaze.

She stared back at him for a long moment. Then: “Good.” A smile. “Very good. It adds credence to the argument that we should recruit older individuals. Children from abroad usually have hysterics.”

“How very disagreeable for you.”

Her jaw tightened at his tone – the syringe came out of her sleeve and Charles flinched, “Sorry – I’m sorry. It’s just … I was surprised.” And terrified, his mind added, but: “Surprised.”

“I’ll let your insolence pass this one last time, Xavier.” She replaced the syringe. “But you must understand: you are a new recruit, and as such there will be no talking back, no questioning unless permitted, no communication with our enemies, no leaving the grounds – no escaping,” she finished, voice flat. “There will be no escape for you, ever, so please do put the thought out of your head.”

We’ll see, Charles thought fiercely, but tilted his chin down in what he hoped looked like a cowed expression. His mind flashed to his students, when they hadn’t completed their homework –

And this time he could not stop the tears. Just one – no, two – but she threw the dossier and papers on the cot and stood up from her chair.

“So much for adult recruitment.” Her eyes held nothing but amused contempt. “Feel free to read your file. Someone will bring you some food, and your shoes are in there.” She gestured at a steel cabinet in the corner. “You are under constant surveillance, but if you behave well, you will be moved to the Manor.”

“How long will I be here?” Charles said, and, “ – the Manor?” What’s that? his mind finished, as he remembered: no interruptions, no questions – that bitch –

She crossed her arms over her chest. A ring gleamed on the middle finger of her right hand – bright metal, with a diamond in the center. Just like the bracelet, and her necklace. His mind catalogued, as it always did; while it did, he met her icy stare.

“You will be here as long as I choose to keep you here, Xavier. But really, you don’t think we keep children in this unpleasant an environment forever - do you?”

She walked away without letting him answer. Charles heard a door open and close, and lock with a click, before he thought to spring up and run after her. His palms hit the unforgiving steel, and he choked down a twist of fear – anger – pain – before turning to look at his metal, thought-killing cage.

The Brotherhood had him. Their leader – every instinct told him it was so – was a telepath as powerful as she was vicious. And he didn’t even know her name.
Chapter Notes

Author's note: I have to slow down this week, because 1) I have moar!Skool, and 2) I need to figure out a way of halving my adjectives. :P Seriously: soon our beast - *cough* - Erik will show up, and ... interesting times will ensue!

But really seriously ... in case it's not obvious by now: not only is this fic an AU, but it's an AU in which I play fast and loose with relative ages, good-guy/bad-guy orientation, and even some mutations. (i.e. McCoy is a human, mostly, and the beast part of him is within his mind - yeah I dunno, but having a Beauty and the Beast fill with a beast (named Beast) that's *not* the "Beast" beast? Too. Complicated.)

So. If minor characters are OOC, my apologies - but I hope you keep reading!

Charles stared at the ceiling of the metal room. Then he flicked his eyes down to his father’s watch – held open above his sternum, circled by his fingers. Six days, five hours, thirty nine minutes. And counting.

There were no bells, no sounds – nothing but silence. So he had set the watch arbitrarily, marking the moment the woman had left the cell as twelve noon. Since then, he had done nothing but sleep, catalogue every dent and scrape in the metal walls, and run dozens of mental exercises. That, and walk a rut in the floor. He was surprised he hadn't yet worn through his shoes.

The first thing he had done was take those shoes out of the steel cabinet. He had slipped them on, then tried to straighten the wrinkles in his shirt. No luck. He had still been wearing his suit jacket - but there had been no sign of his undress gown. Raven had it, Charles had decided. There was no way Oxford would have let him be taken peaceably; in the struggle, someone must have taken his academicals, and that same someone would have given the gown back to Raven.

Charles stared at his shoes. Then he stared at the panel outlined in the door. The first time it had clanked, five and a half days ago, Charles had almost jumped out of his skin. Then curiosity had overcome instinctive wariness, and he had walked over and pried at the panel’s edges until it opened. The inside showed a catch mechanism that, once pressed, revealed a flat button on the outside. He only noticed that later, though, since in the deep recess someone had placed a tray – a tray holding food.

He had almost leaped at it, before controlling himself. You are under constant surveillance, he remembered, and he’d be damned if he would give them the satisfaction. So he had set the tray on the cot, closed the panel, and surveyed the room again. Then he had started tracing the walls with his fingers. If one thing had opened, surely another would, since they didn’t expect him to wash his hands with saliva. Did they?

Memory had made him clench his jaw. He was hardly a stranger to hardship – days of searching on the Oxford missions, nights of alternating the watch, irradiated water and rotten food … He knew how to piss in a corner. But – he winced – somehow, it would be more humiliating in this metal box than in some ruin of a house.
His patient exploration of the walls paid off, though. A taller panel, when pressed at waist height, folded in half lengthwise and revealed an austere lavatory, with a sink and soap. Triumphantly, Charles had washed his hands. Then he returned to the cot, took the tray, and sank to sit cross-legged in one corner, so he could see anybody that might come in the door.

Nobody came in the door.

He had cleaned the tray in the sink and held on to it. He had thought to use it as a weapon, since the metal chair was bolted to the floor at the foot of the cot. But then no food appeared for twelve hours, and he gave up and placed the tray back inside the recess in the door. And the door had to be at quite solid, since he didn’t hear anyone reply when, at the clatter of another tray, he had shouted … half question, half curse.

The food was simple but oddly good – there were spices that he had almost forgotten existed. The lights dimmed and brightened on a twenty-four hour cycle. But nobody spoke to him. He didn’t hear a sound except the tick of his watch and his own breathing. And nobody came through the door.

And even though the water was amazingly, blessedly hot – one had to build a fire waist-high in Oxford to achieve anything of the sort with the boiler in his college house – he could only take so many showers before tiring of the sight of his lobster-red toes.

So when he wasn’t sleeping or pacing, Charles lay flat on his cot, folded his hands, and ran through one mental exercise after another. Calculating $\pi$, reciting Plutarch and Virgil, analyzing every last expression of the female telepath, calling up all his memories of the Brotherhood … … and trying, very subtly, to gauge just how hampered his power was by the muting properties of the room.

And how the bloody hell did those properties work? Charles set a tendril of thought to tracing the lines in the ceiling, inching carefully along, checking for any triggers or tripwires. He would give anything for a sheaf of blueprints – and not only because he had memorized his Oxford file in the first half hour of his imprisonment and had nothing else to read. Blueprints, a schematic – hell, an outline scribbled on a cocktail napkin would suffice, as long as it –

Clang.

Charles bolted upright, the watch clattering to the floor. He found his footing, grabbed the watch, darted for the corner – all while yanking his power back to himself. It was like reeling in yards of fine silk from off a clothesline – awkward, all the more awkward because of his heart thumping at such an absurd rate.

The door thumped, and something rattled in the lock. Straightening, his back to the corner, Charles crossed his arms over his chest. He would not show fear –

– even when the door swung open and someone who could only be described as a hoodlum strolled inside.

A hoodlum with a cigar.

“You found the food,” the man said, watching the cigar twirl between his own fingers. Then he sniffed, overly loud. “And you found the can, thank god, because I drew cleanup. Good kid, smart kid –”

Charles stared back at him, keeping his mouth shut.

A broad grin. “A big, polite pretty kid – Frost sure can pick ‘em, fuck me.”

“No, thank you.”

“No talking!” the stranger roared. Charles flinched and ducked beneath an outstretched arm – and the other man dissolved into laughter. “Shit, that gets ‘em every time. Name’s Logan.” He extended a hand. “What’s yours?”

Charles kept his arms pressed behind his back. His heart was hammering – and only started to slow when the man continued: “Take it easy. With me, a lot of those rules is bullshit, O.K.? So talk away, mock away – just do it when Frosty the Snow Bitch isn’t home. Now: what’s your name?”

One last hesitation - then he took the plunge, and took the man’s hand. “Charles Xavier.”

“Xavier – nice to meet you.” Logan had a grip like a wine press. He dropped Charles’ hand, though, after only one shake, and turned to shout over his shoulder: “Hey McCoy, catch your ass up –”

“I’m here,” said a younger man in a white coat, walking inside. He fixed Charles with a nervous look, his eyes made all the more prominent by his glasses. “All ready?”

Charles’ stomach lurched. “Ready for what?”

“Moving day.” Logan flung open the cabinet and grabbed its only contents – papers and the red leather dossier.

Charles’ instincts flared. Even though it was only paper, and a carrying case … still, it was his. “I’ll carry that –” he said, but:

“No you won’t.” A smirk at him. “You’re done with this old info – you’re done with your old life, so it’s going back to Frost, and you’re going … huh. McCoy?”

“Yes?”

“Where’s he going? They really sticking him in with the kids?”

Slender hands dusted off the white coat’s immaculate front. Charles saw the metal bracelet on his wrist glint, but he – McCoy? – was saying, “He’s a new student.”

Student?! flared indignantly in his mind; he almost didn't notice Logan's frowning: “Yeah, but –”

“Orders.”

Logan shrugged, then ambled out of the door, gesturing at Charles to follow. “C’mon, c’mon, time’s a-wastin’.”

“Don’t worry,” McCoy murmured to Charles, as they stepped outside the cell. “He looks like bad news, but he’s not. Not here.”

His inflection sounded … Charles didn’t know. Empty? No, “empty” was too strong. Perhaps like a bad joke looking for a punchline it had lost.

“Besides, for real bad news?” said Logan, tromping ahead. “You should’ve found the vidscreen in there. It’s behind another panel. Too bad you didn’t – you must’ve been bored out of your chess club mind.”
Charles hardly heard him. He looked everywhere, as fast as he could, cataloguing materials and directions and possible ways to escape. They were walking down a sterile hallway of the same metal. There were no markers, no signs, but the two men seemed to know where they were going.

Except then they stopped. Charles almost ran into Logan’s back, and a hand from McCoy on his own shoulder made his skin prickle, because there was an intent he could sense …

He tried his best to concentrate – hurry hurry – what is it … The dampening field, area, whatever-it-was – it was still in full effect, and even though his power was still there – numbed and sluggish but there – he didn’t know whether or not to tip his hand and wrest the two under his control and get the hell out –

A long whistle from Logan interrupted his thoughts. “Heart’s going a mile a minute, and –” another pronounced sniff – “damn, you’ve really started to sweat.” He gave a mocking grin. “You wouldn’t be thinking of doing anything really, really fucking stupid, would you, X? You mind if I call you X?”

Charles gritted his teeth, cursing himself for being so transparent, but then: “Logan,” McCoy sighed. Sighed, and held out a length of cloth. “Mr. Xavier, I’m afraid you have to be blindfolded for this next part.”

“Don’t know what good blindfolding a telepath’s going to do –”

“We’re still within the boundary,” McCoy cut in. “And once we’re out …” He looked at Charles solemnly. “We’re going to take you to where you’ll be living, and training, for the foreseeable future. But – and this is beyond my control, Mr. Xavier – if you try anything, there are security measures in place that will end up with you being, well, dead.”

“And I’ll be out a new punching bag,” Logan gave the cigar an exuberant chomp. “Which would be a shame. So be a good sport, O.K., kid?”

“I’m not a kid.” He felt the energy draining out of him, leaving a chilly numbness. “I’m thirty-one years old.”

“Oh …”

Turning, Charles saw McCoy staring at him, eyes luminous – pain hurt sorry – from behind his glasses. Then the boy – Charles made an effort to drag his mind back to the name, since he had automatically substituted the epithet – offered him a tentative smile, the metal ring on his right hand glinting as he tightened his grip on the cloth. “I’m actually only twenty. So it’s … it’s nice to have you here.”

“Thank you.” Charles turned his back on McCoy and bent slightly at the knees, Raven’s age – my God … His mind was still buzzing from the emotion that had lanced through even the protection field. “If you must, you must. Justice was blindfolded too, you know.”

“Yes.” The cloth wrapped around his eyes; fingers worked to make a tight knot in the back. He welcomed the cool darkness; it gave him space to think. McCoy’s grip was light on his left elbow. Charles smelled Logan’s cigar and heard his clomping stride echo ahead of them. Think.

He was being moved to another location, one to which, presumably, the suppressing field did not extend. He would take inventory of his prison immediately, he would gauge just how he could control the thoughts of his captors –

Doubt suddenly passed through him, like a cloud in front of the sun. He didn’t know how many
there were – he didn’t know who they were: whether or not the other telepath – *Frost?* – would be within range …

And for that matter, he had never locked down another individual’s mind before. He had influenced minds – usually to ease attention away from Raven. Influenced, yes; detected lies and truth, yes … but some things were sacrosanct, and to him, the autonomy of the mind was the greatest of those things.

Was he capable of it? Could he do it?

Charles kept pace with the other two, down long echoing hallways and once a bizarre swooping sensation in an enclosed room - *was it a lift? it had to be a lift* – while trying and discarding plans on one level of his thoughts, and cycling through doubts and scruples on another … A third part, one keeping relentless track of their movements, wrested his attention to the fore when much chillier air suddenly hit his skin.

He took one step forward, and – his power returned to him.

It was like stepping into a blast of sunlight. For: one instant, his breath caught in his throat; another instant, and he sent his thoughts flying like a bird – one quick circle spiraling out – *Logan* – a rough-edged impression of anger and coiled energy on a tight leash – *McCoy* – what felt like a fractal, and a bizarre impression of bulky strength behind a door painted blue.

Then he felt a hint of cold, and he flung his own thoughts to ground, like a hawk dropping out of midair. Frost – she was here, somewhere, and –

- he sensed something that felt like a wash of diamond-sharp edges and snow, and he yanked his power back to himself and –

- *wait* –

This was his chance to try something.

*I hope I don’t regret this …*

Charles rolled out three hints of thought – one a rugby ball, one a billiard ball, and one a marble, all tethered to him with silk – and then he braced himself.

- *oh god* -

Frost’s power hit him with a *smack-crash*, like a wave of icy water. Charles staggered; he registered Logan’s attention snapping to him and McCoy’s gasp. “What is it, Mr. Xavier – do you –”

*Here it goes. Play it to the hilt; out-Herod Herod; trippingly on the tongue – go* -

“No –” he slurred, falling to his knees, slapping his right hand to one temple. “I’m sorry, I’m *sorry* –”

He made as theatrical a show as he could, of *retreat* and *run away* – like a circus elephant lumbering into a game of hide-and-go-seek. “*Stop* –”

It wasn’t hard to fake a greater pain; the nausea twisting his gut and the glass-sharp jabs at his thoughts were bad enough. *Escape*, he thought, and made it as loud as an air-raid siren.

*Don’t even think about it, Xavier!*

Charles did his best imitation of *delirium tremens*. “Fine – *fine*, just let me –”
Frost had found the rugby ball thought, and he flinched in real pain as she whipped it back at him, sharp as a shuriken. *All of it,* she somehow sent to his mind, like shards of ice. *Draw it back, now.*

He obeyed, reeling in the rugby ball. Making a show of winding its thread around itself … picturing one of his students, defeated on the sporting field, nose dripping blood and eyes red from weeping.

Charles was aware of being on his knees – of the weave of his own trousers, rough beneath his fingertips. McCoy was saying something, but he focused all his attention on Frost.

She prowled round the boundaries of his mind, rippling a diamond-edged searchlight over and around, illuminating the surface. He kept all his veils as opaque as he could, letting out his memories of the metal cell, his impressions of Logan and McCoy, the memory of his cousin masquerading as that of his sister – and he felt her snag the silver cloth he had wrapped round the black-haired girl, and she pulled the thought to herself effortlessly.

But she didn’t find the billiard ball.

Or the marble.

Charles kept his thoughts as quiet as he could. *Surprise, later. Elation, later. Planning – later later keep it secret –

*Do not try anything like this again. Ever. Do you understand me?*

He made his thoughts babble – *yes yes I’m sorry yes* – and, with disbelief surging beneath the veils – *god damn it stay put* – he felt Frost withdraw, her power folding in on itself like a ice-crystal fan.

Only when he was sure she was gone did he allow himself to speak. Well – grunt, really. “Ungh.”

“Yeah, no shit.” Logan’s voice was strangely … taut. Strained. “Fucking A, bub, you are gonna be some fun. Not every day you get to feel a telepathic smackdown. She hasn’t done that in years. Remember Betsy, McCoy?”

McCoy’s voice cracked. “Never mind.” Unsteady hands pulled him to his feet. “Mr. Xavier, I don’t know what you tried, but please don’t do it again.”

Charles drew in breath to ask, but then froze.

With his newly unrestrained power, he suddenly saw the image as clear as day: the young McCoy, crying, spread-eagled on a table.

With all of his fingers broken.

Another wave of goosebumps prickled over his arms, his back. His throat felt thick as he said, “Fine. I’m sorry – I just.” *Breathe:* in and out. “It won’t happen again. You don’t need to worry.”

The image of the crying boy faded from view. Charles allowed himself to be tugged along, his triumph at eluding Frost’s power tempered by something else. An ache, like he had been punched in the stomach.

And all that, he realized, without the blindfold being taken off.

Charles fought to calm himself again. Time enough later, to reflect on what had happened. For now, he needed to keep track of where he was being taken, to put together a mental map.
The tap of shoe soles on metal stopped. He heard a door shut, then a slight rumble and click. He smelled a different sort of tobacco than Logan’s cigar – and something else. Dust, perhaps. Old carpet. He heard the *snk* of a match being struck, caught a quick whiff of sulfur, sensed the tiniest hint of warmth from a candle - no, from two.

And the next door opened and shut with a creak and clack – it was obviously made of wood. Biting his lower lip, Charles tried something physical, not mental.

“What do you do here, Mr. McCoy, if I may ask?” – and yes, his voice was echoing slightly in the way it had in hallways in Oxford – off wood and what could be carpet, or cloth hanging on the wall.

“May he ask?” Logan rasped, mockingly. “You may. Whether or not we answer is – well, huh. Is our day-to-day classified, McCoy, or what?”

“Never mind,” McCoy said. He sounded exhausted.

Silence fell, except for the sounds of their progression through a series of rooms – enclosed air smelling differently in each. Until Charles drew in a breath of bookbinding glue and leather, and said excitedly: “Is this a library?”

There was a pause. Then Logan growled, “How did you know that?”

“He knew that because he’s actually opened a book more than once in his life.”

“Up yours, you lab rat –”

“I just,” Charles interrupted, “It just smelled like the reading room. At Oxford.”

“Did you enjoy working there?” McCoy’s voice was neutral, but his grip on Charles’ elbow did not let up – and then a door opened and closed and they were in what sounded like a hallway.

He had no reason to feel disappointed, Charles told himself, swallowing the ache in his throat. He kept his answer light. “Yes. Very much.” He paused, then said, “I don’t suppose you can tell me what, exactly, I’ll be doing here?”

Silence fell again. It lasted until they had walked down a shallow set of stairs, and another door had opened and shut.

“You can take off the blindfold now,” McCoy said, quietly.

Charles did not allow his hands to shake as he felt for the knot. The fact that he practically ripped the fabric away, he told himself, was mostly due to the fact that that same knot was too tight. Then it was off, and he could see.

McCoy and Logan looked back at him, expressionless. Candlelight made their features glow.

Charles looked at them, warily, then around the room. It was of middling size, with a bed in one corner and a wardrobe perpendicular. There were three arrow windows set high up in the wall to his right, and a door to his left. He turned and saw … a bookshelf. It was empty; he suppressed a twinge of disappointment. A fireplace occupied the center of the bookshelf’s wall – the grate was dusted with ashes but the bricks of the hearth had been swept. A metal fireback glinted from behind the grate.

The overall impression, with the off-white plaster walls and the red-and-yellow blanket on the bed – even as shadowed as they were – was one of … warmth. Charles blinked. *Warm*. He hadn’t
expected that.

“This is your room,” McCoy said. “There are only a few rules that you have to keep in mind. You’re in an old manor used as a training center. You can’t go outside the house without one of the supervisors,” he held up his left hand and shook the bracelet on his wrist. “Follow the schedule you’re given, stay out of the West Wing at all times, and observe the eight o’clock curfew.”

“And for the love of fuck, don’t set the place on fire,” Logan growled. He put his candle on a rough-hewn mantel above the fireplace, then paced back to lean one shoulder against the door. Charles didn’t need telepathy to pick up on the vibration of let’s go let’s go.

“The schedule you mentioned.” He kept his voice calm. “When, exactly, will I be given it?”

“All students get one on their first day – what?” McCoy frowned at him.

Charles made an effort to control himself, reining in his half-hysterical laughter until it was a sputter. “It’s only – professor one day, student the next –” he massaged his temples, “You know. Whiplash.”

McCoy had relaxed into a smile, albeit a wry one. “I could have phrased it better. It’s just – everyone’s usually much younger, you know. Everyone is younger. You’ll meet them tomorrow. I suppose you could be called,” he thought a moment, “a novice.”


McCoy grinned. “Apprentice.”

“Gentleman scholar.”

"Tutee."

“Holy shit, I think I just felt my balls drop off.” Logan rolled his eyes. “See you around, X.” He grabbed the doorknob.

McCoy turned to leave as well – and Charles held out a hand. “Wait – what’s tomorrow?”

“Testing.” His smile had gone. “Learning. It’s different for different people.”

“And what’s in the West Wing?”

The ring on the middle finger of McCoy’s right hand flashed as he gestured with the candle he was still holding. “Just don’t go in there.”

“But what –”

“What it is,” Logan said, deceptively gentle, “is absolutely none of your fucking business. But don’t worry.” His mouth twisted as he opened the door. “It’s none of ours, either. You are not alone.”

“Except that you are, here,” McCoy muttered – so quietly that Charles instantly knew he hadn’t been meant to hear it.

“Yeah, well.” Logan sauntered out. “Sweet dreams, kid.”

McCoy stared at the floor for a long moment, then said, quietly, “Good night, Mr. Xavier,” and left. Charles was left alone, staring at the door. He heard a key turn in the lock, and footsteps, and then nothing.
He stared for a long moment. Then he turned on one foot and took in the room. The one candle
provided only the feeblest light – the shadows it cast reared high against the plaster walls.

Charles took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He thought of Raven’s favorite marble, won during a
tea break game at her first class at Oxford … She had been eight years old. It had been a blue cat's-
eye, cracked across one side.

That was one tiny fraction of his power – a marble he sent rolling under the doorway and down the
hall outside. There was nobody there.

Charles gave it five minutes. All things considered, he was proud that it only took him five more, and
the leverage of one of the wardrobe’s hinges, to break his belt buckle. And only one more minute to
pick the lock on the door.

He opened it, and followed the marble – *cat's-eye cat-feet* – down the hall. He took another marble
from his mind, orange-red – *two are still smaller than the billiard ball, yes?* God, he hoped so. He
turned the marble into a hummingbird and sent it flying outside. Logan’s mind and McCoy’s mind,
feather-light touches – and then what they saw as they walked across what must have been the
manor’s grounds, which was: an imposing building, a good four stories high – and one window with
the faintest bit of flickering light, on the third floor. A window just below and to the right of a tower.

_Their right, my left_, Charles thought, and sped up, and called the hummingbird back to himself. It
zipped around his head as he found a door that felt correct, and eased it open. He ran up a winding
staircase. _Quiet quiet stay quiet_ –

There was a door with a rusty handle where the stairs ended. _Please be open – please_ – and it _was_,
and the cold night air on his flushed face felt like a kiss, like the last kiss he had from his mother …

Charles didn’t realize he was gasping, half-sobbing, until he made it to the tower’s edge and grabbed
hold of one of the merlons. He stared out at the night sky through a hot haze – his mind was reeling.
And all it reeled round was: _escape._

Frost could be evaded, if he kept his mind under tight control. The two who had given him a room
could be deceived. But what was he going to do – a prisoner of the Brotherhood, with images of
violence, torture, coming at him from all sides –

What were they going to do to him?

And – he buried his face in the rough tweed of one coat sleeve, shuddering. He shook his head back
and forth; he felt the gritty scrape of stone on his brow. _Raven._ His sister – what must she think?
What was she doing? Would he ever see her again?

How could he find her?

Charles yanked his head away from the merlon. The hummingbird would not do; it was too small.
He had the blue cat's-eye, though - Raven’s favorite. He felt his eyes sting as he wrapped power
round it, crushed the whole together and reshaped the resulting darkness into a raven in truth. Charles
watched the bird raise its head and flutter its wings, small and black, _smaller than the black eight-ball
– you can’t see me in the night_ – He sharpened it until it had an arrow’s point, and shot it into the
sky.

He found Polaris and sent the raven north – north and – east? West? The flight widened into circles –
wide, dizzying loops, because he didn’t know where he was, he didn’t know how to find Raven, and
everything was dark and empty.
*Everything*. The raven was flying back to him, weaving half-drunkenly through the air, because it was tired. *Everything’s dark.*

When it lit back onto a branch in his mind, he stroked its feathers and let it fall into nothingness. Then, for a long time, all he could do was stare over the tower’s edge into the night.

*Tomorrow*. Frost could be evaded, and – he felt a grim resolve, cold and sure – everyone could be deceived. He had never counted himself as arrogant, but he knew his own intelligence, and he knew what he could do. And if everyone could be deceived, then …

Then he could find a weakness, a flaw in the diamond, and he could follow that flaw to his freedom. Freedom from the mockery of being lumped together with students –

Charles closed his eyes. Shook free of his own ego, and concentrated. Freedom to fly to his sister; freedom from the Brotherhood.

Freedom to find his way home.

Until then, all he could do was stare from the tower into the night: dark, and cold, and empty.
“Tap tap.”

“Hey.”

“Tap tap.”


Charles stared at the ceiling, plaster dappled the palest gold from the dim morning light. As deep as his exhausted sleep had been, the knock had woken him instantly. But he found, staring dully, that he didn’t want to move.

He heard footsteps, booted, going down the hall; another knock. Then another, further away. Doors opening and closing, a few different voices – children’s voices. He gritted his teeth. Memories of Oxford, of his students, all crowded to the forefront of his mind and jostled for a turn, at twisting the knife a little deeper –

He passed a shaky hand over his face. That twist to his stomach had to be hunger. The last tray in the metal prison had been perhaps two days previous. Standing on the tower in the chill for two hours extraordinary, flinging his thoughts at the sky again and again, even after his first failed attempt – all had left him ravenous and parched. But going for a drink of water would require that he move, and that, he didn’t want to do.

Which left him where he had started. Charles idly wondered if he would be sent back to the cell if he refused to get up. Literal, not figurative detention.

The voices were getting louder, more raucous. A girl shouted something and there was a stampede in the direction opposite the tower stairs. Probably another stairway. Raven would do that, on weekend mornings and holidays – take a running start down the longest hallway of the college house, fling herself down and coast on a pillow, shrieking all the way. Charles squeezed his eyes shut at the memory –

When he opened them again, Raven was standing at his bedside.

“What–”

Charles threw aside the bedclothes and grabbed her hand before he knew it. One word from her and he would know how she got here; one thought from him and she could tell him everything –

– except he yelped as that same thought careened straight into what felt like a smooth and polished wall. She yanked her hand away.

Charles focused – breathe in, breathe out – and only stopped breathing when the illusion disappeared and a small child stood in front of him. She had to be five years old, perhaps six. Auburn hair brushed her shoulders. Her eyes, when they met his, were a clear and remote grey. Then they flickereded, and he saw a large conch shell, glistering white and pink and orange; polished and unyielding.

The child was a telepath. He felt the first hesitant beginnings of a smile tug at his mouth.

“Good morning.”
She stared at him.

“My name is Charles Xavier,” he continued, keeping his voice gentle. “What’s yours?”

The girl said nothing – but he felt something brush against his mind. Charles stretched out another silver thread of thought, and caught glimpse of a small thing – *an animal?* – peeking out from the shell. It darted back in, quick as a wink, but he was left with an image pristine and as bright as a photograph from Before.

A group of children seated around a long table. A plate holding bread and cheese. And wound around the image, like a plain frame for that same photo, was: *breakfast, friends, late – who?*

“I’m someone very much like you.” He smiled, and found a memory of himself, groggy in pajamas and fumbling for a coffee carafe, one long-gone New Year’s morning in Oxford. He got to the moment when he poured salt instead of sugar into his cup and took a loud sip – he focused on the image of his spluttering reaction and Raven’s hysterical laughter.

One corner of the girl’s mouth curled up, like the smallest tendril of a fern.

“I don’t suppose they have any coffee down there?” Charles swung his legs out of bed and raised his eyebrows at her, exaggerated. “You’re probably all too young to drink it. Well, let me get some clothes, and I’ll –”

His eyes caught on the door to his room. It was open.

“Did you do that?” He blinked – it had been rather more difficult to lock the door again with his mangled belt buckle, but he had managed. He had not wanted anyone to discover his escape. “How did you do that?”

Charles turned to look at the girl. And there, wobbling at the level of his hands, was a cup.

“Did you do that?” He blinked – it had been rather more difficult to lock the door again with his mangled belt buckle, but he had managed. He had not wanted anyone to discover his escape. “How did you do that?”

Charles turned to look at the girl. And there, wobbling at the level of his hands, was a cup.

He stared for a moment, then took it. It dropped into his hand, heavy, and water sloshed over the brim. The girl looked up at him, her head tipped to one side.

“Well.” He felt a bit blank. “I was thirsty. Thank you very much.” At the fern-smile, again, he took a drink. When he stood up, she took a rather abrupt step backward, so he gentled his voice again.

“And you did that all by yourself?” *Telekenesis as well as telepathy. And how old is she?*

She nodded. Another photograph – the children again, the table and plate, all in brighter colors. Framed by: *late.*

“Right.” Charles strode to the wardrobe. “Give me two minutes. I don’t think shaving is quite necessary, is it? What do you think?” He sent another image – himself, unkempt and snaggle-toothed, roughing up his own hair with his fingers and jumping from the bites of fleas.

She gave another image in reply – himself, considerably foreshortened, as seen from below. Slightly scruffy, but glowing in a bright and clear light, gold streaming down from the arrow windows. Framed by: *I like you.*

He swallowed against a sudden tightness in his throat, and smiled down at her. “Why, thank you. Run to the hall and stand guard – I’ll be out as fast as I can.”

There were several changes of clothes in the wardrobe; plain colors and of a plain make. He tossed on the first that came to hand, folded his own clothes and tucked them under his pillow, made his bed.
as quickly as he could, and hurried out to the girl in the hallway. “Lead on.”

The chatter of many voices sounded the same as that of Oxford's boarders, even from behind a thick wooden door. What was different was the way this group fell silent the instant he opened the door and stepped inside.

Carefully, making no sudden movements, Charles surveyed them all. He sent the smallest tendrils of thought out for complete impressions. A girl and three boys. The girl looked to be in her early teens; she had dark skin and eyes, and black hair shot through with – white? At her age? And her mind had been a clear sky, but he saw – *clouds on the horizon who the hell is that where's Jean? A lightning flash –*

He reeled his thoughts back in and stepped to one side, saying, “Thank you for the directions –” with one touch on the younger girl’s shoulder. He catalogued her tiny flinch – filed it away for later with a thread of – *find out why –* even as he dropped his hand and she edged around him. “And good morning to all of you. My name is Charles Xavier.”

Silence. He didn’t need telepathy to sense the defensive wall that had gone up. The silence stretched. The girl broke it, with: “C’mon and eat, Jean – hey.”

A macchinetta was scraping across the range; he turned to see the smaller girl’s puckered brow and outstretched hand. He caught the image – this one with a patina that could only mean memory: himself, sitting on the bed, rumpled – with a frame twining into words: *I don’t suppose they have any coffee down there?*

“Jean, you know the rule.” The other girl’s voice was firm. “No powers in the kitchen.”

“And that coffee’s mine,” the brown-haired boy said. He, and two other boys – one with red hair and freckles, and the other, slightly older and blond – were glaring at him.

“Well, thank you for the thought anyway – Jean, is it?” Charles kept his voice light as he strolled over to the range. He felt the glares stabbing into his back. “Hostility to the interloper: as homey as fresh-baked bread. *Sehr gemütlich.* Speaking of which: is there any? I caught a whiff of it, outside, and I’m rather famished.”

A pause, and then: “In the wooden box,” the blond muttered, and: “What’s gemoo – gemooty – whatsit?” asked the redhead.

“Gemütlich – or, rather: Gemütlichkeit. It’s German for “the quality of being at home, among friends – cozy, warm, accepted.” Charles threw a grin over his shoulder, covering his own flash of confusion – he really couldn’t think why he would have come up with something German, and now, of all times. “It’s also me showing off. I tend to do that in order to get caffeine.”

The children stared, some more flummoxed than others. And – he smiled to himself as he fished the remnants of a loaf out of the breadbox – he could almost feel the hostility starting to melt into curiosity.

He examined the bread. “I don’t suppose there are any knives here?”

The brown-haired boy snorted. That was answer enough.

Charles looked around the kitchen. It was a long, narrow room, with an ancient double range on one side, a counter perpendicular – he was leaning against their join – and a sink across from him. The door was rather massive, with one of the iron circle-handle jobs that reminded him of Oxford. In fact
… he turned the thought over in his mind, as he tore off a piece of bread. The entire room reminded him of Oxford – a return to older tech out of necessity, not desire, what with the rationing of gasoline and electricity, to say nothing of the equipment required to keep more advanced machines running.

So it was back to wood-burning stoves and ranges, there. But here: the cell … the cell had been nothing but metal, requiring advanced tech to work, given how thin and flexible some of the panels had been. And artificial light, on a twenty-four hour cycle … Why the stark difference between that room and this kitchen?

“Are you going to eat that or what?”

Charles blinked, coming back to himself. The children were still staring at him. The older girl looked especially serious.

“I –” he looked down at the piece of bread, which he was methodically shredding. “Oh. Yes.”

“Because we don’t waste food, here.” She held his stare longer, then looked away. “Give Jean some.”

He saw, with a flicker of guilt, how Jean's eyes were fixed on the bread. “Ah, of course.” He swept the crumbs into his palm. Where were the plates? Another look around – new territory – and Charles sent his mind skipping across theirs instead, a quiet silver pebble on water. There were plates in a cupboard – he took two, one for Jean and the other for his bread. There was cheese, sliced, and a ceramic jar of milk in a box with ice, next to the sink – he took them out. There were two jars on the countertop – he took them, flicked the memory of their contents out of the dark girl’s mind, and held them out to Jean. “Raisins or apricots?”

Jean smiled at him. Sent him raisins, with the frame yum –

“Raisins it is –” he said.

“How did you know that?”

He had started putting cheese on bread – but at the older girl’s voice, Charles paused, turned. Her eyes were fierce, locked on his; the boys were equally tense.

“Oh.” He shrugged, and set the bread and cheese on the stovetop. It was hot as blazes; melting the cheese shouldn’t take long. “I’m a telepath. Like Jean.”

There was a long pause. He could almost hear their glances, darting to each other – reworking their assumptions – speculating – and then:

“You know what?” the redhead said, excitedly. "That’s actually great. Because Jean – and I like you Jean, you know? But,” back to Charles, “she doesn’t really talk, so she needs to tell us stuff with her mind, and sometimes it can be all – wham. Like last Christmas - I mean, Fourth Quarter.” He grinned at the younger girl, who dimpled back. “Remember, Jean? The chocolate? Me falling down the stairs?”

He mimed a spectacular pratfall. The darker boy snorted into his coffee; the blond smiled. The redhead soldiered on in the face of the older girl’s glare. “So with another telepath, Jean can tell us stuff without giving us migraines, and –”

“She tells me plenty,” the girl snapped. “And there’s no powers allowed in the kitchen – you know that.”
“Except for John keeping the fire going, me keeping the icebox going, and Jean using her pictures.”

The blond gave her a long look. “So why don’t you go ahead and ask Jean how she wants to communicate, instead of telling her?”

Charles winced to himself. Ten minutes and he had put his foot smack dab in the middle of their routine, their power structure. Given the unavoidable round of meetings at Oxford, he had always prided himself on being able to read a room, telepathy or no. Just because these were children was no reason to throw diplomacy out the window.

The cheese had melted. Quickly, he took a handful of raisins and pressed them onto the soft surface. Then he took the plate to Jean, and set it and the milk in front of her with a flourish.

“If you want that, tuck in. If not, send it back my way, because that cheese smells delectable. It’s a cheddar, hm? We have cheddar in Britain, but not this color.” In the midst of the chatter, opening the icebox, he caught a strange mental ripple ... from the children.

He turned and looked.

Jean was staring down at her plate, smiling. She touched one of the raisins embedded in the cheese. Then she looked up and her smile widened.

Another photo, in a frame – his image, leaning against the counter – but this frame was made of solid gold and smacked into him full force: I LIKE YOU –

“Ngh,” and he pinched the bridge of his nose. The sensation was remarkably similar to another vivid New Year's memory: namely, Raven dropping a book on his head from the upstairs landing.

When he opened his eyes again, though, some of the children were grinning at him. “Damn,” said the brown-haired boy, and the redhead snickered, “I felt that one, and I’m all the way over here.”

“You need some ice on that?” the blond asked. He flourished his fingers and – Charles felt his eyes widen – there was a ball of ice. How did he just – that’s fascinating –

“Bobby, quit it.” The older girl rolled her eyes. “And move over – make room. What’s your name again?”

“Charles Xavier.”

“Make room for Mr. Xavier.”

“Oh, really, you may call me –”

The girl glared. “Mr. Xavier: sit down. I’m Ororo. These guys,” and she pointed, “are Sean, John, and Bobby – and you’ve met Jean.” She tipped her head at Jean – who was tucking into the bread and cheese with gusto. Charles saw Ororo’s eyes soften. Then Jean looked up at her. Charles sensed the distant flicker of thought.

“Actually,” Ororo said, “before you sit, please get Jean a cup for her milk. And get yourself some coffee, because John is sharing this morning. Aren’t you, John?”

“Yeah, O.K.,” John muttered. “It’s kinda strong.”

“Believe me when I say: that’s quite all right.” Charles knew his voice sounded fervent – he gave Jean a cup without thinking and stared at the macchinetta, fingers twitching. Coffee – and before he knew it he had burned himself on its metal.
“Might want to use a cloth, dude –” and before John finished snickering, Charles picked up the image of himself pouring salt instead of sugar that New Year’s morning, and drinking; framed with funny.

*Did she just send that to* – Sure enough, the other children began to laugh.

“Oyez.” He poured himself a cup. “Jean, that’s my memory – you can’t just go giving it to all and sundry because it’d make a good conversation piece, or – *ah.*”

**Frost.** Her power felt like a sharp icicle, needling at his skull. As quickly as he could, stomping down on his rush of fury, Charles reeled everything in – even the smallest room-reading tendrils of his power – and tossed them beneath the veils. The pain turned into a distant itch.

“Jean,” he said sharply. She looked up, alarmed. He caught the image of a small animal vanishing inside the conch shell, framed with a question, and he gritted out: “Yes, do it now. Quickly.”

Jean blinked – once, twice. And then her face was opaque as it had first been, in his room.

“Mr. Xavier,” Ororo began, “was that –”

Suddenly, all of the children yelped. Some hands flew to temples, others flattened out on the tabletop. John had only just dropped his mug, to dig his fingers into his hair, when Charles felt the itch intensify into an ache. Bobby gasped, Sean pressed his face into the table – Jean whimpered – and then the pressure stopped.

For a long moment, there was only the sound of their breathing.

Then Sean muttered, “Ow ow ow …” and Bobby, rubbing the heels of his hands into his eyes, said: “Yeah.”

Charles felt his pent-up anger twitching in his jaw. “Anyone want to tell me what that was?”

Ororo’s voice was flat. “Wake-up call. Are we all awake, children?” She pasted a saccharine smile on her face, and broadened it into a rictus at the dismal chorus of: “Yes.”

“Is that a regular occurrence?”

“Welcome to our world, Mr. Xavier.” Ororo had put an arm around Jean. “And yeah. Usually every morning –”

“– but usually not that goddamned strong,” John spat.

“Watch your mouth in front of Jean, man.” Bobby took his plate and cup over to the sink and nodded briefly at Charles. “You want coffee, Mr. Xavier, you’d better hurry up. After the wake-up call, the monitor’ll get here in five minutes, tops.”

The others started in on their remaining food like a pack of wolves. Charles stayed where he was, staring at the door.

She had caught him completely off guard. His mind flew back to his resolution – *Frost could be evaded* – and anger almost choked him. Frost could be evaded? He hadn’t seen this attack coming – not at all. How was he supposed to focus on evading her, deceiving her – his escape, his offensive – if he couldn’t even twig to something as simple as a wake-up call?

Unless he wanted to give her that impression.
Charles took a deep breath, stepped away from his anger and considered. The weaker she thought him, the better. Perhaps a focus on his gifts as an empath – perhaps the idea that he could prepare the veils quite well if given enough advance notice. After all, no telepath would send the first blow in a battle by registered post – so surely she could be led to believe him exceptionally weak in that aspect. Her will against his: let him cave in like a sand castle to a wave. Let her believe that their clash of yesterday had undone him for weeks. Let her believe that. She had missed the billiard ball, the marble …

Now that was a strategy. Deceptive weakness, and practice, his mind whispered to him, practice your stealth, and your veils, and cripple her when she least expects it …

Frost could be evaded. Everyone could be deceived.

A crash of plates and, “Sean, you idiot!” snapped him out of his reverie. Looking at the children squabbling for a place at the sink, washing their dishes, Charles felt a momentary twinge of conscience.

Everyone could be deceived … Did ‘everyone’ include them?

Then the door swung open, and Charles tabled the matter for another time. Tabled it, and covered the table – an ugly, splintery one, the opposite of gemütlich – with a veil.

Time now to face both the day and the person who had just walked into the room.
“Good morning, good morning,” a girl – no, woman – caroled as she strode to the table.

She was short, and on the delicate side, with thick black hair tumbling over her shoulders. Her boots made a confident clack; the boots, Charles realized, that he had heard walking down the hallway earlier.

He catalogued: high boots, plain dark trousers. A ring glinted steel on her right hand, like the bracelet round her left; he caught only a glimpse of a necklace. It was difficult to see the latter under, of all things, a ragged sweatshirt. It was not a particularly good fit; the cuffs were folded over twice and there were two large rents in the back. And he could hardly read the faded Cornell on its front –

Charles took a scalding sip of coffee to cover his brief start. Cornell. His mind clicked over facts – university, New York, Ithaca, Iroquois League, Finger Lakes – he found the memory of a map, and flagged it in brilliant red – but could it be that simple? Surely not; surely they wouldn’t hand him such a crucial piece to his escape on his very first day unrestrained …

But she was saying something.

“… and it’s getting cold, so the sweats’ll be coming out sooner rather than later. All right: same assignments; you all know where to go. Except for you!”

She had turned to Charles, grinning. Then she held out a hand. “I’m Angel.”

He took it. “Charles Xavier; a pleasure to meet you.”

“Yeah, right. But at least you’re not crying, which is more than could be said about some people. Right, Bobby? For about a month? Wimp.”

“Shut up.” Bobby’s eyes were flat.

“Two months, and that’s no way to talk to an official Monitor of the EBS, is it?”

“Ugh.” Ororo swatted Angel on the arm. “Give it a rest. Otherwise we’ll have to start blowing trumpets every time you come in –”

“She can blow my trumpet –” John started; Sean snickered and Charles sighed. Adolescent hormones. Perhaps it was too much to hope that imprisonment would change human nature.

“John,” Ororo started, but: “Can it, Johnny-boy.” Angel flipped a folded piece of paper out of one pocket. “Here.” She held it out to Charles. “Your schedule.”

He unfolded it. Typed – which means a working typewriter somewhere – at the top of the page was:

Morning: McCoy

Afternoon: Logan

Evening: Ø

“Um,” he began.

Angel interrupted him. “McCoy will meet you in the workroom; Bobby, John, you show him the
way. And Logan’ll come get you when you’re done there.” She slapped her hands together. “Clear out! C’mon, Jean.”

The children filed out of the door without another word. Startled, Charles made a quick job of drinking the rest of his coffee and rinsing the cup in the sink. The thrum of let’s go let’s go buzzed at the edges of his mind like a hornet.

He turned to see Angel tapping her foot, watching him. “You know, Chuck – can I call you Chuck?” She smirked. “You’re lucky it’s me here and not Alex. ‘Cause if you don’t hop to and move when a commander says – well. Alex shocks people. I just sting, and I’ll be nice and let it go this time, cause you’re new, and kind of old, and everything. Old fish new fish.”

**Brat fish.** Keeping his face neutral, Charles brushed past her and walked to the boys waiting for him. His mind clicked over everything, storing images – a chilly stone hallway, with stairs leading back up to the students’ rooms. The other children had already gone further down the hall; he caught a glimpse of Sean’s red hair before he disappeared around a corner.

“Just ignore her,” John muttered as they started walking. But: “No talking!” rang out merrily from behind them. Charles looked back over his shoulder. Angel gave them a cheerful salute, a piece of cloth dangling from her hand, and then walked away – with Jean.

The surprise made him think of his - worry - as quick as light. It bounced off the cool and closed conch shell.

Jean stared back at him, eyes solemn, before turning to walk up the stairs. And Charles didn’t know precisely how to catalogue his reaction when he saw that she could hardly reach the banister.

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Bobby and John were silent on their way to – the workroom, Angel had said, so Charles kept a careful track of their route. *Hallway, right, then left, up another flight of stairs, and right again.* They left him at a door, with only a muttered: “Good luck.”

“Now just what,” Charles said to himself, alone, “is preventing me from leaving right now? Strolling out the front door and straight to the nearest town?”

Perhaps the fact that he didn’t know where the front door was, or if one even existed. And he still didn’t know where he was, geographically … although if he were in the Finger Lake region of New York, then the disconcerting chill of an early September day could be explained easily enough. The weather had been far worse immediately after the war, of course, what with two years of nuclear winter - but high on the endless list of aftereffects was “regular” winter’s new norm: early to come, late to leave, and bitterly, unbelievably cold. At least, in the higher latitudes.

Charles had only once or twice considered leaving Britain for climes further south. Then he had found Raven, and soon after that the equatorial ozone depletion figures had been published. And then Britain in general and Oxford in particular had to deal with an influx of refugees, when they had expected the opposite problem –

He took a quick step back as the door opened in his face. There was McCoy, blinking at him from behind those glasses. “Mr. Xavier – I didn’t hear your knock.”

“That’s because there was none,” Charles replied. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid I was woolgathering for a moment.”

“No problem.” McCoy stood to one side. “Please come in.”
The room was plain and stark, with whitewashed walls and dark timbers slanting across the high ceiling. And – Charles inhaled, walking towards them – windows on one wall. They were clean enough to shine. Through them, he could see a middling-sized strip of green, bounded by trees. No, not just trees: a forest. He squinted, but could not see any other green, or a hint of lake, or –

“I forget that you haven’t had a view yet.” McCoy gave him a half-smile. “We’re in the middle of the woods.”

“And which wood might that be?” Charles tried, only to see the half-smile quirk into a full one.

“You know I can’t say.”

“Hm.” He tipped his head, considering. McCoy looked happy, not especially suspicious … perhaps the tiniest bit of pressure? Charles stretched out a tendril of share with me, and said: “No, I didn’t know. Why can’t you say?”

“Rules.” McCoy’s voice was distant. Charles narrowed his eyes, turned the tendril into a ribbon – Raven’s favorite ribbon, wide and red, edged with lace – with share share share –

McCoy shook his head. “Huh. Why can’t I …”

There was a flash of cold, and Charles yanked his thoughts back and veiled them. Feeling a drop of sweat roll down his back, he kept all his senses trained on the glacial sensation of Frost’s touch, an inquiry, casual – like a shark gliding by, made of ice. A glint of diamond teeth …

Then she was gone. Shite. He watched his hands, ordering them not to tremble. Can’t try that here – or, at least, not on my first day …

“I can’t say – only because, well, there are rules.” McCoy hadn’t noticed a thing.

Charles exhaled shakily. “I don’t suppose there’s a rulebook?”

“Ha – and, no. Well, not until you graduate.”

The incongruity of him, a professor, being treated like a student by someone a decade younger … it hit Charles again, like gravel flung into his eyes. He gritted his teeth. Were McCoy not a perfectly innocuous young man, he might hate him a bit. Just a tiny bit. Even if his smile was wide and bright.

“Sit – please sit, sir. I can’t tell you how much it means to me, that you’re here.”

Charles found an empty chair by one of the three long trestle tables, all strewn with wires, various bits of electronics and paper – and sat. McCoy shoved aside a stack of books. “I’m working on a whole set of experimental projects, and I’ve been hoping for someone with a bit of my skill set to come along. I don’t know how much training you had in a lab setting –”

“Some,” Charles cut in. “Not much.” Not much, with Oxford struggling as it had, and with the requisition of most equipment by the British government in its consolidation efforts, but with a bit of my skill set stuck in his thoughts with a venomous twist, before he sent himself the firm message: He doesn’t mean it. “I only had a few classes before the war.”

“Before – oh. That’s right. It’s weird – I mean, I was only two when it started. But luckily my mom and dad got into a bunker. And then I got to finish school early, since we lived in the Research Triangle.”

“North Carolina, then?”
“Yeah – and when the EBS, um, recruited me and I came up here, I didn’t mind so much. I mean, the chance to work with what they have, and –”

McCoy’s mouth shut with a snap. Charles filed the information away – *north of the Carolinas*. He kept his voice mild: “‘What they have’, you say. What do they have? Curious minds wish to know …” He tried a sly smile.

“I’ll bet. I suppose you could just go in here –” McCoy tapped his temple – “and dig it all out, right?”

“...Wouldn’t want to damage you somehow.” *Which is the truth.* “I’m really not sure of how strong I can be.” *Which is slightly less truthful, perhaps. Stronger than Frost* blazed across his mind like a comet, and he veiled the thought in a flash.

“So if I say: ‘I’m thinking of a number between one and ten …’

Charles bit back a smile; McCoy was bellowing *ONE* at the top of his mental lungs. “I’d say: ‘what a coincidence, because I’m thinking of how, interestingly, that number itself is identical to one of its three cubic roots.’”

“...Sweet.” The grin was getting ridiculous. “Complex numbers.”

“...Yes. But McCoy –”

“Call me Hank.”

“Hank, then.” Charles bit down on his lip. *Tread carefully.* “You said, yesterday evening, about there being tests?”

“Oh yeah. I almost forgot. I know this is going to sound dumb, but …” Hank pulled a packet from beneath a book and gave it to him. “Here. An I.Q. test.”

“An … I.Q. test.”

“I know.” A rueful smile. “And then some other aptitude things. Would you mind? I know you’re brilliant, and you know you’re brilliant, but some people need it in triplicate before deciding what to do.”

“It’s no trouble.” Charles kept his voice neutral, although he was losing the fragment of good humor he had recovered earlier. McCoy seemed to have forgotten that *some people* could undoubtedly have them both lined up against a wall and shot. “Then what?”

“Well, usually these take all morning, but – oh.” His glasses magnified the blink. “I guess we could, um, sort the books? Or clean up a bit –” he waved at the chaotic workplace, “or talk about stuff. I don’t know.”

“I’m sure we’ll think of something.” Charles took the pencil held out to him and set nine-tenths of his mind to considering which ‘stuff’ might be the most strategic. The remaining tenth dutifully opened the packet, noted that the tests really hadn’t changed since his seventh birthday, delegated them to the medulla oblongata, and went off to join the plotting.

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Three hours later, they had cleaned off one and a half of the three tables. McCoy had been chattering to him about the technicalities of the telepathic dampener. Charles had been intent on memorizing every single word, despite the first jabs of a headache – when he caught a whiff of cigar smoke.
“Hey, you know you’re not supposed to smoke inside.”

“Shut up.” Logan grinned at them from the doorway, a cigar lit and clamped between his teeth. He took it out, to enunciate more clearly: “Shut up, egghead. You got the papers mostly stacked, so there’s no worries, yeah?”

“Mr. Xavier,” McCoy said, turning quickly towards him. “You have to go with Logan for the afternoon’s tests. But I am really excited that we get to work together, and – ”

“You never know.” Logan strolled inside, with a curl to his smile undoubtedly meant to intimidate. “They might decide to put him in edge weapons instead.”


Logan flicked some ash at him. Charles refused to look away. “Charmed, I’m sure.”

“Yeah, you are charming today.” A head tilt, and then Logan slowly and deliberately put out the cigar in his own palm. “So I am really, really excited that I get to run your ass into the ground, little X.”

McCoy winced. “You know, you don’t have to be such a –”

“Less talking. More moving.” He took two strides and then clipped Charles on the shoulder with one square hand. Charles bit back a grunt, because it was far heavier a blow than he would have thought possible. Then fingers dug into his biceps. “You hear me, Xavier? Come on, move.”

“See you tomorrow, Mr. Xavier, and we’ll –”

His voice was cut off as Logan slammed the door shut. Not an easy feat, Charles decided – solid wood and metal ornaments to boot. Much the same as the rest of the doors in this place – doors that were moving by at a rapid clip as Logan jogged through the hallways, clearly expecting him to keep up.

Another door opened, and Charles gasped. It was cold –

Outside. They were outside, and he hadn’t even kept track of the way there. He frantically double-checked the last minute in his mind; good, because the steps were there – just subconscious, and he would have to unravel them later –

“Huh – I heard that.”

Charles half-jumped. It wasn’t enough that Logan was a toser - he had to be a telepath, too? But ... Logan was smirking at him. He abruptly realized that his stomach was growling.

“Didn’t eat a lot this morning, did you?”

“Um.” He cast his mind back. That must have been the reason for his headache; one cup of black coffee, and a cup of water, so he was dehydrated as well as hungry. “Uh, no.”

“Uh, no? Uh – guess what, X-boy: days you train with me, you eat anything you can get your pretty hands on, because you. Will. Need it.”

Charles held his ground, watching their breath puff white in the air.
“And the last thing I need is you passing out on me.” A critical look. “Or getting pneumonia – would it kill you to wear a sweatshirt?”

“Apparently it will kill me not to.” Clamping down on the anger that was beginning to build, he bent to double-check that his shoes were free of pebbles – his leather dress shoes – oh, no. “But Angel only just said that they would be given us tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Logan shrugged. “O.K., whatever. So, there are rules –”

“Yes, I've gathered that –”

“Rules, Xavier. But the only rule with me is: keep up.”

Charles stared back at him, anger simmering.

“Well, that and do what I tell you. And don’t die.” A madcap grin at him. “C’mon, c’mon –”

And Charles had been keeping the veils up all day, so he couldn’t say why Logan's *we're going to run to move to run* made his own energy surge. He was normally unaffected by the thoughts of others, but now –

– now Logan had sprinted away from him, and Charles swore, and ran to catch up.

Jean came to him as the sun was beginning to set.

Charles caught the brush of her mind against his – his own image from that morning, *Mr. Xavier* and *where?* He sent a reply, a bird as pale and small as he could manage, and tried to cough the news at Logan.

Who grinned down from where he had braced his arms on Charles’ knees. The weight – the *pain* from the weight – would have been ridiculous even if he hadn’t been exhausted from running. But take those hours into account, and add a few tree climbs and then endless goddamned sit-ups, and Charles had long since consigned every single part of his body to the fire. Especially since he would not give the bastard the goddamned satisfaction of his turning off the pain receptors -

“Two hundred ninety – c’mon c’mon, you can do it. I believe in you – *nine*, hell yeah!” Logan slapped his knees; the force of it rattled his bones. “Turns out Mr. X has a muscle or two after all! Now: one last one! Make it an even three.”

But Charles was staring up at the blue sky, at the way it was darkening. Darkening, but also turning purple with red spots – and then there was Jean’s mind again, thank god.

“Jean’s coming,” he croaked.


“Happens.” A cough; he didn’t have any moisture in his mouth left to swallow. “When I’m stressed. Things,” he pointed to his temple, “get a little odd.”

Which wasn’t precisely true, but he was not about to tell anyone that he could hear Jean walking toward them from a mile away – *no*, twenty feet, and she was almost there.

And Angel was with her. Charles coughed, wincing at a stabbing in his chest.

“Angel, baby!” Logan shouted. “Look what I’ve made!”
“A mess?” she trilled, but then: “Holy shit, Logan!” Charles heard footsteps start to sprint, then her voice cracking: “How did – what did you –”

“Actually I lied: didn’t make a thing. He did it all by himself. I thought he'd be a wimp for sure, but the crazy fucker would not admit defeat. Remember when you came, girl, and I had you crying for your mommy before two miles?”

“And then I fucking flew away, you bastard.”

“And then the boss dragged your sorry ass back, yeah, chained you up by the leg - scream, baby, scream.” Logan’s grin flashed … colder? Charles blinked, woozily – there had been a hint of something … but it was gone.

“Shut up, sir,” Angel choked, and: “Can he stand?”

“He’ll be O.K.” Strong hands beneath his arms, lifting. “I think.”

“Could have fooled me,” and why did Angel sound so – upset? Worried? What were the words? He seemed to be forgetting words. There were words washing all around him, more and more of them.

Then he felt a frantic push from Jean’s mind, and Charles saw his own image. Logan holding him up; himself limp and spent, skin parchment-white in the dusk and hair black from sweat. Pain pain what’s wrong –

“It’s all right.” He coughed, and cracked his eyes open. Gave Jean an attempt at a reassuring smile, and pushed calm and love at her as forcefully as he could. Habit, from Raven – his head was spinning – Jean’s grey eyes were wide and shining with – tears? Don’t cry, he sent; but then picked up … love … in return.

Charles blinked.

Then he held out his free hand, and Jean took it.


“Maybe –” Angel hissed, but Charles took a deep breath and rasped out: “Wimp.”

There was a moment of silence.

Then: “Well,” Logan said, and Charles could feel the – fucking A – bubbling up from his thoughts, woven through with amusement. “Well. Fuck me.”

“Can’t you think –” a gasp, “of something –” another gasp, “original to say?”

“All right: Fuck you –”

“Logan, Jean’s right here.” Angel’s hand, small and strong, squeezed Charles’ free shoulder. “Let’s just get him inside. Get some food into him, some water.”

Charles used the slow, limping walk back to confirm, dreamily, the route that he had mapped that morning. Before he knew it Angel and Logan had opened the wooden kitchen door and set him down on one of the benches; there was a flurry that must have been the children making room.

A jumble of voices, and then the two loudest were gone. Silence spread in their wake.
Then: a touch to his mind – *food*.

Charles opened his eyes and met Jean’s. Then he looked down. Saw a bowl of soup in front of him. “Oh,” he said, and, “Thank you.”

“No problem, Mr. Xavier.” Sean’s voice was hushed.

Ororo’s was even smaller: “Do you want some bread? Or cheese?”

“No thank you, Ororo; not just now.” He picked up a spoon and aimed it carefully. “How was your day? Bobby? John?”

“Um.” Bobby’s voice was rough. “We’re kind of – not allowed to talk about what we did.”

“No … but that doesn’t mean you can’t tell me how you are. So. How are you?”

There was another pause.

“O.K., Mr. Xavier.” Bobby cleared his throat. “I’m O.K. Um. How are you?”

A muffled slap that must have been Ororo cuffing him; Charles ignored it, and considered. “I think I’ll be all right, Bobby; thank you. I hope so.”

There was a gust of – *relief ouch I hope so too* – from around him, strong enough to ruffle his veils. He focused on the soup. And the children kept the bowl full, and returned his spoon whenever he dropped it.
Chapter 7

The children were subdued during supper. Charles kept a vague focus on their quiet conversation, surprised at their good manners. Then again, he had seen it before. After an Oxford mission that had made the monthly news, and his stay in the infirmary to have shrapnel dug out of his legs, his students had been the epitome of politeness. But only for the first few days - it had worn off within a week. He was curious to see how long the courtesy would last in this environment.

Or he would be curious, were he not so tired. He caught himself nodding downward into his soup bowl for the third time in as many minutes, and heard Bobby’s huff of laughter.

“C’mon, Mr. Xavier.” There was a clatter as Bobby took the bowl and spoon. “You should probably go upstairs.”

“But it’s hardly even – wait.” He fumbled at his pockets. “What time is it?” And where’s my watch –

“Dunno,” Sean said. Charles hardly heard him; a sliver of panic jabbed through his daze. The watch, my father’s watch – I left it beneath my pillow with my clothes –

He got to his feet, and yelped at the pain from bursting blisters. The collective wince that puffed from the children’s minds like a smoke signal made him smile, with an effort. “Nothing to worry about. I just – these shoes weren’t the best for running.”

“Yeah.” John’s voice came from beneath the table. “You need sneakers or something.”

“Do we have any that would fit?” Ororo asked, and: “He can have mine for now,” Bobby said, and the bubble of talk and sparks of thought – find shoes, find a first aid kit, fix Mr. Xavier – at least broke their anxious quiet.

The watch. He bit his lip. Were clothes usually taken away? “Bobby – where should I wash this?”

He plucked at his shirt, sweaty and grass-stained. “Or what should I do with it?”

“You kinda have to wash them in the tub. At least, there’s always soap.” He could hear the shrug in Sean’s voice. “And we don’t mind if people smell a bit.”

“Except for you, dude, when you wouldn’t take a bath after you got here, for like – three months. Nothing worse than a stinky Mick –”

“John,” Charles snapped. “No ethnic slurs.”

A frozen pause. Then John muttered: “But he calls himself that –”

“As a member of the group in question, that is his prerogative.” His feet throbbed. “But unless you are all in the mood for a lecture on the hegemony of the normative in a post-apocalyptic context, I must ask you please to refrain from any language of the sort.”

The pause stretched longer.

“Hege – wha?”

“Never mind, Sean.” Ororo sighed. “No powers in the kitchen, no bad language in the kitchen, and new rule: no ethnic slurs,” she shaped the words carefully, “in the kitchen. O.K., Mr. Xavier?”
“Yes, fine,” he mumbled. “I’m sorry – I … my feet –” He felt fluid seeping into his socks – blood or pus, and please let them have antibiotics, because the last thing he needed was septicemia –

“He can use my first-aid kit,” John announced. “It’s in my room. I’ll go get it.”

“Nah – we’ll bring him upstairs, all of us. Come on; let’s go.”

There was a scramble for the small candles – one each - left in a box on the counter. They lit Ororo’s with a spill from the stove. Then the children clustered round him as a group, and before Charles knew it he was being propelled toward the stairs. He gritted his teeth past the pain of each step, and allowed them to steer him to his room, where he sank down onto his bed.

But as soon as they had scattered to their own rooms, he dug beneath his pillow, frantically – his suit jacket and shirt, his trousers, and there in the trouser pocket: the watch. Oh, thank God.

Charles poured the chain into one palm. The puddle of steel links warmed, gradually, and blurred as he stared. He didn’t realize he was gripping the piece as tightly as he was, though, until Jean touched a small finger to his white knuckles.

“Oh.” He smiled at her, shaking off the reverie. “Sorry about that.”

She tipped her head, wistfully. Charles held out the watch. “This was my father’s. Do you like it?”

The steel case glinted in her pale hands, its flat gold scrollwork catching in the feeble light. He cast an instinctive eye at the candle she had brought in and set on the floor. There must have been a holder in her room – its size was perfect for her, its iron loops of an intricate, surprisingly delicate craftsmanship. Where did she –

The other children came back in, drawing his attention away from the puzzle. Ororo blew her candle out. “Jean’s is lit,” she explained, and: “you only get one for the night, so we try to save them.”

Bobby held Jean’s candle at a better angle. Ororo took off his shoes, then peeled off his socks – Charles bit down hard on the inside of his cheek. The children hissed in sympathy. ”Man, you are insane,” Sean said, and Bobby half-laughed: ”Who needs sanity?”

“Here.” John crowded in with a scuffed white box, a faded red cross on its top. “Here’s the kit.”

“The Red Cross.” He couldn’t say why it made his throat hurt. Perhaps because he had mostly seen kits of the sort in material recovery missions – Raven, trying to trade one for food – he quelled the memory and forced a smile. “Thank you, John.”

“No prob.” John took out a length of bandage. “Although you should probably get your own. If you write that down and give it to Alex tomorrow morning, he’ll bring you one.”

“He didn’t bring me any chocolate,” Sean grumbled.

“That’s ‘cause you don’t need chocolate. Save it for Quarter Gift.” Ororo gave the socks to Jean.

“Run some water in the tub, O.K.? Put these in, and – you got anything else that needs to soak, Mr. Xavier?”

“Quite a few things, I’m afraid.” He made his voice humorous. “But nothing I’m going to take off in front of you children.”

The boys snickered. “Right. I almost forgot - sorry.” Ororo got to her feet, and held his candle to the flame of Jean’s. Then she wedged it into the holder that Logan and McCoy had left … had it only
been last night?

Charles stared at the candle, his exhaustion making the light shimmer. The water plashing in the bathroom sounded hollow. It was hard to believe that so much had changed, and in only a day … a week …

“Good night Mr. Xavier,” Ororo said. The other children joined in chorus; Bobby added: “I left you a pair of my socks.”

“Good night, all. And thank you.”

Jean joined them from the bathroom, sent good night to him – and they all trooped out, closing the door.

Charles ran a hand over his face. Then he gritted his teeth again, and pushed up off the cot. Took his clothes from yesterday, limped over to the wardrobe – god damn it that hurts – and retrieved a looser shirt and a pair of sweatpants. Someone had been in there, he noted, leaving – and he counted – three pairs of sweats, and three jumpers. He poked through the pile, and his spirits lifted at the sight of blue knit. Dark blue – he took it automatically. Sank his fingers into the soft wool.

“We have a winner.” His voice sounded tired, even to his own ears. “Even if you are unraveling.”

The blue was the same color as Raven’s scales, the last time he had seen her without her disguise. The rose-cheeked English mask she wore; the innocuous English name – Mallory – she wore … he squeezed his eyes shut, fighting the choking knot in his throat. “Damn it.”

Charles took all the clothes and limped to the bathroom. As far as he could tell in the candlelight, the water in the tub was already murky. He stripped, put his old clothes (your real clothes, they captured you in them) and the day’s sweat-stained articles in to soak.

It was chilly in the bathroom. He looked in the rough cabinet beneath the sink; found a toothbrush and a washcloth. Cleaning himself off was the business of two minutes – he had made do with fewer resources on the missions. Ducking his head beneath the tub faucet – feeling the water wash the sweat out of his hair – that was an indulgence.

Then he made his way back to the cot, wearing what were now (and will be forever, world without end, Amen) his night clothes, and collapsed in a heap to take care of his feet. There was rubbing alcohol and a tin of salve in the kit.

Five minutes and several lengths of bandage later, he felt considerably better. Charles tugged on Bobby’s socks – thick and warm, obviously home-knit. He had just rolled his shoulders against the ache in his back, and considered some stretches –

– when he heard footsteps, and the click of a key in the lock. And: “Night, Xavier. Sleep well.”

Angel.

Her steps went down the hall. He heard the same words, muffled; and then the distant clump of a door shutting. Just like he had heard, that very morning.

Except it was more difficult to hear now, because his ears were practically buzzing with his own rage.
Locked up like a goddamned child in a dormitory – curfew, his mind snarled, and sleep well, and student - I.Q. test - my skill set. Who do they fucking think they are?!


Like him.

He checked his watch; wound it carefully. Listened for five minutes, and sent out tiny flickers of his power to stand as warning beacons on the stairs, at the doors.

Then, calmly, coolly, he walked to his door, picked the lock, and set out for the tower again. Just like last night, except that now he had a blue knit sweater, a mental map, and anger coursing through him instead of fear.

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Well ... Anger, and a sense of dull fatigue. Even though it had been easy enough to retrace his steps to the tower … Charles stared at its door, thinking of the winding staircase, and felt his feet throb. Walking, and walking quietly, had been bad enough.

He could climb the tower again, of course; turn off the pain receptors and power through, send his mind out flying once more … to find a nearby town or city. But …

Charles sighed. While he could tell himself that strategy was the best option – retreat, regroup, and plan how best to use his mental energy – he could not help but consider that a defeat.

“Well.” His own whisper was reassuring in silence, in the darkness. He had left the candle in his room. No need to send light flickering through the windows – the high arrow windows, he noted, through which moonlight was streaming. Perhaps he could figure out his latitude from the moon’s position, somehow? From its phase? Turning around, Charles tiredly called up memories of astronomy tutorials – but a bigger window, he’d actually need to see the damned moon before he could calculate anything.

Where to find a bigger window? Someplace that needed light – the workroom, or the library.

Charles froze. The library.

Not even twenty-four hours ago – himself, blindfolded, being walked through a series of enclosed rooms, silent as a tomb. The smell of books and leather and what he realized now had been wood smoke – a library.

His mind raced back through memory: the library, a door, a long hallway, a set of shallow stairs and then the door to his room. And then the blindfold came off.

Before he knew it, Charles had ghosted back along the hallway that led to the tower. Further, and he turned a corner and there were those shallow stairs that led to the dormitory – might as well call it that. He had turned left, he remembered – their right my left – so … he turned in place, back to the dormitory. And looked right.

Nothing, except – and his heart thumped in his chest – a dark opening, which stretched out into another hallway. He hesitated once, then started walking down it as quietly as he could. Accounting for the different sounds of shoes and socks, it was the same hallway – wasn't it?
He closed his eyes to check. Yes, it was the same … although when he opened his eyes again, there wasn’t much difference, since there were no windows of any sort. His vision rapidly adjusted to the darkness. It surrounded him, holding him in black velvet hands.

So soft, so dark … so pitch black, that the shimmering light outlining the door at the hallway’s end looked like the purest gold.

Charles stopped in front of the door and bit his lip. There was a light in there. Enough to be firelight, or maybe – could it be electric? He couldn’t tell from the quality. Not precisely. He’d have to go inside … His hand just barely brushed the wrought iron of the door’s handle –

And he felt a sudden chill.

He snatched his hand back from the iron. Goosebumps raced up his arms, over his neck. For some reason, and all at once, he knew he was being watched.

Charles closed his eyes, stretched out his mind. There was no sign of Frost. The faint presence of the other children – all sleeping, he noticed, amused – registered as the tiniest sparks in the eye of the red-orange hummingbird. The alert beacons, the bird – he catalogued them all – still less than the billiard ball; good. He sent the bird darting through the door in front of him, and ahead. No sign of anyone.

A giddy excitement rose up in him. Now or never. Try it. Because really, Charles thought, as he grabbed the handle and tugged the door open – if they were going to treat him like a disobedient schoolboy, he was going to act like one.

Charles eased the door shut. And let out one shaky sigh – nerves? Excitement? … Pleasure?

For the room in front of him was beautiful.

There were books on carved shelves lining the walls, stretching up to the ceiling. There were a few scuffed chairs and a round table with papers spread over it; a carpet and a desk at one window, a desk with an entire dark array of pigeonholes; and three windows actually, each with thick curtains drawn back. Charles darted over to one and found the moon; made a note of its phase and – he checked his watch – of the time. Then he turned his back to the window, and gazed at the rest of the room again.

The light was electricity - warm, though, golden and low. He couldn’t see its source. There was another door opposite the one he had come through. The fireplace in the middle of the adjoining wall held nothing but ashes. Two chairs were drawn up close to it. And by the chairs: one table with a candelabrum, and one with –

Charles felt a grin split his face. Was that a chess set?

Carefully, he walked closer. It was. The pieces were set up for a game, and – Strange. White was made of – what was it? Steel? He picked up a knight. No; it was heavier than steel would be – it had to be silver. He saw tarnish creeping up the horse’s mane, though the rest was polished to within an inch of its life. He nudged a black pawn with one finger – just about as heavy, so it must be iron, or lead ...

And Charles gasped as the white knight vibrated in his hand.

What –
He set the knight back down, hurriedly. Stared at the other chess pieces.

They were still.

But then the candelabrum – wrought iron – clattered suddenly on the other table. Charles whirled, touched it in disbelief. Then he stretched out his mind –

– and he froze.

_Not literally frozen, his thoughts raced, not frozen, you can move, because it’s not Frost, it’s not Frost –_

It felt different from Frost. Much different – whatever it was. It wasn’t attacking him, for one thing, although he felt a solid, weighty attention zeroing in ... on him? No, on something else - like a screw vise tightening, and – he flinched – making the chess pieces shiver on their board.

What _was_ it?

Charles stared at the other door, his feet rooted to the floor. He shifted his weight. _You can move._

He felt, of all things, one of his blisters pop.

He heard a distant _boom-thud_ – was that another door slamming? and _where?_

Clenching his teeth against their clatter, he sent the red-orange hummingbird flying through the library. Through rooms, through doors that he only remembered as sounds from behind a blindfold – down hallways and into a –

The hummingbird’s wings flashed as it collided with something.

Something immense: a solid, seething coil of darkness.

And the darkness was running towards him.

“Oh, fuck,” Charles gasped, and _shite shite RUN_ – He ran for the door, wrenched it open and pelted down the hallway. _Get away get away_ – The sting of blisters popping and hot fluid in his bandages, and there was the open entrance – he wheeled right and raced for the dormitory.

A _crash_ rebounded down the library hallway – he sensed the darkness poised at the threshold, sending a wave of something after him – Charles found his room, ran inside and slammed the door so hard that its lock and handle and hinges all shook.

It shook. _He_ shook. He was shaking so hard that he could hardly hold onto his watch – the steel trembled in his fingers as he flipped it open. He stared at the time, squinting in the dim light of the candle. _Forgot to blow it out; what a waste, a waste –_

Not even five minutes, since he had looked at the moon. Not that long …

But apparently long enough to have his life flash in front of his eyes. _Fuck._ Charles slid to the floor, his back to the door, as the watch slipped out of his nerveless fingers. He cradled the steel in his sweater; wrapped the chain around his wrist and pulled. The sting of metal on flesh brought him back to himself.

“What was that?” he mumbled. The inside of his mouth tasted metallic; _fear._ “God.”
He reached out a thread of thought; extinguished the warning beacons as quietly as he could. No sense in leaving anything out, to give him away. He flicked the thought out, further …

The darkness – *whatever it was* – had disappeared.

Gone; vanished into the night. Perhaps it couldn’t move past the library door? Next time he would have to be more covert, just so he could see –

Charles felt a cough itching, so he coughed, and it turned into a ragged laugh. *Next time.* Because he knew himself – schoolboy or scientist – well enough to know that there would be a next time. Locks and doors, self-preservation and all sanity notwithstanding.

"Who needs sanity?" he whispered, and felt the laugh turn genuine.
Chapter 8

Tap tap.

“Hey.”

This time, because Charles was listening intently, he caught the scrape and click of a key in the lock. It was a male voice, this morning, and more weight was being shuffled from foot to booted foot outside his door, as the voice said:

“Time to get up. You got twenty minutes.”

“Right.” Charles kicked off his blanket and got out of bed. It was easy enough to slip out of the sleeping clothes and into another set, although it took extra effort to focus on anything but the twinges from his feet. He carefully placed his watch in a shirt pocket, grimaced at the grime coating the bathtub from where his old clothes had been soaking all night, gave them more water, took John’s first aid kit, and padded into the hallway as quietly as he could. He needed time to think; time, food and coffee.

A wisp of thought confirmed which room was Jean’s. Charles eased the door open and stood at her bedside. She was curled up in a ball underneath a blanket. Her forehead was knotted in sleep, and her small hands had the soft fabric in a death grip.

“Jean,” he whispered. Sent out images, soothing ones. A flower, the sun rising, a punt on the river Cherwell ...

She sent nothing in return.

Charles decided to let her sleep, and made his careful way downstairs to the kitchen. He set the macchinetta to work, searching the cupboards for coffee, then assembled a hasty breakfast. He filled a glass with water and drained it. Then another. It would be best to stay hydrated. That and his stomach had roared at him when he had seen the cheese and bread. Fill up on water, and he’d be less likely to eat everything in sight. The children needed to eat, too …

“And speaking of which …”

He smiled as the boys came crashing down the stairs. Well, technically it was only Sean crashing. The other two followed with less noise.

“Mr. Xavier!” Bobby led the way inside and set John and Sean to different tasks. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better, thank you. John, I have your first aid kit – thank you – and I’ve brewed coffee.”

John said nothing but: “Hngh,” as he stared blearily at the macchinetta. Bobby grinned. “He’s like that every morning. Here.” He held up a foot, encased in a ragged trainer. “We can switch shoes – I know I said I would, yesterday. Don’t know if you’re running today or not.”

“Mm.” Charles ate a dried apricot. “Let’s wait and see, shall we?”

Then there was nothing but the sounds of morning, familiar to him from so many days at Oxford – though here on a much smaller scale. He took his thoughts away from the clatter and chatter, though – carefully paced himself, eating, and cast his mind to the library mystery. Item the first: he had only
touched the door handle, the windowsill and the chess pieces; Item the second: even given his discretion, something had chased him out; and Item the third: he had been scared out of his outstanding Oxonian wits.

How to solve the mystery? He took a meditative sip of coffee; John had sloshed an unhealthy amount into a cup for him. He couldn’t ask the children – he didn’t want them to get in trouble or, even worse, get ideas of breaking curfew themselves. They couldn’t run as fast as he, and they didn’t have …

A prickle on the back of his neck was the first warning of Frost’s probe. Charles only had time to say, “Best put down anything breakable,” before the wake-up call went needling into all of their minds.

“Ow.” “Ouch.” “God, I hate that bitch –”

“No bad language in the kitchen, John,” Sean said in a high-pitched voice. Then he frowned. “Where’s Ororo, anyway? Not as much fun if she’s not here –”

“To hear herself be mocked; really, Sean,” Charles kept his tone mild. “For that matter, where is Jean?”

The kitchen door creaked open; a young man – boy? – with a strong build and close-cropped blond hair took one look inside, then turned around without a word.

“Alex!” Sean’s voice cracked. “We felt the call. I bet Ororo and Jean are upstairs – it’s not like they would try to –”

“Yeah, got the message,” the other boy - Alex - called back as he took the staircase two steps at a time. “Give me two minutes.”

There was a pause. Charles looked at Sean’s freckles, standing out like a pox on his suddenly white skin. “Sean? What would they … not try to do?”

Sean looked down at his plate. “Escape. Because,” he mumbled, “I mean, Angel –”

“Shut up,” John snapped.

“Really,” Charles felt tolerably blank. “You can trust me, you know.”

“Uh-huh. Last adult to tell me that hit me with a tranq the second my back was turned –”

Bobby reached out and gave John a gentle punch to the shoulder. “Chill, man. And Mr. Xavier, it’s not that we don’t trust you. It’s just not the best thing to talk about. At breakfast, I mean.” He gave Charles a lopsided smile, with less warmth in it than usual.

Charles did not even attempt to break the silence that followed. He busied himself instead with preparing cheese and bread for Ororo and Jean, since he refused to admit that they would not be coming downstairs in just a moment, right as rain –

“And here they are,” he finished. Jean had sent him a picture – curiously wavering – of her neatly made bed. He felt them on the stairs, and then outside the door – “Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Ororo’s voice was flat; she held Jean in her arms. “Thanks.”

She sat with difficulty: Jean refused to let go. Charles hardly had time to send a brush of what’s
wrong before the young man – Alex – tromped into the kitchen.

“You guys know that doesn’t fly, right?” He shut the door, grunting at its weight. “Not that I care what stupid shit you try to pull when Angel’s here, but when I’m here it’s my neck on the block. So –”

“I’m telling you,” Ororo said, quietly furious, “she’s sick. She has a headache. Right, Jean?”

Jean hadn’t touched her food; there were shadows under her eyes. She nodded.

Alex shrugged. “Not my problem – not your problem either, Storm, so you should really keep out of it, you know.”

“You don’t know much –” she lashed out, but: “Storm?” Charles asked.

Alex flushed. “Never mind. So. You must be Charles Xavier.” He mispronounced the last name, affecting a hoity-toity accent. “I can call you Charlie, right?”

Charles fixed him with an impassive look. “I’d just as soon you not. Even though I am in this dormitory, I’m considerably older than you are. Mr. Xavier will do.”

Alex's jaw had dropped. Charles refused to look away. He saw a flush spread down Alex's neck and turn darker, and then: “O.K., Mr. Xavier, you know what happens if you mouth off a Monitor?” A crackle of energy ran over the ragged shirt, somehow – where the hell did that come from? – and the other children flinched.

In for a penny, in for a pound. Do it.

Focusing his thoughts into a sharp point – still less than a billiard ball - good – Charles pictured a scalpel, slicing, and quickly, quietly, he flicked the last minute out of Alex’s mind, like a magpie nipping up a silver string. Then he tossed mild-mannered complacency over the rest. Fine cheesecloth over a bowl of quivering gelatin –

“Huh.”

Charles gritted his teeth, pulling back all the power and sinking it as far down as it could go. Veil. He had never actually tried an excision before. The magpie had been eager, white and black with sparkling eyes - but now it was gone. Odd, to have a bird appear and then vanish. But, “There’s a first time for everything,” Charles muttered to himself, and waited for Frost’s icy touch, for Alex’s eyes to flare, for –

“Mr. Xavier?” Ororo’s voice was hushed. “What do you mean?”

“Just a moment.” He watched Alex carefully. “Wait and see if –”

Alex shook his head, then blinked. “O.K. You know that doesn’t fly, right?”

John’s eyes widened; Bobby said: “Yeah, we know, Alex. We’re sorry.”

“Good.” Alex’s brow was furrowed. “Anyway, you know your schedules – all the same as before. I’ll be back in five. We’re off to a bit of a late start, so eat fast.” The bracelet on his left wrist winked as he ran a hand over his buzz cut. “Yeah.”

He turned on one foot, and left.

The door had hardly closed when all eyes flew to Charles. “Wow,” breathed John, and Bobby’s
voice was uneasy: “What was that?”

“Well –” Charles felt an abrupt wash of dizziness. “Um. It’s nothing I’ve tried before.”

“And probably nothing you should try again.” Ororo stared at him, intent. “You know … Lady Frost can take anything she wants from us, from our minds. Even from Jean’s.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Charles saw Jean shake her head no. Ororo did not, though, as she was focused on him, and continuing. "So if she sees that you went ahead and messed with Alex – without him noticing … geez, Mr. Xavier.” She bit her lip. “Please don’t do that again? At least, not with us watching?”

“I – I hadn’t even though of that …” The dizzy spell had gone. Now he just felt ill. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s O.K.” But her voice was small.

“No, it is not O.K., because – haven’t you heard, Ororo?” Sean waggled a finger. “No powers in the kitchen.”

Bobby laughed. The solemn mood was broken. The boys finished and cleared the plates and cutlery; Ororo coaxed Jean to eat a few bites. Alex breezed back in. “All set?”

“Yeah,” John said, but: “Almost forgot.” Bobby crossed his arms over his chest. “Alex, Mr. Xavier needs a few things. A first aid kit, some tennis shoes, and – anything else, Mr. Xavier?”

“A bottle of Scotch,” Charles muttered. Alex snorted. He had ferreted a scrap of paper from one pocket along with stub of pencil, and was writing in a laborious hand.

“I’ll rustle those up, Mr., um, Xavier? Am I saying it right?”

“Yes. And some laundry soap, please.” He herded the children towards the door, noting with a twinge Ororo’s worried look, directed at John and Sean’s gleeful grins. “Let’s go.”

“Yes, let’s.” Alex tapped Jean on the shoulder. “C’mon.”

They went their separate ways. It took him a moment to switch shoes with Bobby, so Charles had time to see Jean slowly leave Ororo’s arms. Her head was hanging so low that Alex could hardly manage the blindfold. Then Ororo was following the rest of them, jaw set and lips pressed into a thin line, and Alex and Jean were walking up the stairs.

He took all of his worry, and what he sensed of Jean’s pain – from meters away, my god – and secured them under the strongest shields he had.

The morning with McCoy ran along similar lines as the previous one. Charles made noises of interest as McCoy chattered about his work, oddly manic. He helped finish clearing the tables, then helped unroll sheet after sheet of blueprints. His interest was finally piqued – the project looked more complex than any that had ever been possible in Her Majesty’s government. And even when he had been asked to consult, his teaching duties had made participation from Oxford rather difficult.

After a long hour of discussion, Charles hadn’t realized that he had fallen silent until McCoy cleared his throat. Wait – no, he hadn’t cleared his throat. He had made a strangled sound, and was clutching the ring on his right hand. Odd. What had they been talking about? Charles retraced his thoughts: he had explained his one visit to a pre-War particle accelerator; McCoy had wistfully expressed a desire to see one; Charles had recommended asking for vacation pay, and McCoy had laughed, and then
Charles didn’t know what to make of it. Could Frost sense them taking as much as a two-minute tea break? Without the tea? Ridiculous.

“Sorry, Hank – sorry.” He smiled. “Just slightly wonderstruck. Where will you get the power to run this? And honestly –” he pointed at a separate schematic – “is it a variation on an MRI, or a cryogenic tank, or what? And how will you use it?”

McCoy was still staring.

“Hank?”

McCoy shivered, then jerked his eyes away from the window. He fixed Charles with a look. “I’m not going to use it. All I do is the engineering.”

“All? You say that as though it’s something small. It’s really not.”

“Yeah, I’m so glad you’re here to tell me that.”

Charles stared. Of all the things he hadn’t expected, McCoy snapping at him - growing a spine, his mind whispered - after all of forty-eight hours’ acquaintance … well. That was first and foremost on the list. McCoy had picked up on his surprise, though, because his shoulders slumped.

“I’m sorry. It’s just … I’m just …”

“Just what?” Charles kept the prompt gentle. Years of working with alternately sullen and hormonal students had left him able to pinpoint the moment a secret would slip its restraints.

McCoy tipped his head back. Light from the windows picked out the frames of his glasses. “Mr. Xavier … I already like working with you. I mean, I think we’re going to get a lot done … but …”

“… ‘But’ what?”

McCoy darted a look back and forth, almost as though he were – checking for eavesdroppers? Why on earth – but he was whispering: “Tell them not to talk about it.”

“Beg pardon?”

“Escape – tell them not to talk about it.” The sunlight gleamed off McCoy’s necklace – steel links, Charles absently noted. Above that necklace, the jump of an Adam’s apple, the clench and unclench of other muscles in the throat. “You have to be careful when you’re here, Mr. Xavier, because if you even put a toe out of line, you –”

“Hank.” He made his voice neutral, quietly curious. “It was one passing remark, and made hours ago to boot. Why on earth need we censor our conversations to that extent? And what do you know about people escaping?”

“Maybe I – maybe I know what happens, if you do,” McCoy said. “Just don’t think about it.”

Charles blinked. “What happened to you?”

Sweat had beaded on McCoy's forehead. “I can’t tell you about it.”

“Just like you can’t tell me what sort of machines are used here; what this machine,” Charles pointed at the schematic, “does; where we even are, for pity’s sake –”
“Oh, that?” McCoy’s jaw clenched. “We’re in what used to be New York State. North-ish – up by Ithaca.”

Charles had a moment to process the surprise – his mind caught fire with elation *I knew it I knew it* – before McCoy continued in a miserable rush: “Because who cares if you know? What are you going to do, honestly? You put a foot over the estate line and they’ll know; there’s not another person for miles and miles; and they catch you and … and do things to you.”

“Things. What sorts of things?”

“Things. You know what, Mr. Xavier?” McCoy stabbed a finger at the blueprints. “This is for a telepath, a goddamned telepath.” He looked wild; Charles, suddenly uneasy, had the impression of wheels spinning off a tricycle, a tricycle with a child still on it. “They’ll screw you into it and make you scream, so if you even think about escape, you –”

“Escape?” A deep voice cut in from behind them. “Who’s thinkin’ about escape?”

They both whirled. Logan stood behind them, leaning casually against the door. “’Lo, Xavier. McCoy.”

“Logan -” McCoy was suddenly babbling, “Logan, I didn’t mean to say anything, you know I didn’t – you know I –”

“Yeah.” Logan sounded oddly gentle. “I know.” He tapped the door with the heel of one heavy shoe. “Let’s go, X man. And McCoy – you need to stop work. You need to go take your pills and lie down. O.K.?”

Charles had no idea what was going on; there was nothing he hated more. “Really, I don’t think –”

“Nobody asked you what you think, Xavier.” Logan’s voice was still gentle, but underneath it was coiled something with no give whatsoever. “McCoy had a rough night –”

“I didn’t have a night. I didn’t sleep, I can’t sleep -”

“- and this is a bad kind of day for him. So. McCoy, do as I say. And you,” Logan quirked an eyebrow at him. “C’mon.”

Charles followed him, feeling his knees wobble. “What the hell was that?” he hissed. “We were just discussing a project, and then he falls to pieces all of a –”

“X,” Logan breathed, quietly, “you ain’t hearin’ another word inside. That lab has cameras everywhere. Every – fucking – where. You don’t think they let that much tech just sit on its ass, do you?”

“Too much of an asset –” Charles said, glib.

“Ha ha.” Logan pushed open the outside door with a grunt, and took a deep breath of the cold air. “Good weather.”

“Good weather for running?”

Logan broke off from his intent scan of the treeline. “Oh hell no, X. You see, I had it from a reputable source yesterday –” dark eyebrows waggled, “that you might, in fact, be absolutely positively bugfuck crazy.”

“Didn’t know they had juries in jolly old England.”

“Well. There are differences, and similarities, and –”

Logan wasn’t listening. He was staring at the trees. Then he quirked a wry smile, hooked a thumb at himself – “Judge” – spread out both his arms – “jury” – and waved a hand at the forest – “and executioner.”

Charles hid a shiver. “Who’s the executioner?”

And – had that been a movement, at the treeline?

“What’s the executioner, you mean. That forest, there.” He jerked his head. “Or if not that forest, the cold. Or if not that, agents of the Free West who pick you up and squirrel you away in Colorado for their experiments.”

“… What?”

“Not that that’d happen, because: we protect you, Xavier. Someone gets hit with the stupid stick and decides to run away? They get tracked down and brought back before other people – who are less nice, by the way – can grab ‘em. So it’s for your own good.”

“How very comforting.” His jaw was beginning to ache, where he had clenched it. “Is that the party line?”

“God damn it, X, be careful.” Logan hissed out a breath; it puffed white in the air. “Don’t say that shit out loud.”

“Logan: what has brought this on?” Charles kept his voice level. “Ororo and Jean were late to breakfast this morning, and now McCoy has a panic attack in the laboratory, and you start intimidating me in a markedly cozy fashion –”

A snort. “Give me a break. You honestly don’t feel it?”

Charles frowned. “Feel what?”

Logan had stopped, mid eye-roll, and was now looking at him askance. “You – you don’t feel it? Really?”

“Feel what?” A tendril of thought – oh – he’d have to drop the shield he’d had in place since leaving this morning, to cover his own incursion on Alex’s mind –

An ice-cold prickle spread over his entire skull, and Charles felt his stomach lurch. It felt as though he were wearing some bizarre, unpleasant sort of electric cap. Blinking, he looked at Logan. “What the hell is that?”

“And now he feels it. Well.” A shrug. “You get used to it, on days like this – and I don’t know what special telepathy shit you were pulling to keep yourself from a migraine … but. Whenever something weird happens – people late for things, y’know … Anyway. The watch is doubled.”

“Oh.” Charles felt faint. *Frost.* “Well. Don’t mind me if I pull it again.” And he put the shield back up; reinforced it. The ache faded into a distant buzz, then nothing.

Logan wasn’t listening. “It’s just so we can make sure nothing weirder happens. Like: people getting
stupid ideas and doing stupid-ass shit. Like making a break for it.” His eyes were narrowed, focused on the trees.

Charles squinted; he could have sworn something had moved. But dropping the shield to find out would mean a headache, so –

“Anyway.” With a shrug, Logan reached beneath his leather jacket. “Let’s get it out of your system.”

And then Charles could do nothing but stare, as Logan held out a gun.

“Take it.”

He felt his mouth opening and closing. *Like a fish,* came the distant thought, and an image: the Oxford public library and their iridescent fishtank; Raven pressing her palms against the glass, and fat Mrs. Berkis the librarian: *don’t smudge that, lovey –*

“Xavier.” Logan’s voice was hard. “Take it, and shoot me. And then run.”

“I can’t –” He knew his eyes were wide. “In cold blood? Really, I –”

Logan pressed the gun into his hand; wrapped his fingers around it. Some type of Browning automatic - worn, well-used. The clip was placed correctly. The safety was on.

“Shoot me, Xavier, and run. That’s a direct order.” He grinned, showing white teeth. “And in case you’ve forgotten, I’m one of the bastards keeping you locked up. Poor little baby, so far from home –”

The jibe stung, but schoolyard taunts were beneath him. When he had supervised the free hour of Oxford’s students, after all, he had –


They had all been underestimating him, here. He looked into Logan’s dark eyes. Those eyes were … smirking at him. And for all his rough attempts at camaraderie, Logan was standing there, right there, between Charles and his freedom. *Escape. You’re not like the rest – you can escape ...*

“What’s the problem? Here’s a hint: you point it at what you want to kill.”

Charles felt his thoughts turn very cold.

He could escape. Logan was in the way. But he could put Logan *out* of the way, with one shot.

“C’mon, X man.” An eye roll. “While we’re young, huh?”

And if Logan thought he’d pull the shot, somehow – aim deliberately wide, or in the air – well, then he had another think coming. *Escape. Everyone can be deceived – Logan can be shot and you can escape –*

*Shoot him. Shoot him and run. Escape.*

“But –” Charles kept his voice stammering, and faked a wobble in his wrist. “But I don’t really know how to use a gun – I mean, I mean –”

Logan made a sound of contempt. “Why am I not surprised? O.K., X boy, take off the safety – yeah, with your thumb, like that. Don’t use both your thumbs, you moron.”
"Um, then what?"

"Then you –"

It was extremely satisfying, Charles thought, to take Logan with a shot between the eyes - and right as he was beginning to roll them.

He fell like a sack of bricks. Before he had even hit the ground, though, Charles was sprinting for the woods. He ignored the flaring pain from his feet; the weight of the gun in his hand. Make it to the trees he thought, cold and removed – just like an Oxford mission - make it to the trees and then duck and weave, and get another shot ready –

He made it to the trees. He felt his own breath rasp in and out of his lungs, tight and controlled, as he hid behind a tree, coiled himself up to sprint again, and leaped out –

– and he was hit from his blind spot, hard, by something that felt like a wrecking ball. A fast wrecking ball.

Charles kept himself limp, dropped with the weight, and tried to roll – but a hand – was it a hand? knocked the gun away and wrenched one of his arms behind him, trapping it; then the same happened to the other and there was a knee digging into the small of his back, god damn it.

“Logan,” he croaked. “Logan – how the hell did you get up from a shot like that? I swear I hit you – I swear it.”

There was no answer.

The air was suddenly cold on the back of his neck. “Logan?”

No answer.

But Logan – no, the something crouched over him was breathing, and … it had human hands. One of the hands had moved to his wrists, pinning them together, right in front of its knee. The other one had tangled in his hair and mashed his face down – shite – right into the leaves and bracken. Definitely human hands. They were warm.

And its breath was warm.

Charles tried to struggle; the hands clenched mercilessly and he yelped in pain as a thumb found a pressure point and dug in hard. “Logan, this isn’t funny –”

“I know, right?” Logan’s voice, from a distance; Charles heard the sound of jogging. He frantically tried to move, to escape, squirming – but he couldn’t see, couldn’t catch a glimpse. He couldn’t break free –

Logan was still talking, coming closer. “I didn’t think you had it in you to kill me like that. Damn, Xavier. My mighty heart is breaking.”

The crunch of footsteps, and there were Logan’s boots, right next to his head. “All right,” he heard Logan mutter, and, “I think he gets it.”

The grip tightened, somehow, and … was that a growl?

Logan breathed out, long. “He gets it. Enough.”

For a long moment, Charles swore he felt a glare boring through the back of his skull.
Then he felt a puff of hot breath, and the crushing weight was gone.

Charles lay still, gasping. Logan’s voice rang out. “Where’s the gun, man?” His footsteps crunched some more. “Oh wait – here we go. And – oh, oh, the safety’s off,” he tsk’ed. “You coulda shot your eye out.”

“I didn’t have time to check it.” Rolling to his back, Charles stared up at the tree canopy. “What was that?”

“Oh, that? Forest spirit. I used to say the Wendigo, but since the Ojibwe are further north -”

“Come on.”

“Need-to-know basis.” Logan moved into his line of sight and gave him a manic grin. “And all you need to know is: that is what catches and eats all the little boys and girls that don’t behave themselves.”

Charles stared at him. Logan arched an eyebrow. “Now. Are you going to behave yourself, Mr. Xavier? Hm?”

“Why not?” he said, faintly, and stumbled to his feet.

“Great. Then start behaving yourself by telling me: where’d you learn to shoot like that? You had me going for a minute, you really did.”


He didn't realize he had stopped and bent over, hands tight on his knees and head swimming, until he felt Logan pat him on the back. "Easy, Xavier."

"I tried to kill you." He fought back a wave of nausea. "God - I tried -"

"Key word: 'tried.' And no word in this world's gonna make your breakfast taste any better coming up than it did going down. Deep breath. Deep, cleansing breath, c'mon."

"Sorry," Charles mumbled, tasting bile.

"Nothing to be sorry about. You were just following orders. 'Shoot me and run,' I said - and you did. And right between the eyes, too.” Logan tapped his forehead, grinning. Then he uncurled the fingers of one square hand and showed him a mashed and flattened bullet. "No harm done. Pretty good party trick, if I say so myself."

"Your mutation – oh.” Charles exhaled, straightening, and stared. “Healing … regeneration … That’s amazing.”

Logan visibly preened. “I know, right?” He clapped Charles on one shoulder. “Let’s go back inside. Party’s over – and I want to hear more about these mission things. You have to do recon, or they put you on active duty?”

“A mix.” Charles massaged his shoulder. It still hurt, where he had been tackled by - what in blazes was that thing, anyway? He kept talking while darting glances around the forest. What had it been? Where had it gone? “And do all your parties involve guns?”

“Yeah, guns or shit blowing up. What can I say? We’re a fun crowd. C’mon.”
Following Logan back to the manor, Charles turned over the entire incident in his mind. His heart was still hammering; his thoughts were scurrying back and forth like mice. He felt terrified.

He didn’t like feeling terrified.

So, carefully, he took down his shield and – even more carefully – sent a small, drab sparrow flying through the weave of Frost’s telepathic net.

Its wings fluttered against something tracking rapidly deeper into the woods: a seethe of roiling iron - like a cloud of shrapnel – then: rage – and Charles yanked the bird back, breathing fast.

It was the same as last night. The same mind. The same thing.

And now he was ten times as curious.

If anything, the children were even more subdued at dinner than they had been the evening before – small wonder, Charles thought, what with Frost’s field hanging over them like malevolent humidity, all day long. He took the first aid kit, soap, and trainers from Alex without a word, and gave the other set of shoes back to Bobby. Bobby returned his loafers. Charles spared them a glance – the soles were ingrained with gravel, and a piece of what looked like sea glass - odd - had embedded itself in one heel.

Well. He would consider that later.

Just as he would consider Jean … later. She looked just as pale, just as tight-lipped as she had that morning. The shadows under her eyes were darker. But Charles didn’t have time to engage in chat beyond the ordinary – and even that chat was only answered by leaden mumbling. Not that Jean would chat. But he sensed he could draw the answer out of her, with his mind … it would just take planning, and trust, and care.

Not the work of one evening, in other words. What could be done in one evening? The library … He bit down on his own excitement – the something, whatever-it-was, could move around outside, but how was it confined when inside? He would have to find out.

Time flew by. Before Charles knew it, each had taken a candle and gone to bed, and Alex had locked them all in their rooms. The slightest mental touch confirmed that the children had fallen into the heavy sleep of exhaustion. He had killed some time by scrubbing his dirty clothes with the soap; now he hung them up to dry off any projecting bits and pieces he could find. There weren’t that many. They probably didn’t want anyone committing suicide – easier to pare down protrusions than to take away any and all pieces of cloth. Though, really, one could manage with a shoestring and the doorknob. He had taken his obligatory guard shifts in Oxford’s prison; he had seen it done –

Charles shook off the morbid thoughts and peered cautiously out of his room. He set up tiny flares of mental awareness as he walked to the shallow stairs; up them and to the long, dark hallway. He walked down it as quietly as he could – easier, since he had left off his shoes and socks in favor of bare feet – towards the distant rectangle of golden light. Tiny thoughts; the smallest alarms – less than a billiard ball – and really, that’s getting to be automatic by now …

Carefully, he unrolled the sleeves of his blue sweater, and gripped the metal handle of the door. It was possibly keyed to body temperature, to the sense of skin – he couldn’t be sure, but he was taking no chances.

The library was just as he remembered, inside. If anything, it was warmer and even more inviting than it had been before. There was a couch that he hadn’t remembered, with a low back, upholstered
in a warm red material. And on the table ... There were the maps, but what was on them?

Charles bit down on the temptation. Better, first, to make sure of what might be coming, and coming soon. A thought the size of a bird, rolled thin as pastry with a silver rolling pin, and then thinner … such a thought could be unfurled like a hall runner and cast out the other library door, and sent coasting over a great distance. Charles did so.

Then – carefully, quickly – he picked up the maps and gave each one a look. He could recover the information later.

And it was only because he was watching the table, he realized, that he saw the steel nib of a pen … quiver.

*Right. Here we go.* He strode over to the chess set, stared down; then made up his mind. Picked up the black king – *take the bait, whatever you are* – and cupped it in his hand.

He waited – and his power … stretched as thin as gossamer over a good chunk (at least, he hypothesized) of that part (*whatever part it is*) of the manor … waited.

“Come on, you,” Charles muttered. “Come on. Where are you?” Acting on an impulse, he held the black king above his head and let it fall.

It landed on a chair with a soft thud.

And the guarding field of his power – so thin … *all* of it went up in a blaze, crisped in the heat of a burst of something else’s fury.

“Oh there you are –” he gasped, and took off running. *Run – run!* The same mind, creature, *thing* – human? – as in the woods, as last night: a whirlwind of metal barreling down the hallway even goddamned faster this time – “*Fuck* –” Charles panted as he darted into his room. “For the love of …”

It only took a moment to lock the door again, from the inside. *Getting better at it …* He regrouped his power, fluttering back to him like flakes of ash. Sent it spinning out, and ramped up the power of the flares on the walls, on the flagstones, at the door …

So he felt the instant the creature stepped over the library threshold.

And when it started walking down the hall.

“Oh.” Charles gulped. “Oi. You can’t do that. Can you – can you do that?”

And it wasn’t walking, really – it was … prowling.

It only took one flash of awareness from the flares – a lean shadow, dark even in the gloom of the hallway – folding down to its feet and *sniffing* the stone – it only took that glimpse for Charles to start feeling less clever, and more terrified.

He looked down at his feet.

“… oh no.”

Some of the blisters from yesterday had torn again, in his sprint. And as he watched, blood welled up from one of the biggest, and dripped onto the floor.

Charles’ heart thumped hard in his chest, as he took in the blood spatter that led to his door. His door,
and back down the hallway, back to the threshold, back to the creature …

Tiny flecks of crimson in the candlelight. Hardly enough to – oh God, the *candlelight* –

Charles ran for the candle; blew it out and dove into his bed. For a long moment, he could only hold the blankets to himself, and shiver. It was ridiculous, to be sitting straight up and staring, like a child afraid of the dark. Or of starving, or of imprisonment – of nuclear war, of men and monsters … of everything turned out to be true, a *true thing* in this brave new world … and no hideous fairy tale …

He almost bit through his lip when he sensed the creature turn down the dormitory hallway. *The door is locked*, his mind whispered, reassuring, and *you’re safe – you’re safe* –

The doorknob turned.

Frozen, Charles stared at it. *It’s locked – it’s locked* –

And he heard a rasping creak, and a rattle – and then the mechanism of the lock clicking open.

Charles had found, in certain moments of his life, after the war, that he could rely on a combination of adrenaline and the most potent fear to slow down his movements. To make them silent. So it was easy enough to lie back, close his eyes, and pretend to be asleep.

Too late to pull up the blankets; too late to avert his face. He had to face the door, and breathe deeply – in and out, *in and out* …

A floorboard creaked. The creature was walking inside – two steps, *three* and Charles felt a whisper of movement above him.

And then he felt a warm breath, wafting over his face.

He didn’t dare bring all his flickers of power back from their places in the hallway – what if this thing were a telepath? What if it could detect the flares, the alarms … what if it knew he was awake? …

Then, for a brief moment, he felt nothing. Had the thing gone? Had it - Charles bit down hard on his tongue as he heard a scrape, and smelled the faintest trace of something charred.

There were the footfalls again. And the warm breath -

- drawing closer. Closer. A puff on his cheekbone.

*Don’t panic.* Charles swallowed the metallic taste of fear – *don’t open your eyes.*

Another breath. And a finger, tracing through a lock of his hair that fell sweaty over his brow – a warm touch –

It was a relief to channel his flinch into a sleepy stir and mumble. Charles almost heard the finger being snatched back – he definitely felt another exhale – and was that a growl? No, it was a shuffle, and …

… and something oddly … hot? Heat near his hair, and two drops - three - falling in soft *plips* onto his pillow.

Charles felt his mind race *what is it what is it*, but only gasped and sat up again, heart pounding, after the creature had left – after it had passed the threshold of the library and slammed the door. He almost heard the reverberation – strong and heavy as cold iron.
“Stop it,” he told himself. Charles scrubbed his face with his hands. Then, cautiously, he felt his pillow. There was something on it – something …

He stumbled out of bed and held the pillow up, up to where moonlight glimmered through the arrow windows.

“Shite,” he breathed.

Wax. Three hardened drops of wax. And four fingertips' worth of blood.

And not just in moonlight. Charles turned, skin on his neck prickling, to stare at the candle resting on the mantelpiece.

To stare, because it had been lit again.

Charles didn’t sleep much that night. And it was only when he woke, and went to the mirror to talk away the remnants of his fear, that he saw the streak of blood on his forehead. Vivid red on white, beneath a dark brown-black, above wide and staring blue.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

It seems worthwhile to reiterate the warnings, and add one that I missed.

**Warning** for: dark!fic, post-apocalyptic AU, captivity, intimations of child abuse, graphic depictions of violence, dubcon.

Thanks. S.

*Raven.*

Charles was sitting cross-legged on his bed when Angel knocked on the door. He had taken a quick bath and dressed, re-bandaged his feet, scrubbed the floor of his room and, when all was done, stared into the mirror again. *You are strong. You are powerful. Everyone can be deceived.* “I’ll get out of here,” he had whispered, and: “Raven, Raven …”

If Angel was surprised by his immediately opening the door at her knock, she did not say so. Instead she gave him a shove between the shoulder blades. “Go get some coffee, Mr. Xavier,” and: “How are your feet?”

He made vague sounds in reply. But on the way down to the kitchen, and during the entirety of breakfast, he repeated the name to himself. A talisman. He had been taken to this cold place in his sister's stead; he would escape it just as she would, were she here. Charles knew Raven, so well; like the freckles and scars on the backs of his hands. She would never give up; she would never give in …

The monster in the library could keep to itself. He would turn to the tower instead. All his power, all of his mind brought to bear on escape, and Raven.

John and Sean were in high spirits; Bobby and Ororo less so. And Jean … Jean looked even worse than she had the previous day. As Frost’s icy touch passed over them all, he saw her squeeze her eyes tightly shut. Charles took in her wan features and her wince, and decided: some of his power would be focused on Jean. Unraveling the mystery there.

The glee of the younger boys was explained when Angel almost skipped inside, saying: “Quarter Gift! Quarter Gift in approximately one week, ladies and gents, so tell me what you want!”

“Chocolate!” Sean yelped; John talked over him, and the babble sent a twinge through Charles’ temple.

“O.K., enough.” Angel grinned. “Let me rephrase that. Write down what you’d like, on these pieces of paper –” she let a handful of paper scraps float to the tabletop, “and with any luck, you – will be a winner!”

At Charles’ raised eyebrows, she explained: “Quarter Gift, Mr. Xavier. Four times a year, students are permitted to ask for something; whether or not they get it depends on security, of course, but something usually gets given, and it’s good. So even though you’re totally an adult, and probably
above such things …” She gave him a wry smile. “Feel free.”

“Not quite free,” he murmured. “I suppose a complete survival kit and a pair of skis is out of the question.”

Angel shot him a sharp look. “Watch it, Mr. Xavier. I don’t know about you, but I don’t need a repeat of yesterday.”

“Like ‘Duck, Duck, Goose,’ only with electricity,” John snickered. “Like freeze tag,” Sean added. Ororo gave them a tired glare, her arm around Jean’s hunched shoulders.

“Like neither, when you consider.” Charles kept his voice level. “Anything but a children’s game.”

Angel shrugged. “Child’s play to Lady Frost. So anyway …” She held out pencil stubs. “Let’s have it.”

Charles considered asking for hard liquor, but wrote: reading material/books – various subjects, advanced levels, including any available histories of the Free West and the EBS, and of their conflict. His mind turned the topic around while the pencil was still moving. Quarter Gift – Quarter – and: four times a year … of course. Some aspects of human culture never changed, it seemed, even with nuclear war and dictatorships. The system was undoubtedly structured on the seasons - well, what had been the seasons; he would bet his life’s savings that next week was thus the autumnal equinox.

He handed his slip of paper to Angel without thinking. For his mind was working: 23 September 1969 … which meant that today was 16 Tuesday, and he had been brought to the students’ quarters on 13 Saturday … That night, the night of the thirteenth, he had fled to the top of the tower and sent his mind flying to Raven …

Raven …

Pulling his thoughts away from his sister, Charles felt a shiver skate down his spine as he realized: he had been taken out of the cell on the sixth day of his captivity. Thus, he must have awoken, and met Frost, on 7 September. But the Takers – the EBS – had found him in Oxford on the first of the month …

Even accounting for transport … he had been sedated for a week.

His skin crawled. What had they done, while he had been unconscious? They could have done anything -

“All right, everyone.” Angel jammed the paper scraps into the front pocket of her sweatshirt. “Let’s go. Oh, and Mr. Xavier, you’re doing your afternoon stuff all day today. Morning guy’s out sick.”

Charles remembered McCoy’s wide-eyed panic of the previous morning. His mouth suddenly tasted bitter, like he had eaten ashes instead of bread.

The taste didn’t leave for the rest of the day. Logan was his usual self, dogging his heels during their endless rounds of the manor, steering him into tree stumps in the woods, making him dodge random punches. “That’s for shooting me, right in the head,” and, “That’s for being such a damn good shot, X man,” and, “That’s just for shits and giggles.”

If anything, the bitterness had tripled when Logan was through with him. But Charles chalked it up to anaerobic excess.
For the next few nights, Charles picked the lock on his door and made his silent way to the tower. The first night there had felt strangely familiar, as though his efforts at sending forth his thoughts had left a ghost of himself to haunt the battlements. His ensuing efforts continued along the same pattern as the first: no success. But, Charles told himself, you're getting more accurate. And it was quite difficult, to fling forth such a small portion of his power, to control it over such a distance. It would be unreasonable to expect results so soon.

Two nights before the equinox, though, his raven found Syracuse.

He had shot it towards the North Star, then sent it angling slightly east. After all, he had those images of the library maps preserved in his memory. It was only a shame that he had paged through them so quickly, for certain details were missing. On a certain black-and-white map, there had been a red stripe lying to the north of a blue dot, and three more concentrated areas in red strung along the stripe like beads of blood. So he took a guess – made a hypothesis – and had flown north by northeast …

From such a height, the town looked like nothing more than a sprinkling of silver dust.

Charles had spiraled down through the air, his pulse leaping in his ears. There were lights – not numerous, though, and quite weak. Were they gas lamps? Electric? He could not tell, but he could send the raven winging up what had been a silver thread from far above, what turned out to be a main street – it was so small, this hamlet, and he hardly knew what had happened when he crashed into a person, until a panicked flash of hey something in my head! made him gasp and flutter free.

Then, with an unfathomable sensation – as though he were crashing through one spiderweb sort of wall after another, with a thwack, thwack, thwack rhythm that he realized was his pulse – Charles opened his eyes wide and saw: he was back at the top of the tower.

He lay there for a long time, grinning from ear to ear. He rifled through the person – boy’s – thoughts: out after curfew – games start tomorrow – Syracuse will win – and a sense of mine and pride making that same name glow …

Syracuse. It could be done – the raven could find settlements; hell, he could find people. “Could I talk to them, I wonder?” Charles had said, and: “Damn,” because his voice was rasping, as though he had been shouting for an hour.

Charles had sat up. Then he had been promptly and spectacularly sick – but even that, and his crushing migraine, could not dampen his high spirits over the next two days.

Then the Quarter Gift was given, and his mood … well.

His mood changed.

McCoy had been back at work for a few days; Logan had been consistently and cheerfully relentless. Charles found that even as his thoughts ranged wide and free over the diagrams in the morning, and flew far from the tower at night – his body was becoming less loose, less free. More knotted. On the morning of the 23rd, he was scrubbing himself as quickly as he could in the chill of his bathroom when he noticed the changes. His muscles were more taut, yes – even though training for the Oxford missions had ensured that he could run and fight at a bare minimum of competence … but his ribs … Charles felt his own sides, and swallowed against a hot knot in his throat. He was rapidly losing weight.
He had never been indolent or overfed, but this … Charles shuddered. His students were all told – Raven was told, as a child, and even he had picked up an echo of the earnest government programmes – the gaunt faces and emaciated bodies of the victims of fallout, of starvation and disease … watch for them, and watch that you yourself do not become so. If there was food, eat it; you’d never know whether there’d be any the next day.

But he ate the food here. There was just … not enough of it. The elation of finding Syracuse had obscured the constant hunger that made his body vibrate; the ensuing migraine – only just wearing off, thirty-six hours later – had eclipsed the low-grade headache he had every day. Each and every day, no matter how much water he drank.

Charles tugged a sweatshirt over his head. He looked in the mirror – his jaw, strung tight, was sharper, and his cheekbones had a more pronounced jut. He wasn’t sure he disliked the effect – his eyes looked, if anything, larger and more blue, and he knew just how effective they could be in charming women and men – anyone legal – into his bed –

He cut off that line of thought with a snort. Imprisoned with a gaggle of schoolchildren. It was just as well that he was being run ragged by Logan every day, that he drained his mental energy flying off the tower each night. Otherwise he’d be reduced to wanking like an adolescent. After all, he was goggling at himself in the mirror like one.

He checked for the watch in his pocket, and went down to breakfast

Making it through that day was no more challenging than any other day. The thrum of excitement from the children – even from Jean, who had been losing weight herself – made him smile, both at the breakfast table and the dinner hour. And then, when they had washed the last dishes … with a wry twist of amusement, he noticed how his own footsteps were quicker than usual, even as the children cannonballed up the stairs before him.

There were two large cardboard boxes in his room.

Charles unclenched his fingers from where they had knotted in his sweatshirt. Then he took his time, changing into his sleeping clothes and – to give it a sense of ceremony – winding his watch before dropping it back into his shirt pocket, beneath the blue sweater. He always did so before a new class, each year … and this was something new, after all …

He knelt before the boxes, and carefully opened them. His heart leaped at the sight of books. So many books: there had to be at least three dozen.

Sean’s whoops from down the hall sounded very loud in the silence. Charles heard his own unsteady breathing. He had a sudden memory of Raven, tearing into the first of her Christmas presents, the first year she had lived with him …

He swallowed against the tightness in his throat; willed the tears away from his eyes. Tried to keep his fingers from trembling as he lifted out the first of the books.

Charles took his time, gloating over each volume. Most were American classics of fiction and poetry. He had hoped for the most recent works of genetic theory; unreasonable, he decided, since they really couldn’t be expected to read his mind. That includes you, Frost. Perhaps he could ask McCoy.

He grinned at the complete volume of Shakespeare, but felt that grin change to a grimace at the sight of One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich and De Profundis. Someone in the EBS high command, it seemed, had a nasty sense of humor.

But his satisfaction at having something to read – anything to read – made the flash of frustration
vanish. Until, that is, he got to the bottom of the second box.

There, Charles found a thin but sturdy book. He drew it out.

*Freedom Rising!* blared the cover. A bizarrely orange eagle stretched its wings wide over – was that a bonfire? It was all red-orange, against a blue background. He blinked, flipped the book open. *Freedom Rising! The Story of the Free West.* Charles turned the pages. Bright colors, solid lines, stalwart soldiers, smiling mothers and rows of rosy-cheeked, beaming children.

There was a vocabulary building section, at the back.

And the entire thing was typed in a god damned thirty-two point font.

He heard the blood rush in his ears. Odd, this feeling – a sort of light-headed dizziness. Charles supposed it was rage.

“Mother fucker,” he heard his own voice hiss. “Those bastards.” *Any available histories of the Free West and the EBS, and of their conflict,* he had written, and they had given him a god damned children’s book.

He must have thrown it, for he heard it hit the wall with a thwack. He rose to his feet.

And then Charles stood staring at the door, every new fiber of muscle in his body drawn tight and aching. They wouldn’t give him a history? They would bloody well patronize him? Then he knew exactly where to go, and what to do.

He waited for Angel to lock them in, for all the children to fall asleep – each one happy, some more than others. Then he picked the lock in less than a minute and strode down the hall in the dark. His shoes were still on; his heart was pounding. *To the library,* Charles thought, and he made his footsteps loud.

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By the time he made it to the library, though, Charles had changed his plan. Since he hadn’t seen any sort of card catalogue, earlier, and he didn’t know the system in use – if indeed there was one – he decided that it would be better to take a more thorough look at the maps. After all, he could come back for a history any time he wanted. Charles edged into the library, stealthily, keeping his power on high alert. The room spread out before him, warm and inviting, and there were the maps on the table …

Something was different. His shoulders stiffened, and he looked round carefully. There were things he hadn’t noticed, even on two visits – a metal catwalk nine feet up the wall, rendering another floor of books accessible. There was a spiral staircase in the shadows of one corner. And there –

That was the difference.

Charles’ eyes fixed on the fire crackling away in the fireplace. Someone had been here, and recently … His skin prickled. No time could be wasted in sliding the silver cloak of his power under the door, rolling it down the hallway, unfolding it into the nooks and crannies of the darkened manor. “Stand guard,” he whispered to himself. Then he snatched up the iron candelabrum and placed it on the edge of the long table, weighing down the flimsy maps. “Stand guard for me …”

For a long moment, Charles watched the wrought iron, his throat completely dry. He touched each distant flicker of his power, cupped them in the palm of his hand, in his mind. Small flickers … so small in the gloom of the manor house, the vast darkness of his prison. *So small …*
He felt nothing. Saw nothing. And so, with a carefully controlled eagerness, Charles turned to the maps.

He flattened out the topmost. Its edges and creases were well-worn, some almost falling to lint. One edge was much rougher, though—perhaps it had been part of an atlas, quite some time past? Charles’ mind clicked away, cataloguing. It was a city in the mountains; the contour lines ran thick in certain areas. “Oh, of course,” he breathed, because he could just glimpse a faded DENV—in one upper corner. Denver. Capital of the Free West. Charles checked another corner of the map—and there was a faded, near-invisible 1949.

The map was covered in markings: various hatchmarks, thick daubs of ink in different colors, line after line of what looked like code. And there was the occasional note, in a strong slanting hand. But he had never called himself a graphology expert. Damn and blast. Charles bit his lip, searching for a key of any sort—there was none. But: “Ah,” and he grinned, pulling out another map. The original marks were being transferred, in all their accumulated detail, onto another topography of Denver. The paper of the new map was much thicker, with brighter colors and cruder lines. Perhaps the Free West had had to scale back their printing efforts. For there in the corner was: F.Y. 19.

Free Year 19. The world’s new hodgepodge of dating systems always gave his students unquantifiable grief. The 15th year of Elizabeth II Regina; 1969 in the Kingdom of Britain and Unified Europe; 1388 hijri—or was it 1389 yet?—in the New Caliphate; 4605 in Zhōngguó and who knew what in various other corners of the world. And Free Year 19, in the Free West.

Nobody in Britain knew what system the Brotherhood used. Nobody … Charles grinned. Nobody except him, now. For the map he turned over next, the third one, finely worked in black and white, had 1969 for a header—as clear as day.

“Odd,” he murmured, twiddling the fine paper. Given that reports of its governance had ranged from absolute dictatorship to outright cult, one would expect the Brotherhood to have its own dating system. An opportunity to bring the world into orbit around itself, as such régimes tended to do. But it would seem the Free West had had the idea first, on this continent …

Though the printing was black and white (and a fine print— they must have a more advanced system) the third map was also color-coded. Charles checked the key. Blue bars indicated … fortifications? Why on earth … Arable land was colored green, predictably enough; vivid orange and pink marked off irradiated and contaminated areas; certain cities were outlined in red. And there was the red line—a road, connecting Buffalo to Syracuse and Albany, passing north of their current location … Charles let his finger fall on a dark blue X—“X marks the spot.” Ithaca, and the manor …

How to get to the red-marked road? He bit his lip, checked the key, then measured as best he could. Sixty miles from Ithaca to Syracuse, angling north by northeast; perhaps less, as the crow flies. The raven, his mind whispered. And were those tiny red hatchmarks spreading north from Ithaca … towns? Villages? Or settlements of some sort? One could hoard enough food for a journey of such great length, but winter’s descent would make it exponentially more difficult …

He sighed to himself. “You’d have to act quickly.”

Then a distant spark of his power flared.

Charles jerked his head up. Act quickly—now might be an excellent time to do so—

He narrowed his eyes, carefully probing with his thoughts. The feeling of that cloud of metal—yes, there it was. Moving—Charles focused—moving towards the library. But slowly, this time. He bit back a harsh laugh. As though it were trying to sneak up on him.
“No rattling; no give-away tonight ...” He smiled a tight smile. “Well done, old chap. I – whoops –”

Something had rattled after all. Blood thumping in his ears, Charles turned around. Round and round – he looked, but couldn’t see what had moved …

But the creature was still advancing. Slowly.

“Good of you to give notice. Well,” he tore himself away from the maps, “better be getting back.”

He stepped quickly to the door and turned the handle.

Charles froze.

Nothing had happened.

He pushed at the iron ring; tried to twist it and turn it. Nothing. The door stayed firmly shut.

Charles heard his own ragged breaths; high-pitched, almost strangled. He dropped to one knee, frantic; pried at the lock – it had changed, somehow – melting, or re-forming – fused to the plate, to the doorframe –

“Oh god,” he mumbled, heart thudding. The creature had turned a corner or something, for the full brunt of that steel-strong awareness was corkscrewing tight, closer and closer on the room, on him –

_Hide_ – his mind shouted at him: **HIDE** –

“But where –” Charles jumped to his feet and glanced up, around, desperately. There – the spiral staircase in one corner, and an iron catwalk branching out from its head. The catwalk joined the stacks up there. They could hide him - he could hide in the shadows between them.

There was one such recession directly above the other doorway – the door that led further into the manor. He'd hide there, and then he’d get a glimpse of the thing, and he could spring the lock after it had left. That was the only possible outcome. Other possibilities did not bear consideration, and _would not happen_.

Even as he thought, Charles started running, not caring as he knocked the table, jarring the board and sending chess pieces pattering to the hearth. He practically flew up the stairs and crouched down low in the shadows between two of the stacks. He drew all his power back and wrapped himself in veils. _You’re invisible, nothing can notice you_ … It was close - closer …

The door beneath him creaked.

Charles only just remembered to use the sound as cover for a desperate gulp of air; he held his breath and squeezed his eyes shut.

So he saw it in his mind’s eye, instead; the dark and sullen mass of fragments – nails, shrapnel, steel wool and barbed wire – edging into the library and looking round. Staring.

Charles focused on keeping his sips of breath silent. Perhaps, if he kept his eyes shut – _I can’t see you; you can’t see me_ … A memory flashed: Raven, giggling uncontrollably at a roly-poly barn kitten hiding behind a sack of oats. Its head and body had been concealed, but its tail had been in plain sight, whipping back and forth as it prepared to pounce.

He reached out with the tiniest thread of thought. Then Charles bit down hard against the panic, and the fear, his teeth digging into his lower lip. The creature’s presence had filled the entire room, like cold water would a metal bucket. Or molten metal would a pond. That awareness, that focus –
He thought of the kitten, lashing its tail. *Cat*, Raven had chirped, *cat* – she had only just begun to talk, six and a half years old … Curiosity killed the cat, but surely a telepath was exempt from that adage. Charles peeked –

And stared.

He was almost disappointed. The creature, monster, *thing* … was just another human.

Charles blinked. He had had visions of a robot, a deadly machine, some sort of siege engine or juggernaut – but here it was, only human. Male, perhaps six feet, eleven or twelve stone. Red-brown hair and a slender build. The only thing that tallied with Charles’ earlier imaginings was a strange vibration – a sensation of coiled wire – of a certain tension in the shoulders, in the back.

Charles breathed out, in a tiny sigh – *oh shite quiet* – because the other man had inclined his head and turned.

*Don’t panic. Better not panic.* Far better to slide a hand over his own mouth and bite down on one finger, hard. *Quiet, quiet.* The man was slowly turning in place, eyes methodically moving over the room, flicking between the first and second levels. Charles was too far away to see any details, but had the passing impression of stark features, a tight-lipped mouth –

He flinched at the quiet *tsk* – it might as well have been a gunshot to his strung-tight nerves. The man was walking over to the table; no, prowling – that image had been accurate, too – and staring.

*Oh no the candelabrum* –

Then Charles’ jaw dropped; he felt his own breath moist against the hand that he had clamped over his mouth. The wrought-iron implement was floating back to the table by the fireplace. It came down to rest on the marble top, silently.

The back of his neck prickled. More mutant gifts – this one an affinity for metal, some small-scale telekinesis – how did it work? The idea was fascinating – but *save the fascination for later, damn it.* Charles wedged both hands into his hair and tugged, trying to focus on being quiet. He peered through the catwalk grille. The man was in profile; he looked like he belonged on some pre-War coin. The only sounds were the fire’s pop and snap, and the rustle of the maps as the creature, *man* – examined them.

*Go away,* Charles thought, fiercely. *Go away; let me get out of here.* He kept his power muted. No sense in running any risks. The fact that he was here in the first place: treed like a cat on a kitchen shelf, in a corner of an opulent library, in his own goddamned prison – surely that was risk enough. Charles pulled at his own hair, harder. *Save the hysterics for later …*

And the fire was all the way down the stairs. It was ridiculous to sweat. *Nerves,* he thought, and: *fear.* Well, less fear now, just: *stay still, stay hidden; don’t move or breathe …* He swiped at his damp forehead; sweat was beading and moving on his neck, oddly chilly. And his heart thumped, as though it was being hit with a weight –

Charles ran his fingers down his temples, wiping away the sweat. Down further –

– *wait -*

*That’s not sweat.*
It was the smooth steel chain of his watch. It had risen out of his shirt pocket, like a snake from a basket. Now it was undulating over his skin.

And Charles had only one moment to stare, and think: how interesting.

Then the steel flashed a cold loop round his throat – he gasped, too loudly – and he could only think: just made some noise, so might as well breathe now and what a shame I can’t – I can’t – can’t breathe –

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Sounds. There was the sound of shoes – shoes with rubber soles – kicking against the thin metal of a floor, against the wood of a bookshelf. There was a grating, wet rasping noise – not any known language. There was a louder sound – clang clang clang – footsteps on metal stairs.

Someone had a line of fire slicing his throat; and a coppery taste flooding his mouth. Someone saw everything turning black, black and red, in fiery, spreading rings –

Oh. That someone was himself, Charles’ mind realized. It would appear he was being strangled. It would appear he was going to die. Such an unpleasant business.

He felt threads of his power leaving him. The raven floated up to the library ceiling and looked down. His fingers had gotten scratched in the woods that afternoon, running with Logan – they were clawing at the steel chain now. There was blood on his neck. His skin was white; the blood looked black.

Glossy black feathers were falling from the raven’s wings. They drifted down onto his body where it arched like a bow against the floor. And they landed on the back and shoulders of the other man, as he leaned down and grabbed in one fluid movement, as he took Charles by the shoulders and slammed him against the wall.

The raven heard a sick crack.

Then the raven saw something sparkle in the darkness. Curious: the wall wasn’t made of wood, not completely. Part of it was metal. One steel panel, in the entire library, and of course Charles had chosen to hide in front of it. Silly Charles. The raven tipped its head to one side, watched the taller man drive a fist into Charles’ gut – watched the steel chain slither loose and fix itself to the panel –

And the raven melted into air, into thin air – air, breathe – and liquid copper was welling up and flowing from his mouth –

Charles gasped for air; he felt it rattle through the blood in his throat. He reached up, found the strands of steel chain on each side of his neck, affixed to the metal behind him – his watch was heavy and stuck to the panel, he couldn’t pry it loose. But he could breathe, now, and he could say:

“Stop,” he choked, “stop –”

Another crack – white lights flashed in front of his eyes as his skull hit the steel panel again. Then there were fingers coiling round his throat, slipping on the blood before digging in tight. Charles cried out and started to thrash – he landed a kick on what felt like a shin and then doubled over, almost retching in pain, as the man kneed him. A hand on his shoulder pushed up, as did what felt like a thigh, thrust up between his legs – his mind catalogued away, neutrally, and noticed how he had coughed blood on the other man’s face, now that they were eye to eye.

The blood made the man’s eyes look very green.
“Stop,” Charles gasped: “stop – *please* –”

The man’s eyes glittered. And the grip on his throat loosened, just slightly.

Charles gulped for breath, staring. He couldn’t move. He was being propped up, yes, but held in place by one hand on his shoulder – and if he struggled, he knew the other hand would choke him again. So he settled for just staring.

Those eyes narrowed. The man – *creature – monster* – spoke.

“Why did you come here?”

Words. Words meant things, his mind offered, helpfully. *Why did you come here?* Charles tried to think, tried to remember.

“Didn’t come,” he choked. “I was – *taken* here –”

The man bared his teeth. So many of them - strong and even, and all really very white, Charles thought, even as a distant part of him heard his head crack against the steel for the third time. And now it appeared he was going to vomit; it made sense, the body reacting to trauma –

A snarl, and he was being thrown from the wall onto the floor. Charles broke the fall with his palms and then stared down, down at the blood and vomit dripping through the grille. *Not on the books*, his memory sighed, and *Raven, you know better than to bring tea into the library –*

“You were told never to come here!”

Charles felt a white-hot crunch on one side. He fought not to pass out; caught at a shard of his power from where it lay splintered, shaped a dart and threw it at the other man’s mind. A glancing touch showed an inferno of anger, but with pre-marked fire lines, and the lines were blazing into the other side – an arm – a *wrist* –

A strong grip wrenched one of his arms behind his back, and then Charles felt a pop at the base of one of his hands, and he had to scream.

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He must have passed out, at least, for a little while. For when he opened his eyes again, he could feel the tight pull, where blood had dried on his chin. He heard nothing but the rattle and rasp of his own desperate breaths.

Except then he heard a grunt, a rustle of cloth and then the *creak* from the catwalk. A rattle of steel.

“Get up.”

Charles flinched away from the voice; curled in on himself. A mistake – his ribs sent up a wave of pain; he retched, but there was nothing left –

“I told you to get up.”

“’m sorry,” he slurred. “Can’t.”

“Really.” And Charles flinched again – that grip had returned, and one of his own hands was being held … between two other hands. Those hands were warm. But the voice was cold as it said:

“Which finger?”
He fought to focus. “What?”

“Charles Xavier. Professor Xavier. Professors like to write. So. Which finger?”

“I don’t –” He gulped. “I don’t –”

“It really is not that difficult, Professor. Each time I give you an order, and you disobey, I break one of your fingers. So. Which one?”

*Oh my god …*

*I have to …* Charles exhaled, rattling. *Do it.* He scraped together all the power he could, sent it flowing through his body to find all of his pain receptors – *all of them* – and turned them off. Easy.

Then he stood.

There was a pause. Then the other man gazed up from where he crouched; uncoiled to his feet. He hadn’t let go of Charles’ hand.

“Very good.” Those eyes glinted green at him.

Charles swayed where he stood, but returned the look with what he hoped was an expression of mild curiosity. He tried lifting an eyebrow. Blood stretched, tacky, on his forehead; he let the eyebrow relax. *Maybe not just now.*

The other man raised his own brows in reply. “Walk,” he ordered.

He blinked, or at least he tried to. His eyelashes were gummed together, in a few places. Charles asked, “Where?”

Those eyes were narrow on his. “Down the stairs. Now.”

Charles made it down the stairs easily enough, only losing his footing twice. Both times, the man caught his arms and held him up. Then, “Out the door,” the man – *creature, thing* – growled, and Charles thought: *But I hadn’t finished with the maps.*

He decided not to say that out loud, though. It seemed the wrong time for it.

The dark walls in the hallway were rippling, strangely – and then, there was the raven again, flitting above his head. It watched him walking down the halls, weaving on his feet. The taller man beside him seemed nothing more than a bad dream: a shadow in the shadows.

The raven was a shadow, too. It could hide very well.

So it watched from the rafters as the creature left him at the door to his room. It watched over him as he slept. Then, quite some time later, it saw Alex walking up the stairs, and flew down to his bloodied head with a warning cry.

*Charles tried to open his eyes. He really couldn’t. So he only heard a gasp, “Mr. Xavier, holy shit –” and then running footsteps. Then there were many feet running, and hands trying to move him, and voices – “Careful, careful,” “Oh my God –” “Damn it, McCoy, if you’re gonna puke, do it in a corner –”*

*“Don’t …” His voice was almost gone. “Don’t let the children see.”*

*“God, Mr. Xavier,” Angel was crying. “Can you stand up? Get up –”*
“Tired,” he said. Or had he said it? Had he thought it? *Tired.* The other voices were fading away.

Then the raven tucked its head under its wing. It was tired as well. So tired ... as though it had flown to Syracuse, to Albany, to London and back, time and again ... *Raven ...* Charles felt oddly sad. His power flickered; he felt soft pieces of it drifting to the ground, feathers or ash. He saw the sparks going out. He loosened the power’s grip on his own body, with a sigh. Part of him saw all the pain receptors flaring into fire, burning like beacons in the night. *Raven ...*

And then it seemed that the best thing to do would be to pass out. So Charles did.

But not before he realized: the monster had kept his watch. And, somehow, that seemed the saddest thing of all.
The darkness was different, this time. Silent and cold. Too cold. The days were getting shorter, the nights even colder. He needed to get home – he needed to make sure Raven knew that the cold was coming.

“Raven …” He heard an echo: it sounded like his own voice. “Raven – where are you?”

*Come home, come home. Raven, Raven fly away home …*

It was so dark. He couldn’t see her anywhere. Except: *there …* there she was, golden and laughing, hair streaming out behind her as she ran toward him. Golden hair, bright against the darkness. He knew it was morning, somehow.

So why was it so dark?

“How many, Charles? Quick – count!”

The ravens spiraled upward, silver against the blackness of the sky. He frowned, feeling a stab of pain through his head – and silver made no sense. Ravens were black; the sky was blue. But there were seven silver birds, and – “Seven is a journey,” Raven said, not smiling now. She put her hand in his. “Don’t go.” Her eyes were wide, and filled with pain. “Please don’t go …”

Why was he crying?

Perhaps because Raven was crying too, wedged against him in an armchair, staring at her blue-scaled hands, trembling. She was so young, and the Takers were coming to Oxford the very next day.

“Try again,” he heard. The echo of his own voice cracked. “I know, I *know* it makes you sad, but if they find you – Raven, dear heart,” he held her close. Her tears were hot on his neck. “What would I do if you were gone?”


“But it’s so dark,” she wailed. And it was. How had it gotten so dark? “It’s so dark.” She put her hand in his. “Don’t go.” Her eyes were wide, and filled with tears. “Please don’t go …”

Why was he crying?

Perhaps because the music was so beautiful, delicate and ringing silver off stone.

*He bare him up he bare him down / He bare him into an orchard brown.*
Raven sitting at his side, at a Lessons and Carols service – and even though it was dark in Christ Church cathedral, somehow pitch black, he could see the vivid colors of the stained glass, floating in front of his eyes. And the music: it was Britten, a melody woven round with the shining-silver line of: *Lully lullay, lully lullay / The falcon hath borne my make away.*

“What’s ‘make’?” Raven whispered, and he whispered back: “It’s archaic. For ‘mate.’”

“Oh.” A pause, then: “What’s ‘archaic’?”

He felt his own smile, crinkling the corners of his eyes – an echo of a smile, like it was long gone – and it was so dark in the cathedral. Why? “‘Archaic’ just means ‘old,’ Raven. It’s a very old song.”

“Oh.”

“Shh – listen.”

_In that orchard there was an hall / That was hangèd with purple and pall._

“Charles?”

“Yes …”

“Why is it so dark?”

_And in that hall there was a bed, / It was hangèd with gold so red._

“I …”

Why, indeed? It was cold, for that matter – getting colder, as well as dark. It was the bleak midwinter, he knew – snow lay piled high outside, on earth as hard as iron.

*Lully lullay, lully lullay / The falcon hath borne my make away.*

So cold, so dark. The wind was wailing, mournful and lost, around the high stone walls. Raven put her hand in his. “Don’t go.” Her eyes were wide, and filled with sorrow. “Please don’t go …”

_In that bed there lieth a knight, / His woundes bleeding day and night._

Charles felt a shudder pass through his body. He was lying on something; there was blood in his mouth. And somehow, Raven was older now. Twenty.

*By that bedside kneeleth a may / And she do weepeth both night and day._

Twenty, and a teacher – he was so proud of her. He had forgotten to tell her that … But how to tell her, now, when she was gazing at him from so far away?

*Lully lullay, lully lullay / The falcon hath borne my make away.*

Far away: a golden spark across a dark and empty field – no, an expanse. A vast spread of cold darkness; a chasm deeper than any he had ever seen.

“They took me away. I didn’t tell you –” he said, weeping. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you. I love you. It will all be all right – I promise you.”

_Don’t go._ He saw her shake her head. She was crying, too. *Please.*
Then he saw her – no, he didn’t, she was fading from view – but he somehow knew she was preparing to jump. To fly … to fly and find him. And they’d find her, he knew. Every instinct he had told him they would find her –

“No!” Charles screamed into the wind, desperate – it was picking up, darkening into a howl. “I promised to protect you. I love you, do you hear me? I love you –”

But the wind was too loud. It shrieked against his ears, cold and relentless – he gasped for air, he couldn’t breathe and it was dark, so dark, and there was a sudden sharp pain in the crook of his arm –

Charles groaned, and opened his eyes. He was lying on a bed, and staring at a white and grey ceiling. He blinked, then shifted up slightly – just high enough to check his surroundings.

And then he felt a rush of relief, so strong it left him dizzy. There was McCoy – McCoy looking pale and washed out in the harsh white light. And the pain in his arm was from an I.V. that had just been placed.

He tried to speak. “… Hank?”

McCoy whirled, almost knocking over the I.V. pole. “Mr. Xavier! Can you hear me?”

The words were too loud, clanging against his skull, but Charles didn’t want to tell him so. “Yes,” he said, instead. He blinked owlishly. “I can hear you perfectly.”

He hardly needed any of his power to read McCoy’s emotions – joy relief regret with a thrum of fear pain but mostly joy – they were practically coming off him in waves. “We thought – you had a concussion, and we thought you might be out for quite a bit longer.”

A concussion. Memory swirled to the surface of his mind: his own head, ricocheting off unforgiving metal. And before – they had kept him sedated for a week.

Charles broke into a cold sweat. “How long?” He swallowed. “How long have I been … out?”

“’Bout eighteen hours, all told.” Another voice, and Logan’s face appeared above his, looking grim. He tugged a pillow up behind Charles’ head, propping it at a better angle. Charles looked round as discreetly as possible. An infirmary of sorts? His mind started to catalogue. No windows, basic hospital bed – a heart monitor and an I.V. drip – and a machine in one corner … that he didn’t know. How could he not know it? It had electrodes, and a round band of … plastic? Something synthetic. Charles frowned – the tech was advanced here, yes, and Oxford had been so primitive that perhaps it was understandable, but still –

Logan had kept talking. “Eighteen hours, all the kids in a tizzy – didn’t I tell you not to pull any stupid-ass shit, Xavier?”

“I didn’t pull anything,” Charles said, dignified. “I –”

But Logan’s face went still as he looked to the side, his eyes dark and gleaming. “Heads up,” he muttered to McCoy, who turned and swallowed hard.

Then Charles only had time to hear the authoritative click of shoes – before he was blinking up at Frost.

He had forgotten. The leader of the EBS … the sheer power that she wielded. Even if she had
missed the billiard ball, the marble. *Veil veil veil*, he thought, desperately – and even though it gave him a twinge of headache, he did. And he did so just in time to meet Frost’s eyes, and to note, dispassionately, that she was calmly, icily furious.

“Mr. Xavier.” Her voice was crisp. “It’s been some time.”

“Mmm.” Charles tried to sound agreeable. *And stupid*, his mind whispered. *Pretend you’re still concussed. Pretend you don’t know anything.*

“Do you remember what you did, Mr. Xavier?”

“Um. I … I actually don’t remember. No.” He blinked up at her. “Sorry.”

Frost’s eyes widened for a split second; then narrowed, and … *god.*

He had almost forgotten how it felt: that moment on the threshold of the Takers’ hall; their skirmish his first hour out of the cell. That icy power focused on him, running its cold crab claws over his mind, testing for weaknesses, probing and prying … He kept his veils firmly in place, and released one squid-ink jet of *pain* – the memory of his skull crashing against steel –

He felt her mind flinch away, and the diamond-edged control that immediately smoothed over the surprise. *Ha* – but she was speaking:

“‘Sorry’, Frost said, ice cold. ‘Sorry’ … Well, Mr. Xavier, you should know that such regrets now are nothing in comparison to what they will be if you trespass again. There are rules here.” Frost tilted her head to a different angle; Charles had the sudden impression of a raptor eying a mouse. “Rules that you will follow, with no exceptions – or you will be punished. And only your current state –” she curled her lip at the I.V., “prevents me from showing how exactly how, and showing you right. Now.”

Charles kept his eyes lowered. *Aren’t you clever*, he thought, viciously, *rhyming like that* – but then: *veil, veil, keep it veiled …*

He heard rather than saw Frost turning to leave – a rustle of well-tailored linen. “And it might interest you to know, Mr. Xavier, that since monitor Angel was the one responsible for securing you in the evening, she has been punished too.”

Charles felt his stomach lurch. “What?” His mind went over her words, disbelieving. “What – that’s not fair – she didn’t do anything. *I* did –”

But Frost had gone. He sensed the icy echo of her power, *click click click*-ing down the hallway.

Mutely, he looked up at McCoy and Logan. McCoy was still standing, as rigid as the I.V. pole and just as thin. Logan moved off the wall with a grunt.

“Logan,” Charles said carefully, and, “McCoy – that’s not right. Angel didn’t do anything wrong.”

Logan’s eyes looked like smudges beneath his heavy brows. “Take it up with her, then.”

“With Frost?”

“No,” McCoy said quickly. “With Angel. And really, she should understand.” He grimaced. “I mean, *I* got punished when she tried to escape, so you can always try telling her it’s karma or something –”
“McCoy…” Logan cut him off. He sounded weary. “Leave Xavier to it. And X man … Don’t even bother trying, with Frost. Hell,” he gave a half-smile, with no warmth. “Don’t even think about it. There’s rules here, there’s the way things have been since this whole op started … And that’s the way they’ll stay.”

Charles felt his temper flare. “Rules. What sort of rules land me with – what do I have, Hank?”

McCoy rattled off the information. “Concussion, four broken ribs, broken wrist, hemorrhage in the strap muscles and laryngeal tissues attendant on ligature strangulation –”

*Strangulation – god.* Charles gulped, hard – then frowned. “So … how am I even able to talk? For that matter,” he flexed both wrists, and blinked. “One was broken. How … after eighteen hours? What level of tech do you have here?”

“Not tech,” McCoy began, carefully, but: “Classified, yeah?” Logan growled.

“Maybe.” McCoy’s voice was quiet. “But he’ll know eventually. He might be able to help with the synthesis – the duplication, you know?”

“Duplication of what?” Charles heard the avid curiosity in his own voice.

McCoy jerked his head toward the I.V. pole. “That.”

Charles frowned. It wasn’t saline, of course – the liquid’s bizarre color was the obvious giveaway. “Um. What is that?”

“Blood.”

“Blood?” He felt his eyes widen. “What the hell kind of blood is purple?”

“Archangel’s.”

“Well whoever Archangel is, I hope he, she, or it is O-negative.”

“I know what I’m doing, Mr. Xavier. Archangel’s one of us – I mean, in the EBS high command –”

“Stationed on the front.” Logan wasn’t looking at McCoy; he was examining his own fingers instead. His jaw was tight. "Here's hopin' he keeps his ancient ass *there* this time."

"Logan, really -"

"You know what I think, Doctor."

"Not all of us can heal ourselves,” McCoy snapped.

Charles thought it best to jump in. "The blood has healing properties, then?"

"... Yes," McCoy said.

Logan glared at his own fists.

"And he tops off our supply whenever he does his rounds," McCoy said, quietly, "and we gave you some."

“You’re welcome.”

“And you’d damn well better be grateful, Xavier, because I may bitch, but that shit’s worth its weight in gold –”

“Oh that’s right – I mean, if everything’s pretty much healed –” With one quick twist of his hands, McCoy tied off the I.V. and unhooked the blood pack. He walked out of Charles’ peripheral vision – there was a puff of cold air and then the thud of a small door closing.

“As I was saying,” Logan gritted out, “You’d better toe the straight and narrow from here on out, X man. Every drop of that stuff that you get means one less for others, after the next battle. And when I say ‘others,’ I mean: everyone who’s been promoted out of training, everyone who fights. We’ve got ten-year-olds on the front. Fuck: we’ve got a shapeshifter down by St. Louis who’s only six, you know? Six, and air-dropped into god damned Denver every other week.”

“I’m sorry.” Charles hunched his shoulders. Shapeshifter – his mind flashed to Raven – veil veil veil.

“It won’t happen again in future. Who knew? …” He tried to lighten the tone. “My mother always told me to read books, when I was a child – ‘for my own profit,’ she would say. Who knew that a trip to the library would turn out so expensive?”

And he knew, instantly, from the way McCoy and Logan froze in place – that he had said the wrong thing.

“The library?” McCoy said. His voice wavered.

Logan’s voice was rough. “Which library?”

“I …”

“Tell me, Xavier.” Logan’s teeth were bared. “Tell us. Now.”

Charles couldn’t help his shiver. “The library you – you took me through. When I had a blindfold.” He spoke in a rush, before he could stop himself. They had healed him. They deserved the truth. “I remembered the directions, and I –”

He really didn’t expect it – so Logan’s knuckles growing, somehow, lengthening into three long and shimmering metal blades - but no, not his knuckles, they’re coming out from between his knuckles - fuck ... Heart pounding, Charles only realized that he had pressed back into his pillow when Logan had to take a step forward to touch those blades to his throat.

“We told you not to go into the West Wing.” The blades – claws – were sharp. He felt their edges whisper against his skin. But Logan was still speaking, in the quiet, reasonable voice that Charles had come to recognize as a preamble to making him run until his feet bled. “So. Why did you go into the West Wing, X man?”

“I didn’t know.” Charles looked Logan straight in the eye. “I had no idea where the West Wing is, or how to get there.” Which was a bit of a lie, he realized; he had seen the moon through the windows – he should have realized he had walked almost due west. Damn it. “You never told me.”

There was a long pause.

Logan’s gaze did not waver. But then Charles saw a corner of his mouth twitch. “Huh.”

And as the metal slithered back into Logan’s hand – how the hell did he do that? That’s fascinating – Charles heard McCoy exhale, loud and shaky.
Then Logan gave him a half-smile, oddly self-conscious. “I guess you got a point there.”

“Fine, then. Point of information.” McCoy launched into busy work – trying to change the mood, Charles realized - the sudden surge of adrenaline made him pick up every single flutter of the white coat, each nervous twitch ... McCoy was rolling away the I.V. pole, speaking quickly. “The library’s in the West Wing – it pretty much starts at the door. There are lots of rooms in the West Wing, but you can’t go in any of them, O.K.? Especially not the library – I mean, geez, Mr. Xavier – you went in the library. I honestly thought you were just caught wandering the hallways or something –

“Broken bones, concussion, ligature strangulation …” Charles kept his voice light with an effort. “Is that the standard procedure for bad behavior at night?”

Freudian slip, he thought to himself, wryly – but they didn’t pick up on the innuendo. Instead, he saw them exchange long looks.

“Classified,” Logan said quietly, and: “Just – don’t do it again,” McCoy said, even more quietly.

“Right.”

Charles watched them put the room back in order. He felt oddly blank.

He had just been beaten half to death by a … mysterious stranger. You will meet a tall dark stranger, he thought, and bit back a jolt of hysterical laughter. He had been given a miraculous cure. And McCoy and Logan were acting as though the entire situation were commonplace.

He made his voice clear, and carrying.

“Who was he?”

There was no way to miss their shoulders stiffening.

“Don’t know who you –” Logan began, but: “Nonsense,” Charles said, calmly. “If the library is so important, then surely you know exactly who gets to use it. So. Six feet tall, reddish-brown hair, blue or green eyes, about my age or perhaps a little older – and a homicidal maniac. Who was he?”

McCoy was looking at the floor, twisting the bracelet around his left wrist.

Logan fixed McCoy with a look Charles couldn’t read. Then he turned back to Charles and said, voice flat, "You told Frost you couldn't remember."

"Funny how the mind works, isn't it? Who was he?"

“Need-to-know basis, Xavier. Don’t ask again.”

Charles had a flash of the intuition that had always served him in good stead, “‘Need-to-know basis’ – you’ve used that phrase before. So, is he the same man who tackled me in the forest last week?”

He saw McCoy flinch. Logan, in contrast, glared at him. “Why don’t you just pop it out of our heads, X man? Oh wait. Because you can’t do shit. You don’t know shit. You don’t know who the fuck you messed with, and you don’t know how lucky you are to have a body to put back together.”

“… And you can’t tell me? Truly?”

Logan looked away first, and: “No,” McCoy said, clear as a bell. “We can’t.”

It was ridiculous, Charles thought, to feel his throat tighten the way it did, and his eyes sting. It was
all a ridiculous sham.

“Almost as though there were some sort of magic spell afoot.” He let his mouth twist with the contempt he felt. “A fearsome curse; a mighty geas – and not a hope of breaking it. I must say: that’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Tell it to Lady Frost, then.” McCoy’s voice was low. “She loves a good joke.”

“Hell, I have a good joke.” Logan grabbed Charles’ foot and tugged. “Get up, Xavier. Knock knock, McCoy.”

A sigh. “Who’s there?”

“Frost.”

“Lady Frost. Lady Frost who?”

“Bzzt.” Logan waggled his fingers.

Charles shook his clothing out, deliberately not thinking about the blood staining his blue sweater. “I don’t get it.”

“Not if I’ve erased your memory, you don’t,” Logan agreed. “And then I can tell it again, and it’ll be just as funny. Again and again and again. C’mon.” He held out a length of cloth. “Blindfold goes on. And we’re going the outside way – just so you don’t play detective with any more room smelling. I shoulda known, what with your ‘Oxford Reading Room’ bullshit.”

“Why don’t you just slice my nose off?” Charles snipped. “With those – things in your hands, you could probably do it.”

“If by ‘probably’ you mean ‘definitely, you jackass’ – then: yeah.”

“That would make no grammatical sense.” The cloth was wrapped tightly around his eyes; to take his mind off his prickle of anger – not despair, he was not giving up hope – Charles asked what was in the forefront of his mind. “And how did you come by them, anyway?”

There was a long pause. He heard a door open, and McCoy’s light footsteps tap ahead of them. Then a growl from behind, as Logan shoved him between the shoulder blades. Charles winced – his ribs still felt bruised.

“Move it,” the gruff voice ordered.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

A longer pause. Then: “A present. A gift, you might say.” There was thick rage in Logan’s voice, in his thoughts – congealing black as dried blood. “From the Free West.”

Charles felt his thoughts race; then froze as he felt six sharp points slice through knit and cloth, and jab into the flesh of his back. I didn’t even hear –

“And if you ask me any more questions about ‘em, X, I’ll re-gift them - straight through your skull. Understand?”

“… Understood.”

It was not long until a door clanged shut behind them, and they were outside. The air was intensely
chilly – Charles instinctively turned his face, searching, but could not find the sun. He called up his 
hummingbird, sent it fluttering against the minds of the others. Yes, it was night. They were both 
angry – well, Logan was angry. McCoy’s mind was a whirlpool of … fear? And: odd – he was 
hyper-focused on his ring, his bracelet –

Wait. They were walking faster. Why, Charles wondered, why would we be …

He sent the hummingbird flying.

And recoiled, with a choked-off gasp, as he felt the raging cold and rusted bloodstained metal cloud – distant, but there – they were walking toward it. Why? he thought wildly. Why the hell walk toward it?

Him, Charles corrected himself. They were walking toward him. It – he was a human - well, a 
mutant. A man, though. And … and he was watching them. Oh. Of course. He was in the manor – 
he was watching them from … from high up? Charles didn’t know where. He shivered as the 
hummingbird came flying back to him, huddling against his neck – shivered, and –

His heart shot into his mouth, he almost tripped over his own feet.

"Watch it," Logan said. A strong arm wrested him back upright. "Careful."

Charles hardly heard him over the frantic buzz of his own mind. What he had felt - oh my god …

Only when a wooden door creaked shut behind them did he breathe again, shuddering. And when 
Charles had been put back in his room with the door locked behind him, he didn’t even bother to 
take off his clothes before walking to the bathroom, stepping into the tub and turning the water as hot 
as it could go. He crouched there until he was soaking wet - and imagined, in the darkness, the dried 
blood unfurling from his blue sweater in rust-colored clouds. He stayed there a long time.

It was only when he was safe in bed, under the rest of the clothes from his wardrobe – piled high, 
because it was cold – that he named his own thought - feeling - I don't even know ... Dragged it out 
in the light, and named it.

Fear. A particular, and particularly sickening, stomach-twisting fear.

Because even though the other man’s gaze had been an iron weight on his neck … for only a second, 
Charles had brushed against his mind. And that mind was seething with rage and rusted with blood, 
yes … but for a flash, there had been the image:

- his own face, drained white; his neck strung round with steel; and blood. Blood smeared around 
Charles’ mouth, blood staining his lips and his teeth, blood clotting on his tongue …

There had been that image. There had been rage.

But there had also been … want.
Chapter 11

Charles hardly slept. Without his watch he did not know the time, and there was little moonlight. He lay flat on his back and stared up into the darkness, keeping a small part of his power flickering in the hallway and a larger flame burning at his door. Because … and he had forgotten earlier, but it had come rushing back in full force when he had heard something creak in the hallway outside – the creature – the man … could undoubtedly force any lock in existence. Although, really, if it – he – prowled into the room – what could Charles possibly do? Hide behind the door and brain him with the Shakespeare? God.

So he lay awake, listening and gritting his teeth at every sound. He tried not to think about the shrapnel cloud of rage, the white-hot spike of want that had slammed through his temples. Far better not to think about it.

Instead, Charles methodically catalogued the images from his dream, the memories of Raven, the flickers of emotion on Logan and McCoy’s faces. All of their words. He tucked everything away, and moved on to recite Hamlet. Then Macbeth, King Lear, Othello … He had something to check them against, now …

And because of his power standing sentry in the hallway, he felt it the instant Angel came to wake them up. Angel … He had been unconscious for a day, so he must have missed Alex as monitor. Guilt twisted through his stomach. What did they do to her? Charles kicked off the blankets and clothes and got to his feet. There was only one way to find out.

Angel only got one knock in before he opened the door and said in a rush: “I’m so sorry.”

She blinked. “Well. Good morning to you, too.”

“No, Angel,” Charles stared into her face. What had they done?

“Frost told me you had been punished for my being outside my room. So I wanted to tell you: I am sorrier than I can say.”

For a long moment, she was quiet. Then she shrugged. “That’s all right. I mean, you got pretty smashed up. It could have been worse for me. At least … I think it could have.”

“… What did they do?”

“You know?” A line appeared between her eyebrows. “I don’t think I remember.”

Then she shook her head. “But I do remember that I have to wake these kids up. You’ve got twenty minutes.”

Angel looked up, and met his eyes. And for one seemingly endless moment, Charles heard her in his mind.

Screaming.

Aghast, Charles watched her walk down the hallway. She knocked on one door, then another. Then she crossed the hall and worked her way back up. When she had finished, she turned on one heel to face him. “Still here?”

“Angel,” he whispered. “What did Frost do?”
“Her face looked weary. “I don’t remember. And it makes my head hurt – so stop asking questions and go eat your breakfast, Mr. Xavier. Please.”

Without another word, Angel walked back down the hallway. Charles watched until she had turned the corner, and then slammed the door of his room behind him. “That’s – I can’t –” The words stuck in his throat. He couldn’t think. All he could do was breathe in, open his door and slam it shut again.

“Hey, knock it off, John – oh, Mr. Xavier!” A red-haired blur ran down the hallway at him. Before Charles knew it, he was half knocked off his feet. He winced at the stab of pain from his ribs – *not enough of that Archangel’s blood, I suppose –*

“Mr. Xavier, Mr. Xavier,” Sean chanted. He had wrapped his bony arms around Charles’ torso, as high as he could reach. “You’re all right!”

“We thought you had – been taken away.” John’s voice, uncharacteristically quiet.

Charles smiled at him. “I suppose I’m rather like a bad penny.”

“Huh?”

“I always turn up.”

John frowned. “I don’t get it,” and: “What’s a penny?” Sean asked.

He squeezed his eyes shut, tightly, then opened them again. Of course. Post-nuclear bartering systems. “Never mind. Come – let’s go downstairs –”

“No,” Sean interrupted. “The others want to see you too. Jean was really upset. I mean really **really** upset –”

“Yeah, she kinda looked like a sick mouse instead of just a **mouse** mouse –”

Other doors opened. He heard: “He’s *back!*” and, “I told you they wouldn’t –”

But Charles didn’t listen. Instead, he let a thought flit out to find Jean, sent her an image of himself – in the hallway, arm draped over Sean’s shoulders, greeting Ororo and Bobby, radiating good health and good cheer. *Not quite true, but it will suffice for now.* He tied the image with a silver cord: *I’m back, Jean.*

He expected a reply – and smiled at the one he received: a picture of him tipping the macchinetta to pour, and *love* wreathed round it like flowers.

Jean opening the door straight across from his and tackling him with all the force she could – that, he hadn’t expected. Charles hugged her in return. And when Ororo told him to carry Jean downstairs, he tried sending the image of himself as a pony – just to hear Jean laugh.

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The image of happiness was not hard to keep sending, what with the warmth of the children’s welcome. Underneath it, though, Charles’ mind clicked away over what had been done to Angel; sorting through her expressions and words, and skating round the dark black void of *rage want* – he wasn’t going to think about it –

He didn’t think the children noticed anything wrong with Angel – except Jean. He saw her brow pucker. It stayed that way through breakfast, and didn’t smooth out even when Angel blindfolded
her and took her away. So. It was something telepathic, obviously – a memory wipe? Or an excision, like the one he had performed on Alex?

Charles kept the matter forefront in his mind during a tedious morning and afternoon of sorting files with McCoy. Logan was away, he told him, and: “You know I can’t say where, Mr. Xavier. How are you feeling?” Neutral replies and automatic alphabetizing sufficed. With his own relieved chatter as background noise, McCoy didn’t notice anything different.

Charles stayed just as removed and observant in the evening. Sean expounded at great length about the quality and quantity of the chocolate he had received for Quarter Gift. John and Bobby had an argument about some aspect of their training. Ordinarily, Charles would have eased into their conversation and wrung as much information out of them as he could … but that evening he merely recorded their words, resolving to examine them later. Ororo was quiet, and Jean was so tired that she dropped three half-spoonfuls of sliced potatoes three times.

Angel was quiet, too, as she led them all upstairs to their rooms, and locked them in for the night. Charles did not imagine her checking and double-checking the lock on his door. But soon enough she had gone, and quiet descended on the entire dormitory.

Charles sorted the books that he had left on the floor the previous night – no, he corrected, two nights ago. Using his private shelving system should have made him happy. But his thoughts kept flying to Angel – what had been done to her?

Flying.

“Oh.” And he had hardly spoken all day, so his voice was unexpectedly loud. But: “I could – I could …”

Really, he needed to find out if he could. He needed to know whether or not he could stay in people’s minds, a discreet guest, from a distance – after flying to them. The child in Syracuse had felt him immediately … but that had been miles and miles away. And as long as Angel slept near the manor … and he wanted to help her, he really did …

Charles made up his mind and made himself comfortable on his bed. Then he closed his eyes and fashioned a bird with grey wings – wings made entirely of down. Like an owl, only its eyes were veiled, its body was veiled … it could not be seen, not be noticed, and he could fly to Angel and see …

He found her mind within five minutes.

A small part of Charles caught fire and blazed. It had been easy, it had been so easy – but the greater part of him focused on keeping things quiet and small … smaller than a billiard ball. Perhaps the white-grey cue ball, dented and worn, from the Rose in Bloom – an Oxford pub where he would bet on games with friends, friends who had once been his students …

The soft grey owl floated over the mist of Angel’s thoughts, looking down at her mind just as the raven had looked upon Syracuse. Eyes closed, lying on his bed … Charles drew in a breath of delight when he realized: he was flying through the mist. He had to dodge the occasional kaleidoscope of butterflies, all of different colors.

Different colors. Charles frowned. The white mist was shading into red.

Then his owl flew out of the redness and hovered over a city street. And Charles heard an echo of himself on his bed, far removed, gasping.
It looked like there had been a street festival. Colored streamers hung from doorways; booths and tables lined the sidewalks. There was a dance floor and a bandstand …

But most of the streamers were tattered. The booths and tables had been overturned. There were plates of food dumped next to empty chairs – and on the distant stage, musical instruments lay smashed and broken.

And everything was covered in ash.

His owl was pale against the reddish-black sky. It swooped low and flew along the street. Then it perched on a dusty railing. Charles coughed – what was in the air? Was that ash as well? He fanned in front of his face, and realized – oh my god …

He was there, in Angel’s mind. Not just as a bird. As himself. He stared in disbelief, as the owl fluttered to his shoulder and perched.

“Do you think …” Even his whisper sounded loud. He bit his lip. “Do you think Frost can sense this?”

The owl hooted. Then it plucked at his neck.

Charles looked down – looked, and stared, and bit back an astonished laugh. “Of all things …”If he had had to consider, he might have thought: academic regalia, or tweed. Perhaps a sweater vest. But here …

Here, in Angel’s mind … it would appear he was a knight in shining armor.

“A knight.” He couldn’t help his own smile. “Ridiculous. Too much of the Round Table, I suppose …” He flashed back to his Oxford office; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Parzifal, Tristan und Iseult*, all dog-eared. The false name for Raven, lest someone remember a half-wild shape-shifter by name and track her down … Malory, for Sir Thomas of that name. She had curled up against him as he had read *Le Morte d’Arthur*, and had chosen Mallory.

Charles started walking, experimentally. The armor was silent – it was light, and of a strange silvery iridescence … Like his veils, Charles realized excitedly. It had become second nature, so long ago, to veil … it had become habit, and it appeared the habit had become armor, here in the mind of a stranger.

“Well,” he said. “Not quite a stranger.”

For he knew Angel, somewhat. The way she had exclaimed over Quarter Gift; her teasing the other students. The street festival must have been vibrant and alive, something living and lovely, before someone attacked and burned it to the ground.

*It was lovely, Mr. Xavier.*

Charles whirled, heart in his mouth.

*But I only saw it once.*

There was –

“Oh my god.”

A girl in a white robe stood staring at him. The white robe had a gorgeous red and gold bird in flight
embroidered on its front. Her hair was dark red; her eyes were grey. She looked at him intently. What are you doing here?

“Jean.” He felt the words stumble over his tongue. “Jean, is that you?”

Yes.

“What are you doing here? How did you come here?”

*The same way you did, I think. Projection.*

“Projection …” Charles felt like laughing in glee. He settled for grinning like a madman. “An excellent word for it. And you communicate so clearly here, Jean.”

She wasn’t speaking – but her voice was somehow in his head – well, mostly in his projection, he supposed. Charles knew that his body was fielding sensations too, even as he lay distant and inert on his bed in the dormitory. But it was different, her communication, here in a third party’s mind rather than between themselves. Jean’s words were no longer a frame for a picture. Instead, they floated into his mind like golden calligraphy touched with fire … but gentle, not burning.

“My lady!” Charles swept an extravagant bow; Jean’s mouth curled up at one corner. “Behold, the Knight of … Well. I’m not sure what I’m a knight of.”

*The order of the coffee pot.*

“No, no, that’s not dignified.”

*Macchinetta, then.*

“No. We’ll think of something later. But for now … Why are you here?”

*I saw how she had been burned. Angel. This morning, at breakfast – and at dinner too. You can see the burn from outside.*

“Ah.” Charles fell into step as she picked her way carefully down the rubble-strewn street. “I’ve been a little leery of looking. I’m not quite sure what Frost can sense and what she can’t. And when.”

And he paused – for at that name, Jean had stopped walking. Her eyes fell shut. For a long moment, she looked like nothing more than a statue. Or flattened – *like a painting*, Charles thought. Perhaps a pre-Raphaelite painting of a child … one who had died too young …

Then she sighed.

*Lady Frost won’t be looking tonight. She used the machines all day.*

“What’s happening with the war?” he asked, cautiously.

*For the war.*

Charles felt the back of his neck prickle. Of course … well, he hadn’t expected Frost to be completely occupied with frightening students and torturing the innocent all day long. Of course such a telepath would be busy with the war effort. He wondered how, exactly. Supervising? Relaying messages? … Coördinating attacks?

“What’s happening with the war?” he asked, cautiously.
Jean shot him a serious look. *I’m not supposed to tell you.*

“Surely you can. We’re friends. I am your knight, Lady Jean,” Charles shook out his hair, “and I was your pony this morning. Surely you can tell me …”

He gilded his voice with persuasion and friendship and love – *tell me tell me* –

And he felt a stronger prickle of shock when Jean smiled up at him.

*There’s a plan – to take Dallas. St. Louis is as far west as the EBS has reached, so far, and if they can get Dallas, then the Free West gets pressure on the southern front, and the mouth of the Mississippi River is completely under EBS control. And then maybe Mexico would become an ally, and the attack could proceed from the south, north over the border to California and Arizona. And the Free West would be pressed on three sides instead of just two.*

Charles felt dazed at the sheer amount of information – he covered his hesitation with a broad smile. It felt strained. “How very informative, Jean.”

*I heard Lady Frost talking.*

And that explained her curiously adult tone. With an effort, Charles made his voice lighter. “Well. I thought Mexico was mostly uninhabited in this day and age.”

*Lady Frost talked about – psychological warfare. Jean enunciated the words carefully. Propaganda. Mexico is a Free West tributary state. The EBS can offer those tributary states better things.*

“Better things – like what?”

Jean gave him an opaque look. *Freedom.*

Charles swallowed against a surge of bitterness, pooling in his mouth. “Freedom. Freedom to be imprisoned; freedom from the Free West – that’s … That’s absolutely absurd.”

*Lady Frost said –*

“Let’s not talk about what she said, then,” he interrupted. His conscience was rapidly reasserting itself; he let his voice shed its persuasion and tell me like scales from a snake. “Have you been in Angel’s mind before?”

*Just once. She only asked me the one time. It was fun. There was a party.*

*Asked …* Charles was suddenly aware of the heaviness of his own body, lying distant on his bed. His stomach had just lurched.

He spoke through the discomfort. “I see. Well, I came here to see what had happened … to find out what Lady Frost had done.”

*And to fix it? Jean’s face was hopeful.*

“You know … with your help, I believe I could. *We could.*”

*How?*

“Let me think.”

They had reached the head of the ruined street. Charles stared over the wreckage, reaching up one
gauntlet to stroke the grey owl perched on his shoulder. He considered. Then: “Jean,” he said, slowly, “would you mind standing guard?”

*Just standing guard?* Her lower lip stuck out; Charles flash to an image of Raven, sulking over her first essay assignment, and he fought the urge to laugh. *I can do more than that, Mr. Xavier.*

“It’s not unimportant.” Charles looked up into the sky of Angel’s mind. Red-black clouds throbbed down at him. “I do not know Frost’s powers –”

**Lady Frost.**

“I call her Frost. That’s her name, isn’t it?”

… **But you’re a knight.**

“Oh.” Charles blinked. “Oh – I hadn’t thought of – well. It can’t hurt here, I suppose. Lady Jean,” he said grandly, “yon Lady Frost’s powers are unknown to me. Therefore, fairly, verily, higgledy-piggledy –” Jean was smiling ear-to-ear; he grinned back at her and continued: “Please, my lady. I need you to watch over the street, and the clouds – and call out to me the instant you feel even the slightest hint of Lady Frost’s power. Or anything else that feels – not right.”

Sure. Jean’s smile was bright. *I’ll see you.*

Then … Charles felt his jaw drop. For Jean held out her arms, and floated graceful as a bird – away from him. Into the sky.

“What next?” he whispered to himself. “… What next?”

*Well.* He quirked one eyebrow at his owl; it tilted its head back at him. “Perhaps a nice little clean-up job.”

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In the end … it was easy. Charles might once have thought: disturbingly easy – but he was a knight, his mind was unfettered and free, and his powers whirled and rebounded up and down the street in Angel’s mind, as he set everything to rights. And he only used his power - the silver and mercury of his mind, flashing from his hands like lightning. He didn't even have to move a finger.

But for all his energy and eagerness, he was surprised to feel himself tiring by the time the tables were cleaned and the steps washed off, the food picked up and the instruments repaired. Charles hadn’t felt tired at all, before – but perhaps something could be said about adrenaline. Now that everything was fixed, all cleaned and sparkling, perhaps he could open one of the brightly painted doors and explore a house, or two … or ten …

He cast an eye out for Jean. No sign of her.

*Do it.*

Cautiously, feeling giddy excitement spiral up his throat, he walked up the stairs to one of the brownstones. Charles placed a hand on the door –

**Mr. Xavier!!**

- and jerked it back as though it had been scalded. “What?” he shouted to the sky. “What is it?!”

Jean was a white light, flying faster and faster to him, until she landed and she was running up the
She was gasping for breath; the whites of her eyes showed stark even against her pale face. Charles retreated from the door and walked to the middle of the street. He looked left and right, then up – stiffened, and stood in front of Jean – my god -

And just in time, too – as a flash of brilliant iridescence half-blinded him, and a whir of wings came to a stop before them both.

“¡Qué están haciendo aquí?!”

Charles blinked. He only had the smallest bit of Spanish –

“¡Hijo de la gran puta!! ¿Quién les dijo que podían venir aquí?!”

- and she was talking too fast -

Angel shrieked and spat – he tossed up an arm, sheer instinct, and felt something crackle and fizz over his armor.

"Angel!!" Jean screamed, and Charles shouted. “Angel – stop! We came to help – we came here to help you!”

She paused. Charles heard the thrum of her wings. Then she said, in a small voice: “… Both of you?”

“Yes.” He lifted his chin. Unbelievable – amazing … Her wings were long, thin and delicate as a dragonfly’s. She could fly – god – and she could spit what smelled like hydrochloric acid. How on earth does she do that without burning her throat? How does she –


“Lady Frost happened.” Angel swiped at the tears just beginning to fall from her eyes. “I like this memory – it was my quince, you know. Back home. I always told myself afterwards – at least I had a good party, before I got recruited. At least I had that. And then Lady Frost set it on fire, and I didn’t have it anymore.”

Jean had put her arms around her, hugging gently. “Oh, baby,” Angel choked. She held Jean tight. “Thank you. Just – don’t come in here again without asking me, O.K.? It’s not that I don’t appreciate it – I do. It’s just that you promised me. Remember?”

But Jean had stepped away. She stared up at Charles. Her face had gone dead white.

Charles flicked his eyes back to Angel; spoke quickly. “We probably need to leave. I haven’t the slightest idea how long Lady Frost will sleep – and I have less than the slightest idea of how much power this took.” He put on a sly grin. “And I’ll need to be up on time in the morning.”

“Right.” Angel had dried her tears. She smiled at him in return. “Thanks for this, Mr. Xavier. Sorry I hocked a death loogie at you.”

“A … what?”
“Alex’s words. Not mine. But – oh …” The smile vanished, and she bit her lip. “What’ll I do if Lady Frost takes another look? There’s no way of hiding this.” She gestured towards the brightly lit and festive street – towards the sky clearing of smoke.

Charles hesitated. “Let me – let me think –”

But Jean walked in between the two of them. She looked up into Angel’s eyes. And then she gave her something.

Charles craned his neck. He couldn’t see … what is it, I wonder …

“Oh, awesome.” Angel grinned at Jean. “I remember these little guys. So, just hold onto it tight and say the magic word, and –”

Jean had taken Charles’ hand in a tight grip. And before he knew what was happening, they were rising through the air.

“Goodbye!” A flash of brightness from beneath them. “See you day after tomorrow – or tomorrow, really – what the hell time is it, Mr. Xavier? …”

Her voice faded away. And though most of Charles’ thoughts were set on taking in the clouds, the shimmering expanse of Angel’s mind … on keeping his grey owl close, and on trying not to laugh in glee at Jean’s power … one small part of him remembered, and wished for his father’s watch.

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The euphoria vanished the instant he hit his own body.

“Ugh,” Charles groaned. “Oh …”

He felt less nauseated and pained than he had after Syracuse, but just as dizzy. Rising carefully from the bed, he wobbled to the bathroom and drank a cupful of water. Another. He splashed water on his face.

Then he carefully reached out a tendril of his power to Jean, in her room across the hall.

Charles blinked.

He brushed his power against the white and hard conch shell.

Jean? … Jean, are you there?

No answer.

He tried flicking his thoughts again, like a tiny spark-ended flail. Jean?

The smallest movement at the opening of the shell – Charles caught at it. Jean – what’s wrong?

And he reeled back, gasping, as a picture crashed full force into his mind. Angel’s face, tear-stained, against the red and black cloud of her mind. Framed with a copper wire don’t come in here again without asking me, O.K.? – melting and hardening into a sharp obsidian YOU DIDN’T ASK.

Charles heard his own ragged breaths. “But …” he said, voice shaking. He echoed the words in his thoughts, projected them to her. “I didn’t know – what do you mean? I didn’t know to –”

YOU DIDN’T ASK.

“I’m sorry,” he snapped. She was a child, and … He bit down on his lower lip, hard. Jean knew
Charles took a deep breath. Then he sent her an image: himself, arms crossed over his chest and head hanging: apologizing to Raven for sending a friend of hers away on a school night. “I’m sorry …”

There was no answer.

Cautiously, he stretched out his thoughts again. He only saw the beautiful hard shell … and the tiniest flicker of an animal, disappearing inside it. Then just the shell, gleaming at him coldly.

“Jean?”

When she didn’t answer for a third time, Charles lay back down on his bed. He stared at his candle. Even though he had sorted and shelved his books, and spent such time in Angel’s mind … it hadn’t burned out yet.

And in its flickering light, he felt absolutely alone.

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The loneliness did not go away in the morning light. Alex woke them, the usual breakfast mayhem occurred, with a more removed touch than usual from Frost … and Charles, doing his best to make Jean smile, was greatly disconcerted by his consistent and persistent failure. Ororo fussed over her, trying her best to coax her to eat. But Jean went off with Alex without a smile or nod – or mental message – to anyone: pale and stooped and silent.

Another long day of busy work with Hank, and the scenario repeated itself at dinner. By that time, Charles had turned from worry to … a more introspective worry. All of his life, he had known that he could charm his way out of almost any social faux pas committed … was it the fact a five or six-year-old was the person meeting his eyes with such grave displeasure, that had him so deeply uneasy?

Charles didn’t know.

The entire problem with Jean – which he heard Ororo and Bobby discussing, worriedly, on the way up to bed – had taken his mind off the memory of rage and want. That latter had faded somewhat, like a bruise might after two days.

Of course, then he had a nightmare and spent the entire next day on edge.

The first night in days that he had hoped for a good sleep … Charles focused numbly on transcribing notes, using an ancient, clattering typewriter given him in Hank’s workroom. Spending time in a concussed coma did not count as sleep. Thus, given his return late to his room – and his petrified vigil – Wednesday night, his guilty insomnia Thursday, and this nightmare … It was Saturday, Charles realized, staring dully at the notes. Back in Oxford – home, his mind murmured – if he felt this horrible on a Saturday, it would be due to a hangover.

No hangovers in this cold prison, though. No alcohol, no sex, and – Charles hunched his shoulders, turning the typed sheet over in the machine. No sex. Not for over a month.

That had to be the reason for the nightmare – himself, choking, tasting blood in his mouth, falling
with a crash and sharp pain to the metal grille of the library catwalk. But then, instead of snarled words and a rib-breaking blow to his side … there had been the sensation of eyes on him, a stare running up and down his body and that dark want spiking hot and urgent into his mind … And then, a hand clamping on his upper arm and another twisting in his hair, hot breath on his neck and the man slamming his face against the grille –

And … Charles did not want to remember the rest. Suffice to say: he had woken up, gasping, in a cold sweat.

**Post-traumatic stress**, he had told himself in the morning at breakfast. He had hardly eaten, feeling dizzy and nauseated. His mind was processing recent events; dispersing their effect via dream imagery. He had had those sorts of dreams before, Charles had told himself, threading the typewriter in the workroom. After certain Oxford missions. And in Oxford, he would call a mission friend and get drunk, or go to the Rose in Bloom and deploy the blue eyes – not letting Raven know, because really there was no need to –

**Guilt**, he had told himself while typing, halfway through the morning. His brain had associated the guilt he felt from Jean’s disapproval with Raven’s imagined disapproval, had his sister cottoned on to his own tendency to work through trauma with sex and alcohol. Not that Charles was a prude; far from it. But one didn’t necessarily share the details of the rake’s progress with a younger sibling. So: the nightmare was due to stress and guilt. Perfectly comprehensible.

It was when a headache had started pulsing in the afternoon, and Charles realized it was Saturday, that he came to an unhappy conclusion. Stress and guilt, perhaps; trauma, certainly. But his crutches had been taken away – no alcohol, no sex – and thus his brain went and manufactured a solution, working with the imagery from the earlier assault. Damn it.

Charles finished typing the sheet, laid it face-down in a pile with its fellows, and put in another piece of paper. Then he stared at it.

Slowly, Charles relaxed his shoulders. He tried massaging some of the tension out of them. He had been hunched up all day, he realized – typing and cringing like a Quasimodo of the secretary pool. Jumping at McCoy’s smallest movements. Fearful.

Hardly like a knight.

Charles set his jaw and went back to work. He was *not* afraid.

**Disconcerted**, he told himself, walking back to the kitchen that evening. Not afraid – just slightly disconcerted by the way his mind took the memory of his vicious beating and expanded it to include sexual assault. The mind, he told himself at dinner, was a unique and mysterious thing. And, given how it had gone from a vicious kick in the ribs to a hideously strong body pressed against his back – no, he wasn’t going to think about it – perhaps his mind was somewhat unpredictable as well.

That night, staring up at the darkness after he had extinguished the candle … Charles performed different deep-breathing rituals, telling himself to relax. Relax. Go to sleep. Don’t dream.

“And perhaps …”

He listened to instinct, reached out with his power. He sent his sparrow flying through the manor house, touching on *Bobby John Sean Ororo* and a gentler brush against the cold opaque shell of *Jean*. Then further; there was *Angel*. Further, further … a glowing red mind, sullen, that felt like *Alex*, walking into the forest. And …
There were other glimmers of minds – dozens of them, Charles realized with a slight shiver. Congregated in what felt like a large open space, deep in the forest. *What on earth …*

But his sparrow felt the chill of Frost’s mind, there, and winged away. *Save the curiosity for later. Be safe.*

The sparrow did not find *him* anywhere. No metal; no rage. No … *want.*

Charles sighed as the bird landed back in his mind and nestled warm and safe against his other thoughts. It couldn’t be hoped, then, that the dream had been the other man’s. No, it was his own. Ridiculous and unhealthy – but could he help it, given traumatic stress?

Tired, and tired of thinking, he had fallen asleep. And of course he had to dream.

And this time, when he woke in another cold sweat the early hours of Sunday morning, he only just made it to his bathroom before being sick.

The same dream: the same crack of his skull against metal, the clatter as he fell to the catwalk and coughed blood through the grille to the shelves below. And those eyes, that *want* – hands taking rough relentless hold of him even though he struggled –

But this time the man had yanked Charles’ head back by the hair and –

“No,” Charles croaked, in the dark silence of the bathroom. The rough plaster of the wall was cool against the side of his face. He thumped his forehead against the plaster, softly. He *wasn’t* going to think about it.

Fully awake on a Sunday morning, his stomach empty again and his head pounding, he had washed his face in the darkness. Stumbled his way back to bed; collapsed in it and tried his best to get back to sleep. If he dreamed again, he didn’t remember anything.

When the knock came that morning, though, and he needed three tries to get out of bed, Charles was relieved to hear Alex confirm that he was actually rather ill. That explained the dreams; fever would do that to a person. But that did not explain why he was sent to work with McCoy again, after Alex had given him a few aspirin and a bluff, “Sorry, Mr. Xavier. Hope you feel better soon.” McCoy, however, gave him a glass of water and let him sleep on the workroom’s cot. And when he left at the end of the day, McCoy gave him something stronger than aspirin.

*What to do?* … Charles drank a bowl of broth and thought to himself, dreamily, at dinner. If he were a medic, he would prescribe sleep, for the nervous exhaustion; aspirin and liquids, for the fever and nausea; and perhaps a series of regular and boring wanks, to take the edge off the stupid imagery that his hindbrain was proffering by night.

Because the actual memory of that *want … want* … had almost completely faded, now. He wasn’t afraid of the man; he did not fear Frost or starvation or torture. He was worried about Jean – she had been silent and withdrawn at every meal. Charles hadn’t yet come up with a plan for how to help her.

But he knew exactly what to do, to show he was not afraid of monsters or men.

So … and Charles hummed, sleepily, as he wove his way down the hallway. So: he felt perhaps less fear than he should, walking back towards the library on Sunday night, 28 September. Or perhaps he was still sick. *Fever,* his mind snapped, *would explain something so spectacularly stupid.* Or: *drugs,* it wailed. *What did McCoy give you?*
Whatever it is, it’s lovely, he thought, and: “Don’t touch any metal,” he sing-songed out loud. Charles kept his breathing regular. *Don’t touch any metal. Keep alert.* Tiny flames of his power placed along the dormitory hall, and flickering through the library and into the West Wing beyond …

“What’s the worst that could happen?” he said under his breath.

*You could die,* his mind screamed at him, and: “Yes.” Charles stopped outside the library door.

“That’s why I’m going to be careful. But I’ll be damned if I show him I’m afraid.”

Charles stared. The glinting curlicues of metal were only just visible in the moonlight from the arrow windows. Before, the mass of oak and iron had seemed only a particularly ornate door.

Now, of course, he knew it was a death trap.

Carefully, Charles knelt. He took a folded piece of paper from one pocket. He had nicked a pencil from McCoy’s workroom, earlier that day, and had loosened an end page from the Shakespeare. And on that thin paper he had written:

*I would like my watch back, please.*

He checked one last time. There was no dark and menacing presence lurking in the library – and he had made sure not to touch any metal.

So, Charles slipped the note underneath the library door.

For one long moment, he knelt there and stared. Half of him – well, more than half – expected metal to slither off the door, to whip round his body and crush the life out of him … Or to hold him there, wrapped up tight like a meal for a spider. Until the door would open and –

Charles shook himself and stood, feeling his flesh crawl as the thoughts slinked away into the darkness of his mind. *Frost can be fooled. He can be evaded. They can all be deceived.* Dinner for a spider - nonsense. He didn’t plan on dying that way.

*Besides,* he thought as he walked silently back to his room – spiders had the good manners to stun their prey before eating it alive.

And having felt that intense rage and want … Charles didn’t think that the man watching from his metal web would have a spider’s courtesy.
Chapter 12

Charles felt much better in the morning. Even Frost's usual telepathic jab did not unsettle him. Perhaps it had been the medicine McCoy had given him; perhaps it had been a good night’s sleep. Perhaps it was due to his success: he had dared the lion's den and lived to tell the tale. Well, the door of the den, technically. And not so much “dared,” as “skipped down the hall whilst high as a kite.” Charles smiled to himself, sipping his tea. Best of all: he hadn’t had any dreams. Angel had needed to knock twice that morning to wake him.

They had run out of coffee, so John was sulking. Sean was humming at a strangely high pitch. Bobby and Ororo were both watching Jean. And Jean … Charles bit his lip, feeling a stab of conscience. Jean looked as badly as he had felt over the last few days.

“Jean, dear,” he said. “Have you ever had tea, to drink?”

Jean looked up at him, her grey eyes dull and flat, deep sunken in her face.

“She’s …” Ororo swallowed hard. “I’ve always said that she’s too young.”

“For caffeinated beverages, perhaps.” Charles rose and walked to the jar containing those hideous what-had-been-American-style tea bags, picking up the hot water on his way. “What John and I have been drinking is, by its taste and smell, chamomile. It’s completely herbal.” He kept up the soothing flow of words as he poured out a cup. “Matricaria recutita, or chamomilla of the same genus. German chamomile, not to be confused with the Roman type – brewed through human history, to help with insomnia, anxiety, and headaches. And you –” Charles held out the cup to Jean, “are having your first taste of it, today.”

Bobby half-smiled. “Walking, talking encyclopedia; that’s Professor X.”

Charles felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle. “Professor?” he asked, lightly. “Why call me that?”

“Um.” Bobby made a show of getting up and clattering his dishes in the sink. “You just sounded like a teacher or something, kind of. So, Jean, you like your drink?”

Jean had closed her eyes, breathing in the steam from the hot tea. “Blow on it,” Charles advised, “wait for it cool down a bit.”

“Yeah, Jean, blow on it,” John mocked, and: “John, that is inappropriate!” Ororo thwacked him with the flat of her hand. “She’s six years old!”

“Who cares?” John stomped to the sink beside Bobby, poured out the tea in his mug, and let it drop. He looked as though he wanted it to break; he glared when it didn’t.

Charles dismissed John’s mood as caffeine deprivation, moving his eyes back to Jean. She was staring into the depths of her cup, as though trying to read the future in it.

“Drink it,” He sat back down, took a sip of his own, and reached out to touch her hand. “It will help.”

She drank. Sighed. And gave Charles a picture, a wash of miserable grey and painful orange – but grey and orange slowly being edged with cool green, and – Thank you.
“Thanks, Mr. Xavier.” Ororo’s eyes were dark and serious.

“No trouble at all.”

Silence stretched, punctuated only by the sounds of Bobby and John washing dishes, until Sean left off humming and eyed Jean’s cup, wistfully. “Mr. Xavier?”

“Hmm?”

“Can I have some tea too?”

Sean had only just finished quaffing his cup – “Ew, weird,” – when Angel came in. She gave Charles a bright smile. “Same routine, everyone,” she said, clapping her hands. “Except: two new things. First: it’s the first of the week after fall quarter day, so you get to start collecting firewood for your rooms. Half an hour before dinner. And John, they’ve decided that you can help with the fires this year, O.K.?”

“All right,” Sean crowed. Bobby quirked a smile; Ororo clapped. John looked oddly divided between keeping up his bad mood and swelling with pride.

“So. Logan’ll meet you all when you’re done with your afternoon training. Right outside the double doors. O.K. Second: starting tonight, there’ll be random nightly checks of all you guys. Just to make sure you’re staying put.”

The children fell absolutely silent. Then, one by one, they all turned to look at Charles.

He met their stares, evenly, and drummed his fingernails against his tea mug, clink-clink-clink-clink. He pitched his voice at a reasonable tone. “Might one ask why?”

“Nope.” Angel gave him a good-natured shove to the shoulder. “Just stay in your room, like a good little student. Because you are all good little students. Right, Mr. Xavier?”

“Right,” he sighed, and: wrong, his mind corrected, coolly. But there was no need to tell Angel that. And – Charles made a careful note to himself – there was no need to get her in trouble again. He would devise a way to circumvent the new surveillance, and he would do so while finishing his dull-as-ditchwater typing for McCoy that morning.

The typing was, in fact, so dull, that Charles had come up with a plan after approximately ten minutes and four single-spaced pages.

------------------------

He wasn’t surprised to see Logan back; Angel had all but announced his return that morning, after all. What did surprise Charles, though, was the smile that spread over his own face as he clomped inside McCoy’s workroom. McCoy hastily moved a pile of blueprints out of Logan’s way; Logan himself tossed a battered leather dossier on a table and sat down with a creak on one of the table’s benches.

Charles blinked at the dossier. “Well. This is new.”

“Why thank you, Mr. X – I’m fine. Yeah, bit of travel. Nope; nothing interesting. How are you?”

“I’m getting out of the habit of asking questions, Logan,” Charles said in a dry voice. “I would have thought you’d be pleased.”
“There’s questions and there’s common courtesy, X –”

“Courtesy? Doesn’t that have one too many syllables, for you?”

“Well, we are feeling better today, aren’t we?” Logan grinned. He pulled a cigar from a pocket of his leather jacket, and lit it, ignoring McCoy’s reproachful cough. “I heard you’d been sick, but I don’t see it. I’m almost tempted to make you run the steeplechase, Xavier, but –” he exhaled smoke and flipped open the dossier, "I’ve got somethin’ new for you instead.”

“What is it?”

“Strategy, Mr. X. With maps. You do know what maps are, don’t you?” Logan pulled out a thick stack of paper, folded over and over. He focused on unfolding them, smoothing the sheets out – Charles was relieved, because that meant Logan had missed his guilty twitch.

“Mind if I keep working?” McCoy indicated the blueprints.

“Yeah, no prob.” Logan flattened the topmost map with one sweep of a burly forearm. "This is for Xavier. So, X man. Scenario number one.

“Here’s the good news: you’re in command of a decent sized group; say three brigades, and some artillery support. Only two fighter jets though. Your target city’s here,” he stabbed a finger at the map, “and here’s the bad news: that city has entrenched defenses, anti-aircraft guns, two divisions of your enemy’s army, and – rumor has it – a nuke all ready and rarin’ to go. And – here’s the really bad news – you’ve confirmed the rumor. Hello, nuke; goodbye your entire army and then some. Ayoille et câlice de crisse ..”

French – no, Québecois. Charles mind quickly filed the tidbit away; he kept an expression of polite attention on his face.

Logan’s dark eyes narrowed as he peered down. “Other points of interest: the city has two airports – one big-ass one here to the northwest, mostly defunct; another one, a military one, here – also to the northwest, but closer – still operational. Got a river running through the whole shebang; it forks a few times. Oh, and there’s a nuclear power plant sixty miles to the southwest.”

“Hmm.” Charles narrowed his own eyes; then got up to pace round the table and sit on its other side, next to Logan. He nudged him; with a huff, Logan moved over. Charles rested his elbows on the metal tabletop. He thought.

“What are my objectives?”

“Good question.” Logan took a puff on his cigar. “Objective one: secure the city and keep it as functional as possible for your own use. It’s an industrial powerhouse. Objective two: even if it’s only a pathetic little bit of uranium, you find that nuke and secure it for yourself – before, repeat before they light it – hey,” he glared at Charles’ snort, “you wouldn’t believe what some of the kids assume about shit like this. ‘Why would they use a nuclide bomb, Mr. Logan?’” he whined. “‘Nuclear bombs are bad.’ And so on.”

Charles breathed out a laugh. “The innocence of youth.”

“I know, right? So. Objective three: grab your enemy’s aircraft before said enemy can retreat with ’em. And just to let you know, there’s some good shit there – and the more of that shit you get, the less they get to use on you, so grab, grab, grab. Objective four –” he frowned. “Aren’t you gonna write these down?”
“No.” Charles smiled absent-mindedly, looking at the map. “I’m listening.”

“Ri-ight. O.K. Objective four: rumor has it the commander of your enemy’s whole army – not just the two divisions, the whole army, is in town. You happen to know that the rumor is true. And since he’s there and within your reach, he needs to bite it.” Logan slapped the table. “So, X. What’re you thinking?”

Charles zeroed in on the map; his eyes ran over contour lines, colors and codes, making a careful record all the while. Most of the names were blacked out, but he saw one – an italicized name, which could perhaps explain how it had been missed. Love Field USA, so: Dallas, Texas, his mind concluded, cool and focused. What a coincidence.

He looked up at Logan. “I’m thinking I have few more questions.”

“Hit me.” Another puff on the cigar.

“First: intelligence. Do I have any agents in the city? Do I have any plants in my enemy’s army? Do I have any taps on the commander’s communications? And – most importantly – if I do have any, or all, of these … how reliable are they?”

“Good questions. Assume you have all three. You have sympathetic civs, and some of ‘em are networked under five good agents, loyal ones. You have approximately ten saboteurs in the army, three of which are with the artillery – all ready and awaiting orders. And – and this is the peach – the commander’s head secretary is your operative, and one of your best.”

Charles whistled, but: “Wait,” Logan drawled. “There’s a catch. Assume that the enemy is gonna have its military telepath cranked up to full power when shit starts going down. So your agents have only a few moves, if they’re gonna be using their abilities. And even if they don’t, you still have to …”

“No, you wait.” Charles knew that his jaw had dropped; he closed it with a snap, and then spoke: “Military telepath?”

“Yeah.”

Logan paused, dark eyes intent on Charles’ face. “They do that, you know.”

“Do what?” He felt faint.

“The Free West. Let’s just use them as a hypothetical, O.K.? Say we’re talking about the Free West. They got a pretty decent telepath – he’s wired into some gizmo that lets him focus in on what everyone’s doing, within a certain area. All the time. Everyone. And we assume that the gizmo’s rigged to pick up mutant activity double-quick. Now we’re trying to build something similar, but we’re working at a big fucking disadvantage … since I am not about to suggest that Frost shave her head, stick needles through her skull and get a cable drilled up her -”

McCoy cleared his throat. Charles blinked in surprise; he had forgotten McCoy was there.

"Spine. Spine. Why, what did you think I was going to say?” Logan grinned. “ Couldn't happen to a nicer -”

“Logan,” McCoy snapped, and twirled one finger in the air.

“Right.”
“What?” Charles asked.

“Recordings!” Logan boomed. “Recordings, Xavier. As the commander of your army, you’ve done some flybys, you’ve done some spying. You have recordings of strategic planning sessions! This commander’s been in the field for upwards of twenty years – mostly the Pacific Theatre in World War II. So you know him, and you know his game.”

“Surely nobody is that predictable.”

“Well, this guy’s pretty dumb. And by ‘pretty dumb,’ I mean: your operative is leading him around by his dick.”

Charles did a double take. “What?”

“You heard me. She’s good.”

“All … right. Well, then she might be able to get the nuke’s location out of him.” Charles raised an eyebrow.

Logan’s grin was narrower, this time. “Very good, Xavier. Assume that she already has.”

“So I know where it is – that’s good. That saves me considerable time.”

“All well and good, maybe, Mr. X – but what do you do when things start to get crazy and Commander Dumbass decides to light it?”

“Oh, no.” Charles smiled. “I should have it well in hand, by then.”

“Is that some Brit speak, like: you’ll have things under control? Or: you’ll actually have the nuke? Wrapped up with a bow on it, just for you because you’ve been such a good little boy, ho ho ho?”

“The latter.”

Logan crossed his arms, one hand brandishing the cigar. “Tell me how.”

Charles felt his smile widen. He hadn’t done this in years. Oxford had pulled him off his tactical team and put him into the field as the more senior officers – those who had been active before the mandatory iodine and inoculation régime – had succumbed to radiation poisoning or the plague. So: he was rusty. But he still remembered some of his favorite shortcuts.

“Terrorist groups,” he said, crisply. “Which ones feature, in this city?”

“Wait.” Cigar smoke, exhaled in a cloud – it almost looked as though it had puffed from Logan’s ears. “How do you know –”

“Oh come, you’re not that naïve, Logan, surely? Every country has them; and usually one to several cells in major cities. Which groups, in my target city?”

“Um.” Logan scratched his head. “You’ve got some drug cartels –”

“Not interested. They may have similar tactics, but I’m looking for a group with an ideology – preferably an eschatological one.”

“Escha-what?”

“Aiming for the conclusion of human civilization, usually coincident with the glorious appearing of
any number of deities.”

“Translation: major hard-on for the end of the world?”

“Exactly.”

“O.K., uh … try Washed in the Blood. Not quite as big as the Heirs of Aztlán, in your city, but they’ve got an agenda and they love sharing it. Usually with explosives, but they’ve recently branched out into assassination. They’re really big on the suicides. And they’re pretty pissed their brand of Jesus didn’t come back when the bombs dropped, so they’re all for ringing up the world’s curtain. Again.”

“I see. So you must see how simple it is.”

“Damn it, Xavier.” Logan glared. “What am I seeing that’s simple?”

“Staging the theft of the nuclear device by Washed in the Blood. If my city agents are any good, they’ll have their fingers on the local cell’s pulse – where the meetings take place, how often, with whom. My agents will take the device, leave WB literature or an appropriately deranged ransom note, and – this is critical – they’ll either hold important WB operatives hostage and feed them lines to give to the enemy’s commander in turn … or they’ll replace them outright.”

“Replace them outright? You’re talking about infiltrating a terrorist group at the highest level in the space of one month –”

“Am I?” Charles blinked innocently. “I thought this was all hypothetical.”

Logan’s glare intensified.

“And you said ‘abilities,’ earlier. I assumed that my agents are all … well … mutants.”

A hard drag on the cigar. “You assume correctly.”

“Then since this would initially be interpreted as a terrorist operation and not a military one, it is quite possible that the enemy’s military telepath would not be deployed in time to catch them. Especially if he were otherwise occupied – an attack on another city as a diversion, perhaps. And you yourself told me, in the infirmary, that you have a shapeshifter in St. Louis. Why can’t I get him or her?” Charles gave Logan a sleek smile. “You must admit, it would make infiltration quite easy.”

“Well, he’s six, Xavier. He can only come up with so much on the fly.”

“I’m not asking that he replace the enemy commander. I’m asking that he replace a terrorist only a few people know – one with a rhetoric drawing off known source material. A rhetoric that can be memorized beforehand.”

Logan sighed, deeply. Stared at the map.

Then he shook his head. “Table that one. And with few more shapeshifters, it might be possible, but – yeah. Table it. We’ll think about it.”

“You mean I’ll think about it.” Charles trailed his fingers over the map. “I quite like this sort of thing – strategizing. I miss doing it.”

“Well, today is your lucky goddamn day, Mr. X, ‘cause you’re getting this for homework. What are your objectives again?”
“One: secure the city, keeping it functional if possible; two: find and secure the nuke; three: capture the enemy’s aircraft; and four: assassinate the enemy commander.”

Logan gave him slow, mocking applause. “You can take that map back with you tonight; hang onto it this week. We’ll talk this scenario again later. I got a few other ones –” he indicated the pile of papers – “and we’ll hit ‘em now. Any more questions, before we move on?”


There was a pause.

Charles saw McCoy lift his head from the blueprints and look in their direction.

With a strange twist to his mouth, Logan took a final puff on his cigar. “Always relevant, Mr. Xavier, and always the same. Try to keep civilian casualties as low as possible. It’s good propaganda – you want ‘em on your side, and you want the world to know you have ‘em. That, and you don’t have much time for clean-up. And we really can’t spare the lime, these days.”

Skin prickling, Charles waited. Then he prompted Logan: “And … the military?”

“Military?” Logan’s smile was cold. His voice was colder. “Here are your parameters, Xavier: no quarter, no prisoners, no hostages, no negotiations. You kill them. You kill as many of them as you can, because you want to wipe the fuckers out. Clear?”

Charles could have heard a pin drop, in the workroom.

Logan’s eyes were dark. “Clear?”

He tried to shrug, tried to fold up the map. His hands, suddenly, were trembling. “It’s strange to hear you put it that way. I remember my mother … She was a diplomat. She had high hopes for the ratification of the Fourth Geneva Convention.”

“1949, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well.” Logan ground out his cigar on the metal tabletop. “I don’t know if you got the memo, X-man, but Geneva? Got nuked.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Charles saw McCoy look back down at his blueprints.

“Hee now.” Charles jerked his attention back – Logan had pulled out another map, one mostly blue. “Scenario number two. Your enemy’s got an island. You’ve only got a boat. But here’s the good news: it’s a really big motherfucking boat.”

He walked out with Logan to meet the students as the sun was setting. The other students, Charles reminded himself with a grimace; no need to get above his station. Let them keep underestimating you. In fact … he touched the folded map, where it rested in a pocket of his jeans. Perhaps it would not do to show too much intelligence about strategy. Well. It was probably too late, now. And he did enjoy mental exercise – it had been in short supply, recently. He didn’t count his incursion into Alex’s and Angel’s minds – the former had lasted all of ten seconds, and the latter had felt more like
adventure than exertion.

“All right, everybody line up!” Logan’s voice carried. Charles grinned as he saw the children pelting out the double doors – no, Bobby and John out the doors. Ororo and Sean were running from around another corner of the manor house.

“Line up!” Logan bellowed again, and then, in an undertone: “that includes you, Xavier.”

“Right; sorry.” Charles jogged over to join the children, feeling a flush on the back of his neck. They underestimate you. Everyone can be deceived. “Where’s Jean?” he asked Ororo, and she replied: “She went to bed early. Still sick.” Charles began to reply, but Logan’s voice steamrolled all competition.

“All right, everyone – I know you, you know me, and you know what you hafta do here. But there are rules! What are these rules? In summary: no stupid-ass shit; but specifically … Rule number one – no running away! Rule number two – no hitting each other with sticks! And rule number three – the most important rule of all, for when you get back inside, is … is …” Logan grinned his madcap grin. “What is it? Rule number three –”

The children shouted, in ragged chorus: “Don’t set the place on fire!”

“What was that?”

“Don’t set the place on fire!!” – Sean was laughing; even John was grinning ear to ear. Charles smiled despite himself.

“Exactly! For the love of fuck, children,” Logan boomed, “do not set the place on fire! If you set the place on fire, I will be sad. And when I get sad, I cry. And when I cry, it makes me want to kill things. So don’t set the place on fire – and who am I lookin’ at?”

“John!” the children yelled, and: “Me!” John shrieked, gleefully.

“John, John, Johnny boy.” Logan strolled over to him, thumped him on the back. “Do not –” “I know –” “– set the place –” “– I know –” “– on fire!” “Okay, Mr. Logan, I get it.”

“Good, good. All right.” And Logan squinted skyward. “You got thirty minutes. Three-two-one go!”

The children ran for the woods, whooping. Charles stared after them. Then he stared at Logan. “Um.”

“Yeah?”

“What, exactly, am I doing?”

“Collecting firewood, Xavier. When it starts getting this cold, you get a fire at night – you only burn what you collect, though.”

“I thought as much.” Charles smiled, and strolled toward the wood.

“Hey,” Logan called after him, but: “I know.” Charles waved a hand over his shoulder, not turning. “No escaping. I promise.”

“You keep that promise, Xavier. Monsters in the woods, remember?”
Charles bit the inside of his mouth. His amusement at the children’s antics faded with the darkness of his memories. A hand on his neck, fingers in his hair, and later – rage want – The fever-dreams of his illness, the nightmares ...

“Firewood,” he whispered, picking up the pace. And perhaps a candidate for a nice, sharp stake.

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Even though the evening was quite cold in the light of the setting sun, Charles stripped off his sweatshirt early on. He did so to carry back extra wood – for he wasn’t sure what the rules were, but if nobody else thought of it, Jean would have no fire. It turned out the other children were ready to contribute a few sticks each – they did so after dinner. All were happy, though, that Charles had managed much more than they could have alone.

Charles assembled a standard log cabin fire in Jean’s fireplace, since, according to Angel, they had, “Ten extra minutes before bunking, people, build ‘em fast!” It wouldn’t have the best convection, but it would be less vulnerable to collapse. He tried sending Jean an image of her fireplace, and how warm the room would be … and felt nothing in return but the hard conch shell. Charles sighed and went to look for a match, for a lighter, for – He frowned. How the hell were they all going to light these things, anyway?

He heard a knock at his own door and poked his head out of Jean’s.

“Hey, Mr. Xavier.” John turned to look at him. “Are your sticks ready?”

Charles blinked. “Not quite. I built a fire for Jean, though. Are you on match duty or – what are you doing, exactly?”

John padded into the room, took a lighter from his pocket, and grinned up at Charles. “Check this out.”

A click and spark, and there was a tiny flame. And – Charles felt his eyes almost bulge out of his head. John held the fire in his hand, flicked his fingers –

His jaw dropped at the flames that had leaped up in the fireplace, burning away full tilt in a hungry blaze – in less than five seconds.

“Oh.” Charles blinked away his disbelief. “That’s – that’s quite a talent you have there, John.”

“Thanks.” John’s grin widened. “I don’t usually get to use it in this part of the house. Well, sometimes to light the stove – but I need a match, or this,” he brandished the lighter, “or something. I can only control it. I can’t create it.”

“‘Only’ … there’s no ‘only’ about it. My god, John, how do you –”

“Don’t worry,” and John rolled his eyes. “I won’t set the stupid place on fire; geez.”

“Hm.” Charles smiled. “I believe you, you know.”

"Really?"

“Of course.”

John swallowed. Then he looked away and shrugged. “Whatever.” Charles could feel his emotions close back up. “So, am I lighting anything for you, or what?”
“Oh – yes please. If you wouldn’t mind.” Four steps and a swoop down, and Charles was rapidly building a tipi fire in his own room. It did not take him long before he heard John whistle, tossing the lighter back and forth between his hands. “You’re pretty good at that, Mr. Xavier.”

“Thank you, John. I only wish my colleagues and I had had you along on some of our rounds. Remind me to tell you about how we were called, once, to drive a polar bear out of Banbury.”

“The Banbury Bear?” John set the fire to burning with a flick of the lighter and a twist of his hand. “Sounds cool.”


He listened to the fire’s comfortable snap and pop for a long minute. Then he smiled up at John. “In that case – as in so many – I think that a little fire at hand would have gone a very long way. Thank you for this one.”

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Charles heard her footsteps click down the hallway. He stared into his fire, and thought.

Individual heat: an excellent change. Random checks: not so excellent a change. He sighed. Whether or not it had anything to do with his note of the previous night … well. Charles would be willing to bet that so-called ‘random’ checks would be a check, singular, and would happen on the earlier side of the night rather than the later, since the monitors had to sleep as well.

And he had a plan, formed that morning. Carefully, Charles called forth his power and set a thought spinning into flame with his fingers – he thought of John and smiled. Then he placed the thought-fire in the middle of the hallway outside his door. As soon as anyone walked through it, the flash would be enough to wake him from sleep.

Sleep … With a fire like this in his room, it would be unpardonable to pass up on the chance to wallow in warmth. Charles sank back onto his bed, smiling, and closed his eyes – and reflected, before falling asleep, on how for the first time in a very long time, he felt the tiniest bit of happiness.

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His mood got a boost when the thought-fire performed perfectly. In his sleep, Charles vaguely sensed Alex walking down the hall, noisily, but felt a warning spark in his mind as soon as Alex set off the alarm. He opened his own eyes – stared at the ceiling and started to wait the monitor out. It did not take long. Only a few loud, clomping footsteps, and Alex disappeared down the stairs.

Charles sighed. Now – what did he want to do? He was awake, so he might as well … do something.

He rolled over in bed, stared down. There, lying just between the frame and the wardrobe, was the thin children’s book he had thrown at the wall, days ago. Freedom Rising! The Story of the Free West. Charles grimaced as he picked it up. He wasn’t going to read it, no, but … Like called to like, perhaps. He plucked the map of Dallas from the pocket of his jeans, and placed it in the book for safekeeping.

Then he stared at the book for another moment – without seeing it. He had thrown it at the wall and
stormed off to the library … the library, where the man had taken his watch …

My watch …

Charles sighed at the ceiling, setting the book down. Nothing had happened the previous evening – unless one counted this ensuing ‘random check’ business, he thought, frowning to himself. Which – if he were going to place another note – because he could, I can and they’re underestimating me … he should probably try it tonight. First, Alex was on duty, so Angel would not be punished if he were caught – and he wouldn’t be, really, because he knew now – “Don’t touch any metal,” he whispered. Secondly, the checks would probably be at their most haphazard in the very beginning. So when, really, would be a better time to start … than the present?

Besides, the fire had given him courage.

Charles carefully tore another page out of a book – a dusty yellow scrap, from the back matter of Crime and Punishment. He slipped his pencil out from where he had tucked it away in the thick spine of the Shakespeare. And he wrote:

I would like my watch back, please.

Folding the paper up, he slipped it into a pocket of his jeans, picked the lock on his door before he could think twice. The pick was on its last bend, he thought to himself, frowning – the metal was considerably warped, and –

Oh.

Oh.

Charles swallowed hard. Metal. He deliberately placed the pick in a crack between two flagstones, outside his door. He checked his sweatshirt – nothing – and then his jeans – the rivets; damn … Shivering, he ducked back inside his room and exchanged the jeans for sweatpants, transferring the note to another pocket. No metal. He checked his shirt – two metal buttons at the collar; fuck – took off his top layers, and tossed on a clean T-shirt and his lucky blue sweater instead.

Charles bit his lip. Not lucky, actually. Not consistently. Certainly it had been lucky last night, when nothing had happened to him … but he had been wearing it when the man had beaten him, strangled him, almost killed him ….

Really, he had only just gotten the bloodstains out.

He slipped the ragged cuffs over his hands, and stared into the small, dusty mirror set inside the wardrobe door. Normally, at night and with only a candle, he could see nothing. Now, with a fire, he saw his own pale face, the dark blue line of the sweater and the lighter blue of his eyes, wide and staring. And …

Charles saw his eyes widen in consternation. He tilted up his chin, then swallowed, hard. The weal from where the chain had throttled him was still there – less pronounced, but visible. It even rippled with the muscles of his throat as he swallowed again, as he clenched his jaw. He didn’t think it would scar, but … people could see it, if they knew to look. McCoy might have been looking at it; Logan too. He saw the blue of his eyes shimmer; he bit his lip again, harder. His mouth was very red.

His knew his own blood was red – it had looked black, though, that night in the library. From the bird’s eye view of his own near death.
But – Charles narrowed his eyes. He had gone to the library the night before, and had won. His sweater was not the luckiest, perhaps … but its dark blue reminded him of Raven.

Raven …

His sister would not have been afraid of anything. And neither was he. Before he could lose his nerve, Charles shut the wardrobe, slipped off his shoes – nails in the soles; so sorry to spoil your fun, you bastard – and headed off for the library door.

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He called the thought-fire to him and sent it flaming down the hallway to the West Wing, into the library and through it, cascading into individual flickers and casting their light as far as he could reach. Alex had gone, yes, but just in case, Charles left tiny flames burning at regular intervals behind him, down the dark and narrow hallway.

He stared at the door, then knelt quickly and shoved the note under it. “Do svidaniya, Comrade Dostoyevsky. You go to a better place.” Then he half-smiled, and added: “No, not really. Lying. Sorry.”

He paused. “… And I’m talking to a page – from a book.”

Charles sighed. It was not as though he had the excuse of powerful painkillers this time. Perhaps, though, flippancy was the better part of valor: a show of courage in a prison as dark, cold and draconian as this one. Or a show of defiance. Defiance. Deliberately, he reached out a finger on each hand and traced the wood – oak – between the iron decorations. Because I can. Perhaps he could –

The tiny flame furthest from him, at the very end of the hallway, ignited in warning.

Something moving and Charles whirled where he stood, with a gasp -

Wait …

Something small, moving. He blinked. What on earth?

At the end of the hallway, he saw what looked like spark – but what must have been a lit candle. Halfway up the wall, flickering in the shadows.

Charles tipped his head to one side, his mind racing. He would have remembered a torch, certainly. Even though this light was considerably smaller – it cast a new circle of light - it was almost … floating? “How –” he heard himself whisper, and that’s very interesting, his mind said, cautiously. He felt one side of his mouth quirk. It wasn’t enough that this was a prison – was it haunted as well?

And why was the light getting brighter?

Then realization hit him like a wave of ice water. The light was getting brighter, because it was coming towards him. Floating towards him.

In … and he knew it, instinctively. Even though he couldn’t see it.

In its metal holder.

Oh, no.

Charles felt his breath coming faster, panting. No – no … If the metal were moving by itself – and
setting off flame after tiny flame of alarm, advancing at a slow and steady speed towards him – that meant that the person manipulating the metal was surely nearby, and –

*Where to hide?* With a strangled gasp, he grabbed for the door handle to the library – and stopped, his fingers inches from the worked metal.

*Stop. Think.*

The last time he had tried to hide in the library; he had failed. The man had sensed the metal on him and had found him, and tried to kill him. The man had sensed the chess piece falling, the candelabrum moving – he had fused the lock shut: and all from a distance. So if Charles were to touch the door’s metal handle –

“He’d know I was here,” he mumbled to himself, and “oh *god*...”

*I don’t want to die. I really don’t want to die.* “Not when I just got my room warm enough,” he whispered, and choked back a laugh. Something was stinging in his eyes – and it wasn’t the light from the candle –

The candle, Charles realized, which was floating a foot away from him, in mid-air.

Then it drifted to the flagstones of the hallway floor. The wrought-iron holder settled, with a scrape and clink.

Charles held his breath. Had that been – a footstep?

He listened more carefully. There was another. And another – and: yes. It was. Someone was coming. He knew who was coming.

Closing his eyes, Charles stepped away from the door – standing perpendicular to it, his back to the stone wall, melting back into the shadows. He had checked … he wasn’t wearing any metal, which meant that the man could not sense him, as long as he shielded himself from view …

Desperately, he reeled back in all of his power – flickers of fire from everywhere. Then he closed his eyes and pictured a veil – *veil veil veil* - but a real one this time, not just for his mind. A veil in the real world – a shroud – draping over him and obscuring him from even the sharpest gaze.

*God, I hope this works,* Charles thought bleakly – and then he had no more time to think, because he was looking just slightly to his right, and there, stepping into the dim circle of candlelight on the floor, was the man who had tried to kill him.

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*Tried and failed,* Charles told himself. *You’re alive.*

And it was, perhaps, the most horrible thing in the world … to be a foot away from someone who had tried to kill you, and to be trying, the entire time – agonizingly … trying *not* to breathe.

*Don’t let him sense you,* Charles’ mind whispered. *Be still. Be silent; be still.*

But what was he *doing*?

Charles could only watch. He stared at the man’s profile. This close, he could trace the lines of a strong forehead, nose and chin, a taut jaw – *like a coin,* he thought, *he belongs on a coin* – and: *you thought that the last time you saw him,* his mind screamed, and: *you’re going to die* – do you realize
Carefully, Charles turned his head completely to the side, and breathed out through a completely open mouth. Then he breathed back in, and shut his lips tight. Even that, it seemed the man could sense – there had been the flick of those eyes to the left, and a slow tilt of the head …

Charles wished, more than anything, for his own hand to be at his mouth. That way he could at least bite down on a finger in order not to scream.

But the man had stopped. He hadn’t seen him – he hasn’t he hasn’t seen me …

Instead, he was leaning forward and sniffing at the door. Why the bloody fuck – oh –

Charles’ skin crawled as he realized: the man was sniffing where his fingers, Charles’ fingers, had traced between the whorls of iron, over wood. The man’s bony jawline tilted, and then those long-fingered hands came up and flexed against the door – and Charles bit down on his tongue to keep from gasping, as the metal tracery came to life.

My god …

It would have been beautiful, had he not been so terrified. The man pressed his hands against the door and tilted up that stark line of chin and jaw – almost as though he were greeting the metal. And the metal replied – vibrating, almost purring and twisting down and around the man’s fingers.

Charles heard a scrick-ck, from down the hallway.

And he choked back another gasp as the man whipped round and threw a handful of metal down the hall in a molten flash.

His fingers had almost brushed Charles’ face.

Then, distantly, Charles heard the squeak of a mouse, and the tiny scratching sounds of it running away.

It seemed that the man had heard it too, for Charles – fascinated – saw a corner of that thin mouth quirk up. Then the man closed his eyes and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyelids. Rolled his shoulders, dropped his hands, tilted his head back, swallowed. He bent his head from side to side – Charles stared at it …

The line of his throat was very elegant. So: monsters had to relax. Could it be true?

No, obviously, his mind gibbered, not true. Look now - see? The man had turned round again and was glowering at the door. The metal thrown down the hallway had floated back to him - he let it undulate down his hand, like a ribbon, and then trailed a finger along one of the door’s iron bands – and the metal flowed back into place with a faint quiver, as though it had come home.

Then the man turned on one heel, and began to look round, slowly, in a complete circle. His eyes rested on Charles for a second or two – and Charles held his breath, bit his tongue, and tried not to think about how – from this close – he could see shades of grey, blue, and green in those eyes …

The man’s gaze passed over him. Charles closed his own eyes; turned his head completely to the side. Breathed out. Then breathed back in.

Then he turned his head back, opened his eyes again -
And almost screamed, as he saw the man’s eyes staring directly into his own. Only inches away.

This close, Charles could see individual striations of grey in the irises. In the dim candlelight, though, green was dominant. Especially given that the man’s hair was a coppery color, though brown as well – the slight red undertone in his eyebrows made the green stand out –

His mind clicked away, cataloguing, as adrenaline poured into his system, leaving him giddy. It was as though he himself were a cobra, unable to take his gaze away from a snake charmer – or perhaps a milksnake, Charles thought. In fact, the man might be a cobra, but he, Charles, was an innocuous milksnake. Milksnakes were picture-perfect reflections of poisonous coral snakes, though … And he had his own defenses. Didn’t he?

Charles tightened all of his mental veils – and the new thing, the real veil. Look away – nothing to see here –

Was it working?

… oh my god. Yes. Yes, it’s working, because the man had flicked his eyes to the left, frowning – looking away – and Charles could turn his own head to the right and exhale silently; inhale again and then again because he had been so short on air …

But then Charles froze, as the man took a one casual step forward.

His breath was hot against Charles’ jaw. Charles didn’t dare move.

For, if he moved his head a fraction of an inch back to where it had been, he would actually … his mind stuttered. His lips would meet the man’s mouth and then oh god not going to think about that and want and the fact that the man was so damn close.

That mouth. It was almost resting on the hinge of Charles’ jaw. Why? oh god no – Charles tightened the veil, the real one you can’t see me go away –

But then a slight movement out of the corner of his eye, and it appeared the man had leaned closer, because – and Charles’ heart gave one thump, and stilled. His mouth was dry as a bone. Because somehow … the man’s lips were pressed in the hollow of his cheekbone, and Charles thought wildly that someone must have shaved him in the infirmary, because those lips didn’t catch on anything besides the mildest stubble – except then they paused and moved – because the man was speaking.

Well. Whispering, really. And what he was whispering was:

“… Professor …”

The s left a sibilant trail of heat across his cheek. Charles bit back a scream – he wasn’t going to move, no, because the man couldn’t see him, and –

“Charles Xavier …”

Then strong hands traced down the stone wall, before pressing against his shoulders, fingers digging in, and Charles knew the game was up.

“Charles Xavier,” the man said, quietly, “you have a metal filling on the left side of your mouth. Upper jaw, back penultimate molar. Here.”

Those lips pressed against his cheek, moving with the words, felt different from - was that a flick of tongue on his skin? Yes. Yes it was, because there it was again. The man was having a taste. And
had that been a rumble in his chest? Oh my god –

“Right. Here. Did you not remember?”

Charles closed his eyes. Opened them.

“Answer me.”

Charles couldn’t find any words.

A hot exhale against his cheek. “Answer me.”

“No …” His own voice sounded like sandpaper. “No. I didn’t remember.”

“Hm.” Strong fingers flexed into his shoulders, and Charles bit down hard on his tongue, tasting blood.

“Please,” he gasped. “Please don’t …” Please don’t hurt me, his mind finished. He wasn’t sure if he had said it out loud.

But he must have, for the man made a soft sound in the back of his throat.

“If you hadn’t wanted to be hurt, Professor … perhaps you should not have gone wandering by night.”

“I …” It was impossible for Charles to speak – his throat was completely dry.

The man stood there for what felt like an endless moment – just breathing against Charles – strong hands on his shoulders, warm lips in the hollow of his cheekbone.

And then those same hands grabbed and shoved, and Charles choked back a scream – he was not going to scream – as his back hit the library door, and as metal jumped eagerly to his ankles and wrists, his arms and legs, twining around his hips and his torso and – his neck …


For Charles had been trying to breathe, trying, but it was loud and difficult – somehow caught in his chest, but if he could only get enough air he would cry out and wake everyone, see if he didn’t –

“Shhh …”

Frantically, Charles pulled against the metal. The tendrils writhed like snakes around his wrists and arms. He saw the man’s eyebrows fly up and those green eyes spark – and Charles’ panicking thoughts flashed back to the memory of a spike through his mind – want –


Even immobile, though, he could keep his eyes locked on the man’s face. Charles heard his thoughts cataloguing away, thrumming with adrenaline. He felt metal twisted round all of his limbs – one particular strand coiling around his throat – god – don’t panic – He saw the golden light from the candle, forgotten at their feet. He observed the man’s clothes – dark and ordinary, making his spare frame look like a shadow stepped from the blackness of the hallway …

And those eyes, glittering at him.

Charles deliberately looked away. He thought he heard a sound – hissed out between teeth? He
couldn’t tell; couldn’t place it. But the man was speaking.

“So. I have been told that you are a telepath, Professor Xavier.”

Ridiculous, not to have thought of it before – Charles kept his face blank, turned away, as his mind rapidly cycled through possibilities: soar like he had into Angel’s mind, and change the man’s thoughts; slice like he had into Alex’s, and change the man’s memory; punch like he so desperately wanted to with Frost’s –

Frost. Shite. Try something and she might not just wake – she might see, know exactly what he could do, and any hope of escape would vanish. Unless he were to strike her first, and could you? With practice, it might be possible …

He called up his hummingbird, slowed it to such an extent that its wings flapped like a vulture’s. The hummingbird glided to the man’s thoughts – just a quick pass …

And Charles flinched. The bird had flown straight into a sharp-edged maelstrom of metal – shards, nails, spikes – which whirled at it like an angry circle saw. A flash and an agonized chirp, and the hummingbird was flailing back to Charles’ mind, bleeding.

“Well …” And the voice was still so quiet. “Well … I felt that. You’d do wisely to stay out of my head, Professor.”

Charles could hardly breathe; horror had sent a wave of nausea roiling straight up from his gut to his mouth. He swallowed against the foul taste. The man was smiling, just slightly – his teeth white and even and somehow – Charles stared, feeling his flesh crawl. Those teeth. There seemed to be quite a lot of them, glinting in the candlelight.

“What did you see?”

A pause.

Then: “Nothing,” Charles choked, “nothing – I didn’t, there was –” For he could sense something edged with red, or blood, welling up at the edges of the silence. Oh god I don’t want to die –

“And now?”

A tendril of metal nudged at his chin, and Charles had to tip his head back to keep its edge away from his throat. He caught a flash of sharp amusement, crackling along the silence – but then he sensed those eyes caught by something, snapping to the line of … fixing on –

Oh no. No … There was that – want – drifting from the other man’s mind like a dark mist. And then there was one finger, warm, trailing over the weal on Charles’ throat.

“Professor …” And warm breath on his throat. “What do you see now?”

“I don’t –” he said, rapidly, “I can’t see a thing. It’s too dark.”

“Not with your eyes. What do you see in my mind?”

But Charles didn’t want to look. The want was thickening in the air, like a haze of chlorine gas.

“You told me to stay out of your head.”

“And you always do as you’re told?”


Charles gritted his teeth. “Do you torture all the children this way?”

A pause. Then that voice, low and mocking: “Do you consider yourself a child?”

No, Charles thought, wildly; he must have shaken his head by instinct, because there was a pause, and then he felt a warm puff of breath against his throat. “No. I thought not.”

Then the metal was gone from his chin, and Charles could let his head fall forward – could breathe, could clench his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering, could avoid the man’s eyes.

But not his voice.

“You’re not a child, Xavier. You’re a teacher, you’re a strategist, and you’re a mildly competent telepath. Or so I’m told. You have tested off the intelligence charts, such as they are. And yet …” and there was a finger at his chin, inexorably tipping his face up. “And yet, you disobey. Why?”

“Because,” Charles met the man’s eyes as bravely as he could. “I would like my watch back, please.”

Those teeth flashed in a smile. “Yes, I’m sure you would. But I took it, Xavier, to punish you. And since I can’t take it twice …” The green eyes glittered. “How shall I punish you now?”

Here it comes. Charles bit down hard on the wild rush of despair fury I’m sorry Raven – and let his eyes fall shut.

A soft tsk. “Look at me.”

He kept his eyes closed. And hardly needed to use any power to feel the roil of anger anticipation want coil in on itself and knot into rage.

“Disobedient.” The voice was still calm; the contrast with the seethe of emotions beneath the surface was enough to make Charles light-headed with fear. “Too dark to see, you say, and now you won’t open your eyes …”

- what -

Something had brushed over his eyelids. Not a finger, though – a wire, or wires – thin lines of metal rustling along his cheekbones and over his eyebrows.

“… And so I must conclude – that you don’t really need them.”

One of the wires jabbed. Charles gasped and opened his eyes wide, staring at the man’s own – blue-green-grey – so close to his, so sharp and merciless. “No –” he heard his own voice, strangled and desperate, “no – don’t –”

“Why not?” The man crossed his arms over his chest. “Give me one good reason not to take your eyes. And give it to me now.”

Charles felt his thoughts race; another jab made him open his mouth, heedless, and gasp: “I need them to read, I need them to help the children. I need them to – to look at maps, help McCoy with his work – for my work here – I –”

The man said nothing; merely stared, a slow smile curling the corners of his mouth.

Charles felt his thoughts drifting away, like a bird – Raven – fluttering to the massive door’s lintel.
The raven saw the knots of rage tightening around the other man and drawing him closer to Charles – and then heard more words, frantic and fast: “It would be traumatic for the children – the infirmary might not be able to spare medical supplies presently – and, and it would be rather inefficient, wouldn’t it? when I can accomplish more with them – with – please, I need them – don’t –”

In the midst of his babbling, the raven left its perch. It flew silent and swift to the man and perched invisibly on his shoulder. It was dark enough – invisible, veiled – to look calmly into the lethal blur of metal and see:

- an image: Charles’ eyes, thin metal coils and loops spiraling over the line of his cheekbones, pooling in the sockets and caressing his eyebrows. The metal – iron – dark and dull, and his skin white from fear … and his eyes: so blue. Blue, wide and staring – and there, there, vibrating from metal and running hot and urgent through the man’s mind: want …

“… Oh.”

Charles hardly recognized his own voice … as the stammering words tumbling out of his mouth trailed off into a soft, “Oh …”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “Yes?”

The fear left Charles light-headed, but: try. “A good reason.” He swallowed. “I have one.”

A pause. Then: “Yes?”

“My eyes.” Try it. Charles breathed in, out, carefully. Do it. “I’d hate to lose them. Because – I’ve been told … they’re very beautiful.”

Silence.

Charles held his breath. The other man was staring at him, eyes glinting green. Charles tried to look away, but could not. Trapped, with a monster staring at him - eyes pale green jewels in the dark. Like those of a dragon - not, Charles told himself, that dragons existed, of course, but -

The man bared his teeth - and with that horrible gleam, the illusion was complete.

Fuck.

Charles didn’t need his powers to sense the same want pouring off the man like steam, coiling around him tighter than metal ever could. But the raven fluttered to the high and darkened ceiling anyway, watching as the man smacked a palm against the door and made the metal fly off Charles and snap back flat against the oak. Charles had no time to catch his breath as the other grabbed his upper arm and dragged him, stumbling, down the hallway, into the darkness. He could hardly keep up – his mind was racing, because he didn’t know what was going to happen, and some of the possibilities turned the sweat on his neck freezing cold.

Before he knew it, Charles’ back was pressed against the door of his room. The man was glaring at him, he could tell – the raven, gliding, saw want twisted with rage into a hideous tangle. Of course, Charles himself couldn’t see a thing in the darkness. He only felt harsh and hot breaths, gusting over his face.

Then a strange, tiny scraping sound. Then a hiss, and a strong hand clamped over his mouth –

– and Charles screamed against the hand as something sharp twisted into his left thumbnail, and corkscrewed red-hot down into the nailbed – it was excruciating and he squeezed his eyes shut
against tears – then, instinctively, he bit down hard on the hand and heard the man snarl a curse, felt him let go.

He couldn’t speak, he could hardly breathe – even though he wasn’t being strangled – it felt as though he had had the thumbscrew in Oxford Prison – and it was worse, then, as whatever-it-was ripped its way out of his thumbnail, god, and coiled around the knuckle, flexed and tightened –

“Du. You do as you are told from now on, Xavier –” the man hissed. “And never, ever touch my mind again, or your eyes will only be the first thing that I take from you. Do you understand me?”

Yes, Charles wanted to say, hyperventilating. But he didn’t have a chance to say anything, before the man ripped open the door of his room and shoved Charles inside. Then there was the sound of the door locking, faster than seemed possible in a raging scrape and crunch of metal.

The fire was still burning. Charles staggered over to the hearth, fell to his knees and stared at his door, through the door as his raven sensed the man storming back to the West Wing, raging, wanting –

His hand, his hand – what had been done to it? His palm was red, in the firelight. He squinted – his left thumbnail was shredded; blood coated the digit, and Charles could not see what had happened … Frantically, he sucked the blood off, but his teeth caught on something. Something metal.

Charles yanked his mouth away, stared at his thumb. And he felt his jaw sag.

His improvised lockpick – carefully left outside his door. On its last bend, he had thought, earlier. But then, he hadn’t thought it could be bent into anything more.

Certainly not into the ring now twisted around the base of his thumb. A metal ring: silver in the firelight, red with his own blood.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Good lord, that Logan's a chatty one. Another bit of a "break" chapter here, people - hope you still like. And just to let you know, we're coming up on the moment! you've all been waiting for! (... I think?) I'm on a roll: so maybe even before this weekend is out. Depending on the feeeeeedback ... *bats eyelashes coyly*

Also, the brief reference to a mutant controlling volcanism is thanks to Takmarierah's epic fic: "Utopia."

You may find said epic here: http://1stclass-kink.livejournal.com/3115.html?thread=2933291

“You O.K., Mr. Xavier? You look like shit.”

“John! No bad language in the kitchen.”

“You know, do you think you could come up with another one, Ororo? 'cause the same old same old is getting really old, and it’s gonna be even older in December –”

“John.” Charles spoke against the red and black of his own closed eyes. “That is quite enough.”

Perhaps the children were not used to his iciest voice. That could explain their sudden, absolute silence. Then again, Charles thought, wearily, he had only ever used his coldest tones on students who had greatly misbehaved … perhaps it was not quite fair to –

Sod it. He gritted his teeth and opened his eyes, staring down at his left hand. The slightest movement of his thumb sent pain lancing down his palm, up his arm. His thumbnail had been ripped off, or nearly so, and his thumb was throbbing with each heartbeat – and he had to keep it shielded from everyone, lest … Charles frowned, muddled. Lest what? What would have against people finding out that he had broken the rules again? Alex would be the only one punished, and he deserved it, with his loud: “Time to get up, Mr. Xavier,” when he hadn’t slept – again –

He shook the pain-tinged thoughts aside. Adversity bred viciousness only in the least mature of minds; he would not let that happen to him. Rather, he would view it as an opportunity to practice his new discovery. A veil in the real world: diverting attention from something obvious, taking a wisp of his power the size of a marble and wrapping it like cotton round the wound, the dried blood, the bruising –

– the ring at the base of his thumb …

Charles stared at the metal, feeling his flesh crawl. He had to focus on the ring, coiled tight, to keep at bay the memory of how he had got the damned thing in the first place. The steel of his lockpick, thinned and twisted in upon itself, into an implacable circle … implacable, because he couldn’t pull it off. He had tried last night – tried, doing his best to tug, and then biting down on the panicked urge to scratch and yank until his flesh tore again – anything to get it off –
His bruised thumb was pulsing round the metal. Charles bit his lower lip, thinking of how to obtain some antibiotics –

“Mr. Xavier?” Bobby’s voice was hesitant. During all of breakfast, he had been humming what had sounded, bizarrely, like hymns. He had stopped when Ororo and John had started to fight. “Is everything O.K.?”

No, Charles thought fiercely, but: “I’m only – tired, Bobby. I’m having some trouble sleeping. Saturday night was fine, but last night – last night I –”

He trailed to a halt at the first touch of Frost’s morning probe. All the children winced. Charles squeezed his eyes shut against the chill in his mind, then opened them and frowned. “Ororo?”

“Yeah?”

“Where’s Jean?”

Silence stretched again. Charles looked from face to face – then focused on Ororo. Her eyes were strangely bright, and oh, he realized, she’s trying not to cry –

“She’s upstairs.” Ororo blinked hard.

Then Sean said in a rush: “And Mr. Xavier – we’re all really worried. About her, I mean. She’s never been this sick before, and she’s getting worse and worse –”

“Why is she so ill? Can anyone tell me –”

“No!” – and... “... No.”

Charles stared at Ororo and Bobby in consternation. “But why ever not? This secrecy is ridiculous – especially if a child’s health is at stake.”

“Then take it up with Lady Frost.”

All stared at John, who had a look of defiance on his face. “Yeah, I said it. Talk to her. She knows what she’s doing.”

“... John, shut up,” Bobby said, voice cracking, but: “And how would I do that, precisely?” Charles kept his own voice calm. “Call her? Write a note? Ask for a telepathic appointment?”

“Maybe just keep on breaking the rules, man.” John’s eyes burned. “Or are you gonna tell us that you aren’t the reason we’ve got bed checks every night now?”

The flesh of his thumb throbbed; the ring felt as though it were two sizes too small.

Charles met John’s stare. “I may have done some – foolish things since being placed here, John. But let me tell you all, right now,” he rested his eyes on each of them in turn, “I will never, ever do anything to harm you. Whether through my own actions, outright, or through my agency acting on others. That is why I ask about Jean: I want to help her. Not hurt her.”

The children were silent.

“I want to help you all. I want to keep you safe. I promise to keep you safe. But I can’t do that if you don’t trust me.”

John was the first to drop his eyes. The other children looked down at their plates soon after.
Another paused stretched, and then: “Ororo?” Bobby’s voice was quiet. “Your call.”

“I think …” Ororo’s voice was just as hushed. “I think we … can.”

And … Charles felt his eyes go wide, as trust … trust – and even - love … unfurled from the
children’s minds into the silence of the kitchen: four buds joining into a gorgeous flower.

He saw Ororo look at Bobby; he saw her take a deep breath to speak –

And Alex threw open the door. “Regular day for everybody. Let’s go.”

The moment was lost.

Charles sighed to himself in frustration as he walked out with the children. But: tonight, he resolved,
tonight, you’ll speak to them again. They’ll tell you what you need to know. They know they can trust
you.

Later, of course, he could only tell himself what he would have said, had he known; what he would
have done differently. Hindsight was infallible, after all.

Had Charles known that Ororo and Bobby, John and Sean would be gone by that evening … he
would have at least hugged them good-bye.

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“You don’t look very well, Mr. Xavier.”

Charles shrugged, giving McCoy a rueful smile. “I’ve been having some trouble sleeping. Nothing
serious.”

Tentatively, McCoy returned the smile. “Not like that ‘flu last weekend, huh?” He turned back to his
work.

Charles stayed focused on his own project: sorting, prefatory to filing. Alphabetizing notecards. It
was not the glorified secretarial work that had him gritting his teeth, he told himself; rather, the fact
that he could hardly move his left thumb. It was tricky enough that he had to keep the injury and ring
shielded from McCoy, with such detailed work. But he needed to use that thumb, damn it, and …

… And if he had more challenging work, he thought, feeling the grit turn into an outright grinding of
teeth – his mind wouldn’t bring up memory after memory.

Memories. He had kept them at bay during breakfast, during most of the morning. But now …
Charles wiped away sweat on his temple with one hand – the ring brushed his left eyelid, and his
stomach lurched –

_Give me one good reason not to take your eyes_, the man whispered in his mind. _And give it to me
now._

That voice, like gravel, and those _eyes_, green-grey and glittering in the low light …

_My eyes_ … Charles had replied.

And even though he knew his voice had almost cracked in that moment, the night before – in this
memory, now, in the humid workroom … the words somehow became _low_, low and soft. _My eyes_
… his own whisper, caressing: _I’ve been told they’re very beautiful_ …
And green, glowing in the candlelight, rapidly devoured by black, and Charles smashed and sent reeling by a tidal wave of want—

“Put a name on it,” Charles ordered himself under his breath, sweating in McCoy’s workroom. “What the hell is going on in that bastard’s head?”

Want. But: what sort? Charles flicked through the notecards in his hands; flicked through the memories in his mind. His thoughts, cataloguing, had noted different aspects of the want: the hollow sucking quality he remembered from children at the communal soup kitchen—hunger; the wafting, incense-cloud quality he remembered from the monthly Oxford dances—desire.

Hunger. Desire. Charles felt sweat trickle down his back. What had been most disconcerting about the human qualities to the man’s want…was that they had been edged by a crimson thread of—prey—catch it—kill it. Charles had only ever sensed that crimson from Oxford’s barn cats… and once from a solitary wolf that had caught sight of him on patrol...

Dominating them all, though, had been black-red magma roiling beneath the surface and sending up hisses of steam to twine out around Charles’ limbs…the quality he remembered uncurling from behind closed doors at the Rose in Bloom, pulsing from the slick clenching slide around him with his first woman, burning from the hot bitter spurt down his throat with his first man—


The man’s eyes had been so wide and dark—and… Charles felt the back of his neck prickle at the memory. There had a small scar, lying halfway between the right side of the man’s mouth and his nose. And Charles remembered this because the man had pressed his lips together, staring at him hungrily, and the scar had moved just slightly—

Charles cursed, and peeled off his sweatshirt. And his hands, he told himself, were not trembling.

“Something wrong?”

“No, Hank—not really. It’s just—” he licked his lips, “it’s just a bit hot in here. Isn’t it?”

McCoy shrugged at him. “Sorry. The heat in here gets cranked once the first snow falls—and last night—”

But Charles’ attention had flown to the windows. “Snow?”

“Yeah. Look.”

Charles walked to the window, and looked. Sure enough: there was a dusting of white across the grass. “It’s not quite October, is it?”

“October first—tomorrow.” McCoy had moved to stand next to him. “But even before the war, first snowfall here was usually around October twenty-fifth or so. So it’s not that the time is messed up beyond recognition, or anything. What’s wrong is that the ground’s not warm enough to melt it, these days. So from the beginning—”

“It sticks.” Charles sighed. “Yes. It’s the same in Oxford. A little better now that the Gulf Stream has picked up again—”

“Yeah—did you guys like that, over there?” McCoy’s grin was blindingly bright. “It took us five years to figure out how to fix it, and then two more to actually do it—”
“Wait—” Charles’ thoughts stumbled to a stop. He turned, to stare. “What do you mean, fix it?”

McCoy looked, if possible, happier. Light glinted off his glasses, his smile, his steel necklace.

“Hank …” Charles blinked with an effort. “That’s impossible.” With the nuclear winter, convection in the north Atlantic had slowed to such an extent that … It had been a freak of nature, thermohaline circulation increasing. A stroke of luck - a godsend - and admittedly it made everyone in Britain ecstatic, but ...

“You’ll catch flies with your mouth open like that.” McCoy walked to the file cabinets lining one wall, a spring in his step. “We talked it over with Britain’s Queen, and then we got together everybody who could cool things, and everybody who could heat things, and added Volcana and some other people – and crossed our fingers – and: boom!” He slapped one of the metal cabinets. “About one ton of research – most is on microfilm, now. Seven years of work and … Gulf Stream back on board. Not too shabby.”

“Hank. That’s impossible.”

“Not impossible. Just really fiddly. And it took forever, because our people didn’t have a lot of time to devote to it. Even before the war got going, you know? So we had to do the whole thing little by little.”

“This was – how long ago, then?”

McCoy’s smile turned wistful. “About thirteen years ago, now. It was what we brought to the table – the biggest thing, I mean – for our treaty with Britain. The fix was done before my time, but I get to keep tabs on it. Except now, with the war going the way it is, it looks like I won’t be able to get down to the Caribbean to check –”

But Charles’ mind had slowed. We. We, McCoy had said. As though he, Charles, were a member of the EBS – as though his work was for them … his allegiance to them …

He turned to look out the window again. There was Logan, striding into the woods. Charles let his mind free associate. Logan. Firewood. “Why isn’t this room heated with a fireplace?” His lips felt numb. “The dormitory rooms are. The kitchen is.”

“My work – our work – gets a priority. I suppose the reasoning is that we’ll concentrate better if we’re not thinking about how cold we are. But –” and the voice turned shy, “don’t you want to know about how we – I mean, with the Gulf Stream – I could ask for you to see the files, and you could …”

Charles’ intuition told him that McCoy wanted to brag. He suddenly felt very, very tired.

But he tried for a smile. “I would love to see them, Hank. Better yet –” and he waved a hand at the notecards on the table. “I’d like some more challenging work.”

“I know, Mr. Xavier.” A grimace. “And I’m sorry. But they have to know that they can trust you. Before you get to see more important stuff.”

“Aren’t I eminently trustworthy?” Charles tipped his head to one side, deployed the dazzling smile that had got him out of duty with the stifling Board of Trustees.

“Going into the West Wing? I should level with you: that set you back about a month.”

He tasted bile, but kept his voice casual. “What a shame.”
“Sorry.”

They worked silently for the rest of that day – McCoy intent on his blueprints, Charles divided between sorting and seething. He watched the angle of sunlight change, creeping across the room. And through the whole day he tried not to remember. Tried to keep the heat of the room a background annoyance, and not such a horrible trigger: the steam-coiling darkness of hunger, desire … *lust* … The hazy image of his own blue eyes, metal twining round them. The twisting red *prey* – *there* – riding a sudden black surge of *touch him grab him pin him* –

Charles shook off the memory; swallowed another rush of sickness. He asked McCoy about Logan; McCoy shrugged, replying: “He’s busy this afternoon.”

But he wouldn’t meet Charles’ eyes when he said it.

Finally, when the sunlight in the windows had dimmed, Logan himself came to meet Charles. He left the notecards – *good riddance* – and a silent McCoy; fought to keep his legs steady as he walked out of the room, and locked the memories away behind the strongest door he could find.

Leaving the humid heat of the workroom made him feel better, step by step. He matched the Logan’s pace as they walked down the hallway. Odd, because Logan usually made an effort to leave him in the dust. Charles peered at Logan, curious: his eyes looked oddly smudged beneath his thick dark eyebrows, and his hair stood on end. He looked as grim as he had when threatening Charles in the infirmary, when discussing military casualties, when – *oh.*

“A good thing we didn’t strategize today,” Charles said ruefully. “I left the map in my room.”

“Bring it tomorrow.” Logan’s voice was curt.

“Yes, of course. I’ve come up with several additional ideas this afternoon alone. I look forward to discussing them with you.”

“Great.”

It was odd; Logan’s voice had trailed off into almost nothing. He was glowering at the door to the outside. Then he opened it with a slam of one shoulder. “Just fucking great, Xavier.”

They walked across the dead grass. Charles grimaced down at the feather-light cover of snow. So deceptively soft, beautiful … it would only get worse from now on. Any wood picked up from the ground would be damp. At that thought, he glanced around, puzzled. *Where were –*

“All right.” Logan stopped, jerked a thumb at the forest. “Go nuts.”

Charles blinked. “Pardon?”

“Firewood. Gather what you need, Xavier. I’ll get some for Jean.”

“Wait …” He felt a chill, and not from the outside air. “Where … where are the children?”

“Jean’s in bed.” Logan lit a cigar; jaw tight. “Put her there myself. Kid’s sick.”

“Yes, *I realize* that.” Charles’ voice was strained; he knew it, and didn’t care. “I meant the other four. Ororo and Bobby – John, Sean … where are they?”

Logan was silent, staring off into the trees. The fading light of day picked out lines on his forehead. And Charles felt his power, veiled as it was, and small, surge to full alert – picking up the *thrum* of
weariness and worry from Logan … and something … more – sorrowful?

Logan plucked the cigar from his lips. Turned it over in his fingers, and exhaled a blue cloud of smoke. “Deployed.”

For a long moment, Charles could barely breathe. Then: “… What.”

“You heard me, Xavier.” The cigar went back between clenched teeth; his next words were muffled. “Shipped out to the front today.”

“Oh, I heard you.” He didn’t bother to hide his fury. “I just didn’t think you could possibly be saying what you said – they are children, Logan! What the flying fuck are you doing, sending them into a war zone?”

“EBS business,”

“Of course! The almighty, sacrosanct cause of the ever-noble, great and powerful Eastern Brethren and Sistren. So noble that they kidnap; so great that they beat their victims to a pulp; so powerful that they send children to fight and die for them –”

“Fuck you, X,” Logan growled. “We all fight. We all die. The only reason you didn’t get sent with them is that we don’t need a sniper; not at this point.” He flicked ash at Charles and gave him a poisonous glare. “That and Command trusts you just about as far as it can throw you.”

“I’d like to see her try to throw me,” Charles said in a vicious undertone. “Why aren’t you at the front, with those years younger than yourself?”

Logan didn’t take the bait. He gave Charles a flat look. “They’re just getting the ball rolling, down in – down there. I’m usually tossed in when the real fighting starts.”

“Dallas, correct?” He felt a vicious thrill of satisfaction when he saw Logan’s mouth twitch. “The strategy we were discussing. That’s what’s starting, right now.”

A long, cold pause. Then: “Have you been digging through my head, Mr. Xavier?”

“Not at all.” Charles raised his chin. “You just didn’t do a good enough job – censoring the map. Blotting out the names.” He smirked. Love Field. “You missed one.”

“I didn’t miss one. It wasn’t my idea to give it to you in the first place.” Logan gave a jerk of smile, with no warmth in it whatsoever. “But I’ll pass the word along. Yeah, Xavier: Dallas. Command liked your Washed in the Blood idea. The metamorphs’ve been moved there … the other infiltrators-to-be have been briefed – it’s a go, as of this evening. Which means that next week we lift that little nuke, so we have to focus on getting Jean better ASAP. Go get your firewood.”

He felt confused; he hated it. “What does Jean have to do with anything?”

“Need-to-know basis,” was the reply, and Charles felt rage claw at his throat – felt it, gave in to it, and threw a punch as hard as he could.

Logan dodged it effortlessly and punched back. Charles staggered and fell – fuck that hurt – but turned the movement into a drop and roll, and lashed out a foot at Logan’s shins.

And of course he dodged that one, too. “Really, Xavier?” Charles looked up – Logan was bouncing just slightly on the balls of his feet, eyes dangerous. “I could use a bit of stress relief. Your ribs all back to normal, is that it? You want ’em fucked up a bit more? ‘Cause I’m happy to oblige.”
The snow was melting into his trousers where he sat on the ground. Suddenly, Charles felt tired again – tired and hopeless. He dropped his eyes to his shoes. “No.”

“Yeah, didn’t think so.” A snort. “Get up, X man.”

“Why?” He slumped back against the dead grass; the snow pricked at the back of his neck. “What’s the point? I’ll eat and go to sleep. I’ll get up tomorrow and sort whatever fucking file is next on McCoy’s list. I’ll do whatever you tell me to, and then I’ll go to bed again, and – I’m never god damned getting out of here. Am I?”

A long pause.

“No, Xavier. You’re not.” Logan’s voice was quiet. “Once you’ve seen HQ ... That’s where you are, you know? Why else do you think security’s so tight? Why do you think you’re punished for putting a toe out of line? This is the highest-up –” a mocking gesture with the cigar – “this is where the magic happens. The best recruits are sent here.”

Charles resisted the flattery. It wasn’t as though Logan had done it intentionally - he was about as subtle as a block of cement. “The wilds of what was New York, Before. What the hell kind of place is that for a command center?”

“Safe within EBS territory; far away from most physical threats. And where things started. Ancient history. We’ve got labs and tech sunk underground; had to divvy up the critical projects and the aircraft, though. Decentralize it, yeah? Security.” Logan stared off at the forest; then shook his head. “The point, bub, is that you’ve seen things nobody from the outside has seen. And once you see those … you end up either a loyal part of the EBS, or –”

“… Or?”

“I dunno.” Logan gave the cigar a casual puff. “Mindwiped. Dead. Depends on what you do to piss them off – whether or not you can be –” he mockingly enunciated each syllable: “– rehabilitated.”

“Them. Don’t you mean: us ? I think you’re more just a foot soldier to them, Logan.”

“Fine, then: us. And stop thinking you’re the shit, Xavier, because you’re not – especially prancing around after curfew like a goddamned idiot. I don’t suffer fools lightly –”

“The more fool you. You’re torturing children, Logan: you realize that?” Charles knew he was prodding a hornet’s nest; he could see the tension in the other man even from where he sat on the cold grass. “Mind -” he stumbled over the word - "mindwiping a child before returning him to his parents; killing her because she’s seen what she’s seen – that’s absolutely inhumane.”

“What parents?”

Charles blinked.

Logan watched him, then continued: “Most of them are orphans; they jump at the chance for a few hot and a cot. And – and those lucky enough to have a family – McCoy, for example. They’re recruited, and they want to come – to help the cause. It’s an honor to be chosen, Xavier. McCoy’s family is proud of him.”

“I suppose they know that he was tortured for Angel’s escape attempt?”

“That’s the way the system works, Xavier.”
“A system that involves killing children –”

“No. We’ve never killed a child.” Logan’s eyes were shadowed. “Everyone has been –”


“That’s what works. This whole system, Xavier.” He stared into the distance. “It works. The kids come out of this … as loyal as anyone could possibly be. To the cause. They know how much worse it can be – will be, if the EBS is …”


Logan threw his cigar butt to the ground. “Damn. Now I need some wood to knock on. Let’s go get that firewood, Xavier; c’mon.”

“No.”

“Then at least stand the fuck up. You get frostbite on your ass - yeah, McCoy'll fix you up. But he'll take a picture and frame it. Blackmail, you know?”

Even though he felt sick to his stomach, Charles couldn’t help snorting out a laugh. Then he took Logan’s outstretched hand and got to his feet.

Logan let his hand drop, then looked at him intensely. “What do I gotta do to convince you, Xavier?”

“To convince me of the EBS’ greatness and benevolence?” Charles spat into the grass. “Build a time machine; send me back in it to Oxford a month ago, and leave me the fuck alone, maybe?”

Logan said nothing. Kept watching him.

Charles swallowed back the bitterness. “You can’t convince me, Logan. So … don’t try. I look at you and I see some enforcer that chases down children – I remember, you know: scream, baby, scream –”

“Not my style, X man. Maybe others', not mine.” Logan paused. "Angel and I are good now, anyway. She was lucky.”

“Lucky?” Charles laughed, half-choked with anger. “Lucky to be caught –”

“Lucky to be caught by us – and not the Free West.”

It was the gathering darkness, Charles told himself, that made goosebumps prickle down his neck, over his arms and back. “You know …” He kept his voice casual. “One of these days you’ll have to give me a bit more detail on the Free West. I’m too old for the monster-under-the-bed trick.”

“You got a book, right?”

Charles snorted.

“I’m serious: take a good long look at that book, Xavier.” A flash of teeth. “Or can’t you motherfucking read?”

“Oh, shut up –” but: “I knew it!” Logan crowed. “Knew all those big-ass books were just for show. Come on X – get your firewood before it gets too dark – I'll race you.”
Logan had distracted him deliberately, Charles acknowledged, washing his dinner plate in the sink. Perhaps he was more perceptive than he appeared. He put the plate and silverware away. The scrape and clink was all the more noticeable in the kitchen’s utter silence.

The children’s absence felt like a physical ache.

Charles left the kitchen, holding his bundle of firewood under one arm; shoving the other hand in a trouser pocket. Then he winced, drawing the left hand out. The veil had worked – *all day*, he thought, with a flash of pride – and the swelling had abated somewhat, but the skin around the nailbed was an angry blue and purple. Well. He would treat it with the first aid kit tonight. And do the same tomorrow.

He walked down the dormitory hallway. No scampering of the children; no slamming doors or calling voices. Where were they right now? What were they thinking? Ororo and Bobby would be calm, Charles decided; John would be alternately excited and aggressive. Of all the four, Sean was the most likely to be frightened – to be crying himself to sleep that night. He was the youngest, after all …

… and Charles tried Sean's door; blinked when it opened easily. The room looked like a squirrel’s nest. There were clothes scattered on the floor. Charles sniffed the air and grimaced wryly: some of the clothes were obviously cleaner than others. Oxford or Ithaca, the Kingdom of Britain or the EBS … children were children, it would seem …

His eyes caught on a flash of gold paper on the rickety bedside table. He didn’t have to cross the room, or even enter, to know what it was. Sean’s chocolate. He had left without it. *No*, Charles corrected himself, angrily, Sean had been taken away without it –

“Hey, X man.” Logan’s voice, behind him; a long arm reached past and pulled shut the door to Sean’s room. “Not your turf.”

Charles gave a sullen shrug; trailed along in Logan’s wake. Perhaps with the children gone, he thought, he felt more like a surly adolescent than he otherwise would have – *wait – no*. Not all the children were gone – *Jean* was still there, and –

– and Logan was taking firewood into her room. Charles dumped his armload by the fireplace in his own room and then walked right in behind. Whatever Logan had said about not mistreating children – he, Charles, would watch over Jean and make sure that what he had said was true.

He watched Logan build a fire, keeping his own arms crossed over his chest. His movements were brisk, efficient. Jean was barely visible in her bed, curled up unmoving beneath blankets.

He saw Logan fidget more and more, until: “Damn it, Xavier,” he growled, lighting the tinder, fanning flames over the kindling – glaring at Charles. “What kind of sicko do you think I am?”

“Your thought, not mine.”

“Whatever, bub. You’d rather I stroll on off without helping a sick kid?”

“You could help her by stopping – whatever’s happening to her.”

“If I could, don’t you think I would have already?”

The fire crackled into the silence. Charles watched Logan rise to his feet and dust off his hands.
“Damn, I wish my girl was here. She could fix up Jean in a second.”

“I would think Archangel’s blood would be a better idea.”

Logan’s lips thinned. “Hell, no. Big op coming up, we have to hang onto that shit. But I’m here, and if I had Marie with me, she could heal her, double-time. Suck out my mojo and give it to the kid –”

Charles raised his eyebrows at Logan. “You do know how that sounds, don’t you?”

“Your thought, not mine.” He walked to the door. “And I’ll have you know: my baby can take my power – anyone’s power – take it and do what she wants with it. She’s good. She’s really good. And she’s almost as soft on kids as you, so she’d do it no questions asked.”

He leaned against the heavy door and motioned Charles out with a jerk of his thumb. Charles gritted his teeth but obeyed. “Where is she now?”

“Marie?” Logan closed the door – making an effort to keep it quiet, Charles noticed. “St. Louis. She’s got a standing gig in Denver. Drawing down their telepath, bit by bit.” He walked to Charles’ door. “Maybe I’ll get to introduce you guys, sometime. I think you’d like her.”

Then he stopped, and pointed.

Charles stared at Logan, then stared at his door. He blinked, thoughts racing …

Racing so quickly that he hardly sensed Alex walk down the hallway to meet them. “Hey, kid,” Logan said, quiet, and: “Hey.” Alex looked miserable, but muttered at Logan: “Did you tell him yet?”

“Nope.” Logan moved the finger he was pointing, to jab Charles in the shoulder. “You see what that is, Xavier?”

Charles’ tongue felt thick in his mouth. He managed to say: “A bolt.”

And it was: a steel bolt - a heavy silver slash at eye level on his door.

“Yep. And just in case you didn’t get the memo, you stay. In. Your. Room. At night. X. Clear?”

Fury was making his head swim, but: “Yes.”

“Good. You want a fire, Xavier?” Logan tossed a lighter from palm to palm. “Better put it together quick.”

“You can take your fire,” Charles said, quietly, “and shove it up your arse.”

A long, frigid pause, and then: “Not my style,” Logan drawled. “Right. Get in.”

Charles stomped into his room; Alex shut the door with a thump.

“Keep it down, bub –” Logan’s voice, muffled through the wood, was irritable. “Jean’s sleeping. And Xavier –” he raised his voice enough to carry. “I know you’re listening. Bring that map tomorrow – and if you’re thinking about getting back at me, don’t think you can do it by playing stupid, yeah? Bring some good ideas; help the kids get home safe. ‘N sleep well.”

Logan wasn’t mocking him, Charles realized, distantly, as he heard the lock click and the bolt slide home. He was gruff and sarcastic, but – as far as Charles could tell – he seemed to think that life could be boiled down into simple formulae. Action, reaction. Rule breaking, punishment. The cause
was just; the EBS was the best of all evils in an evil, twisted world; Logan was dedicated to safeguarding the children and achieving victory over the Free West …

Or he was just completely and thoroughly brainwashed.

Charles went through the motions of his nightly routine; this time in the dark. He gave his teeth a cursory brush, splashed water on his face, and got into bed fully dressed. He shivered only once before clamping down ruthlessly. He had rejected a fire; he wouldn’t notice the cold. Any response to his own actions he would take upon himself.

Yes, he would accept their responses to his actions … Charles traced the unfeeling metal ring in the darkness. He would curb his behavior, somewhat – be more covert – to ensure that he stayed alive. But … and Charles made his resolve just as cold as the night air. He would keep track of all the pain, all the punishment, all the petty cruelties and injustices.

If he were vindictive, he would resolve to make the EBS pay for every single one of them. As it was, he would watch, and keep track, and plan. Not for himself, though. Charles swiped at his eyes with his right hand, not his left - avoiding the cold touch of the ring.

No, not for himself. He would plan for the children. He had promised to protect them, before they had been taken away …

And if he could, Charles thought, staring into the darkness ... If only he could: he would send all of his power flying south and west, like birds before winter - flying to find the children, to keep them safe. To see them safely home.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Good lord, people - MOAR filler! Which is to say: more world-building, more AU, etc. etc. I promise: ch. 15 is the climax of Part 1 - then a wee epilogue, and said Part 1 will be finito. This fic is rapidly burgeoning into 4 parts instead of 3; mai masochism, I showz u it.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy the detail. A disclaimer: no animals were harmed in the making of this chapter - but there are references to hunting. So if that's not your game, or your bag, or whatever ... um. Backclick?

Also: have a sex dream! Whee!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

My eyes …

Charles heard his own voice – low and soft, a sensual caress. I've been told they're very beautiful …

They are. You are … Warm, strong hands framing his face … so beautiful … you – let me – will you –

And Charles heard himself gasp, felt the arch of his own back, up up into the tense thrumming heat of the man’s body against his own – taut and strong, pushing him back against the wood and iron of the door. You’re beautiful – a rasp, and then he felt something wet and hot trailing over his neck – oh, Charles thought, dreamily: the mark from the chain – the chain of my watch – the man was licking it, daubing his tongue over it like an animal – and Charles heard a high-pitched whimpering sound – oh, that’s me – as the heat moved to his Adam’s apple, as the man mouthed at it, then growled.

His own whimpers were changing to delirious moans as the man’s growl vibrated through Charles’ entire body, where he was pressed against all that coiled and predatory strength. Charles tossed back his head, felt his skull hit the wood with a gentle thunk as steel-strong fingers took hold of his chin, as that mouth brushed the hollow of his cheek and pressed into the hinge of his jaw – Charles was writhing, caught so close and trying to get closer and he felt – wet and hot and he was, oh, he was going to –

And Charles sat up in bed, gasping.

He could only just see his breath, wisps of white rapidly dissolving, in the chill of the room. “Shite, shite, shite,” and he kicked the pile of blankets and clothes away from him … and … “Fuck.”

So to speak, his mind observed.

Charles stumbled out of bed, stomach knotted tight. Shivering, he pulled the bedclothes off, dragged them to the tub and set the water running as cold as it could go.

It was cold, so cold in his bathroom, but: good, Charles thought, desperately. Anything to emphasize
to his body that: no, nocturnal emissions concerning a sadistic bestial madman were not appropriate –

“Although technically,” he said into the chilly air, “it’s morning. So. Not quite nocturnal –” His own half-hysterical snicker cut off the would-be joke – for one horrible second, Charles thought the laughter would change to tears, or hiccups. But: no. He hadn’t regressed quite that far into adolescence – at least, not yet.

“That bastard. This is – the body reacts to stress in different ways,” he heard his own voice, in a tinny parody of lectures long given to his own students, “some less obvious than others. And – no sex in a month, so … this is normal – if somewhat … bizarre.”

_I’m not crazy_, he thought wildly, _I’m not_. “No sex in a month – a month and a half,” he corrected himself. Not since mid-August … a wild night at the Rose in Bloom after the yearly meeting of the Oxford and Cambridge teachers. Charles remembered it well. _The last_, he had thought, drowsing the next morning in the summer sun, sending warm and languid pulses of his power to tease away the remnants of his hangover. _The last, until after the Takers have come and gone. Focus on Raven, now_, he had told himself. _You can survive for three weeks._

“You can survive,” Charles mumbled. “If you had only known just _what_ you’d have to survive –”

He dragged his mind back to the problem at hand. _So to speak_, his mind added, helpfully, and: “Shut up,” he growled. So: sex. Reverting to a schoolboy, sheepishly cleaning his own sheets the next morning … except at present he was less sheepish and more horrified. But it was normal – “_normal_,” Charles repeated, desperate, when the only adult physical contact he had had in a month and a half had been Logan shoving him around playfully; McCoy helping him to a cot when he had felt ill –

– the man’s mouth pressed against the hollow of his cheek: thin lips moving and a whisper of hot breath – _You have a metal filling on the upper left side of your mouth – here_ – and a wet flick of tongue –

“No,” he gasped. Charles buried his right hand in his own hair, pulled until he felt his scalp tingle. “Stop it.”

The memories subsided.

Charles clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering, went to the bathroom door and leaned against the frame. Dim light filtered in through the high arrow windows; it shone pale and wan over the dirty firewood he had left in a pile on the hearth, over the clothes on his bed – now scattered every which way …

It had been so cold in the middle of the night, Charles remembered, that he had emptied his wardrobe again, piled all his clothes on top of himself. He had stripped to keep from sweating too much, and had snuggled down to sleep like a mouse in its winter nest. And he had slept so well, it would seem, that the mouse had thought to spice things up by dreaming its way into a slow and sensual tryst with a god damned snake.

Charles wheeled on one foot and walked back to the bathtub. Then, before he could change his mind, he dunked his head under the frigid cascade of water.

“_Ow, ow – hell_,” he gasped, but it had worked. Just as insurance, he grabbed one of the sheets from the tub and dragged it over his chest, down his body. The cold made his eyes sting and his skin crawl, but he scrubbed away – everything. He scrubbed until he was clean again. “Right. Problem solved.”
He shoved the sheet back underwater, turned off the faucet, and stepped to the sink. In the mirror, his eyes were blue and staring.

– very beautiful –

“More importantly,” Charles said to himself, white-faced in the mirror, “they’re mine, and they’re going to stay in my head. Focus on that, why don’t you.”

He stared for another long moment. He hadn’t shaved – or been shaved – since his stay in the infirmary a week past. Charles sighed. He hardly cared for the patches of ginger that would come in, erratically – he had never kept them around long enough to see if they would develop into a beard. So now he looked even more like an adolescent. Damn it. Perhaps, he thought, rubbing his left hand over the scraggle on his chin, they would let him have a razor? Charles snorted. Doubtful. Perhaps Logan would lend him one, even if only for ten minutes –

The ring brushed his skin of his jaw.

And Charles froze, eyes widening, as he caught a whiff of the scent on his left hand –

Without stopping to think, he grabbed the soap and turned the hot water tap. Soap, a lot of it, and quickly, and he wouldn’t have to smell – Charles gritted his teeth, scrubbing away the feel and the smell of his own come, on his left hand, which meant that if the man could sense the metal of the ring, he could very well have –

“No,” Charles whispered, fiercely. Then he scooped up water in his cupped palms. Washed the hollows and contours of his face and the line of his neck. “He couldn’t do that. He couldn’t possibly do that.”

His fingers caught on an angle of cheekbone … one somewhat sharper than before. Charles swallowed, looking in the mirror. He watched water trickle down his face, drip from his jaw. He was still losing weight.

“Bloody hell, who cares?” he breathed. He ran one hand through his hair, standing it on end. “Shirt. Clothes. Now.”

Because he was not going back to sleep; not that morning, at least. “Happy god damned October,” he snarled at the clothes on his bed, before throwing them back into the wardrobe in a fit of foul temper.

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Charles had been considering the map of Dallas in the morning light for at least fifteen minutes. Angel had not yet knocked on the door – so, he reflected, sharpening the pencil with his right thumbnail, it was earlier than he had first thought. For the thousandth time, he regretted the loss of his watch – then he sighed, and put his regrets away.

His bad temper hadn’t lasted – especially in the face of the useful pain that had flared from his left thumb, when he had dipped the nail bed in rubbing alcohol and bandaged it all up tight. Placing a veil around it had been easy in comparison. Then Charles had carefully sequestered the memories of his dream; he was not going to think about anything, now, except strategy.

Because … and Charles chewed his lower lip, squinting down at the map. Because Logan had said something interesting, the previous evening. Bring some good ideas; help the kids get home safe. It seemed that even if EBS command did not trust the source, they – she – would still make quick and efficient use of any decent strategy brought to their attention. The idea to steal the nuclear device …
implemented within twenty-four hours of his broaching it …

“Maybe they’re desperate,” he said, snide, but his mind replied: *Or maybe they know how good you are.*

“Best prove it, then.” Charles jotted a note in a margin. For it was true: a good strategy would help the children. The faster the EBS made with their petty victory over the Free West, the faster Ororo and Bobby, John and Sean could come home.

“Home …” He tugged a spare sweatshirt tighter around his neck – it was still chilly. And it was strange, to call such a place ‘home’.

He hardly ever thought of his own home, from before the war. A renowned diplomat for a mother; an amiable and harmless inebriate for a father … and a mansion in the country. *Estate,* he corrected himself, smiling wryly. The Xavier family – an old and honored one, with a name highly esteemed and traded upon … His smile faded. Much good it had done them. His mother and father had been visiting London, his mother to speak to Parliament, his father to meet friends. He himself had been still excited about his new rooms at Oxford, when he had kissed his mother goodbye that morning … and the first bombs had fallen shortly after noon …

Charles remembered crying – jagged, wrenching sobs. Twelve years old, being bundled into a fallout shelter. Pressed against all the sharp planes and angles of older students: some laughing hysterically; others trying to keep order; still others completely shitfaced. The smell of alcohol, of vomit, the sound of shouts and hoarse curses, the hot runnel of his tears down his own face …

He had been weeping for his pet rabbit. Of all things.

Charles closed his eyes, remembering. Twelve years old. He hadn’t even considered that his parents were already dead – incinerated – when he had tugged at a proctor’s hand, desperately, and told him he wanted to go home, to find his pet rabbit. To keep her safe.

But the proctor had been weeping, too. And hadn’t answered him.

Charles couldn’t recall that man’s name, he realized, as he opened his eyes and stared up at the arrow windows. A weedy but inoffensive chap – killed in the first gang attack two months later. One burst of fire from an AK-47, and Charles, watching from the rough new perimeter wall, barbed wire and concrete, had seen the man’s gut explode into mincemeat. Oxford had plenty of antibiotics in those early days, so it had taken the proctor two weeks to die.

Charles shook the memories away. At least his parents had died quickly. He had figured it out afterwards – half past noon, and his mother would have been in an anteroom preparing for her speech. Parliament had been near the epicenter – she would have been vaporized by the first bomb. And his father had loved her … He would not have missed her speech. He had never missed a single one, drunk or sober.

Two dead parents; one looted and burned estate; one dead rabbit. Or: three, if he counted the rabbit’s kits, which he usually didn’t. “Well.” Charles flicked eraser leavings off the map. “Rest in peace.” Pets and families … children and parents …

He had never asked, he realized with a wince, whether or not the children here had families. Relatives who worried about them, actual homes to visit … except – *no,* the EBS surely would not allow any leave to do so. “Can’t have the brainwashing interrupted, can we?” He jabbed the pencil viciously; it left a hole in the fragile paper.
Charles sighed. Then he bent to retrieve the children’s book – *Freedom Rising!* – and started folding the map, to place it back inside. He finished folding; then looked at the cover.

“Might as well.”

He opened the book.

*Freedom Rising! The Story of the Free West* blared from the title page. And there was that bizarre orange eagle, spreading its wings wide over a fire, and: “Oh,” Charles grunted, disgustedly. “They think it’s a phoenix.” The iconography was all wrong. A child could create a better one – indeed, he realized, Jean had created a much better version of the immortal bird … embroidered in red and gold, on her white robe within dreams.

He turned the page. “Dedicated,” he read, “to all Free victims of all wars, and to all Humans, everywhere.” Charles felt his brow knit. “Charming.”

At first he merely skimmed the pages. It seemed to be a standard child’s primer of American history: the Revolutionary War; the Civil War; noble presidents and stern generals with all their accoutrements. The illustrations, he conceded, were very well done. Much more convincing than the cover.

Then the first and second World Wars – *America fought for freedom, against the Evils of Fascism and Communism; and against the Mutants.*

Charles felt his eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. Mutants had not been known anywhere until the year after the first bomb had fallen. That horrible summer of 1951 … when the Weathermaker had revealed himself and brought a month of much-needed rain to Ethiopia. He was alive and revered today … but why rewrite history?

*America won two Great Wars. And then the Reds began the Third.*

*Debatable,* Charles’ inner historian observed, even as he paused to take in the artist’s gorgeous interweaving of red, orange, and yellow. Subtle shades, vivid colors, depicting the fire of nuclear war. Because of the breakdown of communication systems – which had indeed exacerbated initial confusion and triggered more attacks – nobody possessed any record of what had happened in late November, on what had been the Korean peninsula. It was quite clear that the Soviet Union had touted the necessity as propaganda; had worked feverishly, night and day, to construct a nuclear bomb; had detonated their first on 29 August 1949 – even as the United States had been stockpiling more and more of their own.

What was unclear was: how, exactly, the Soviets had obtained enough fissile material to respond with the force that … *well.* Charles stared at the lurid illustration, brooding. Had it been the Soviets, who had responded? Or the Chinese, who had launched their own offensive into Korea in October 1950? Or … and Charles knew some historians who were convinced of the most awful hypothesis – had it been friendly fire? An American bomb, misdirected straight into the United States’ Eighth Army, on the banks of the Ch’ongch’on River … 25 November 1950 …

Whatever the origin of the first bomb, enough had followed suit to decimate Korea. And then, as the world had reeled in shock – as the speeches had begun, as the fallout had crept east to Alaska … somehow, America and the Soviet Union had deployed enough nuclear bombs to eradicate most major cities on both continents. With plenty left over, Charles remembered bleakly, for terrorists to steal and detonate in other major cities, all around the world. “No sense in making it invitation-only,” he sighed, and: “Poor Mum.” That had been his mother’s intended speech: a plea for Britain’s intervention – calling on “a voice of sanity to calm the world …” And full insanity had descended in
a rain of fire, and Britain’s revels then were ended.

But no historian knew how it had been accomplished – how such an extraordinary amount of weaponry had even been produced. And due to failures in record-keeping, breakdown of governments worldwide, and the normal backstabbing and secrecy amidst intelligence agencies … it seemed that none would ever know.

Charles shook off his grim thoughts, and returned to the book.

For many long years, the American People suffered. Cities were drowned; farmlands were burned. Traitors and Mutants came into the land, and the Reds invaded the East.

“What?” He felt baffled. “What on earth …”

Nothing he had seen of the EBS – admittedly, little enough so far – nothing had indicated that it was a Soviet colony of any sort. The children’s book was making no sense.

Patriots from the East traveled West. President Stryker was elected freely. The Free West was born: and all began to fight the Mutants of the East – to fight for peace and freedom.

“Bully for you,” Charles muttered.

Here are the Protectors. Here are the Heroes. Here are those who fight for you.

And this picture was a strange blend of the totalitarian and the charming. A stocky man with a goatee extended his arms in benevolence. Dozens of tiny figures surrounded him: generals and builders, policemen and athletes, doctors and scientists … pretty much every profession, Charles noted, except for the arts. All men, though. Strange.

He turned the page and read:

President Stryker protects you. The Free Army protects you. They will defend the Free West!

There, in perfect formation across the double-page spread, marched dozens of soldiers. Charles touched a finger to the smiling mothers watching them; traced it across the rows of rosy-cheeked, beaming children. They were all waving flags.

And there was Stryker, saluting the army. Charles flicked his eyes to the bottom of the page, and read:

The President and the Free Army fight for you. They will defend you. They will protect you from all of the Mutants.

Charles turned the page. And sucked in a breath, despite himself, at the horrible beauty of the illustrations.

They will protect you from the White Queen.

“Oh …” He stared at the image.

A woman, gorgeous and glittering in white, sat on a diamond-cut throne – all angles and light. The design was very cleverly done – beautiful and terrible at the same time … It was as clear, glowing and lovely as a stained glass window.

“Perhaps it’s Frost,” Charles murmured – and his intuition flared into certainty. Of course it was Frost. The greatest threat to the Free West – enthroned in diamond majesty. Although – “Dear, dear,”
he mocked, “the company you keep.”

For Frost’s pristine beauty on one page faced the sheer ugliness of – something, on the other. Above it, the words:

_They will protect you from Erik the Red._

A black shadow outlined in crimson – lean and savage, brandishing two rather ridiculous – swords? Knives? Could it be Logan, perhaps? _Erik Logan_ – a strange name, but Charles had heard stranger ...

Except: “No,” he thought aloud. The blades were gripped in hands, not springing from knuckles.

And besides, the monster had no face. Just angled shadows in the place of features. The background was quite well done, though – a bizarre, twisting interplay of silver and black and red. _The chessboard in the library_, Charles thought – it would look similar, with blood spattered on it. He grimaced and turned the page.

And then he swallowed as he read: _The Mutants will be defeated. The Mutants will be destroyed._

He peered at scores of individuals in miniature, intricately drawn. All sizes, all shapes – some with wings, some with different colored skin and fur and scales – his mind flashed to Raven and he shivered.

And all of those mutants faded into grey shadow as they ran across the bottom of both pages – ran from soldiers of the Free Army, also in miniature … Like stained glass turned alive, but running straight into white nothingness on the right margin.

Charles turned the page. _Almost the end, thank god_. As far as artistic standards for propaganda, the book was quite well done – but it was propaganda, and his stomach churned at the idea of a child reading it. Looking at it … Hearing a teacher read it aloud …

_The Free West will have victory! The Free West will reclaim America – and all Humans will live together in freedom and in peace._ There was a beautifully detailed rendition of a city on a mountain – green grass, white snow, and a blue sky.

All that was missing was a rainbow.

Charles slapped the book shut, lip curling. The little children’s primer told far more than one might expect – at least, to those who had an eye for subtext. Logan had made a good point – again. Charles drummed his fingers on the cover. It would not do to underestimate that one. For all his cigars, and all his bluster, he displayed flashes of a canny intelligence.

And – “Finally,” Charles breathed. There were Angel’s footsteps. Hurried, urgent –

_Tap tap tap_ –

“Mr. Xavier?” Her voice was uneasy. “Can you –” the bolt clacked, a rattle of key in lock and the door opened. “Can you come help me? Please?”

Charles shoved the map inside the book and left both on his bed. “Of course, Angel – what is it?”

“It’s Jean.”

Charles kept his footsteps quiet as he walked out of his room; followed Angel into Jean’s. He knelt at Jean’s side, frowning. She was lying curled up, unmoving. Sweat was damp on her forehead.
Angel had continued: “She won’t get up, and – and she really needs to start eating again.” She bit her lower lip. “There are things that are going to happen – coming down the pipe … and she needs to get her strength back. She’s important.”

“And what do you want me to do?”

“Mr. Xavier … You helped me, after Lady Frost took away my quince. It hurt, you know – what she did. It burned. But after you had gone, all the pain had gone too.” She hesitated. “Can’t you do that for Jean?”

Charles grimaced. “Not without asking her permission.”

A flash of a smile, but Angel’s eyes were sad. “I know how seriously she takes that; yeah. But … McCoy says that he doesn’t have any stronger pills – for her headaches, I mean. Nothing that would leave her conscious. And she hurts so much, Mr. Xavier – can’t you do something?”

Charles took in a deep breath. Then released it. “Let me try.”

He sank to his knees next to Jean’s fireplace, then sat down in the ashes on the hearth. Folded his hands over his brow and relaxed. His mind, focusing, caught the details of Jean’s room in sudden brilliant clarity: same wardrobe, same bed frame, same blankets as the rest of them – same bookshelf … but on that bookshelf rested: a few battered plastic horses; a Rubik’s cube; Jean’s child-sized candle holder, its delicate iron loops glinting; a glass jar full of marbles, sparkling in the morning light …

Charles sighed, remembering Raven and her marble collection. Her favorite cats-eye: blue, cracked across one side. And thinking of Raven, he called one up, made it gentle as a dove, and sent it soaring over Jean’s mind – circling on an curiously warm eddy –

Jean …

There was no response: only an unpleasant, prickling sensation – like static shock on a winter day.

Jean. It’s Mr. Xavier. He smiled to himself; let his thoughts reflect the smile. Sir Charles, of the Order of the Coffee Pot. Are you there?

And all of a sudden the cold white conch shell appeared, looming up out of grey static. Charles felt an immediate shiver of unease; he could not say why. Perhaps because it felt, oddly, as though the shell were edged in electricity.

Are you there, Jean?

Then he heard a faint voice. Yes.

… May I speak with you?

The voice sounded slightly warmer. Yes.

I’m here in your room, with Angel. Will you open your eyes and come down to breakfast? I’ve missed having breakfast with you.

A pause. Then: It hurts.

What hurts?

The shell thrummed, strangely; Charles called the raven away from it; the bird beat a quick and silent
He cast about for a solution. *If you like, Jean – I could send this bird along with you, today … You see?* He made the raven glitter, black and fine and sharp against a mental representation of the sun. *I might be able to take some of the hurt away, as it happens to you.*

Another long pause. It was almost as though Jean were deliberating. And then:

*No, Mr. Xavier. But thank you. I’m waking up now.*

Charles felt his eyes snap open as the bird fluttered out of Jean’s mind. For a brief second, it had been burned into his retina with a hoarse croak - a strange aftereffect. Charles shook his head. It was absurd, at that moment, to remember the folk rhyme his sister was forever chanting – numbering her namesake, telling the future. *One for bad news.* Bad news … What was being done to Jean?

Jean, who was sitting up in her bed. Watching him solemnly.

“Oh good – there you are, sweetie!” Angel reached the bed in two long strides and plucked Jean out of her cocoon of sheets. “*Andale – let’s get you clean clothes and breakfast, O.K.?*” She hustled the child to the wardrobe. “*Can you go make breakfast please, Mr. Xavier?*”

“Of course,” Charles mumbled, and slipped away down the hall.

He blinked at the coals in the wood stove. Stoking them took more than a moment – a practical reason to regret John’s being away. Quickly, he made the cheese and raisin melt that Jean had so loved his first morning here. No coffee, again; Charles grimaced and brewed them both a cup of chamomile tea instead.

Angel came in and set Jean on one kitchen bench. “*I’ll be back pretty soon – running late, this morning. Eat up, Jean.*” She gave the bread an impish smile. “*And thanks for that, Mr. Xavier.*”

Charles blinked as the door shut behind her. Then he looked back at Jean.

She was looking up at him, grey eyes wide and stark against her pale face. And there … there was an image of *Ororo Bobby John Sean* – the four of them tugging what looked like a jar of jam – back and forth, back and forth. Laughing hysterically, and loudly … at least – that was what Charles assumed. For the thought was silent. Silent, washed in the patina that he knew meant memory … and framed by: *Gone?*

He met Jean’s solemn stare, and nodded.

Her lower lip wobbled; her eyes filled with tears.

“Hush – shhh, now,” Charles reached out his hands, took one of Jean’s and pressed her fingers. “*They’ll be all right. They’ll come back – don’t worry, don’t be sad –*”

He had always felt a wrenching helplessness when Raven wept as a child; this was even worse, since he saw Jean’s tears on her face and in her mind, falling in an dark violet patter on the frame: *gone.*

“Jean.” He swallowed. “*You have to take care of yourself. Eat your food, drink your tea.*”

What could he do? What could he do - to help her stop crying, to get her to eat? *To keep her safe,* his
mind whispered: and Charles, acting on instinct, spoke.

“Eat your food, Jean. And leave the others to me. I’ll figure out something – a plan – to bring them back.”

A flash of brilliant gold from her mind – and he yelped as he heard, ringing through his thoughts: *You will*?!

“Yes.” Charles covered his daze in a fierce smile. “But I need to have energy to do it, so I have to eat –” he grabbed his bread, and waggled his eyebrows. “And that means … I’ll race you!”

Jean’s eyes were brilliant as she tore into her own slice. *No need for good manners,* Charles thought, but then: “Just – careful, Jean, be careful. Chew and swallow.” He hid a grin as he watched her slurp her tea, cram more food into her mouth, and start chewing like a woodchuck.

When Frost reached out with her morning wake-up call – much more powerful, this time; almost like an icy slap – he gritted his teeth and threw a veil over Jean’s mind, so she would only feel the smallest touch of pain. Just enough to let Frost – *the White Queen,* he thought, bitterly – know that Jean was there.

And then … drinking his tea, watching her mouthfuls carefully, Charles let his small opponent win the breakfast race.

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Angel had collected Jean and gone; Charles had worked on a blueprint for what looked like a greenhouse all morning. Then Logan sauntered into the workroom, and Charles grabbed *Freedom Rising* from the table and took out the map.

“You like that book?” Logan grinned.

McCoy butted in: “Hard to believe people can swallow that tripe.”

“Indeed.” Charles gave them both a sharp smile. “But the illustrations are really quite well done. Does the EBS have a similar propaganda artist?”

“Why bother with 2-D when you can send dreams, Xavier? Dreams, visions, nightmares: in full and living Technicolor, brought to you by –”

“By Frost, I suppose.”

“Nah.” Logan pulled up a bench to the table, with a screech of metal on metal. “She’s got bigger fish to fry. Nope – we’ve got a few smaller-scale projectionists at the front. And Betsy. Gotta give the Free West’s telepath somethin’ to do when it’s not date night, yeah?”

Charles filed the information away in his mind; rolled his eyes for Logan’s benefit. The other man took *Freedom Rising,* though, and flipped through it – and held up the page starting *Here are the Protectors.* “You catch him, there, X man?”

“Who?”

“Their telepath.” A rough finger jabbed at the page. “*See*?”

Charles peered at the page. He felt his stomach twist.

There, in the center of a gently glowing circle, in a corner – to the upper right of the benevolent,
over-sized President Stryker, was … what looked like … a torso? No, he corrected himself: *a torso and a waist – but:* “Where are the arms?” He heard his own voice, tense. “And legs?”

“No, he corrected himself: *a torso and a waist – but:* “Where are the arms?” He heard his own voice, tense. “And legs?”

“Not deemed necessary. You don’t use it – you lose it, y’know?” Logan gave him a ghoulish grin. “There but for the grace of God, Xavier.”

His stomach rebelled, but: “God is dead,” Charles bit out, controlling himself. “Signed: Nietzsche.”

McCoy snorted. “Nietzsche is dead – signed: God.”

“Ha - nice one, Hank. You been saving that up for a while?”

McCoy had walked to Logan’s shoulder. “Who else here knows who Nietzsche is, huh?”

“Oh, another joke about how I am an Epic Dumbass – it makes me so sad to hear you say it,” Logan mocked. “C’mon, Xavier, let’s cook up some plans –”

“That’s not true.” Charles heard his own voice, shaking; he had interrupted Logan and he didn’t care. “They haven’t – not to their telepath. Tell me that it’s not true.”

The workroom fell almost silent. The only sound was the hiss of heat escaping from a radiator somewhere. Charles felt sweat pooling in the small of his back as he watched Logan and McCoy exchange long looks. Logan lifted his chin.

McCoy spoke. “It's true, Mr. Xavier. They don’t – they only use a few of, um, of us. Mutants, you know? And only ones they know they can control.”

“There’s a camp outside Dallas, you know.” Logan’s voice was soft. “We take Dallas, we set them free.”

“Camp?” Charles’ lips were numb.

“Sleepaway Mutant Camp: Dallas Division. Come for the lanyards, stay for the genocide. Yep.” Logan rolled his shoulders; Charles saw muscles in his neck flex. “We think Stryker got the idea from Germany – he deployed to the Battle of the Bulge, you know, and saw the end of it all. Second World War.”

Charles’ mind brought up the exposés, the newspaper articles, the Nuremberg Trials … he had only been seven, but all the images lingered. Then, of course, the third war had charred the world and the history books on all wars previous had been closed.

“So he’s not …” He took a calming breath; closed the children’s book with a whup; stared at the map. “He’s not the commander you had mentioned, on Monday. You had said – that commander was in the Pacific Theatre, in World War Two.”

“Good memory,” Logan said. He gave Charles a fierce smile. “And yes. Our man in Dallas is MacMurphy. A great strategist at sea – but on land? Well. He’s been getting older, he’s been butting heads with Stryker, and – hell – he really, really deserves to die.”

“Why so?” Charles said, coolly. “And who are you to judge?”

“Why? ‘Cause he was the one to press the button on most of China Before, after Truman got assassinated.” Logan flexed his shoulders again; cracked his knuckles. “And I - and none other - am the one to judge, because I am an especially good judge of character, Mr. Xavier. Aren’t I, Hank?”
“Especially good,” McCoy murmured, not looking up from his blueprints.

“Thanks. And my especially good judgment is: MacMurphy is the mother of all douche-canoes. Thus: death,” Logan drawled. “Any other questions before we start?”

Charles sighed. “May I have a drink of water? It’s hot in here.” But at least, he told himself, you’re in control. None of the memories had resurfaced to trouble him that day. Perhaps, he thought with grim humor, it was due to that morning’s dream. And perhaps that was why he felt so parched.


The days passed, each one marching on the other’s heels, bringing similar routines. Charles took on Ororo’s responsibility of getting Jean prepared for each day. Their conversations at breakfast were all conducted telepathically; he watched her like a hawk for any sign of additional trauma. But her color was gradually returning … so perhaps whatever she was doing was … stopping? Charles didn’t know.

Every day, Logan spread out the map of Dallas and asked him a barrage of questions. Charles requested wind charts, the weather forecast up through the end of the month, population statistics and records of local superstitions – all to keep Logan talking, spilling crucial tidbits of information.

On one day: “So you see,” and he had pointed to the map. “A larger airport, however defunct, is the logical place to hide the most important aircraft. And I’d be willing to bet that the smaller, official airport will be the bait in a trap.”

“Huh,” Logan scribbled notes. “Interesting thought – file it under objective three, and we can send a few spies to case both joints twenty-four hours out …”

On another day: “There,” and Charles had pointed at another place. “Make a false feint towards the nuclear power plant or drop intelligence to that effect ahead of time. With the majority of the winds blowing to the north and northeast, any threat of a meltdown will make them panic. They’ll pile resources into defending it, and they’ll waste time ascertaining your plans for it – and all you have to do to achieve the same effect of force diffusion is: start a wildfire,” he traced a red line, “here. Southeast at forty-five degrees; and you’ll keep the forces at the plant separate from those in Dallas proper.”

“Fire’d have to be real damn big,” a mutter, but Charles made his reply brisk: “Put John and a few like him in a crop duster, and you’ll have it.”

And he turned his back, faking a cough, so Logan wouldn’t see him squeeze his eyes shut. Be safe, John. Be safe, be safe, be safe –

“Objective one …” And Logan scribbled some more.

And on yet another day: “As regards objective four, the enemy commander –” Charles stifled a yawn. He had been putting himself through a strenuous routine of calisthenics each night – to stave off dreams. Combined with daily cold showers, it seemed to be working; the régime didn’t leave him feeling any better rested, though. “To assassinate MacMurphy, I’d recommend a sniper.”

"A sniper; huh." Logan raised an eyebrow. “Why not just poison him?”

“He’ll have a food taster.”
“Car accident?”

“Do you want to risk your operative, in the car with him?”

“Well, it’s all moot anyway, because the thing is, Xavier,” and Logan’s brow creased. “There’s been a change in objective four. MacMurphy still has to die … but … Command wants him taken alive. Kill him on their own time, y’know? Squeeze some info out of him, take a few pics. Propaganda.”

“Savage,” Charles muttered, but: “Fine. You’ll need to lure him to a remote area, and kidnap him,” his stomach twisted, “from there.”

“And how to lure him, you think?”

The idea came to him in a single flash: “The rumor of an important mutant, a powerful one.” Charles tried a shrug. “How old is this military telepath anyway?”

Logan looked at McCoy, who listening attentively to their discussion – as he had been over the entire week. McCoy thought, then said: “No older than thirty.”

“Hm. Well, if he’s truly just a limbless trunk,” Charles let his voice convey his distaste, “he cannot be in outstanding physical condition. I’d set up the rumor of another telepath, to lure MacMurphy to the remote location of its capture. After all, surely he’d love nothing more than to oust Stryker from leadership of the Free West – if they have been butting heads, as you say – and what better way to do that than by bringing in a defense weapon upgrade?”

“A telepath, huh?” Logan gave him a look, from beneath half-closed eyelids. “So to make the scenario as convincing as possible, we’d have to put that telepath on location … Huh. And which one do you suggest be the bait, Xavier? I wonder.”

Charles grinned. Hopeless, but it had been fun anyway. “Why: yours truly, of course.”

“So you could run off, yeah,” Logan said, rolling his eyes, and McCoy smiled ruefully. “You’d be caught before you made a mile.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“Yes, you would, X man; damn.” Logan got up and stretched. “Stupid-ass shit, running away. But speaking of running – we’ve been poking at these maps all week. Let’s go do fun things with guns, shall we?”

Charles looked at McCoy, who pulled a face. “You do that. I’ll clean up here.”

“C’mon, man.” Logan practically bolted for the door. “I got two rifles. What with the heat wave, we might get a rabbit or two, or somethin’ –”

*Good idea,* Charles thought, as he followed Logan outside. Hunting for food, after a few days of unseasonable warmth … it made sense. And it appeared to be necessary. For the third day in a row the bread had had weevils in it and the cheese had tasted sour. It had been difficult to persuade Jean to eat. Charles took the rifle that Logan tossed to him; deliberately distracted himself by checking its action. It would not do to think: how would they survive a six-month post-nuclear winter, if their food was going bad not a week into it?

“Now don’t you go shooting me, Xavier,” Logan sing-songed. “You remember what happened last time you did, right?”
“How could I forget?” Charles muttered. “Besides, I’d rather shoot . . .” he stretched out a billiard-ball thought, flattened it into a net. Stretched it, spread it, threw it . . .

There. One bright flicker of consciousness, deep in the woods to his left. “A deer. Ten o’clock . . . maybe half a mile in?”

Logan was staring at him, eyes wide and mouth hanging open. Charles smirked at him.

He made no other reply than to shut his mouth with a snap, and huff: “Telepathic party tricks. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Then try to keep up,” Charles said with a smile, and set off running as quietly as he could.

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He had a good build for hunting – lithe for silent running, light for careful stalking – and after only fifteen minutes, he took the deer with one shot to the heart.

Charles spared a moment to thank the animal - for its beauty, for its clean leap out of the thicket into his rifle’s sight – and to hope that its death had been clean as well. It seemed to have been. And that was important; at least, according to how he had been taught.

A particular hunting culture had emerged in Oxford after the war: one of economy of resources and respect for the actual act, with or without rituals attendant upon it. It really wasn’t surprising, given that it was a bunch of academics doing the hunting in the first place. The one ardent classicist left on staff had had Diana and Actaeon tattooed on her back - after she had taken the first bear of winter, beating the most arrogant of her male fellows to the kill.

In any case, Charles had learned how to hunt, and how to hunt well; and it gave him a twist of satisfaction to see how thoroughly he had surprised Logan.

Logan had stared at the deer, where it lay weltering in its crimson blood. He had looked oddly ravenous – and his strange metal claws had come out of one hand with a shink, and: “Oi,” Charles had said, sharply. “Stop right there. We need to check its rad level. The last thing I want is to eat a liver full of plutonium.”

“Part of a complete and balanced breakfast,” Logan had snickered, but: “Fine.” He hoisted the deer onto one shoulder. “We’ll set up shop in the stable.”

The stable turned out to be a roughly-hewn stone building, set in a clearing deep in the woods. Perfectly ordinary, except for the absent horses; the missing leather, straw and hay, and . . . Charles shivered, skin prickling. And the lack of any sign that it had ever been used as a stable in the first place.

Logan flicked a few switches on a rusty panel, and electric lights crackled on. There were several rooms on the ground level, and a flight of rickety stairs going up to an attic. Each room had a drain in the center, and a floor set at a slope. And . . . each ceiling sported one bare lightbulb, controlled by the panel outside . . . and several hooks - some with chains dangling. Charles caught a glimpse of a few pairs of gleaming pliers, in one room, before he slammed the door shut.

He did not want to catch any echo of any thought that had drifted through the stable recently. So Charles deliberately muted all of his power as Logan slung the deer from a hook, unsheathed his claws, and went to work. Those claws were capable of surprisingly delicate cuts. Charles watched, jaw set, for a few long moments; then checked in the attic, found a bucket, filled it at the pump outside the stable, and worked on sluicing away the blood.
After the fourth bucket, Logan paused to think. “Huh. With it being warmer like this – even for winter … well. I can’t be sure this meat’ll freeze solid outside, overnight. Tell you what. I’ll drop some off for you in your kitchen, and send McCoy to check it. Then I’ll get the rest to a freezer downstairs, and you’ll have it the next few weeks – if the rad levels check out, that is. O.K.?”

“How about you drop some off to your roommate. Tell him to eat it all.” Logan’s gaze was cold, unforgiving. “If you are too weak to be in the kitchen. Since you’re going to work at the hospital. If you want to eat. You can.”

Charles grit his teeth, and told himself to keep his voice steady. “I’ll do it. If you think I’m too weak. I’ll do it.”

Logan watched him with a steady glare. Then: “You’re not fooling me, you know. You looked like you were going to go for a bite when it was still draped over a stump.”

A long pause. Then Logan said, gruffly: “Nah.”

“You’re not fooling me, you know. You looked like you were going to go for a bite when it was still draped over a stump.”

“Maybe so, Xavier – but you shot it. It’s yours. Yours and Jean’s, if you want to share – but you don’t share with me. Students get first dibs on the food – that’s the rules.” He flicked a forearm over his brow. “‘Cept for Lady Frost, of course.”


“No.” The other man’s voice was fierce. “It’s hard enough for you all, here. I believe that, most of the others believe that. So the majority voted it in – and that’s how the rule came to be: students get first and best food. Period.”

“So if I haven’t had any coffee for the last week or so,” Charles breathed, and: “Shit – coffee?” Logan half laughed. “I’d crawl and beg for coffee, X man; hell, I’d bang Frost, and she could snap my dick off, no question. Here, hand me that bucket. Let me get you a steak or three.”

“I’ll rinse it out, first.” Charles went and did so, returned, and watched Logan make a few choice cuts.

“Right, let’s go.” He sheathed his claws, clapped one bloody hand on Charles’ shoulder and gave him the bucket. “I’ll get back here before the night is out. Where’d you put the guns?”

“Outside.”

Outside …

Oh god … Charles thought to himself, numbly … god.

He had had any number of chances to slip away, when he was filling and refilling the bucket at the pump. Run away with a gun, into the darkness of the woods. He might have been able to get to Syracuse before the sun had risen …

Logan sniffed the air. “Cold front’s coming,” he announced, picking up the rifles.

Perhaps you knew that, subconsciously, Charles’ mind whispered, anxious to reassure. You’re staying for the children - you promised them, remember?

But Charles set aside his own intelligence, his promises. He ignored Logan’s banter as they walked back. He felt numb, and removed – removed from everything but his realization, clear as the night
This could have been his best chance at escape. Perhaps his only chance at escape. But whatever sort it had been - best or only ... he hadn’t thought to take it.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes:

Details re: the Korean War? I cribbed ’em from wikipedia, and from a novel by Chaim Potok. *blinks* Anyhoo. If I got anything horribly wrong, please let me know.
Commander MacMurphy is based on MacArthur, but he (MacMurphy) is really not that important a character, here. And yes, rumor has it that MacArthur drew up plans to nuke Manchuria. Gah.

Stay posted for ch. 15 and 16/part 1 epilogue - Monday night at the latest ... depending on feeeeeedback. [/shameless whoring]
McCoy had brought a strange piece of tech to the kitchen, after Charles had been only a few moments alone. “Bit of an improvement on the Geiger counter,” he had offered, without being asked. Then he had tested the meat and concluded: “Looks fine, Mr. Xavier.”

Charles had grunted, searching in the cupboards for what he needed. When he turned back, though, holding vinegar, oil, and a jar containing what looked like half-dried catsup … McCoy was still there.

His intuition flickered. “Would you like to stay?” Charles gave him a reassuring smile, reaching for a bowl from another cupboard. “There’s going to be plenty.”

“Um.” A bob of the throat, and McCoy had fixed one hand on his steel bracelet, stroking it. “I’m not really supposed to. Stay, I mean.”

“How long has it been, since you were a student here?”

A shrug. “Five years or so.”

“You were – promoted, is it? You were promoted when you were fifteen?”

“Sworn,’ really … but, yes.”

Charles mixed oil and vinegar, thinking quickly. McCoy seemed almost desperate to spill information – with a little judicious prodding, some reassuring words … “Then you’ve had many meals in this kitchen, haven’t you? Surely you can stay, for old times’ sake?”

A pause. Then he heard McCoy’s soft laugh, almost sad. “I really … I don’t know.”

“Take a chance. It’s odd …” Charles frowned. “Usually the monitor swings back in the early evening – but I haven’t seen Angel yet. Nor Jean, for that matter.” He scraped some catsup flakes into the oil and vinegar. “Where could they be?”

“Tonight – um. Tonight is … pretty important, Mr. Xavier.”

All of Charles’ instincts caught at his tone, caught and flared. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“And why might that be?”

McCoy hesitated – and then Charles cursed to himself, as Logan barged into the room. “There you are – c’mon, you know the rules. Move it, move it, move.”
Really, individuals’ comings and goings in this manor were all too fortuitous. Charles decided to seize the bull by the horns. “No,” he said, forcefully – “Stay.”

He didn’t think that he had wrapped the words in any power, so it was strange to see Logan blinking at him – hesitating? McCoy’s mouth was open; he shut it tight, but not before Charles saw him look beseechingly at Logan, those eyes wide behind his glasses – pleading … But then Logan’s face closed.

Hiding his frustration, Charles turned away – another strategy, perhaps? *Try for humor.*

“I mean it.” He grabbed the venison, slapped it onto the kitchen’s one cast-iron skillet, poured the rudimentary marinade over it. “You both have been eying this meat like it’s ambrosia. And if Jean isn’t coming to dinner,” he bit back a stab of worry, “then I can hardly eat all of it by myself.”

A lie, he knew – Charles was pretty sure he could devour every scrap. But something was happening, that night, and he wanted to know what it was.

*Take a risk.*

“If it would be of any help,” he said quietly, “I could shield this memory from Frost.”

There was no mistaking the look the other two exchanged. “Really,” Logan said, dangerously; and McCoy’s voice wavered: “You’re kidding …”

“I’m tired of petty and stupid rules – those that say you can’t eat with someone of a different rank, for example.” Charles kept his tone low and even. “But who knows: a little latitude with the most pointless rules, and I might toe the line on the hard-and-fast ones.”

He raised his eyes from the meat. Logan’s face was stony; McCoy’s, worried. *Damn.* Oversharing hadn’t worked, nor had negotiation. *Try outright sentimentiality.*

“I just wish … Logan? Hank? Please share this with me. I’d like to share it with you.”

Logan bit his lip. The indecision shading his features was so foreign to them that Charles had to keep his own carefully blank, to avoid showing his own thoughts: yes yes he’s bending he’ll break –

“Well of course, I do have an ulterior motive.” He flicked marinade off his fingers. “I need salt and pepper; some garlic and onions. Perhaps some Worcestershire sauce. And I have none.”

“Oh, we have salt and pepper,” McCoy said, quickly. “I’ll just go get them. And I’ll check for the others, too.”

And he ran out of the room.

“Nice job, Xavier.” Logan glowered.

Charles smiled at him. “What do you say?”

Logan sighed.

*Just one more push …*

“Honestly, Logan? Of all the members of the EBS that I have met, I believe you the most likely to have a hip flask. And let me tell you: at this point, I would crawl across cut glass for even a drop of alcohol.”
It worked. Charles felt a fiery pulse of elation as Logan rolled his eyes to the ceiling and walked to the door. “Right, Xavier – back in five.”

“Oh,” Charles said urgently, “And could I borrow a razor, please? I look like – well. Like –”

“Like you got your breakfast on your face, yeah. Fine. Razor and booze.” A serious look. “Don’t make me regret trusting you.”

Logan took one step, but then peered back over his shoulder. “And speaking of which: for the love of fuck –” his face split in a grin, “don’t set the place on fire.”

Charles’ elation dimmed when he discovered that the main door was locked, firmly, with no way that it could be picked. Shite. Turning back, he gave himself a bitter smile – at least, this way, he could show that he was trustworthy. Damn Logan; damn them all …

And he only just made it back into the kitchen before McCoy returned, bearing pepper – “We’re out of salt, Mr. Xavier; sorry –” and onions and garlic. So Charles set his frustration aside, and focused on making the venison taste as interesting as he could given the ingredients at hand. He brewed tea; set three cups on the table. Finally, as Logan returned and folded himself onto the bench, Charles took the razor he held out, poured some hot water into a bowl, and – sighing blissfully, despite himself – shaved with the kitchen soap.


Charles rinsed the razor, set it out to dry and made his way to the stove. “I wouldn’t talk if I were you.”

“Oh, I’m hurt,” Logan whined. “Besides, this?” He ran a palm along one sideburn. “This needs a god damned lawn mower to keep in any sort of order. So cut me some slack.”

"Consider it cut.” Charles gave the two of them the rest of the bread from the box, while waiting for the built-up fire to produce a good bed of coals. Logan and McCoy ate like starving wolves – and, blinking, Charles thought back to his breakfast with Jean, now several days ago, when he had to watch carefully to make sure she wouldn’t choke on her bread and cheese. “Bolting one’s food,” he murmured, “it’s not just for children anymore.”

As soon as decent coals had formed, Charles placed the skillet in the stove. Five minutes later and Logan was jabbing his claws at the meat – far too hot to touch with fingers – and licking grease and savory juice off metal.

“Easy,” Charles had said faintly, but Logan had rolled his eyes almost back into his head, practically tossed the skillet onto the table stone, and pounced on his share. There was no other word for it. McCoy, more decorous, still held knife and fork far too tightly, and chewed as though he hadn’t had food for days.

Charles had thought to cut them all slices of apple, but then, inspired, took the two that had been placed in the ice box, cored them and shoved raisins into them, and placed them in the skillet to bake. One hour later, he knew, and Logan would be jabbing claws into fruit instead of meat.

“Holy mother of God, that’s good.” Logan sighed, then brought his plate up to lick it clean. “Wish Marie was here for some.”
“I don’t,” McCoy said, witheringly. “Your table manners are atrocious.”

“Oh, you know you love it.” At Charles’ chuckle, Logan grinned and continued. “The best EBS shindigs are the ones when we have enough for a food fight—”

“Like we ever do.” McCoy yawned. “And like we ever would. Food fight, I mean. Azazel would win every single time.”

“True.”

“Azazel?” Charles kept his curiosity casual.

“Teleporter,” Logan grunted, stretching. “Damn good one, too. Wish he was here, except …”

McCoy coughed. Charles narrowed his eyes. “Except?”

“Cept he’s off in Dallas.” Logan’s grin was almost manic. “You’ve done it, Xavier – you’ve bribed me into spilling my guts. Congrats to you.”

“Um. Thank you, I think?”

“What he means to say,” McCoy offered, swabbing his plate with a piece of bread, “is that the Dallas operation is going on – right now.” He ate the bread; spoke through a full mouth. “As we speak.”

“Which operation?”

“Objective two, Mr. X: find and secure the nuke. We got all our little platelets clotting up Washed in the Blood, and tonight’s the night they rip off the scab. Here I go, spilling my guts – and I’m not even drunk. So, to help with that, and in commemoration of the mission: here.” Logan set a bottle of vodka on the table with a clack. “This is to get us going – and this,” he brandished a hip flask, “is to keep us going, starting now.”

Logan would hear no arguments for restraint – he poured the vodka into their empty tea mugs. They each slammed back a good four fingers of the stuff, all at once. McCoy immediately doubled over in a fit of coughing; Charles, heroically, limited himself to pounding one fist on the table. Logan just laughed.

“Hot damn, that’ll put hair on your chest.”

McCoy gulped in air. “By your logic, Azazel should be a bearskin rug. And he’s going to be angry you took his alcohol.”

“Who says he ain’t already, Hank? To both things.” Logan waggled his eyebrows, then turned to Charles. “You get a chance to have some booze before a mission, if you want it, but Azazel was god damned responsible this time. Must be the kids. Or maybe he figured he’ll get drunk after.” Then he cleared his throat. “On the topic of him, and everybody else … Let’s remember all our people in Dallas. Let ’em get the job done tonight, ’n bring that nasty little cupcake home. God help us all. To their health!” And Logan took a swig from his hip flask.

McCoy took the flask next. “Their health,” and sipped. Then he coughed again, and wheezed.

“Poor baby,” Logan chuckled – then arched an eyebrow at Charles. “You asked for my flask in the first place, bub. Drink up.”

Charles took the flask. “Their health.”
The alcohol burned going down – it was whiskey, and strong, with that delectable smoke that the vodka had so notably lacked. He relished every drop. “Oh god, that’s good –”

“Give it back –” “No!” “Come on, X.” “No – no, please, let me – oh …” and Charles caressed the flask, took another swig. “Oh, that’s lovely …”

“Damn, who knew you were such a lush?” Grinning, Logan snatched the flask back; drank. “’S mine, X man.”

“Thanks ever so.” Perhaps it was his decreased body weight, Charles thought, happily, or the fact that he hadn’t had alcohol for six weeks. For whatever reason, the whiskey had followed the vodka’s path in blazing straight to both his stomach and his brain. He felt wonderful.

“Mmm. Tell me more about the plan to get the nuke. Is it – is it what I suggested, earlier? It is, isn’t it?”

“Don’t get cocky,” Logan snarled; then burst into laughter: “But – yeah, it is. You’re a wily little bastard, you know that?”

“Oh yes.” Charles beamed. “But it’s nice to hear it confirmed. So who wrote the ransom note?”

McCoy raised a hand with a smile. “And I hope you’re happy, Mr. Xavier. We had to steal a concordance – and from a church, too.”

They had another round, savoring the taste. Then Logan split the rest of the vodka. Then they passed the flask again, and Charles shook his head after his sip, blinking hard. Even though the vodka was helping, the whiskey was ridiculously strong.


He raised the flask. “Here’s to my Marie: bless her heart, bless her soul, bless her god damned gorgeous body, bring her home safe. Santé.” He drank; tapped McCoy on the shoulder, passed the drink along.

“Cheers to my family.” McCoy was starting to look bleary-eyed; he only just touched the flask to his lips and passed it to Charles.

“To …” To my sister, Charles thought, suddenly shivering. To Raven. He shut the swell of memory away; raised the worked metal. “To family.”

“Family … You got any living, Xavier?”

“No. Not anymore.” The lie slipped easily from his lips; he saw Logan incline his head and McCoy assume his best look of sympathy. He didn’t do it well; Charles assumed that he was past tipsy and well on his way to drunk. “Before, I had my parents – and a little sister. But they died in London. February 1951.”

“Sister?” Logan blew out a breath. “Huh. I had you tagged as an only. You know. Up here, in my head.” He tapped slowly at his temple; then he missed and hit an eyeball. McCoy laughed. “Shut up,” Logan said, swatting at him. “And what do you think? Doesn’t Mr. X strike you as … unique? Brought up in a castle somewhere: a chosen heir, a privileged scion, a –”

“You look up those words all by yourself?” McCoy snickered.
But Charles fought to focus – Logan was skating dangerously close to the truth. Damn him; half sloshed and still unnervingly canny. He cast around for a subject change, and then: “Another one,” he said, holding out the flask.

Logan peered at it, eyes just slightly crossing. “Don’t have another one. Marie gave me this one, and it’s enough for me.”

“Another toast, I mean.”

“Nah – you go ahead.”

“Right.” Charles lifted the flask high and began to sing. Loudly. “God save our gracious Queen / Long live our noble Queen / God save the –”

“You never told us about your mutant power of yodeling,” McCoy said, fingers in his ears, and: “Ah, shit, give that back.” Logan grabbed the flask and wagged a mocking finger at him. “You’re EBS now, Xavier.” He made a toast. “Down with the Free West – forever!”

“And ever!” McCoy said. Then he hiccuped. “And here’s to my cohort. Shadowcat, Jubilee – from dorky old me: here’s to you. Stay safe, even though you’d punch me for saying so.” He took a swig. Passed the flask.

“Shadowcat?” Charles blinked. “Jubilee? What kind of names –”

“Need-to-know basis,” and Charles could tell that Logan had kicked McCoy in the shin. It wasn’t exactly subtle – the dishes on the table rattled and McCoy yelped.

“Fine.” He sighed, and raised the flask. “To all of my cohort, with their relatively ordinary names: Ororo, Bobby, John, Sean, and Jean. Their health. And here’s hoping Jean gets better soon.” He drank. It tasted just as good the fourth time.

But the taste immediately turned sour, as Logan grimaced. “Damn straight. The way Frost has her rigged up, wired up – it’s sick is what it is.”

“What do you mean?” Charles felt his warm mood vanishing, like fog beneath burning sunlight. He knew his own voice was sharp. Too sharp, because Logan threw him a puzzled look.

“What … what does Frost do to her?” Charles’ lips felt numb.

McCoy looked down at the tabletop; replied: “Training, mostly. But on nights like this – and for the practice ops leading up to them – Frost draws off Jean, for backup power. For the machines.” He took the flask from Logan, drank deeply this time. “I don’t envy her that job one single bit.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Logan shook the metal container; scowled. “Way to chug it, Hank.”

“Sorry,” McCoy slurried. “Kinda lost track there.”

“I guess. Here, Xavier,” and the flask was held out to him. “Finish it off.”

Charles stared blindly at the kitchen door, then tossed back the alcohol with one sharp jerk of his wrist. He gulped it down; passed a hand over his face.

“Somebody’s a bit sleepy, I think.” Logan started to mock, but then his jaw cracked in a yawn. “And
I guess it’s me. Come on, McCoy – let’s wash up. I’m callin’ it.”

McCoy cleared the table, and waved Charles to his seat when he tried to get up and help; he accepted the good-natured rebuke and sat, staring. Staring, and thinking desperately. Jean, wired up to the telepathic machines, for the war, she had said, quietly, in Angel’s mind … god. What had he done, to let that pass unnoticed? How could he have been so blind?

“Hey, Xavier. Upstairs – let’s go.”

He obeyed, stumbling slightly in the wake of the other two. He brushed a thought against Jean’s door – she wasn’t there. Charles tried to reel the power back in carefully, but his hummingbird – cooing, bizarrely, and flying in happy loop-de-loops – brushed Logan, who growled.

“Oh hell no, not now. You can fiddle with our heads –” Logan waggled his fingers, “tomorrow. When we’re all sober. If everything goes well, Frost’ll sleep in; if it goes tits-up, she’ll have more things to worry about than just us eating steak and boozing. In you go.” He shoved Charles on the shoulder, propelling him into his own room. “Night. Oh, and here.” He gave Charles a heavy metal lighter. “Start your own fire. Just don’t set – don’t set the place – yeah, you know what I mean.”

Logan pulled the door shut with a thump, and a: “Sleep tight.” Through the wood, muffled, Charles heard McCoy slur – “Good night, Mr. Xavier. And thank you so much – the meat was really good –” – and then the slide of the bolt and click of the lock.

Charles stared, sluggishly, at the wood of his door. Heard footsteps recede down the hallway. Then, sitting on his bed, he remembered that he had left the apples in the stove. They would be gone by morning; burned and charred … Fire …

He built a fire with the wood he had brought in, and not used, the previous day. Then Charles lay back on his bed, and built another sort of fire: flames of thought on the flagstones of Jean’s door. The instant someone brought her back, he would know.

It was difficult to start the thought-fire, though. Grimacing, he set his power to work dissipating the warm haze of alcohol permeating his mind. A pity, but when Jean woke him, he would be ready – for there was no one else to help her.

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He felt the instant Jean was returned to her room.

It was Alex, Charles realized, holding himself motionless in his bed. He stared up into the pitch black darkness; the small fire in his fireplace had long since gone out. And there was the thump of his footsteps, the sound of a door closing. Charles felt sick worry coil up from his stomach. He wished it had been Angel. Angel, at least, would have stayed a moment – to get Jean a drink of water, if she needed one, or to build her a fire. Alex just walked away.

Charles sent the hummingbird flying – tried to get a quick read of Alex’s mind. He touched on a complex bubble of emotions … oh. That was why he was in such a hurry. There was a small celebration, somewhere … Charles focused.

Somewhere in the woods. He saw a bonfire, flashes of faces – none he recognized. Beneath it all pulsed something – something Alex was avoiding …

Charles blinked as the stable swam into his mind. Dark – he could hardly see it – oddly tinged with red …
But not important now. Charles shook off the images, drawing his power back to himself. He got out of bed; walked on steady feet to his bathroom and took a long drink of water. Then he sat down cross-legged, on the warm hearthstones, and carefully reached for Jean.

He felt … his power felt … nothing.

Charles stared into the darkness, frowning. He knew Jean was there. There had been the impression from Alex’s mind – a slight weight in his arms, then nothing and a door closed and go go go to the woods.

He tried again. Thought of something small but strong: a tiny, crystal-clear diamond of a bird – like his mother’s old brooch. He remembered how it had sparkled on her lapel as she had bent to kiss him that February morning in Oxford – goodbye – I love you – goodbye – the sapphire of the bird’s eye had winked at him and the diamonds had glittered –

NO!

“God – what –” Charles clamped both his hands to his skull, dug in with all ten fingers. The diamond bird had flown straight into a white-hot wall of pain and – NO. And – he scrabbled frantically in his mind. Where was the bird? Where had it gone? His skin crawled – a tendril of his power, gone. Had it been incinerated? Crushed? Whatever had happened, it was gone from him, and that had never happened before - had it?

Charles drew his knees up to his chest; crossed his arms over them. Stared into the darkness. There had been the cheeky magpie, black and white, appearing and then vanishing when he had taken time from Alex … But he had not felt any diminishing of his power. Not like this.

He would be justified, he thought, listening to his heart thud in his chest. Justified in going to bed, leaving well enough alone. If Jean were eradicating any interlopers in her mind, then he’d be a fool to try again, even if she were in such pain …

Pain. Charles squeezed his eyes shut, and sighed. He knew himself better than that.

Cautiously, he called up another bird. A gentle one, this one: a fluffy pigeon. Round, glassy eyes. Somewhat stupid? Except nothing belonging to him could be stupid. He changed the pigeon into a gentle white dove. Peaceful; that was better. Harmless.

He sent the dove soaring into the air, in his mind. Wafted it over to Jean. For he felt her, now – a pinpoint of brightness in her room. Bright enough to hurt his eyes.

Brighter than she had had been this morning. Had it only been this morning, that he had asked – May I speak to you? – Will you open your eyes? – What hurts? He had sent a raven, Charles remembered calmly – a raven made gentle as a dove, but here was the white bird in truth, brushing up against Jean’s mind as softly as it could.

“… Jean?” Jean? Hello?

The brightness was knotted as tight as a cable – one from Before, turned in and twisted upon itself from the fires of the war, melted into a tangles of black or silver. He remembered them, from Oxford’s first London mission.

When he had found Raven.

The memory made him swallow hard; his own feelings nearly as tangled as the cables – a heap of them at the base of a toppled electricity pylon. There had been a scrape, there, made by someone. He
had wandered away from the team – *your funeral, Xavier; keep an eye out, yeah?* – eating an apple, and had seen the nest of tattered blankets, flush against the remnants of a concrete wall.

*Hello?* he had said. *Is anyone there?*

... *hello ...*

Charles started up from the hearth, almost falling back over. He hadn’t remembered Raven saying anything. She *couldn’t*, at that point; she only learned to talk months later.

There had been a scrabbling noise, and a blonde head popping up from the blankets. It had been incongruous; he had almost laughed, except then he had seen the stark terror in the blue eyes – and then blue skin, and yellow eyes, and blonde hair smoothing into a sheet of copper. His jaw had dropped –

But Raven hadn’t said anything. Not like this – the small voice somehow resonant in his mind …

Then he knew.

*Hello*, he repeated; this time towards the bright knot. *Jean – it’s me. Mr. Xavier. Are you all right?*

Silence.

He bit his lip. *May I speak to you?*

A mental quiver. Then: ... *Yes.*

*Are you all right? What’s happened?*

There was no answer. But then the bright knot dimmed, instantly, glowing through the white bulk of the conch shell. It snapped into abrupt focus in Charles’ mind, looming just as large and ominous as it had that morning."

How in god’s name could a shell be so big? And glowing as it did … Staring at it, Charles felt his neck prickle. The brightness from within amplified the uncanny feeling of electrification – new and strange ...

Just as strange as the sight of Raven had been, a vivid, glowing blue against the dirty grey blankets, the pebbly concrete. *What are you?* he had gasped, and she had tensed to run away. He had wondered if something had happened to her, to make her that way …

*What happened, Jean? Are you sick?*

*Sick ...* he heard, echoing from within the shell. *It hurts.*

*What hurts, Jean?*

*My head.*

Charles walked to his door; pressed his palms against it. *Can you walk to your door, Jean?*

Focusing as hard as he could, he sensed stirring, and a wobbling movement. *Yes.*

*I’m at my door, too. Listen. I’ll tell you a story.*

He had soothed upset children at Oxford with stories. And: *Mr. Xavier, Mr. Xavier!* had always been
the first choice of clamorous students in the common room, on New Year’s Eve, when they would gather together in front of the immense fire built there. He would tell them stories, winding his voice around them like a golden thread, quieting them and calming them ...

He had even calmed a wild Raven, holding up his hands – one still gripping the apple – and saying: *I’m sorry – don’t be afraid … I’ll just sit on this side of your wall.* And then, pitching his voice to carry around stone: *Who are you? My name is Charles Xavier. I’m from Oxford – and on and on, a wave of meaningless words in a soft clear tone, until he had heard the fear recede from her mind and had seen there, vivid and intense, an image of the apple he was still holding in his hand – just visible from around the corner of the wall.*

A wall, a door. Raven on the far side of one – two of the other, separating him from Jean. But he could tell a story.

“This is a story, Jean, from the ancient Greeks.” He heard his voice echo from his mind to hers. If he thought it and spoke aloud he could convince himself that it was October in Oxford. That he was telling Raven a story before she went to bed – even though … He felt a twist of sadness. Even though she was long since grown, and a teacher and storyteller in her own right … and more than a month gone from him.

“Once upon a time,” he began. *Once upon a time …*

“… in a land far, far away, there lived a great inventor named Daedalus. Now, Daedalus was not like you, or like me – Daedalus was a genius, and thrilled queens and princes, boys and girls, with the works of his mind and of his hands. But his life was not an easy one; no. He had been exiled from his home, and had built wonders for King Minos of Crete. He built a wooden cow as large as life; he built the great Labyrinth, and – when Minos’ monstrous son, the Minotaur, was slain in that same Labyrinth, Daedalus built wings that let himself and his son Icarus flee the king’s fury.”

Through his closed eyes, Charles sensed Jean walking forward. *How? The door of her room was locked …*

But no matter. He continued with the story.

“How they flew, and how Icarus the son of Daedalus fell, is another story for another time. But Daedalus ended his wanderings in the court of Cocalus, in Sicily. Now, King Cocalus had two daughters that he loved deeply. And Daedalus made toys and gifts for the children as wondrous and amazing as anything he had ever made.”

Jean was still walking forward. Very much the same, Charles thought, as Raven had, round the crumbling wall outside London. He had not met her eyes, but had kept speaking – low, soft – and had held out the apple.

Raven had taken it. And Jean was still listening.

“It so happened that King Minos was searching for Daedalus, because of his great desire to revenge himself for the death of his monster son. And when he heard of King Cocalus’ inventor, he knew that it was the man he sought. So he disguised himself as a merchant of great wealth, and went to the court in Sicily, and asked for a royal audience.”

Jean was now sitting on the stone floor – he could sense it. Charles kept on with this story, whispering the words to himself; projecting them as soft as birdsong into her mind.

“And King Minos said to King Cocalus: ‘Such a challenge I have here, that no man living can
answer it. I have in this hand a shell’ – and he held it up. 'I have in this hand a golden thread' – and he held it up. 'And I tell you truly: to the man that can pass this thread through this shell, I shall give riches unimaginable.'

“Now, King Cocalus had no need of riches and would have sent the merchant on his way. But his two daughters cried, ‘We know! We know the man who can work this wonder.’ And they took the shell, and brought it to Daedalus.

“Now, Jean …” Jean … he heard his voice whisper in her mind. “Do you think that can be done? Do you think it is possible? That a thread should pass through a shell?”

His dove settled into the dust outside the conch shell, and waited.

Then Charles heard: Yes. And I know how.

“Yes?” He opened his eyes and saw the dark wood of his door. Pressed his fingers against it and felt a splinter.

Yes.

“So much for my story.” He let his rueful sigh echo through her mind. And was that a faint reply of – laughter? Was she laughing? No … but Charles sensed that she was smiling, and that was enough.

It's all right, she said. It's a good story.

“Yes.” He let his dove tilt its head to one side and warble – and there was a small laugh. Good.

But the laughter stopped, and he caught a ripple of something electric – and then Charles yelped as his mind was hit by a white-hot flash –

Sorry! He heard a sob. Sorry, sorry Mr. Xavier, but it can’t – it won’t –

Charles sent the dove flying up, up in widening circles. The shell was trembling, fracturing at the edges.

He swallowed hard. “It’s all right, Jean. Tell me …” and he heard a golden tell me echo through his voice into her head, and wind around the shell. “How did Daedalus solve the mystery?”

He – he tied the thread to an ant. Jean’s voice was thin and pained. And he put a hole in the closed end of the shell, and he put honey there – and he put the ant in, and it found its way through …

“Because it wanted the honey – exactly right.” He waited, tense. Then: “And a shell can be a very strong thing, Jean – like a fortress. Like a labyrinth. Did you ever hold one up to your ear, at the ocean?”

… No.

“Well: I’ll tell you – it makes this sound.” He projected the shh-shh noise of static, waves, whispers that he remembered. He had held a shell to Raven’s ear – a gift from a fellow teacher, a naturalist – and then to his own, smiling down into his sister’s round eyes.

“It whispers. Like it wants to say something …”

Silence.

“And I know you have a shell, there, Jean – in your mind. It’s very strong – I can’t see a way
through it. But do you –” he took a deep breath, and projected with all the – love –and – trust me – he could: “Do you want let it say something … to me?”

Still silence. And then: But it will hurt you, Mr. Xavier …

He bit his lip. “That’s all right. Jean – dear.” Charles swallowed. “I’d rather have it hurt me than hurt you.”

He waited for a moment. Then another.

And he had no warning when the shell dissolved into a blue-white, blinding light – and he was hit by a wave of pain with a brutal smack – a sledgehammer to his skull.

“God,” Charles gasped, sinking to his knees, “my god, oh -” Nausea bubbled up in his throat; he clapped one hand over his mouth as he saw – hands – holding him down, coiling wires around his arms – Frost staring down at him, smiling and saying something, her steel and diamond necklace glittering with her eyes – cold being swabbed on his temples, the sharp smell of rubbing alcohol, and then the tang of ozone and a buzz –

He doubled over with a grunt. The pain – it was unbelievable, roaring through his mind in a torrent of electricity. Distantly, he heard Jean sobbing, sorry Mr. Xavier – sorry –

It went on for – well. He lost track of time.

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Charles stared at the floor, blinking. He had lost track of time, and he could smell that his nose had bled. Huh.

Shakily, he rolled over. Then he sat up. The headache was bad, but – but the fit – the pain – whatever it had been, seemed to be over. And the residue was quite manageable … certainly far less than his migraine the night he had found Syracuse.

Cautiously, he sought the power he had expended – and … there. The dove winged into view, feathers fluttering - looking a little dazed and battered, to be sure ... but otherwise fine.

“I’m fine,” he told himself, and: “Jean?” he croaked. Jean? … Are you there?

Yes – yes, I’m here. The voice had been projected from a place in the middle of the hallway – how was that possible? Charles’ thoughts felt muddled. Had Jean’s projection somehow been caught in the thought-fire that he had set, earlier that night? Had he misplaced something? Had the pain from her mind scrambled his sense of direction?

No, Mr. Xavier – I’m just. I just wanted to hear you better.

“Yes – yes, I’m here. The voice had been projected from a place in the middle of the hallway – how was that possible? Charles’ thoughts felt muddled. Had Jean’s projection somehow been caught in the thought-fire that he had set, earlier that night? Had he misplaced something? Had the pain from her mind scrambled his sense of direction?

No, Mr. Xavier – I’m just. I just wanted to hear you better.

“No, Mr. Xavier – I’m just. I just wanted to hear you better.

“That’s fine.” He sent the dove flying to Jean. It landed – oh ...

Charles felt a thrill. There was a beautiful tree in Jean’s mind – its slender limbs resplendent in leaves of red and orange and gold. The dove perched happily a branch, cooing – then jumped and scuttled to one side as some of the leaves morphed and changed into a large bird. A very large bird – with plumage as beautiful as a fire in full blaze. And with an equally fiery eye. Its beak looked sharp, and its powerful talons sent up smoke from where they held the branch –

The dove warbled anxiously, then looked down as it heard a laugh waft up from below. And there stood Jean – red-haired, grey-eyed, in her white robe.
“Don’t worry, Mr. Xavier. He won’t hurt you.”

“Oh. Well ....” Charles had a bizarre sensation of vertigo – the voice was his, but he was nowhere, there in Jean’s mind … except perhaps in the dove. He gave a mental shrug; saw his dove quickly preen its feathers and dart another glance at its imposing neighbor. “It’s very lovely, Jean. Is it yours?”

Yes.

“Ah.”

Mr. Xavier? Jean tilted her head – and there was no mistaking it. She laughed again. Aren’t you supposed to be a knight?

He saw the dove puff up in indignation. “This is how I am – in your mind, Jean. I mean – I hadn’t asked, so I didn’t know if …”

Oh – but you did, earlier. She gave him a sweet smile. Thank you for asking.

“You’re welcome. I also don’t know if Frost could sense my full presence, here.”

Lady Frost.

“If I were a knight, perhaps; surely you’ll excuse a bird such rudeness.”

Oh, Mr. Xavier. Jean’s smile had turned sad. She won’t sense you. She used the machines all day … so she won’t be using her power anymore. Not tonight. A pause. She was happy about something.

“Was she?” Charles knew his tone was astringent; he didn’t care. Instead, he let down his guard … and with a sigh, he held up one hand in Jean’s mind. He smiled, as he saw a familiar silver gauntlet. Charles surveyed himself – oh. He was holding a large, shining shield – that’s new. He looked around – green grass, everywhere, and in front of him the majestic tree, soaring up into the blue sky.

Hello! Jean’s voice sounded delighted – and relieved. I’m so glad you’re all right, Mr. Xavier. I wasn’t sure if – if my memories would hurt you.

“Oh, I’m fine.” He smiled at her. “There’s no headache in this world that chamomile won’t cure. And this is your mind, Lady Jean?” Charles sketched a bow; the shield got in the way and clipped him on the forehead. He rubbed his brow ruefully as he straightened; Jean’s smile stretched from ear to ear.

Yes.

“It’s quite lovely. Very – very peaceful.” Charles did not have to hold out a hand – he sensed the dove fluttering down from the tree, landing on his shoulder.

Thank you.

He ran his gauntleted fingers over the dove’s feathers for a long moment, staring with Jean out over the broad meadow surrounding the tree. Then he took a deep breath. “Those were memories, then, that you were guarding … What happened, Jean?” He kept his voice quiet. “Rather: what have they been doing to you?”

Jean’s profile was still – from where he looked down, he saw her brow as smooth as pale porcelain.
It was … it is Lady Frost, Mr. Xavier. She uses the machines for the war. And she uses me to help her.

“… Help her?”

I don’t know how they work. Jean sighed. Charles had a sudden blurring sensation of whorls of wire; a switchboard with dozens of buttons; levers and pistons and cranks. I know that they’re for the war, though. Searching, and shielding. Things like that. And I know that Lady Frost needs my mind – to help her power them.

Charles felt an echo of that electric pulse; he shivered. It was like a wave, a sweep of crystal power that left him nauseated – it felt strangely familiar …

He set it aside to examine later. “You do have a very powerful mind, Jean. I remember how you flew through Angel’s thoughts.”

Jean looked up at him, serious, and he hastily added: “And, ah. Going into her mind? I won't do that again. Not without asking; especially not as firefighter post facto –”

- As long as you said sorry to her.

Absurd, how the tables in life could turn. Charles felt like a student called up to the head professor’s office; fixed with a stern look from behind a desk strewn with books. “I did.”

And I should say sorry to you, too. When you first called me, just a little while ago – there was a bird. I thought it was Lady Frost again.

Jean held something out to him in her small hand. It was the diamond bird with sapphire eyes. With an unsteady sigh, Charles took it. He had called it up out of memory and sent it flying to Jean - and if it shone with even half the light it showed now, as it reflected his silver armor up at him in dazzling brightness, small wonder she had panicked.

“It does look like something of Fr – of Lady Frost’s, doesn’t it? But it was my mother’s, you know. Her brooch. I remember her wearing it the last time I saw her. When she bent to kiss me goodbye it touched my cheek.” He touched his cheekbone, remembering. “I always thought it was the bird giving me a kiss, too.”

I’m sorry. Jean looked up at him, miserable. It’s very pretty, really. It’s like your father’s watch.

Charles winced at the thought; to make them both feel better, he smiled: “Don’t fret, child. And … look!”

He held the bird close to him - focused on its reflection in his armor. Wonder if this will work - ah ... The reflection peeled away, wavering, and then fluttered its wings. The brooch bird watched. If jewelry could have an expression, Charles would say that the diamond and sapphire looked nonplussed, as the pale double fluttered its wings and turned larger, became solid and puffed out – oh shite – he tried holding on to it with both hands, but it squawked and pecked him.

So Charles set the fat penguin down on the grass.

It squawked. Jean’s grin spread from ear to ear.

Charles grinned back at her. “I didn’t know any bird could get so heavy.” The dove warbled and preened on his shoulder; the brooch edged close to his neck, pressing diamond-sharp and cold into his skin. The penguin glared.
Bending to pat it on the head, Charles had to dodge another peck. Still glaring, the penguin started rotating its flippers. “Well. Best take it back. The grass here is very pretty, but I think it would like water better.”

*You’re probably right.*

Charles took in a deep breath; let it out in a sigh, and reached out to touch the penguin on the head. He watched it shimmer and dissolve into thin air. It didn’t hurt at all. Instead … it felt like a relief. A small part of his power, clicking back into place like a puzzle piece.

*I like that bird,* Jean said. *You should come back with her – come back and visit. I’ll show you where there’s a pond.*

“Thank you very much.” Charles smiled down at her. “And perhaps your bird could come along, too?”

Jean looked up into the tree. *He likes it best up there.*

“That’s fine, then.”

Charles felt oddly peaceful, in the cool shade of the tree. But he knew that for him, it was late, so for Jean … she had to be exhausted. She needed rest.

“Well Jean – it’s late. And I think you should go to sleep.”

She grimaced. *I don’t want to go to sleep.*

Charles fought not to smile; he was reminded of the youngest of his students. “I mean it. Tomorrow’s another day. We can talk at breakfast.”

She looked up at him again, serious. *You don’t mind, Mr. Xavier – about the memories? I have to keep them shielded from the others* – her voice wavered – *Ororo and them.* But … could you … can you …

Charles heard her unspoken question. He knelt, and looked her in the eye. “I’ll help you with them. I can take any amount of that pain to myself – I’m older, much older –” he gave a theatrical sigh, and saw her smile, “and I can cope with headaches very well. Token of a misspent youth.”

… *A what?*

He grinned. “Never you mind. I’ll help you, Jean. But now it’s time to go to bed.”

*Good night then, Mr. Xavier.*

“Good night,” he said aloud; then felt his eyes widen as a layer of darkness descended – one thin one, then another and another – as though he were seeing the tree and the bright grass, and Jean, through sheet after sheet of carbon paper. It was Jean’s way of showing him the door, he realized with a shiver … and …

Charles lifted up his brow from the splintery wood of his door. And it was really very well done. Very subtle.

Very … powerful.

He stared ahead at his door, and thought. Frost was using Jean for her power – draining her; doing horrible things. He had to bite down on a rush of fury. To do that to a child …
Then a knock on his door made him almost jump through his skin.

Charles gasped for breath, fighting to slow his heartbeat. “Who is it?” he asked aloud; his voice cracked.

A picture of Jean shimmered into his mind, smiling at him from beneath the tree – and then a wind picked up, and leaves blew around her. It was framed with *It's cold in my room.*

“Oh.” Charles felt blank for a moment; then he felt the lighter in his pocket. “Well, I can build you a fire, Jean, but –” and he felt like kicking himself. “I’m locked in.” He rattled the door handle, for emphasis.

*No you’re not.*

And Charles heard the lock click and the scrape of the bolt being drawn back.

Cautiously, he opened the door. There was Jean, eyes gleaming impishly in the dim light from the hall’s arrow windows.


She nodded.

Charles shook his head, mournful. “You’re going to get me into so much trouble.” He grimaced at the unintended irony, flicked a look down to make sure his left thumb was veiled from her sight. It was. “Well: lead the way.”

Jean practically skipped ahead of him to her room. It opened easily – she must have done for the lock there as well. Laying a fire carefully, Charles double-checked. “You can lock me back in my room, right Jean? It wouldn’t do, to get Alex into trouble.”

He heard her - *yes* - projected clear as a bell. “That’s very good, Jean – I didn’t need a picture, that time.” Charles smiled back at her over his shoulder. “Try that some more. It could be like speaking, for you, as opposed to singing.”

*Only if you do it, too.*

He focused on the flames leaping round the kindling. *Like this?*

*Yes!* He felt her delight. *Like we did this morning.*

*Very well. It will be good practice, I think. Of course, feel free to send me pictures if you’d prefer.*

She sent an image of herself, tearing across the grass into the forest with the other students. Charles felt a prickle – it was wood gathering, like he had seen done and done himself … but she was even smaller in the image than now, so … he sighed. It must have been autumn of the previous year. She had been here a year, and even though the patina of memory was burnished and framed with – *fun* - … he felt sad.

“Well.” Then he straightened from the hearth, and went to tuck the blankets round her chin. “I’d tell you a bedtime story – but it seems you know mine already.”

Jean projected the image of herself on a chair, with a huge book open in her lap. *Sorry.*

“Ah.” Charles smiled. “Another one! I didn’t know you could read, Jean – I learned to read young myself, when I –”
But: *no*, Jean sent.

The – *no* – framed a face …

Charles felt his blood freeze.

The face was … the man’s. The monster. A slight smile curling the corner of that thin mouth, as he turned from the chessboard and held out the book –

Charles only realized his back had hit the opposite wall when he felt it – a hard thump. His heart was pounding; he couldn’t catch his breath.

“Jean,” he choked. “Jean – where did you read that book?”

He fought to control his own trembling as Jean sent an image of herself … herself: running.

Framed with – *I’ll race you!*

And then Charles could only stand there, frozen in place, as Jean jumped out of her bed and ran out the door.

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“No,” Charles breathed. He stared at the open door, mumbled: “No, Jean *no* come back –”

Then he heard a strangled sound from his own throat, as his legs burst into action almost by themselves. He ran. *No!* She couldn’t go to the library – she couldn’t think of going into the library, she would be found, she would be killed –

Jean was lightning-quick on her feet. Charles pelted after her, heart jolting into his mouth. He couldn’t see her, he couldn’t see, as he rounded one corner right, then another corner left and raced down the long dark hallway –

*Too late* – “No,” he gasped, as golden light flared at the hallway’s end – he saw Jean easing the huge door open, and then the beam of light turned into a line again as the door closed. Charles skidded to a stop before he hit it. The solid oak of the door loomed and the lines and coils of metal leered at him – he threw one desperate look down at the metal handle – *sod it* – grabbed it and wrenched the door open.

Jean, where was Jean? Charles gasped as he saw her, small in front of the huge fireplace, extending her hand to the carved mantelpiece.

A book there inched out from its fellows, little by little, and then pulled free and floated down to her. She looked at him, curiously, as she walked to one of the chairs in front of the fireplace, and hoisted herself into it.

Charles felt his teeth chattering, as she held out the book to him, and sent an image. Herself, leaning against him, Charles turning a page, framed with *read to me?* And *what’s wrong?*

“N-nothing,” he croaked, “nothing, Jean – I – I –”

And then the ring on his thumb moved.

Charles gasped. He stared down at it.

The metal bent, just slightly. It shifted, as though considering … and then it sent up a throb of heat.
Charles grabbed his left thumb with his right hand, covering the ring as he felt the veil waver and fall, as sweat broke out on his brow.

What's wrong? he heard from Jean – but he couldn’t reply, because the ring flared. Then it started turning, tightening like a vise – biting into his flesh as though it had sharp metal teeth - the pain shot from bad to excruciating, and Charles bit down hard on his own tongue, trying not to scream.

What's wrong, Mr. Xavier? Is it my memories?

It wasn’t, it wasn’t, he tried to say back to Jean, but his thoughts were splintering and he tasted blood. He shielded the pain from her instead, using his strongest veil. Then Charles carefully knelt, and sat, so he wouldn’t startle Jean too much when he passed out. Because he was going to – he could feel it, he knew it – his mind was wailing it at him –

It is, isn’t it? I’m sorry. Jean’s voice was mournful. I’ll read to you instead.

Focusing through waves of dizziness, Charles saw each of her movements as though separate from the sequence of the whole. How she set the book down at her side and scooted off the massive chair. How she turned to pick up the book again and bumped the table. How chess pieces fell over on the board. Just a minute, she thought at him – it oozed into his mind slow as treacle – and she began picking up the pieces and putting them back in place.

The ring stopped tightening.

Charles stared down at it, disbelieving. Touched it. It was still hot, burning … but it no longer felt as though it was trying to sever his thumb.

He hardly registered Jean’s walking over to him, nestling at his side and carefully placing the book into his lap. Here. She opened the tome to a leather bookmark. Then she sat and stared at the page for a long moment; looked up at him, and turned the page over. Gravely, with great import, to the right. Then another, to the right. Backwards, a distant part of Charles’ whispered, amused; the greater part was occupied in staring at the door – the door through which he had sent the dove flying as fast as it could, to see …

The dove had seen the metal cloud instantly, whirling dark and sharp with rage, where it prowled – three turns away from the door, two, one …

It was on the other side of the door. It – no, Charles thought to himself, bleakly. He.

After all, the distant part of his mind pointed out. You know it’s a he. Recall your dream, in which –

“No,” he whispered to himself. “I won’t.” He didn’t want to think about that – insanity, himself writhing around a monster – just before the monster killed him.

You won’t what? Jean asked.

Charles licked his lips to reply; didn’t take his eyes off the door.

So, for one instant, he could picture what the man saw as he slowly opened it and, even more slowly, walked inside the library. Himself – Charles – blank-faced with terror, staring at the door. And Jean, looking up with bright and happy inquiry, turning a page in the wrong direction.

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Then: Oh! he heard from Jean.
And, disbelieving, Charles stared as she got up, turned to smile down at him, and said: Watch!

She lifted the book with one hand, then let go. It floated in midair. And she extended her small fingers, and the book floated across the room, wobbling slightly –

Charles could almost hear the moment the man took control of the book’s studs and clasps.

It snapped into his hand with a thunk.

Those hands were very large. Long fingers pale against the book’s crimson cover. Charles knew he was staring. He couldn’t help it, really.

Jean’s smile had faded. She seemed puzzled; then her eyes widened and she hung her head.

Jean. Charles thought to himself. Oh. I hope he doesn’t kill me in front of Jean.

He heard an echo of – I’m sorry. It’s late, I know. Jean’s thought – directed differently, directed away from Charles – opposite – it was like listening to something said underwater – an obscured burble …

Then he shut his thoughts and emotions down, shut them tight under his veils. Because: the man had closed the door. One hand’s long fingers were curled around the book. The other hand … had reached into a pocket, and pulled out his watch – and Charles saw the steel shine as the man turned it to look at the time –

“Fast Mitternacht.”

Charles felt befuddled at the German. His mind scraped together the will to translate - almost midnight - as slow as molasses. It could be because that voice had been very quiet – and those eyes were glittering at Charles from across the room.

Jean must have thought something at the man – perhaps: that’s Mr. Xavier’s watch! Because the same low voice drifted from behind those teeth, gleaming in an almost affable smile … the words:

“Nicht mehr, maidele.”

Not anymore.

And Charles was feeling many things, but chief among them was fury.

Thus, the veils. It would not do to upset Jean.

But Jean wasn’t upset. She was watching the man, head tipped to one side, as he prowled across the room to the fireplace, stared at the chessboard … then lifted the table it rested on, gently, and – moved it … behind one of the chairs? Why would he do that?

Jean must have asked the same question. Because the man looked back at her – and Charles’ blood curdled at the sight of that smile. “Das macht nichts.”

His thoughts moved at a fraction of their normal speed - sluggish. It had to be shock, or fear … for Charles was not quite fluent in German, but - a memory wavered into his mind: Oxford, tiny cups of bitter coffee with Weiss from Philosophy, a moment of unexpected clumsiness - Das macht nichts, Karl - her laugh as he scrambled for the cup, fallen to the floor - never mind, Charles …

He shook off the memories; focused desperately. The man had walked across the room to the ornate, carved desk. And now - he had crooked a finger at Jean, and Jean was walking towards him and
Charles half-started from his feet, thinking to run after her, pull her away, save her –

The ring flared and yanked – his hand was wrenched behind his own back, and he stumbled back down to the floor, gasping.

He tried to focus his eyes. The man had put the book down on the desk’s blotter. He reached out to one of drawers; opened it. He placed the watch inside, and took out – Charles widened his eyes to see.

It was a small syringe.

“Oh god, no.” He licked his lips to try and croak: “Jean – come back here –” but he couldn’t find the words.

Charles could only feel the tightening band of pain around his thumb, as he watched Jean sigh and hold out her arm. As the man – god, was that a sedative? *Let it be a sedative, not poison,* because Jean was wobbling on her feet and then she would have flopped onto the floor in a heap if the man had not caught her.

He did, though.

*He gave her a shot,* his mind said, distant, and *let it be sedative,* and *don’t let him hurt her* - The man wasn’t for now, but who knew if that would change? He placed her on a chair by the fire. Then he walked back to the desk.

One gesture both shut the drawer and melted its handle around and into wood, creating what looked like an unbreakable lock.

The next gesture sent Charles reeling to one side and dragged across the floor – wood and carpet – yanked by the ring to the fire’s iron grate – held there, immobile and gasping, his head frantically twisting to try and see a way to escape.

He saw the dirty soles of Jean’s feet, from one corner of his eye. He saw the stones of the fireplace; the carpet’s fringe. And a distant part of his mind observed: *oh. That’s why he moved the table. More room to work. Makes sense –*

And then the man loomed into his vision, face twisted with rage, and Charles – *too late* – his mind thought – gasped and flung his right hand behind him to grab something, anything to throw at him –

“No,” the man hissed – flung out a hand, and a poker flew to his palm with a thwack. “You were told never to come here – I punished you for coming here. Now …” and he leaned over, spread his hands in front of Charles’ eyes, and Charles felt his mouth go dry in terror as the poker flexed and melted, and twisted through those long fingers like an iron serpent. “What, exactly, have you failed to understand, *Professor?’”

Charles stared up into those eyes – *more grey, this time,* his mind observed, and: *insane.* The iron was slithering round the man’s knuckles, thinning to the width of a chain –

– *a chain – my watch –*

– *the bastard kept it –*

And Jean was unconscious. Distantly, Charles brushed a thought across her mind to check. *Just to be sure.* It would not do, to have her see him die.
Then he drew back his lips, bared his teeth, and spat in the man’s face.

A snarl of rage – and it wasn’t iron around his throat, it was a hand – two hands – and he’s going to strangle me – and I’m going to die now, Charles thought.

He sensed the raven fly up to the mantelpiece. Look down … at where he had brought his own right hand to his throat, at how he tried to reach the man’s eyes, tried and failed –

It was just like it had been when the man had first found him here. Well. Fingers instead of a chain.

The raven sighed, watching as that right hand faltered, fell back to the hearth with a thump. Strange noises. Almost as though he was fighting Frost again, mind-to-mind, and making a show of agony, except this time it was real –

_Frost._

Jean had said that Frost was not using her power. _Not tonight._

_She was happy about something,_ Jean had said.

She would be happy, to see him dying.

… dying …

Charles could not say whether it had been the will to survive, or something else, that made him do what he next.

All he knew, later, was that his struggles had been ceasing, that he had been dying, when he called the raven to him –

- gave it one last command -

- and flung it into the man's mind.

And Charles did so with absolutely all of the power he had left.
When Charles opened his eyes, all he could see was darkness.

“Hello?”

His voice was hoarse, as if he had been screaming. He swallowed; tried again. “Hello? … Is anybody there?”

The air was hot, close and acrid; he coughed on a gritty particle of – well. He didn’t know what. It was so hot he was sweating. And Charles could smell something burning.

“I can’t see,” he choked – and then he blinked as the sun came up. Or came out … really, he didn’t know which. And it couldn't be the sun, in truth - it was a different quality of light. Reflected?

Who knew? All he knew was: it had been pitch black, and now it was light. A wan, watery and grey light … as though the moon were shining from behind thick clouds … but it was light. He could see.

And he could see that he was in hell.

“Oh …” Charles breathed. He stared out across a bleak and desolate landscape. “Oh my God.” Horrible. There were mountains, with snow on their caps – except they were somehow bubbling and hissing steam. And a strange black runoff was flowing from them, down into the dark river wending at his feet. He looked closer.

The river was choked with dead bodies.

“Well.” He swallowed bile. “How very unpleasant. And … well,” he shivered, “I was going to say undeserved, but who knows? Did I deserve hell? Who can say?” The air was hot, but at the same time everything felt brutally cold. “I died, and I’m in hell. Damn.”

He waited for his mind to add – so to speak.

But there was nothing. It was as though his thoughts had been struck dumb.

God, it was cold. He struck his arms against his body – wait …

“Wait a minute –”

Charles stared. His armor – he was wearing that iridescent silver armor … the armor of thoughts. Of dreams. Of his veils … He stared at his feet, wildly. There was the shield – new this evening, from his brushing Jean’s mind …
And lying next to the shield …

He picked up both shield and sword. Tried to swallow. “Right. So … I’m not in hell – I’m in … his … oh God I’m in his mind.” He bit his lower lip, tasted blood. “Where’s my raven? Hello?” His voice rebounded, panicked echoes ringing strangely off the mountains, “Where are you? Come back – I don’t want to leave you –”

Something rumbled, in the distance. Charles felt his head snap around; he stared wildly. The river, he saw, had started to glow - in a particularly horrible shade of green. “Shite,” he yelped, and wheeled on one foot.

He stopped, and stared again.

There was a wood there, almost in front of his nose. Just one stretch of dark sand away from the river. A forest. And the trees … Charles stepped closer. Were they birch? Or ironwood? Something grey or silver …

Ironwood. Iron.

The forest was made completely of metal.

Something rumbled again. Closer. Charles whipped his head back around. The river had started to foam and bubble, moving the corpses up and down, up and down, until he thought he would be sick at the sight.

A flash from the river’s horrid green glow lit up all the water for one split second. Charles froze.

There was something in the water, almost on the other shore. The river was wide, so he could hardly see … something moving – not dead – something half-submerged by the corpses, and then less than half, because it was straightening. And he knew that shape …

It was a monster. No, he thought faintly, it was the man. The man, and he had held out both his hands – and metal flew from the corpses and became two swords – and he was wading through the water.

Coming towards Charles.

“Oh God,” he choked, and turned to run. He made it two leaps into the woods –

– and cried out, as a sharp metal leaf whipped across his brow.

First he felt no pain, then a sting and a throb and he could almost taste the flood of adrenaline. “God damn it –” Charles gasped. Metal vines were creaking from around the trees, slithering out towards him. Like the door, he thought wildly, and no, no, I won’t let this happen to me –

He raised the sword high, and brought it down. It flashed in an arc of silver fire. A vine snapped and crumbled to the ground, turned to dust.

Charles turned at the sound of something loud - not far enough away from him. Water, still sloshing – the monster – man – was still in the river.

Metal rustled around him. Whispering. Hissing.

Charles gritted his teeth. “I’m not going to die here.”
The leaves clinked together. The sound they made resembled nothing as much as mocking laughter. Another leaf slapped him in the face.

“Really?” he snarled. “Really?! Then I accept your challenge.”

Charles raised the sword in a salute. Then he brought it down hard, and did so again and again, scattering shards of shrieking metal right and left as he ran deep into the forest.

He could hardly see out of the sweat in his own eyes when he stumbled into a clearing. Really, he almost didn’t realize it was a clearing, until he had taken several more strides and marveled that the vicious trees and vines were parting so smoothly –

“Oh,” Charles sucked in a breath, coughed, bent over. The shield pressed against his knees. “Right.” He threw a look over his shoulder; behind him, the forest twisted and steamed, hissing. Shuddering, he turned back – and then heard himself gasp.

An immense castle loomed up before him. It seemed to touch the dark sky.

“My God …” he murmured. Somehow, a quiet voice seemed appropriate. “It’s … it’s …”


He couldn’t stop shaking. It was adrenaline, he told himself, or perhaps nerves. Every sense was strung out taut, giving his mind an overwhelming amount of information – where’s my raven, he thought, desperately – I don’t see it, I can’t hear it –

But he did hear movement, from behind him – and Charles thanked every combat instinct he had, for making him throw himself to the side, and dodge the slash of two hideously sharp swords.

He knew they were sharp, even though made of … was that black metal solid iron? How was that possible? God … They sliced grey grass and tore up sod in their downward sweep; they made the air vibrate with an ugly sonority. And the man holding them was strong, he knew … Charles swallowed, bringing his shield up. Very strong. And raging at him, teeth bared – whipping the swords around and up for another swing –

Charles blocked with his shield, parried with his own sword.

And felt his jaw drop, as the shining silver blade sliced through iron as though the heavier metal were butter.

The man was left holding two hilts. Charles blinked at him, over the rim of his shield. He looked just as shocked as Charles felt.

“Oh …” Charles’ voice caught. “You weren’t – you weren’t expecting that to happen. But how did I –”

The man bared his teeth again and drew a dagger out from a high black boot – he was wearing all black, Charles saw, distantly, and he really was excellent with edge weapons, because the dagger was coming right for his face –

He raised the shield, and felt the metal shatter into a thousand fragments.
Charles gasped, peered around the shield again – at the man’s staring eyes. “And you weren’t expecting that to happen, either.”

His thoughts raced. If his blade could slice through iron, and his shield shatter the same, then what if …

Charles darted out with his own sword. The man dodged it – but his hands shook, and the iron hilts dropped just slightly – Charles narrowed his eyes, pressed the attack. The man raised the shard of a sword to parry, and Charles cut through it and felt the silver blade bite into flesh –

The man jerked away. Dropped the hilts; clapped one hand over the other forearm …

Charles stared at the blood welling up through those long fingers, dark in the dim light. A distant part of his mind thought: that must be how I looked. Every time the man had drawn blood. Fingers white-knuckled, eyes staring in disbelief …

Then he saw every movement clearly – as though slowed down. He saw the man toss out a bloodied hand and gesture. Then he saw vines spring from each fingertip, oddly – how strange … springing from them and flying out to the pieces of iron on the ground –

Until Charles sliced them into ribbons with his sword and they crumbled to dust on the ground.

The man’s eyes went wide. In surprise? Shock?

“Oh …” Charles breathed. “You really weren’t expecting that to happen.” He stared into the man’s face. “Any of that. Were you? So, then.” Charles took a step forward; the man stepped back. Another step, and the man stumbled as he retreated. Charles’ heart was hammering. “What will happen … if I do – this?”

He leaped, feinted high, and then brought his sword around and up, slicing, and - he should have heard the man scream in agony, since his head tipped back and it looked as though he were howling - but there was only the rustling of the metal trees, a strange static. As the man tried to keep from falling, blood now running freely from him, Charles felt an instinctive cringe of horror, but – he deserves it – and that carried him through the overwhelming surge of nausea he felt as he ripped the blade out from the other’s side – as felt a grate that could only have been ribs. Shuddering, he whipped the blade round fast, caught the man in both shins, and drew back, panting, as the other stumbled to his knees.

He deserves this. All of his memories of the abuse the man had visited upon Charles crystallized into one thought, clear and pitiless: he deserves to die.

Charles took one long step forward, and set the tip of his sword at the man’s throat. “I ought to kill you,” he whispered, breath coming in harsh gasps. “I ought to kill you for what you’ve done. I ought to kill you for what you are.”

He stared into green-grey eyes – still the same strange mix of color, he thought, distant, even though they were wide, and … was that fear?

A hot breeze buffeted his face; perhaps it came from the river, for it brought the stench of corpses. And the fear – fear – in the creature’s eyes lit an unholy spark of glee deep within him. Charles felt a vicious laugh bubble up from his throat. “Oh, are we afraid now?”

He brought the sword up, set the flat of it against one stark cheekbone. Then he brought it back and slapped the man, meaning to sting – the angle must have been wrong, for an angry mark instantly
started dripping blood. “Can’t say I’m sorry,” Charles murmured, tracing the blade back to the man’s throat – more blood beaded on skin, started trickling down. “Really, I can’t. This couldn’t happen to a more deserving –”

He heard his raven cry aloud.

Charles wheeled, gasping.

The cry was somehow ringing from all sides – everywhere, vibrating into his ears – echoing from the distant mountains. Those mountains, Charles thought, dazed, were doing truly bizarre things to sound. The raven cried out again – and the sound came from the castle, this time.

“Oh,” Charles cried out, “where are you?” It was his raven, he knew it, and it was here, somewhere. He couldn’t leave it, not here in this hell –

The smell of corpses was overpowering – his stomach lurched and twisted. Then a rustle from behind him made him bare his teeth. He turned, fast as he knew how, and –

I knew it – saw the man bending forward, stretching out his power for the shattered blades.

So Charles kicked him in the face.

He felt something crunch under the force of the blow; saw a crimson spurt. And still heard … nothing, which was bizarre. There should have at least been a gurgle or a groan, for the man knelt, face in his hands. More blood was welling through his fingers, running down to his wrists.

“You’ll excuse me,” Charles said, breathing hard. “I have to go find my Raven. Wait, no – not that Raven, not my sister Raven – I have a bird,” he said, words tumbling out one after the other, “and it’s here, but it’s not my sister, even if it is a raven – God.” He felt dizzy. “Why the fuck am I explaining anything to you? I’m going to find my raven, you bastard – and if you come after me there –”

He gestured with his sword at the castle.

And then he felt the tumult of his thoughts go quiet – quiet and focused, narrowed on one vicious point.

“That,” Charles said thickly. “That castle is your mind. Isn’t it?”

The man looked up.

“Well. I mean: this is all your mind. But that.” He jabbed with his sword; swallowed hard. “That has your thoughts in it. Your secrets …”

The man’s eyes were very green, wide and staring. Compared with the red of his blood, and the ashy pallor of his face.

His face, that had drained of absolutely all color.

Charles smiled. “Well then.” He brought the sword back round; trailed it over the man’s fingers. “You won’t mind if I take a look. Hm?”

He feinted for the eyes; laughed as the man jerked his head back and away. Then Charles took a deep breath; leaned forward … and bared his teeth. Like an animal, he knew, but the rage in him was almost overpowering – and he needed to show the man how much he bloody well hated him.
“Go back to your woods,” he whispered harshly. “They suit you.”

He turned his back on the man; turned, and walked to the castle’s gates. There was an immense portcullis, wrapped round with chains. Charles tested the chains with his sword – he could make short work of them, but, “Why expend the effort?” he said, airily. He found a tiny gatehouse door and cut its metal handle and lock in two.

Then Charles kicked down the door and walked straight into the castle. He walked through the darkness of the gatehouse, blinked at the strange brightness of that bizarre unlight reflecting, dizzying, off harsh angles of steel – angles of something raised, something strange, in what had to be the courtyard – bailey, he remembered. And there was the keep – its immense double doors looming up in front of him. He stared, shivering. Those doors could not be kicked down.

So Charles took hold of a heavy wrought-iron handle, and opened one door. And he didn’t look back to see if the man was following him; no. He looked back to watch the wan light from the sky fade, as the darkness of the keep closed round him.

With the light went a good deal of his bravado. Charles stepped forward, the sabatons on his boots ringing off stone.

It was dark inside, but not so dark that Charles could not see. Gloomy, rather. Charles stared. He was in a huge hall, unbelievably huge. He could hardly see to the other end; he was shivering, even in his armor. “I’m not afraid,” he told himself fiercely. “Find the raven. Come on, come on –”

He picked up the pace, striding across black and grey flagstones, the grey stained with – he didn’t want to think what. Long banners trailed down from above – they were tattered and torn. Charles squinted up. He couldn’t see the ceiling; he couldn’t see from what the cloth hung. The effect was oddly insubstantial, sending a chill creeping up his spine.

The banners were mostly red. Charles was almost running, now, towards the Imperial staircase at the end of the hall. He fought not to panic; the gloom and the vast scale of everything felt at the same time empty and relentlessly oppressive. As though an immense stone was lurking, biding its time, waiting for the right moment to fall and crush him. Red banners, red tapestries flew past him as he ran; it looked as though the dark were oozing blood.

“Oh, there’s a silver one. Lovely.” He stopped in his tracks, heart hammering; made his way over to where a tapestry covered the wall behind a dry, silt-clogged fountain. Calm down. Take a moment to calm down. Charles peered at the tapestry. It glimmered in the darkness – oddly … lovely. He bit his lip. Silver threads twined and twisted round turquoise and dark blue, to make a gorgeous backdrop – background for the image of … a unicorn, pure white and beautiful, chained to a silver tree.

The unicorn’s eyes were …

Charles stomach gave a nauseated little lurch. Those eyes were human.

And they were very blue.

“Stairs,” he said, faintly. “There might be something at the top of the stairs.” Charles turned from the chained unicorn and made a run for it. “Get to the top of the stairs and breathe again - oh God - why did I come in here?”

He kicked up dust from the ancient carpet with every step as he pounded up the stairs. First up from the right towards the center landing and then – Charles chose to go to the right when the stairs split again. He did not turn around to look … he had the horrible sensation that he would see his mirror
Coughing, he reached the top. There was a balcony to his right, overlooking the entrance hall. He ignored it – there were only gargoyles there, perched on the railing and holding up the arcade. Charles shoved open the rusted door lying directly ahead of him; jogged through. And there was a hallway, stretching away to his right – it must parallel the balcony, he thought, behind it – indeed, there was a false arcade on one side. And on the hallway’s other side there were doors, nothing but iron doors - some ornamented with more iron, wrought fine, and others glittering strangely - stretching out as far as he could see ...

But then he felt a draft.

Charles whirled, looked to his left. There – there was an opening. A door shape, the stone built around it – but with no actual door, wood or iron. Instead, a rusted yett was the only thing separating him from – “Air,” Charles gasped, and, “there’s the sun, oh. Wonderful.”

He pushed the yett open; it gave with a spine-tingling screech. Charles stepped outside. The air was hot and gritty, still, but at least it was moving – at least he could breathe again.

Charles paused for a moment, just breathing. He stared down into the bailey. From this distance, the steel something glinted dangerously in the grey light; he gulped at the wave of vertigo that swept over him.

How had he gotten up so high? He had only climbed two flights of stairs, but had walked out onto what appeared to be almost the very top of the keep. Dazed, Charles looked up and around, squinting in the half-lit gloom. There were two bartizans on each corner of the keep that he could see – he was standing on a tiny balcony below, and halfway between them. Stone stairs branching behind him led to each corner.

He picked one stairway; jogged up it. Another smaller stair led from the bartizan to the main bastion; Charles doubled over to breathe deeply before continuing. All of his running with Logan, and yet a few sets of stairs had him winded. Perhaps it was the heat, in the man’s mind, the rasping catch of each breath in his lungs …

The raven’s call echoed out over the bailey.

Charles gasped, then ran up the stairs. There was his raven, wheeling round the battlements and soaring to the highest point of the keep. He ran and ran, finally leveled out onto flat stones – took a deep breath of air, somehow cleaner, this high up, and laughed. “It’s you – come on, let me get you, we’re going –”

Raven - no, the raven drew its wings close to its body, angling in to land with another loud crahk. And Charles blinked as he saw where it perched.

On one of three statues, set at the edge of the bastion. The one in the center, set on a wide, shallow pedestal, thus taller than the other two. Even though it would have been taller anyway, if it were taken off the pedestal and set on the flagstones with its fellows, since it was ...

He knew who it was.

The raven ran its beak over glossy black feathers, then beat its wings just slightly against the stone shoulder of the man.

Wait …
Charles walked closer, staring.

Was it really him?

The statue was just as tall, but it looked younger, somehow. Still with the same profile … He had once thought it suited to a coin, but it was equally striking in stone.

Hesitantly, Charles stepped in front of the statue. He stared into the man’s face. Fewer lines, and – Charles peered closer – the scar between his nose and lip was gone. There was a certain quality to it: nobility, perhaps. Charles blinked. The sculptor had not been skilled enough to convey it fully, though, since there was no emotion there.

He sheathed his sword, and reached out to touch. Then had to smile to himself - or begin a smile, anyway, since it slipped away. There was no real sensation through his gauntlets; of course not. But what if ...

Tentatively, Charles leaned forward. He touched the hollow of his cheek to the statue’s chin.

Then, self-conscious, he stepped back. He couldn’t say why he had expected it to be warm; it wasn’t, of course. It was cold, and with the rough texture of cement. He brushed his own armored fingers over the man’s hands. They were the same size as they were in reality – folded in front of him, over the hilt of a sword.

If anything, he looked like a statue on a crusader’s tomb – taken out of the crypt and propped upright as a castle guardian.

His eyes, staring into the distance, were empty.

Charles sighed, set his shield down at the statue’s feet. He held out one gauntlet to his raven. “Here …”

He couldn’t say why he whispered. Perhaps to hear the clink and scrape, as the bird stepped gravely onto his hand. He stroked its dark feathers as he brought it to his own shoulder, sighed again as it ran a beak through his hair.

Then he turned to look at the other statues, one on each side of the man. And almost fell over in shock.

God. One of the statues was obviously Frost. Staring at ... what? Charles turned to look - to see what she saw. It had to be what the statue of the man stared at, too.

The view consisted of the terrible mountains: white snow steaming at their peaks, but poisonous runoff turning their sides black as obsidian. There was a red glow on the horizon, gleaming off the sluggish roil of the river. Moving slowly, Charles remembered, because of all the corpses. He blinked at a sudden hot gust of air – it smelled like ashes, and stung his eyes.

Charles bit his lip; looked back at Frost's statue. Her face had been carved with great attention to detail: and – Charles shuddered. She was smiling.

A diamond was inlaid on the hollow of her throat. It connected to the carved line of a necklace. Charles stretched out a hand to touch it; it was just within his reach. Then - "Ow!" - the raven pecked him in the head.

“Oh, right.” He gulped. “Mustn’t risk – breaking anything. Or … there might be traps, here. Mazes, snares - traps for the unwary.” He turned to stare into the bird’s dark intelligent eye. “Thank you for
the reminder.”

He gave the other statue a quick glance. It was another man – older – and no one Charles recognized. He had blunt and weathered features; he held in his hands a strongly carved helmet. The guards for nose and cheek had a swooping, curved line; Charles found them strangely unsettling. “Because it’s impractical,” he told himself, firmly. “An arrow could punch right through his philtrum.”

And because the older man was smiling broadly at the very same mountains, just like Frost ... and Charles pictured that smile coming from beneath that helm, and felt his skin crawl.

There was a gem placed on the helmet, in the spot of the mystical third eye – fiery, the size of a pigeon’s egg. Perhaps a ruby.

Dismissing him, Charles turned back to stare at the man one last time – not the older man; rather – *his* man – the thought whispered through his mind before he could stop it. “Just distinguishing between the two,” he gabbled, flinching. The raven croaked on his shoulder. “Don’t laugh,” Charles snapped.

“One more look, and we’re going. Just – because …”

And he paused, staring. Then he frowned, and reached out with one finger of his free hand.

There was the hint of a groove in certain places on the man’s hair. Chalky dust clogged most of it, just as it did the stylized carving of the curls. But it looked as though there should have been a circlet there.

“A diamond to your left,” Charles murmured, “and a ruby to your right. Why don’t you have anything? No torc, no crown; no jewels for your sword.” Charles moved his own lips in a ghost of a smile; he couldn’t say why he felt so sad. “It doesn’t seem fair.”

Impulsively, he laid his armored hand against the man’s face; traced one stark cheekbone with his thumb. “Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?”

A shriek from the raven made Charles jump in place. The bird flew off his shoulder, circled once, and returned to him. Feathers floated down, down into the bailey – and –

“Oh, shite. *There* is the beauteous majesty of Denmark.” Charles gulped. “Fuck me, we’ve got to get out of here.”

A dark silhouette, doing … something … to the steel thing in the middle of the bailey. He wasn’t afraid, Charles told himself; not at all. He could kill the man here with his new sword … He just wanted to leave – to escape this hell of metal and ash and supremely unsettling statuary. “Right.” He checked for the raven on his shoulder, stepped down from the pedestal, unsheathed his sword and grabbed his shield. Took a deep breath. “Hold on tight; we’re going.”

Going was easier said than done. Charles walked down the two flights of outside stairs, pushed back the yett, then made his way down the Imperial staircase. The mammoth, dark and horrible keep – he breathed carefully, trying not to choke on the clogging dust. And once his mind had started in on how he was not afraid, it promptly presented him with one problem after another. Would he have to fight his way back out through the woods? What would he do to get out, once he had? Jean had flown out of Angel’s mind, he remembered wildly – could he fly? How could he get past the man in the courtyard?

And – Charles stumbled to a halt at the bottom of the staircase. How could he make the man forget this?
He dragged in a long breath. “And how long have I been in here?”

A wave of fatigue made his head spin – or was it … a strange wave of heat, from outside? Clenching his teeth, Charles firmed his grip on his shield, transferred his sword to that hand, and cautiously opened the keep door.

The raven squawked. And Charles flipped the sword back to his right hand only just in time to parry the iron bar swinging to smash his head.

“God damn it,” Charles gasped, as he felt the smash-grate – as the silver blade turned the iron to splinters. The raven flew off, gracefully; perched high up on the wall overlooking the courtyard. “What the hell does it take for you to – to –”

Surrender? his mind asked. Give up? What did he want, anyway, from the man’s thoughts – why had he even come here?

One small part of his mind whispered: I didn’t even mean to come here. I just …

“I just didn’t want to die.”

Charles swallowed against the dryness in his throat, staring at the man’s glittering green eyes. He was an arm’s length away; body taut and fingers splayed for attack; face twisted in rage.

“Can you understand me?” Charles said, hoarsely. “I don’t want to die. I – I want you to let me go. Let me go home.” He raised the sword; the man stepped back, baring his teeth.

Charles saw the dark bruises on that face; blood smeared down from nose to chin. There was a cut on one cheekbone; a line of blood on his throat, and – Charles’ stomach gave a guilty twist – a dark and matted stain on the side of his black shirt. From the sword blow to his ribcage …

But: “Why do I even feel the slightest hint of guilt?” he snapped. “You started this. You took me from Oxford – you took me away from home, from my sister.” The man’s eyes flashed; Charles soldiered on. “I shouldn’t feel bad at all, for hurting you. I – I don’t.”

The man merely stared at him. Then – Charles frowned – then he backed away further; turned and jogged over to –

– to the massive steel plates, flashing in the dim light – Oh, Charles thought. That’s what it was. A bunker.

He followed the man, cautious but curious as well. A bunker: squat and ugly, almost flattened … and it looked to have a set of doors set at an incline – doors that could slide open. The man was trying to open them now. They looked to be welded shut, though; locked in several places and wrapped round with heavy, strangely glittering chains. But they had been opened at least once – Charles saw scorch marks, scoring and dents, places where the metal had warped …

“What is that?”

The man ignored him, whipping strands of power at the chains and tugging, pulling as hard as he could.

“What’s in there? What …” Charles’ eyes narrowed. “What’s so important to you, that it’s – chained up and buried in a bunker?”

The man wheeled to glare at him. Charles adjusted his grip on his sword; saw the fear flash across
the other’s face, and … perhaps try something different … “Here,” he said, quietly.

And he laid his sword on the ground.

“Here …” Charles wove as much calm and soothe and tell me into his voice as he could. “Tell me: what’s in that bunker?”

Staring down at the sword, the man flattened his lips into a white line. And then the raven’s cry was the only warning Charles had, as the man leaped for his throat.

“Stop!” Charles hit the ground with a thud and clank of armor; he cursed and brought his shield up into the man’s jaw. The fingers on his throat fell away. Charles followed up on the punch and rolled, pinning the man beneath him.

The man glared; pushed with his elbows to sit up. Charles shoved him in the shoulder – he thumped back down into the dust. Then he twisted his body, trying to wrench away – Charles countered the move by tightening all the muscles in his own legs … and … and why was it difficult to swallow, all of a sudden? Charles couldn’t say. Except to say that his mouth was very dry.

He stared down into those … those eyes. They really were very … very –

“Green,” he said. “Or grey. More grey, here. In this place.” He knew his jaw had fallen open slightly, his own eyes were wide; he didn’t want to think of the picture he made, gazing down at the man …

The man, who was staring right back up at him. And in his eyes: fear.

Charles breathed in and out, carefully. “Here now … what have you to be afraid of?”

He brought one armored hand up; eased it to the man’s face – those stark features were immobile, frozen – as Charles touched the bridge of his nose. It was starting to bruise, horribly; Charles realized he must have broken it with his kick. He swallowed. “I’m …”

I’m not sorry, he thought, fiercely – but there was so much blood, and he had been so angry before, in the clearing outside the castle. “But why shouldn’t I be angry? I hate you,” he hissed down at the man, “I hate you for what you’ve done – for what …”

For what you are, he had said. Charles traced his armored fingers over the man’s brow, loosening one lock of auburn hair from where it lay stuck to skin with blood. Then, suddenly – because it felt too heavy – Charles let his shield fall to the ground. He fumbled at the gauntlet on his right hand, trying to find fastenings, clips or hooks or buckles or – “How the hell does this thing come off?” he mumbled to himself. His fingers felt clumsy; his voice hoarse. “Just – get off, come on …”

His raven screeched at him. Charles ignored it.

The man lay frozen beneath him. Staring. He didn’t even blink when Charles brought his right hand, bare, back to the stark line of cheekbone and jaw. As Charles touched him, fingertips catching on drying blood.

He was so warm, Charles thought, distantly. Body heat like a furnace, radiating through the armor from where Charles straddled him, heating his fingertips like embers … “You’re – you’re …” He couldn’t find words; there was a strange heat turning all of his thoughts warm and thick, like porridge with honey. Charles spread his palm against the man’s cheek – and his eyes flew to that bloodied line of throat as the man swallowed, hard, with an audible click.
Charles breathed out. “You … let me … Will you let me.” He wasn’t asking; not really. The words; they weren’t there. He couldn’t – he mustn’t –

But he did.

And perhaps Charles closed his eyes so tightly because he knew how wrong it was. How wrong: to lean down further; to feel another’s body beneath his, trapped – another’s breath warm and quick – frightened – on his lips; to find the man’s mouth, and to kiss him.

The raven was shrieking at him. But it was easy to ignore. Because of the kiss.

In his dreams … Charles drew in a shaky breath through his nose … in all of his own dreams, he hadn’t yet had this kiss. The man had beaten him, bitten him, licked his neck and mauled him in the darkness of those dreams … but had never kissed him.

Unless he counted that press of lips on the hollow of his cheek, that night by the library door. That hadn’t been a dream, though. And he didn’t know if the man had intended it as a kiss. Not as Charles intended this one.

Charles squeezed his eyes more tightly shut. It was wrong. Wrong to taste the blood on that mouth, wrong to flick at those lips with his tongue; wrong to bring his hands up – one armored, one bare – and press at that sharp line of jaw, angling, until the man had to open to him; wrong wrong wrong to drag another deep breath through his flared nostrils and almost smell himself getting hard.

He felt pressure … there, down where the man was shifting; trying to break free of Charles’ hold; small movements of legs and hips, and then they grew more frantic, and even as he moaned into the man’s mouth and pressed himself against him harder, Charles felt something strange. It would have been a half-strangled noise, if it were audible. As it was, something was vibrating against his mouth.

And then a hand on his brow, pushing, fingers trembling – Charles released his hold on the jaw, on one side – grabbed the man’s wrist with his own gauntleted hand; grabbed, held it back down and twisted one armored thumb into bone just so – his tongue, where he was running it over the man’s lips, licking at him and then delving inside again, felt that hot slickness vibrate as the man struggled harder.

One thigh snapped up against Charles’ armor, desperate, aiming for – Charles gave the man a warning bite. Then the man’s free hand, scratching at his throat, trying to push him away, trying and failing – Charles deepened the kiss even more and ground down harder, because he was stronger and he would take this kiss even if the strange vibrations turned what felt like a rattle and the man’s grip was slackening, turning limp – and all those delicious movements of hips and legs were stopping.

Oh – wait.

Charles’ eyes flew open; he jerked his mouth away and sat back – and the man dragged in air and started coughing hard. Silently … It was bizarre - but Charles’ attention was caught, and he stared at blood flecking liquid black in the dust. Of course – he had broken the man’s nose, so he couldn’t breathe through it … which meant that he, Charles, had …

“Not so pleasant, being strangled. Is it?” He made his voice cold. “Do I need to demonstrate again?”

The man’s eyes flew back to Charles’, wild; he lunged and shoved, struggling like an animal in a trap. Charles batted the blows away easily with his bare right hand; kept him pinned with his weight, leaning into his grip on that wrist. It was strange … As he gazed down at him, feeling the hot thrum
of desire thick and heavy in his own blood, Charles felt the same rage from their duel trickling back into him … but darkening, somehow.

He, Charles, had intended that kiss. And that kiss had been wrong. And anything else would be wrong.

*Especially if you intend it to be so.*

He hesitated. The raven really was making a good deal of noise; he didn’t know why.

*This is his mind, after all … If you keep behaving in this way – it’s not you. It’s him. It’s his influence; it’s his mind; it’s his fault. He deserves this.*

“Well …” he whispered. The man’s eyes flew back to his face, from where they had been staring at Charles’ left hand; the gauntlet there. Charles spared a glance for their intertwined fingers, too – the silver armor was already leaving bruises. He looked back to the other’s face, and smiled – a deliberate baring of teeth. “So. Tell me: what’s in that bunker?”

No answer.

“I know you can understand me. So I’ll tell you right now – you’re going to tell me everything I want to know. I can do things to you that will make you beg to tell me. And no, nothing involving physical pain.” Charles grinned. “I think you have that angle sewn up. No … another sort of … pressure.” He moved his hips, just so – the man’s eyes shot down, then back up – Charles saw their whites flash, panicked.

“Shh …” He leaned forward, feeling his smile slip away. “Don’t be afraid. It doesn’t have to hurt. Just be still. Here …”

And he brushed another kiss over the man’s mouth. Slow, lingering and warm – and not nearly as forceful as before. Giving him plenty of space to breathe.

He drew back. The man was still staring. And if he had been fearful before … now he looked absolutely petrified.

“Here …” Charles kissed him again, trailing the fingers of his right hand over cheekbone, jaw. This time he tried a flick of tongue over those lips, slightly parted as they were –

The man jerked back again, the back of his head hitting the ground so hard that it raised a puff of chalky dust.

“Well, now. This won’t do.” Charles released his grip on wrist and jaw, leaned back and considered. Then he got to his feet. It was odd – in reality, his knees would have twinged, he knew – but in the man’s mind he felt strong. He put the gauntlet back on his right hand – far easier the second time dealing with all the catches. Charles watched out of the corner of his eye as the man cautiously sat, muscles tense – he felt giddy with the adrenaline and desire flooding him – and he knew he was quick enough to reach out and snap his left hand around the man’s biceps as he sprang up to run –

“No.” He yanked on the man’s arm; retrieved sword and shield with his right hand. “Come on. Move.”

A silent stare. The green eyes were very wide, but not glittering any more. Instead, they looked almost murky against the dead white of that face.

“I said move. To the keep. Now.” Charles raised one eyebrow. “Unless you want to tell me what’s in
that bunker?"

Silence. Charles tightened his hand, pulled, and the man took one stumbling step. Then another.

It was strange, to see him graceless. Charles thought back, dreamily, to the number of times he himself had been wrested round and thrown, tackled and mauled by the monster from the shadows – whether in dreams or awake. And now the tables were turned.

Charles couldn’t help throwing a glance over his shoulder as they walked into the keep. The bunker gleamed steel at him, ominous. He had lost sight of his raven, he realized with a twinge. But: there … it was perched on top of a crenelation, high up above the bailey. Watching him.

“Stay there,” he called. “Stand guard. And if it opens –” he threw a sharp smile at the man, “when it opens … come and fetch me.”

He turned his back, ignored the raven’s screech, and walked with the man into the dust-clogged darkness of the keep. Charles watched out of the corner of his eyes, narrowly, as the other lifted his chin. The banners and tapestries stirred –

– and Charles dug in his armored fingers; felt the man try to tug away. “Don’t try anything,” he said, softly.

He swallowed against his own nausea as they passed the silver unicorn tapestry. He deserves all of this. The man’s footsteps hesitated, then began to drag as they got closer and closer to the Imperial staircase. “Now,” Charles murmured to himself, “if I know minds – and where people put the thoughts they find most deeply private … I believe that – if a mind were a castle, I would find them in a cellar. Or a dungeon.” He avoided the flights of stairs, kept walking straight, and: “Ah. Sure enough.”

Between the divided flights, supporting the landing where the stairs met before dividing again, there was a stone wall. There was only one thing hanging on it – a strange cloth. It was black and silver, threaded through with crimson. It glinted at him, ominous – and when he reached out a hand to touch it rippled as though it were alive. It was strangely heavy.

But Charles drew it aside anyway; hooking it onto a catch in the wall. He watched the man as he did so. Green eyes staring dead ahead, lean jaw gone tight. The profile marred by him biting down hard on his lower lip.

In an alcove behind the cloth there were three things. Charles eyed them curiously. Resting on the bottom of the alcove, there was a red bowl, filled with what looked like shards of glass. Hanging from the top of the alcove was … was that a mezuzah? It must have been: there was the letter ש. It looked to be of silver, though tarnished – its intricate filigree was blackened and stained. Perhaps from age, or from a fire …

And in a small stone outcrop, jutting out in the alcove’s center, there lay a single bloody coin.

Charles didn’t know what to make of it. He looked more closely at the coin – his stomach gave an unpleasant twist as he recognized the swastika. 5 Reichsmark. Hardly enough to be blood money …

Under the grip of his left hand, the man’s right biceps was drawn tight as a steel cable, flexing. Charles shook him lightly. “No. Now: show me the way inside.”

The man stared at him, eyes flat. Charles did not need to hear a voice – or use any power whatsoever – to read the: No.
Power …

He felt a sudden wave of dizziness – the raven was croaking, or his ears were ringing – and the man was watching him, teeth bared, like a wolf waiting for the first sign of weakness.

How long have I been down here? Charles’ mind reeled, but: “Do it now.” He threw the man away from him into the stone wall just to the right of the alcove. Hastily, he slung his shield over his back. Then he pointed the silver sword at the man’s throat. “Open.”

The energy and fury, everything drained from the man’s face. Charles shivered. The other looked as blank and empty as his statue on the bastion. Emptiness, leaning forward, touching the mezuzah with long fingers. Then the man kissed those fingers, closing his eyes … and a hidden door swung open. Skin prickling, Charles gestured with the sword – and he followed the man inside.

This is wrong.

Charles gritted his teeth against the thought stabbing at the base of his skull. This is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong – but: “He deserves it,” he whispered, hoarsely.

It was hot, down in the depths of the keep – a wet heat, though. Probably due to what lay at the end of another stairway, one that began a few yards in front of him, on the other side of a roughly hewn stone entrance. The stairway was steep, and looked to be carved out of the same stone.

And it ended in what looked like a pool of blood.

Charles fought to keep from screaming. He had been here too long – pain was thumping at his temples. The lust and anger that had carried him this far was wearing off. He was trying for breath, and couldn’t seem to find it. The air was too hot; hot and wet …

The pool of blood lay directly ahead. He walked closer; stared from the top of the steps. The pool stretched far into the distance; he could not see its end before it vanished into darkness. It was a narrow rectangle. Charles squeezed his eyes shut - it looked familiar, there was something about it that pulled at his memory, hard … Reflecting? Something to do with a reflection? But - no - the thought was gone.

At the very top of the steps was a square table. Topped with - marble? What material was it? Charles could not say. It did not matter, though … since all of his attention was riveted to the crown that rested there.

An iron crown.

It looked heavy. It was only a thick band … simple enough, if roughly made and dark - with several jagged collets spiking up from it. The collets were roughly the same size. Except …

Except for the one which was slightly larger. It was the Ouroboros, wrought from iron thorns that spiked inward. Charles peered at the crown, biting his lip … The large collet looked as though it were intended for a round jewel, or a piece of metal … those thorns could hold another piece of metal … if that metal were a circle …

… that coin …

His headache was getting worse. It was so damp and hot, and the smell of blood was everywhere … and there was pressure: the darkness of the man’s mind, closing in on him like a vise.
Charles backed away from the pool and the stairs; the table and the crown. He looked away from the center stone frame, examining the wall curving on both sides and round his back. There was a splintery wooden door to his right. It had a scrape above it, marking where the mezuzah had obviously been torn away.

Charles touched the door. A horrible cascade of images – pain fear blood sorrow – a gaunt woman, eyes both kind and despairing, alles ist gut, mein Schatz, alles ist – and the crack of a gunshot – and he recoiled with a cry.

The man hadn’t moved. He was staring through the open stone frame in the center of the circular wall. Through it, into the distance: staring at the pool of blood.

Charles swallowed thickly. “Right. I mean, not the door on the right, no. This one.” All of his intuition, instinct, led him to the door on the left – made of ebony, with sleek and understated lines. He touched it – and there was nothing but a feeling of … “Oh God.” He choked back a horrified laugh, feeling his mouth flood and his chest tighten. “This is it.”

He strode to the man, ignoring the thrum in his own mind – this is wrong - grabbed his arm and dragged him over to the door. Threw it open. “Well,” and he felt a grin split his face; hot and vicious against wrong wrong wrong – “I knew you had it in you.”

Charles tossed shield and sword in one corner of the room, feeling a strange heat pulse at his temples, a heavy warmth pool in his gut. He swallowed hard. “No sex for a month and a half – and see what your reaction is, to a cheap imitation of a bordello? Oh, for the Rose in Bloom.”

The entire room was dominated by an opulent bed in the center, draped in silk and velvet. Charles could hardly see the color of the luxurious materials – he glanced up. And up. The only source of light for the entire room was a far distant window. And heaps and heaps of candles, their wax dripping down their crystal holders and pooling on the floor.

He stared into the fragments of mirror after mirror, lining the walls – glass shards still caught in their heavy gold frames. Someone had shattered all of them. In one of the largest fragments, Charles caught a glimpse of two people writhing on the bed – he choked back a gasp of surprise. Frost and … the man he had seen as the other statue. The man he didn’t know, smiling out at the destruction beyond the castle’s walls.

“So. They came to this room, wherever it existed in reality, to fuck. And you – did you see them, at one point? Perhaps from behind a mirror? Perhaps you were a child,” he mocked, “and traumatized. How very sordid.” Charles’ head throbbed. He turned just in time to catch the man clawing for the door handle – “I told you,” Charles snarled, “you’re going to tell me everything. Who is that man?”

He pointed at Frost and the stranger, twisting together on the bed, in the mirror fragment.

No answer.

“Fine. What is in that bunker?”

The man’s eyes looked desperate. A distant part of Charles told him: this is wrong – and then told him that he had gone too deep. That he was too deep in the man’s mind, and there would be no escape if he –

Charles put an armored hand in the middle of the man’s chest; shoved. The men stumbled back onto the bed. With a growl, Charles followed him, pouncing and pinning him. Then he sat up into a straddle, staring down. The blood on the man’s face looked almost black, he was so pale; wild-eyed and starting to struggle. An arm flew free before Charles caught it again; the same with a leg,
bunching the silks and sending something to the floor with a metallic clatter.

For a split second, he wondered what it was.

But then the man shoved up again, almost crazed, desperate to get away. So Charles jabbed the other's shin with a sabaton toecap and pushed forward viciously. Resistance, but then the sharp point must have cut deep, because the slide was easy -

The man's head jerked back. He kept struggling; writhing. The rustle of the bedclothes was very loud.

Charles kissed his neck; licked up to his jaw and sucked at the dried blood on his chin. Kissed the man, bit his lips and his tongue and used all of the new found strength he had in dreams to keep him still; trapped and open to the kiss, open to everything that he poured into it – Charles’ own anger and want and guilt … guilt for breaking this far into a mind, guilt for wanting the sadistic bastard in the first place – and guilt for enjoying everything that he, Charles, was doing to him.

Every last thing. Pressing him down, having him, tormenting him – Charles caught a glimpse of his own eyes in a mirror fragment: wide and dark with lust. For one wild moment, he felt that he could enjoy this – every last thing – forever.

Charles might never have found his way back out, were it not for his raven.

A distant cry had made him draw his head back from the man’s chest, where he was biting and sucking bruises into the skin. That shirt had been the first to go, and Charles had had no compunction about digging his armored fingers into the wound on the man’s ribs – feeling something spasm, there: now you know how it feels, you bastard –

“You like this?” he had panted, watching goosebumps race over the man’s arms. Perhaps from how Charles’ hot breath felt against the slick of saliva he had left as he worked his way down … “You must like this. Or you’d tell me what’s in the bunker and I would stop.”

But it was strange - the man had gone still. Charles looked up: and saw that the man had brought a hand to his mouth. He was biting down on it, eyes squeezed shut.

And … was that …

For a moment, he wasn’t sure he saw it. The candlelight had been steadily dimming for some time. But …

Charles felt his jaw sag. There were tears tracking down the man’s face. Leaving rust-colored traces from where they ran over dried blood, as they wended their way down, down …

This. Is. Wrong.

The shout from his mind left him dazed, ears ringing – no … it was his raven. Calling out for him.

And Charles realized:

He had thought the raven was guarding the bunker; but: no. It had refused to come with him, deeper into the man’s mind. It had flown instinctively to the highest part of the castle, to where the air was clean. To the shoulder of the statue that looked so empty … and sad. Charles had not wanted to admit that the man could possibly look sad. That would mean that he would have to admit that what he was doing … everything he, Charles, was doing …
Everything that he had been doing … was wrong.

Charles let his head fall onto the man’s chest. “Oh God …” he slurred.

Suddenly, he wondered if he himself would weep. “I’m too far. I went too far in – I can’t –” he gasped and started to hyperventilate, “I won’t be able to get out …”

The ornate room with its shattered mirror walls rippled – was it starting to constrict? The raven’s cry was desperate.

“I’m here!” Charles shouted, voice hoarse. He backed away from the bed; grabbed his shield and sword from the corner of the room. He stared at the man, lying there – still halfway dressed, yes, but bruised and bloodied and wrecked, staring up at nothing.

“Help me,” Charles whispered, staring. He felt tears catch in his throat. “Get me out of here. Get me out, let me out let me out – I don’t want to be here anymore –”

The mirrors rippled again – the shards melting together and reforming; fuck, was that Frost, staring from them, smiling? “God,” he choked, and then screamed: “Help! Get me out!”

There was a hoarse crack from above – Charles looked up and gasped at the raven flying down to him, fast as light from the distant window.

Charles felt a distant thrumming, growing louder and louder – he didn’t have to see in order to hear and to smell, to know that there was blood from that pool trickling in under the door. The raven catapulted into his shoulder, crying out. He held tightly to it: “The whole place,” he gasped, “it’s wrong, we have to get out – but how?”

The raven fixed him with its glittering black eyes.

“Oh,” Charles croaked. He tried a smile. “If an owl can do it, you can do it? Is that it?”

It made no reply except to spread its wings. Charles didn’t expect it to … And he put aside all expectation, all thoughts of how he would look stupid, doing this – the raven squawked encouragement and he took a deep breath, and said: “We’re going now.”

And he held out his arms – like Jean. Like his raven, spreading its wings. And like them both, he flew away, as around him in the depths of the man’s mind all the candles went out.

Charles gasped and opened his eyes.

He was, oddly … warm. Even though he was lying in the ashes of the fireplace, in the library, and he should have been cold.

“The library,” he croaked. “I made it back.”

He tried to move his head – a headache instantly flared into being and he winced. Then he tried to move his hands. The right one was perfectly fine; the left –

He groaned. The left had that ring on it, and the ring was affixed to the fire grate. And only the man could detach them …

The man, who lay draped across Charles, like a blanket. A … warm blanket.

“Oh,” He heard his own voice, faint. “Oh, dear.”
Cautiously, he stretched out a tendril of thought into the man’s mind – just brushing it. *Don’t go back in; don’t get caught* don’t get caught …

The man’s thoughts, half asleep and without any sense of the rage and *want* of the metal blur … were ordered, strangely enough, in repeating patterns on the surface. Almost like a blueprint, if a blueprint could be silver or steel. Charles caught a hint at enough turmoil beneath, though, to make him wince.

“Upbraid yourself later,” he said. “Get out of here now.”

Tiredly, feeling as though his head would burst, he painted a simple silver-gilt command on a ribbon. *Wake up.*

He sent it to the man.

And watched, shivering, as those green eyes blinked open.

Charles felt a deep sense of unreality. That face … he had last seen it broken and covered in blood; blood and – his mind flinched away from – *tears* – And here the man was, looking as he ever had. Much like the statue now … though not empty. There was a sense of warmth about the eyes. Perhaps it was the way they were lined beneath; maybe it was the smallest hint of crow’s feet.

Yes, he was older than the statue. And there was that scar …

Charles sent him another ribbon. *Hold still for a moment.*

Then he leaned up, and pressed his lips against the scar. A kiss - a gentle one. Careful. The man’s skin was so warm … not like the statue at all. And he hadn’t shaved that day – Charles drew in a shuddering breath – not like he had, in the kitchen, out of a bowl of hot water and with soap … Charles moved his mouth. He could kiss him deeper here, in reality, and it would be –

He drew back. The man was looking at him; if a description could be made of his expression, it might be: mildly curious. Or: warm.

Charles closed his eyes on the guilt, stabbing into his gut. If he kissed the man now, the way he had in the other’s mind, it would still be a lie. *Wrong*, he thought. *This is wrong.*

Suddenly he felt nothing other than fatigue. He lay his head back down. Sent a thought. *You don’t have to hold still anymore.*

Nothing really changed. The man blinked a few times. He looked tired as well. Then – and Charles shivered as he did so – the man lay his head back down. He rested one side of his face on Charles’ sternum. Charles could feel that hair tickle beneath his chin, lightly –

He exhaled, feeling his stomach twist. “This – I can’t.” It was so warm, and if he didn’t break away now he never would.

“I’m done here. Done with this.” He sent a command, bright gold on the ribbon. *Separate my ring from the fire grate.*

The man did.

Bringing his hand back down, Charles flexed his wrist, groaning. Then he had a flash of inspiration, and: *Yes*, he thought to himself, fiercely. “Do it …”
He held out his left hand. *Take this ring off.*

Leaning up and away from Charles’ body, the man obeyed, blinking sleepily. The metal uncoiled from around his thumb with a twinge – but, once free of it, the abused flesh almost breathed a sigh of relief.

The man held the ring in the palm of his hand. Then he slipped it on his own left thumb.

“What – *no* - get rid of it, destroy it –” It would give the whole deception away, its presence there. Charles sent a panicked ribbon, twisting and knotting in on itself: *destroy that ring!*

A dim, sleep-fuzzed reply. *No. And: mine.*

The man sighed out – a gust of heat on Charles’ face – and … Charles froze, as the other nuzzled into the crook of his neck, sighed again, and gave every indication of settling down to sleep.

“Fine, then.” Charles sent – *forget about how you got that ring; everything to do with it* – wafting it into the man’s mind. “How can I do this?” he muttered. “How? I’m not going back in there …”

So Charles called up his raven – feeling, despite his fierce headache, a burst of happiness to see the black silhouette of its wings. He gave it the ribbon, and had it tie *forget about the ring* around a tree in the metal forest. A small tree. One close to the edges.

The man huffed out another breath, and tightened his grip on Charles.

He really was very warm. And his face looked … peaceful.

"Until he wakes up," Charles said to his raven, shivering, "and realizes what I've done."

Unless, of course, something else could be done. Charles stared down at the head on his shoulder, feeling bleak. *Peace.*

“I can give you peace. Or … I can try.”

With one last flicker of power, he painted silver words on a gossamer thin banner. *Forget about this night. Forget about everything that I did to you this night. Forget that I was ever in your mind this night. … Forget. Forget. Forget.*

He paused, and added one last command. *And sleep now. A good sleep. With a good dream.*

Then he gave the banner to the raven. The raven flew above the silvery woods; released the banner and let it expand to cover a vast swathe of ground, of memory. Given a good sleep, it would unfurl itself to fill the man’s entire mind, and Charles would be safe.

“And you’ll be safe, Jean.” He spoke to her dirty soles. “I’m going to talk to Frost tomorrow.”

He had promised Jean, after all. There would be another day, to slip under the man’s defenses and give him the order: *set me free. Set us all free.* And now he was so tired … so tired that he could almost sleep here, draped in the man’s warmth.

The raven was warm too, as it wafted back to Charles' mind and faded away.

Charles carefully got out from under the man; turned him over, laid his arms down at his sides. Left him dreaming there, on the hearthstones. And took Jean back to her room, and went back to his own … to prepare for the next day, to sleep if he possibly could.
It turned out that he couldn't sleep. Nor could Charles forget. All he could do was stare into the ashes of his own fire until morning came.
Epilogue - I

Chapter Notes

Aaaaand how many of you were expecting the dub!con to go, erm ... THAT WAY? :P

This is the epilogue to Part 1. Thanks for reading!

Charles knew he was brave. He knew he had courage; dedication and – dare he say it – valor. Angel had made him a knight; Jean had given him a shield and a name. His actions in the man’s mind - newfound sword notwithstanding - had tarnished that armor … but Charles knew he was brave. One had to be, in this world, to face down death, and pain, and fear.

Of course, that was when he thought he knew fear.

It took only just under thirty hours, from the moment of his leaving the man on the library hearth to sleep, to realize that: no - he had never really known it. Not in truth.

At least, not before the night of the sixth of October, and the morning of the seventh.

Charles did not eat anything the morning after his escape from the man’s mind. He stared into his mug of tea, instead, thinking.

Mr. Xavier? Jean projected, eyes wide. She sent an image. Charles, his face ashen, looking down into his tea. Are you sick?

“No, dear.” He took a long swallow. “I’m not sick. I’m just thinking.”

I fixed the locks this morning.

“Yes, I saw.” Charles gave her a smile. “Very good work. I’m glad that Alex won’t get into trouble.”

Me too. She crammed a piece of bread into her mouth.

When Alex came into the room, Charles stood to accompany him and Jean out the door. He followed them to the base of the stairs. Then up the stairs.

“Um, Mr. Xavier?” The boy looked confused. “McCoy’s workroom is that way.”

“I need you to take me to Lady Frost, Alex,” he replied, calmly. “I must speak with her.”

Charles did not put any power into his voice. All he did was repeat his words, over and over, until Alex was persuaded to get another blindfold and take him through with Jean. In a way, Charles was glad for the blindfold. However foolish he thought it, the cloth shielded him from the disbelieving hope in Jean’s eyes – and a love for him, shining from her face, that he did not think he deserved.

“So you see,” Charles finished, “Jean is too young. Her mind is malleable – a positive, yes – but too much trauma now could damage her irreparably.”
“And so you take it upon yourself to suffer in her place?” Frost’s tone was mocking, delicate, diamond sharp.

Charles breathed out, carefully, and met her eyes. “I only point out, madam, that you have two of us, now; where before you only had one. Even splitting the burden would take some of the stress from Jean’s mind.”

She’s only a child, he thought fiercely; forgot to veil, such was his fatigue, and saw Frost give a moue of distaste.

“Such sentiment, Mr. Xavier. As you have gathered by now, the EBS makes demands on all of its people. Children are not excluded.”

He felt every bit of his weariness, bone-deep. “I know this. I just … Lady Frost,” he said, voice low, and saw her eyes gleam with vindictive pleasure. “She’s a child, and as such - her brain is still growing, and developing, and any damage you do - any damage done now might not be able to be undone, later.”

“Hm.” Frost toyed with the letter opener lying on her desk.

Glass, Charles thought. Or crystal, but that would be prohibitively expensive. He hardly registered the other elegant and beautiful objects in her office. They were walled off by opaque glass from an immense and lively workroom – one thrumming with energy, electricity, activity. Mutants he didn’t know had fallen silent as he had walked through, holding Jean’s hand. Jean had waved at some of them.

So many new faces; so many machines and things to learn … but Charles’ mind refused to catalogue. He felt too tired.

“This issue, Mr. Xavier, is that you are, to be frank, singularly untrustworthy. Why should I give any of this work to you?”

“Because, Lady Frost: if you do, I will prove myself trustworthy. If it means that Jean will be kept alive for a few more years.”

Unexpectedly, Frost looked pensive. “You think the situation that serious? Really, she has an MRI every month, and nothing has been discovered that –”

"I have worked with children for over fifteen years. I know what accumulated stress, sleep deprivation, and mental trauma can do to one of them. Even if she doesn’t have an aneurysm, she’ll fade away from lack of nourishment. Or,” seeing Frost about to retort, Charles played his trump card, “knowing Jean, and knowing Jean’s power – she is perfectly able to will herself to go to sleep one night, and never wake up.”

There was a long silence.

When Frost spoke again, her voice was soft.

“Well. When you put it that way, Mr. Xavier … I suppose you may have a point.” Her eyes stared at him, cold. “We shall use you in the Finder today, and see how you fare. If all goes well, we shall repeat the process tomorrow.”

She smiled. “And in between, we shall discuss my definition of ‘trustworthy.’”
The Finder, Charles decided later that evening, was … unique. It would have been exhilarating, had it not been so painful. As it was, two mutants he didn’t know had to help him undo the straps and buckles before he could wobble up off the plastic incline. A third mutant - feathers, how strange - brought water to sluice the plastic clean. In another life, Charles reflected distantly, he might have felt humiliated. Now, he didn’t care.

“We’ll have another made, molded to you.” Frost’s eyes had glittered. “I commend you on your excellent idea, Mr. Xavier. And we shall see how we might best occupy Jean in her new schedule.

“Now.” Another smile. “Go wash yourself, change your clothes, and eat. Christopher will show you the showers.” She gave the mutant with water a brisk nod; he nodded back.

Charles didn’t have to talk to this feathered Christopher person, which was just as well. He was deposited in a shower stall, given a change of clothes, and left alone.

He had finished showering and was sitting on a bench, staring, when – “Hey X man …” came in a whisper.

“Logan –” he looked up, tried a smile. “How are you?”

“Well, pretty damn good, since we ourselves got a brand new nuke and nobody got killed … but, really? About a hundred times better than you, I bet.” Logan was staring. “Seriously, Xavier: the Finder? What the fuck?”

“For Jean,” Charles said. He closed his eyes. “I did it for Jean.”

“… Right.”

Silence, then Logan cleared his throat. “You’re a good man. You know that, X?”

Charles blinked up at him tiredly. Logan’s face looked drawn in fierce lines: lines of sadness … but also pride. And when he spoke, his voice was gruff.

“You ever need me to do something for you: you tell me. All right?”

“All right.”

Logan shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Water from his shower dripped onto his broad shoulders. “And I’m not just saying that cause you almost drank me under the table last night.

"And speaking of which, Xavier – a bit lame to ask you for a favor just after offering to do you one, but … You know you mentioned … fiddling with our minds? About last night? Well, could McCoy and I – uh, have that done, I guess?” He gave a tight smile. “Frost hasn’t checked yet – she had something else mental to fix, a big job … but she’ll check tomorrow.”

Charles hadn’t the foggiest idea what he was going to do, but: Jean, he remembered. Jean had given Angel a token, the night they had restored her quince. He would ask her to give one each to Logan and McCoy.

“Stop by tonight, quickly. Dinner hour. Before we go to bed. We’ll take care of it then.”

The mutant with the water – Charles had already forgotten his name – came to collect him then. And Charles could only walk slowly away.

Dinner was soup. It tasted oddly metallic - though that didn't matter. Charles had no appetite.
Jean had watched him with hero-worship in her eyes all evening. She had tried to apologize for the library incursion; he had smiled, and told her to think nothing of it. More true than she knew—the last thing he wanted to do was think anything of it.

When Charles asked her for two tokens, for Logan and McCoy, she beamed, and invited him into her mind. And there, in the shade of the immense tree, she showed them to him. Charles held up the delicate stones—two separate ones, each on its separate golden chain—and admired the way they gleamed with fire.

*You put it around your neck, in your mind. You say a word you decide on earlier—a special one. And the memory will stay in your mind for only you, until you say the word again.*

“What if you say it accidentally?” he asked.

Well, she huffed, *that’s why it has to be a very special word.*

“Right.” Charles smiled at the glimmering pendants. Then he made his voice casual. “Can you make these, Jean, for someone who mustn’t know that his or her memory has been erased? Do you think that’s possible?”

Jean’s eyes had gone solemn. *I’ve never done that, Mr. Xavier.*

No, Charles thought to himself with a sour twist of shame. No. Of course she hadn’t.

Logan and McCoy came inside the kitchen, ostensibly to drop off the grille for inside the stove, taken out for cleaning when the apples had proven difficult to scrape off. Charles sent his owl winging into each of their minds with the pendant and instructions; Logan gave him a grin and a thumbs-up; McCoy, a squeeze on the shoulder, and: “I hope we can still work together some, Mr. Xavier. I’ll miss you.”

In the silence after the men had left, Jean offered: *I think he really will miss you, Mr. Xavier.*

“Yes,” Charles said, emptily. “And I’ll miss him, too.”

Jean bit her lip, looking woebegone. Then she sent him an image: herself, holding out the pendant, framed with *I can teach you how to make them*—

“Tomorrow, perhaps. All right?” Charles swayed to his feet; smiled down at her with an effort. “Right now I need to sleep.”

He wove his way down the hall, to his room.

And froze as he opened the door, and saw Frost, Alex, and Angel standing there.

“Well,” he started. “Good evening.”

“Good evening, Mr. Xavier.” Frost smiled at him—he shivered. Charles saw that Angel had been crying; her eyes were red. Alex looked an odd cross between mutinous and ill.

“Mr. Xavier, I had mentioned, earlier today, that we would be discussing trustworthiness this evening. Since you are an academic, and undoubtedly given to teasing out new levels of meaning in any number of words, I thought to make my definition of ‘trustworthy’ absolutely ... concrete. So there can be no misunderstandings between us.”
She stepped to one side.

And Charles saw, attached to an iron ring newly set in the wall by his bed …

… a chain and shackle.

He breathed in. And out. *Focus. Just breathe.*

“What is this, exactly? I – I don’t understand.”

“I find that hard to believe. This is all there is to understand: you are going to be chained in this room, every night, so you do not wander any more, whether in your sleep or wide awake. So. Feel free to brush your teeth. Ms. Salvadore, you are dismissed. Mr. Summers – build a fire for him, and leave. Mr. Xavier and I have one more item to discuss.”

Charles knew he had to be in shock. He should have been screaming, shouting and fighting the humiliation of being *chained* in his own bed – “Chained,” he whispered to himself in the mirror, “in my bed? That’s – that’s absolutely inhumane. Not to mention: *ridiculous.*”

“I heard that,” Frost’s voice rang out, crystal clear.

The door had closed after Angel and Alex, so Charles knew he would be alone with her. But he was not afraid. Head held high, he strode out of the bathroom and walked over to his bed. Sat. “Just get it over with,” he gritted out.

“Of course.”

Charles looked around the room, to take his mind off the sensation of the shackle closing around his ankle, the click of the lock. Alex had built him a roaring fire. His room was in perfect order; excellent, since he hated visitors seeing a mess. Frost tugged at the chain to test it; it clanked, far too loudly.

The metal was ice cold around his ankle.

“There.”

Charles didn’t look at it. Refused to look at it. Instead, he gazed up at Frost. “If that is all, perhaps I might be able to sleep?”

“I certainly hope so, Mr. Xavier. For, you see … I have one more item to explain to you.”

Frost slowly paced to the hearth. Backlit by the fire, her silhouette seemed a void, even in the dark room.

“Namely: that my definition of ‘trustworthy’ also encompasses knowing what *you*, as a budding telepath, get up to in other people’s minds.”

Charles’ heart went still.

“Quite some time ago, now, you excised part of young Alex Summers’ memory. Quite well done, if I may say. But you did not know how to cover your tracks well.” She paused. “I let that excision remain – it being sixty seconds at most. But …”

A long pause.

“But, Mr. Xavier … imagine my surprise when, this morning, my very dearest colleague – one who
has always been like a son to me – walked into my presence trailing … banners, of all things. Flags. Giant signs, to another telepath – at least, to one of my ability. All reading: *Forget. Forget* …"

Her voice slithered out of the darkness.

“… *Forget.*”

Charles did not say a word.

He was conscious, of all things, of a chunk of toothpaste left in one molar. He probed at it. It dissolved into a burst of mint.

Then he swallowed hard, and started to speak –

Frost cut him off. “Understand this: I do not know what you did to him or why; nor do I care, precisely. My prince is an adult and well able to handle himself. Indeed, as soon as I had reversed your little commands, he paid the front a visit – and I am told that he handled three entire platoons of Free West soldiers. Alone.” He heard the smile in her voice. “The darling boy has such a temper.”

Charles’ tongue felt too big for his mouth. He swallowed around it; said the first thing that came into his mind: “How many soldiers are in a platoon?”

“I’m sure I do not know, Mr. Xavier – military specifics are beneath me. No, my point is … I do not know what you did. But he does, now. He remembers everything. He knows.”

She walked to the door.

“And I want you to know that he knows.”

A pause. “And, of course, to sleep well. Good night, Mr. Xavier.”

The door closed behind her. The lock clicked, the bolt slid home.

And Charles, there in his room, chained to the wall, realized: he had not known fear, before. Ever.

Thus, it was a surprise when he woke up alive the next morning. Alive and unharmed. “The surprise of my life.”

His mind added – but timidly, and only after a long moment – *so to speak.*

It wasn’t a surprise that he had slept. Charles had thought, at first, that sheer terror would keep him awake all night … but the Finder had drained his mind so completely that all he could do, eventually, was fall into a deep and exhausted slumber – even with the new weight chafing on his ankle. He hadn’t heard a single sound to wake him.

Angel came in and practically ripped the shackle away, cursing in Spanish. Her fierce imprecations on his behalf accompanied him downstairs; he joined Jean at the kitchen table.

Jean, he noticed with a start, looked pale.

“How is the matter?” He knew his voice was sharp; he didn’t care. “Do you feel sick again?”

She shook her head; gave him a curl of a smile. Sent him a picture: herself, yawning over her cup of
tea, framed with: tired …

“Oh, I see.” Charles stared at the table. A distant part of his mind felt relief.

Jean gave him a cup; projected the image of himself, weary from the Finder, drinking the tea down – and her giving him another cup. She had made the frame as golden and rich as she could; a statement: LOVE.

“Thank you, Jean.” He took a sip of the hot drink. “Now, why on earth are you tired? Did you have trouble sleeping?”

Those grey eyes fixed on his, and Jean nodded. Then she sent him another image.

Charles almost choked.

The image was … as seen through Jean’s door, only just cracked open a fraction of an inch:

A lean, dark shadow; standing rigid in place. Standing right outside Charles’ door – his door – my door, he realized, mouth going absolutely dry, despite the tea.

A shadowed hand, reaching for the door handle. For the lock. Then … pulling back?

And then … the shadow exploding into motion – slamming its hands against the wood and clawing; looking as though it wanted to do nothing more than smash the door to smithereens and burn it in a fire.

An undercurrent in Jean’s memory: the sound of snarls, ferocious and bestial – and the wham of a fist against wood, slamming again and again and again –

Jean looked at him intently. She framed the image with a question:

Love?

Charles closed his eyes. Opened them; looked back at her. And managed to say:

“Not really, dear.”

He managed a smile. ”Now: eat your breakfast before it gets cold.”

Even though he himself felt cold. Frozen. Frozen in fear – his blood turned to ice in his veins.

End of Part I
This is a fill from the X-Men: First Class kink!meme. For the prompt, & as this is being posted at lj, please see the following:

http://1stclass-kink.livejournal.com/4418.html?thread=5247042#t5247042

**For:** aleapandfly  
**Re:** Dark!Beauty and the Beast AU/themes, dubcon.  
**NB:** Let me reiterate all of the warnings.  
**WARNING,** for: dark!fic, post-apocalyptic AU, captivity, bad language, drinking/smoking, intimations of child abuse, **graphic** depictions of violence (torture, terrorism, warfare), dubcon.

Dark and cold; cold and dark. Everywhere, fires had gone out, burnt into cold ashes. *Breathe.* In and out; out and in. Charles breathed. He needed to get home – he needed to tell Raven something; something important …

“Raven …” He heard an echo: it sounded like his own voice. “Raven – where are you?”

*Come home, come home. Raven, Raven fly away home …*

And there she was … her arms raised, as though she were lecturing her students. Speaking to them, teaching them: a bright flicker of gold in the class hallway … standing still and patient and … not running?

Charles frowned. She should be running; laughing. Golden hair should be streaming out behind her as she ran toward him.

Except now, she looked up from her students and stared at him. Directly into his eyes.

It was so dark. He couldn’t see her anywhere. Except: there she was, staring at him. Golden hair, bright against the darkness.

*Wake up, Charles.*

“What?” he croaked. “Raven – where are you? I can hardly see you …”

Somehow, she was so far away. A golden spark on the fringe of a unfurled banner of nothingness: old night unrolled into the corners of the world.

*Wake up, Charles.*

“I’m tired.” And he was – he didn’t understand. He couldn’t see her face, but he knew she was staring. “I don’t want to wake up, Raven.” His own voice, Charles knew, sounded exhausted. “I’m tired.”

*Charles. Count.*
His golden sister stretched out her hands. Something black flickered against her brightness – a speck, that turned into a dot and expanded; a thread, that thickened and unfolded into a twist of black cloth … that unfurled tiny wings and began flying toward him.


*How many, Charles?*

“How many?”

“Just one.”

*Count.*

“I told you. Just one.” He blinked, slowly; the bird was flying with steady beats of its wings. Closer, now; he could see it clearly, even against the darkness of the carpet keeping Raven from him.

The raven was very ... large. Strange.

His sister’s light glimmered around the edges of its wings, dimming as the shadow bird grew even larger.

*Wake up, Charles.*


Silence. Then:

*Wake up, Charles.*

“Right.” He folded his arms across his body. “Right, I will – I just –” Charles tried to take a step – and realized that his feet were rooted in the ground. He couldn’t see, in the dark, to find out if they were real roots or not; in a dream, he was just as likely to turn into a tree as anything else. He looked back up.

The raven was huge, he realized, eyes widening – and flying silently. He couldn’t see Raven anymore. Charles focused on the bird again; watched its pitch-black feathers beat up and down - and its beak was so sharp and its eyes glittered and gleamed at him … hungry. It wasn’t his raven, he realized with a panic: it looked wrong. It had filled his entire field of vision. And it smelled wrong. It smelled like … dry rot. Like blood.

Like death.

*Wake up, Charles – the last flash of the golden spark – wake up wake up wake up –*

And Charles jerked upright in his bed, gasping.

It was cold in his room, as usual. October was pressing onward; the days were getting ever shorter and the nights freezing cold. He was tangled in his sheets, as usual – fully clothed under them all, and sweating. Everything smelled slightly unpleasant. He would have liked to wash his bedding somehow, but sheets hung in the bathroom during the day ending up marked with slivers of ice by evening.

Charles stretched out his power to the thought-fire set to burn in the hallway, as he had every night since …

He shuddered.
There was a shadow on the other side of his door.

Again.

As there had been almost every night since he first had the shackle put round his ankle.

It was funny, Charles thought distantly: how the mind could become accustomed to the most vivid and terrible fear, given enough repetition. The first night after Jean had relayed her memory to him, he had stayed awake as long as he could. He had set the thought-fire only when he had to sleep, and only after considering other options. A flock of birds, watching over him while he slept; an impenetrable tapestry, woven over the door in silver threads … or a fire set to burn, to wake him. So he would be aware, alert …

It had worked. He had jolted awake as soon as he had sensed the first slow slide of the shadow through the fire. Charles had sat up and stared at the door, heart pounding into his throat, as he sensed it – him, the man – leaning close, unfolding two strong hands against the wood, flexing his fingers …

The door handle had rattled, slightly. Charles had jumped, immediately ashamed of his own strangled whimper. Then the chain had clinked – and sounds from his own throat dried up in fear as he sensed the man’s power, slithering through the room like a brood of metal vipers. All that brutal animal awareness … focusing in on the shackle round his ankle … like a drill bit, a sharp corkscrew turning and turning …

“Go away,” Charles had whispered, low.

The shackle had grown warm. One pulse, two …

“No –” He gritted his teeth fiercely, and jammed one finger into the space between metal and flesh, behind the sharp bone of his ankle. “Go away!”

Any minute the shackle would tighten and the pain would start. His heart raced; his mouth tasted metallic – fear. So Charles had given in to the panicked flurry of instinct and sent his sparrow winging towards the door, towards the man’s mind, carrying a brilliant blue banner: go away go away as large as life –

In retrospect, Charles realized that he might have expected it. The first night he had been awake to sense the shadow, though, he hadn’t been thinking clearly.

And then all he had felt was the shock and pain of metal slicing, stabbing the bird. A whirl of shrapnel, like a deadly kaleidoscope of grey and black and silver, caught one wing and … Charles felt jagged flashes of pain rebound through his skull. He had seen a wood chipper, once, in Oxford – the town carpenter had one that ran on propane – and the way the wood disappeared into its maw with a crunch was very like this –

Very like. And the sparrow flew jerkily through the room, back to him … trailing blood and making faint chirps of pain. Charles felt his mind reach out and gather it close. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m sorry – I didn’t know …” That this would happen. That he would be prepared with – something … What was it?

The presence at the door had taken one step away. Then another. One flame of Charles’ thought-fire had licked, cautiously – shoes and dark slacks, and the lines of bone and tendon at his ankles – only touched long enough to receive a few sensations, before flickering down into embers; hiding …
There had been that want, again, of course: the seething tangle of desire-hunger-lust-prey … But there had also been a wild, dark surge of satisfaction.

“I’ll show you,’ hm? Something like that? ‘I have defenses ringed about my mind, and you only caught me off guard the once’ – fine. Do you feel better now?” Charles had spat at the door. “Then don’t come back.”

But the man had come back, the next night. And the next, and the next.

Charles hadn’t wanted to risk any more injury to his power; it had taken the better part of a dream to heal the sparrow. That hadn’t happened with the hummingbird, the only other time he had run into the perimeter defenses of the man’s mind … Realizing that, Charles had felt a twist of anxiety, one that had nothing to do with the lurking shadow. He didn’t know enough about how his power worked. He needed to know more.

So he would keep the thought-fire burning. He would open his eyes each time he felt the man stop in front of the door. Charles would wait, tense, until the shadow prowled away. Sometimes that would be all. Other times there would be scraping and the scritch of fingernails on wood; the clatter of the bolt; the cold sounds of the chain scraping, where its length pooled on the floor … like a snake making itself comfortable in its nest.

But sometimes the shadow would just … leave.

Charles didn’t understand. If the goal was to frighten him: “Congratulations,” he croaked into the chill of his room, the first time. If it was to make him lose sleep: “Good work,” he mumbled into the pressure of his hands on his eyes, a week later. But it happened again and again and again … so, he reflected, shivering, on the night of Saturday 18 October, if the goal was to drive him absolutely insane …

“It’s working.” His laugh was high-pitched and ragged in the darkness; he could only just see his breath puff white. “It’s bloody well working, you bastard. Now go away. Go away. I want you to leave.”

And the shadow left.

If only it all could be so easy. Charles squeezed his eyes shut. I want you to leave – a want expressed, and the monster left – with only one flicker of the fire to mark its passing.

And left without a sound – or. Well. Perhaps that slight noise that had made the fire flare had been … the scuff of a shoe, retreating. It could have been a whispered word, or a laugh.

Anything but a growl, Charles thought, desperately.

Because if it had been a growl, with a hungry edge … it had been quiet.

So quiet … that there was no chance it could wake Jean from sleep.
Even if Angel hadn’t demonstrated that she was now used to the sight of his chain – flourishing its key each morning with aplomb, wincing in sympathy at the scrape on his ankle turning into a callus – her happy smile that morning, as she ushered Charles downstairs, would have been … unseemly. Really, Charles thought, dull, trying to stoke his mind into full wakefulness. What could prompt such a mood, in such a place?

Small things, perhaps. Jean beaming at him, and a cup of tea on what they had established was his side of the kitchen table. Charles went to fetch dried fruit for them both, and bread. There was no more cheese – there hadn’t been for a week.

“Here, Jean.” He set a plate in front of her. “Eat up.”

Then Charles blinked at the image that glowed into his mind, like sunlight. Ororo, her white-shot black hair, her dark skin and eyes, smiling down at Jean – and the whole framed with: We get a present!

“A … present?” Charles knew he looked confused. “What are you talking about?”

As if called by his words, Angel came into the kitchen, carrying a cardboard box. “Ta-da! You are the lucky winners!”

That present! Jean’s thought hit his mind like a bag of cement; he winced, and she immediately looked contrite. Sorry, Mr. Xavier –

“Don’t worry. If I may ask, Angel –” Charles gestured at the box with his mug of tea. “What’s all this?”

“Well, Mr. Xavier: there’s good news and there’s better news. The good news is: Ororo’s been Sworn.”

“Beg pardon?”

“Oh, sorry – I forget that you don’t know. ‘Sworn’ is basically your promotion to ‘full responsibilities and privileges.’” Angel’s voice took on an oracular tone. “So Ororo’s not a student anymore. And when she gets back, she might replace me as a monitor – yeah, sweetheart, that’d be cool, wouldn’t it?”

Angel had turned to Jean as she set her slender hands to work opening the box. The ring on her right hand glinted; the bracelet on her left flashed. Charles hardly noticed them.

Sworn. Ororo, perhaps fifteen or sixteen years old, now a fully-fledged member of the Brotherhood. Charles corrected himself bleakly: the Eastern Brethren and Sistren. She was on the front, perhaps in Dallas … and even if she lived, they might not see her again …
The box was open; and Jean’s squeal of delight was so unexpected that Charles gave a start. “Why, Jean – I never heard you make a sound … before.”

No, his mind interjected – he had. The hair on the back of Charles’ neck prickled as the memory flickered into being. Jean had cried out in Angel’s mind, shouting Angel’s name … But he had not heard her speaking voice since.

Charles made a mental note to review the details of his visit to Angel’s mind – his thoughts shied away from his visit to – don’t think about it – and he told himself to consider Jean’s selective muteness as well. Then he turned to look at the box.

It contained a motley assortment of … things. Jean was lifting each out, her eyes wide and her small hands careful. She had placed a large book on the table already. Next to it was a stack of thick paper – colored pencils strung tight to it with string. Charles watched Jean lift from the box a smaller box, perhaps the size of a loaf of bread, decorated with an intricate design of criss-crossing wires.

I gave her that box, Mr. Xavier. Charles could feel the warmth from Jean’s thoughts.

Did you? he replied. It’s lovely.

Jean gave him a fern-curl smile. You’d better talk out loud, since Angel is here.

Very well, and: “Angel,” he sighed. “You said there was better news?”

“Oh yes.” Angel grinned at him. “When someone is Sworn, the other students keep his or her things. We don’t like to waste stuff – and you’re not supposed to carry anything with you, when you make your vows.”

“So …”

“So that means: unless you want me to throw it all out, you and Jean get to divvy this up!” She gestured at the cluttered tabletop. “Is that all, Jean?” She nodded; Angel continued, “Good. Then I’ll just leave you to it – back in ten.”

Charles hardly noticed her going, until he heard: “Oh, I almost forgot. Sworn are allowed to pass on words of wisdom, inspiration, blah blah blah – only the one time. So: feel lucky, Mr. Xavier, because …” She presented him a square of paper, with a flourish. “You have a message.”

He stared at Angel for a long moment. Then, shakily, he took the piece of paper. It was flimsy; there was what looked like typeface on one side. “Thank you.”

“No problem. I assume Ororo means it for Jean, too; baby can’t read yet, so maybe you can read it to her?” With a smile, Angel left.

Charles ignored the inner voice that reminded him – you’re not likely to forget that she can’t read, hm? – and unfolded the note with trembling hands. It was handwritten – the typeface, he realized, meant that they only had scrap paper left over. “Shall I read this aloud, Jean?”

Jean nodded eagerly. Charles cleared his throat, and began;

Dear Jean and Mr. Xavier,

All four of us are fine. No injuries but it is hard work here. Sorry so choppy but not a lot of paper. Jean: I LOVE YOU – stay strong. I think of you every hour, every day. You can make it. Listen to
Mr. Xavier; he will watch out for you.

Charles paused, in order to swallow past a lump in his throat.

Mr. X, he continued, please do that. I know I can trust you. Thank you for everything – I am glad you are with us.

“With us?” he breathed, half-choking. “And what have I done for you? Oh, Ororo –” because his mind was full of images of her fighting in battle; shot and killed; captured and tortured, and not even Raven’s age –

Jean sent him an image: himself, smiling down at them all, macchinetta in hand – framed by: you love us.

“Well.” He swiped his sleeve across his eyes. “To conclude.”

Both: help yourselves, but I would like Jean to have my wall hanging, & Mr. X: have my book. It helped me grow a backbone; it might help you too.

Love, (always always, Jean bean) - Ororo

“… Grow a backbone?”

Charles blinked hard. “What the hell – oh, sorry Jean.” Ridiculous, to feel put out by a teenager’s jibe; he had heard worse in school, but why would Ororo of all people – and in such a note, too …

Frowning, he hefted the book. Let Rain Come Down: the Life of Haile Zänäbä. An elegant portrait on the cover; a man dressed in pure white, with dark eyes, skin and hair, and a lion – how very understated, truly – reclining at his feet. “Well,” Charles said to himself. “Not unambitious, certainly.” The tome could serve as a doorstop, and – he flicked through it – it had hardly any pictures. It was written in what looked like dry, academic prose. “Really, Ororo, I wonder … ”

His ears caught a small crinkle. Charles’ eyes flew to the spine of the book –

– the spine –

“Oh, Ororo – backbone, spine,” he whispered, “of course.”

Was that a frayed edge to the binding? The last few pages of backmatter hanging somewhat more loosely than the rest of the book? Already his fingers were itching to take the volume apart; with an effort, Charles controlled the urge. Angel might return at any moment; it would not do to have her discover whatever was hidden there. Because he knew, Charles thought, feverishly. Surely something was hidden there. Ororo, hiding something this entire time … What could it be?

To distract himself from the prospect, he turned to look at Jean – turned and bit back a laugh. She had almost disappeared under a swathe of brightly colored fabric. “Is that the wall hanging she mentioned?”

He saw the fabric move in what must have been a vigorous nod. “Very well,” he continued, tone light. “This book is mine –” his fingers did not tremble as he moved it to his side of the table; he was perfectly self-controlled. “And that hanging is yours. Now – what else would you like?”

A distant part of him called to mind the image of a carrion bird, picking over a bejeweled corpse. He shook his head: nonsense. Ororo was alive, and surely she would be fine … And this was part and parcel of a fine human tradition: keeping belongings in the family. Family. Charles smiled wryly.
“Choose what you will, Jean. I’ll have whatever you don’t care for.”

Jean let the cloth drape her shoulders. Wide-eyed, she picked the paper and colored pencils. She sent the merest pulse of inquiry to Charles.

“It’s fun, isn’t it, when no words are necessary?” He smiled at her. “And yes: of course.”

She carefully set the paper and pencils to one side. Then she looked at Charles, then at the assortment still remaining, then back at him.

“He’s thoughts were thrumming with the book the book the book—the book the book—the book—‘I have what I want.’”

Jean shook her head, frowning; and Charles suddenly saw—he guffawed, despite himself. A pig, sitting at the table and wrapped in the bright wall hanging, surrounded by all of the gifts, and: it’s your turn.

“Oh, Jean—I don’t think you could be selfish if you tried. But, Miss Piglet,” he raised his eyebrows, “why don’t you pick one for me?”

She blinked, considering the items left. Then she smiled her small curl of a smile, and pushed the metal box toward him.

“Why, thank you.” Charles opened it—the lid fit perfectly. Inside were … “Oh dear.” Inside were several pots of makeup, and certain other toiletries. “Well, Jean—I’m probably not going to wear lipstick, but—” he caught sight of her trembling lower lip, “but, I’ll treasure this always.”

For: surely, Charles thought, surely there was something in there he could use. Lip balm, perhaps, or moisturizer—the cold, dry air left everything exposed feeling chapped. He closed the lid again, firmly. “And you gave this to Ororo? When was that?”

Last year. I asked for a pretty box for my Fourth Quarter Gift, and then I gave it to her. She had been talking about how her things were going everywhere when she would open the bathroom cupboard …

“How kind of you.” Charles returned her smile; he made a mental note to ask for something that could be re-gifted, come December. He ran his fingers over the braids and curlicues of wire twining round the box. “It’s quite finely done. I wonder where—”

An image, in his mind: the man—the man oh my god him—seated cross-legged and holding up a plain metal box—

Charles jerked his hands away from the metal, as if it burned.

—still in the image: those stark features unchanged except for one quirk of the mouth, a glint to the blue-green eyes—as the man extended both index fingers with a flourish … and as wires shot from somewhere to twist and coil around the box’s sides—

Charles’ bench had made a screeching sound as it skidded backward over the stone floor; it had almost drowned out Jean’s: It’s pretty, isn’t it?

For a long moment, he only heard his own breathing. Charles stared at the box as though it were a bear trap; he only just caught a glimpse of Jean’s brow puckering. Isn’t it, Mr. Xavier? Don’t you like it?
“Oh,” he croaked. Then he cleared his throat. “Oh, yes, it’s very pretty.”

It’s yours now.

“Oh, well, the thing is,” and he thought, desperately, “ah – the thing is, it’s far too pretty to be just for me. In fact …” and Charles emptied out the metal box as quickly as he could, “I’ll keep these lovelies, and we can keep this even lovelier lovely downstairs. Here. In the kitchen.”

Because one could not pay him any amount of money to have that thing in his room. He might as well sleep with his neck in a garrote. Staring at the decorations, Charles remembered metal twisting and coiling round his eyes – he shuddered.

That’s a good idea. Jean had brightened. Where in the kitchen?

“Um.” Charles cast around for something, anything, but then Jean scrambled over to the counter. She raised one hand; the jar containing teabags wobbled into it. She returned, and began to transfer teabags from jar to box. It’s just right for these!

And that way, Charles realized, gritting his teeth, he’d have to look at it every single bloody time he wanted a hot drink. All the more reason to make good on his ever-lurking thoughts: escape escape escape. Frost can be fooled. He can be evaded – defeated. And they can all be deceived. And Charles would be gone – gone home to Oxford, with coffee to drink, he thought to himself, caught between a laugh and a sob at his own pettiness. Coffee to drink, Raven to talk to – no.

He’d talk to Raven and Jean.

For, watching Jean press in the last teabag and try her best to shut the overflowing box, Charles came to a stark conclusion. If he were to escape, he’d have to make his plans for two. There was no way he would ever leave Jean here.

In the meantime, “It was a good letter of Ororo’s, wasn’t it?” He took the box from her, firmly – I’m not afraid – and shut the lid tight. “And I take her words to heart. So, Jean …”

And Charles gave her a stern look. “No powers in the kitchen.”

Except for talking, Jean sent, brightly.

“Well, yes.” He put the box in a dark corner of the counter. Out of sight; out of mind … “Now that it’s just the two of us.”

Just the two of us, Charles thought, staring at the back of Jean’s head as the blindfolds were taken off. Her hair gleamed copper in the unforgiving fluorescent light of what he had started to call ‘the Hive’. It was the vast workroom he had first seen … how long ago was it, now? Almost two weeks, he realized: twelve days since the seventh. And every day of that twelve, he had seen mutants he didn’t know, rushing in and out of the room … all with purpose to their steps. All had a role. All knew what to do …

As if reading his mind, a mutant with a shock of purple hair whistled. “Hey, everyone. Whose turn is it?”

“Denise, I think –”

“Let me check.” A stocky, brown-haired woman consulted a clipboard, affixed to the railing that circled the entire room. “All right, sweetheart.” She walked up to them, gave Jean a smile and held
out one hand. “You get to help me today. Psychometric dynamics,” she murmured, giving Charles a half-smile, too. “But she can draw some pictures, I think.”

“I’m sure she’ll be no trouble at all.” Charles knew his voice sounded reserved; he tried to smile in return, but his face felt like wood. All of these mutants – all of them, he thought – had watched Jean get strapped down and tortured … every day? Well. However many days per week Frost had felt so inclined.

“Speak of the devil,” he murmured. There was Frost, striding along the upper level of the Hive. Her shoes clicked as she walked past door after door.

*Those doors* … Charles’ curiosity was almost a physical ache. Surely all the doors opened onto unique and invaluable things, since the Hive was the hub of the EBS’ command wheel. He had caught a glimpse of a long hallway behind one of the doors – and since he hadn’t seen any evidence of a panopticon from his brief forays outside, Charles concluded that they were underground. And the daily use of a lift, that he felt while blindfolded … surely that confirmed it.

The Hive had an upper level, then the level on which he was standing, and then another sunk even lower. Staring down, Charles felt his spirits sink as well. At the lowest point of the lowest level stood the Finder.

He swallowed back a surge of bile. He really had thought so much of himself, his first visit here, thinking that he would be placed in the Finder. He had assumed thus from Frost’s words – not considering that when she said she would *use* him, she had meant it. Frost had made use of him.

And he had let himself be used.

The Finder was straightforward enough: a metal rail at waist height – or a little higher – twisted into a circle three quarters closed. It looked very much like the Hive, albeit simplified, with open walls, and in miniature. It had a component for the head: something that looked like a crystal crown mated to a jellyfish.

Next to the Finder proper was an accessory: a long sheet of plastic, two inches thick, complete with what would have been a built-in straitjacket had it sleeves to cross in front instead of straps at the wrists. As it was: there were two such plastic sheets now. One had been Jean’s … and the other …

Charles sighed. The other was his.

“Good morning, Mr. Xavier.”

Charles could hardly control his twitch. His power hadn’t sensed Frost coming downstairs; he had only just twigged to the clack of her heels on the metal floor in the last twenty seconds. He needed to know more about how his power worked; hell – he needed to know the ins and outs of *Frost’s* abilities. To find some weakness in the ice bathing his mind; to find a flaw in the diamond of her inmost thoughts.

“Come along. It’s past time.” She led him to the swooping metal staircase; held up with wires, wending its way with the curve of the walls and going down to the Finder. Charles followed, held out his hands to be wrapped and submitted to having his temples daubed with rubbing alcohol. The smell was already becoming familiar.

He turned his head to watch Frost, as she carefully eased off her shoes and drummed her fingers on the Finder’s railing. She murmured to one of the technicians - Charles didn’t know who - only knew that he had feathers instead of hair. And Charles had only seen McCoy on this level once, tinkering
with one of the panels. He had shut it with a few sparks and spoken excitedly to an androgyne working at his side – then had seen Charles and given him a thumbs-up.

Charles hadn’t returned the gesture; his hands had been occupied at the time. He tightened his own grip on the metal conducting rods now. The wrapping helped with the heat. “Jean never needed those,” someone had said, dubious - and Charles had started at an English accent - or was it Irish? Was he - he half sat up to look, but then Frost had cut across his line of sight with a smile: “Jean does not have this much raw power, yet.”

For he remembered her words.

“You have a good deal of power, Xavier.” Frost had taken him into her office on his second day at the Hive – 7 October. She had not inquired into his activities the night previous; except for a cold brush against his mind – one that had him unfurling his strongest veils, and her smiling a secretive smile. Charles had been standing, rigid, as unmoving as the statue of the man … the statue standing tall between the other two.

*My prince*, she had said to Charles, of the man. *My prince*. If she were the White Queen, then she truly had a beast for an heir – a fierce and slavering attack dog on a chain. Even though the dog in question could manipulate metal. Charles had given himself a moment for consideration: what would bind someone – something – like the man, to someone like Frost?

After smirking at him for some time, she had waved Charles to a seat. She controlled him easily enough, it would seem – but how did she control the man? What power had she over him?

*Too many thoughts*, his mind whispered, and: *why come back here? Do you want her to turn your brain into porridge?* As he had taken the chair across from Frost that second day, Charles had felt many things. He had been less occupied with nerves and with the need to make his case, and more concerned with riding the fearful tide of a shadow, lurking at my door all night; aching from his first go with the Finder – having the occasional flash of waking dreams – a haze of colors and images and a unicorn with blue eyes …

With his mind as murky as muddy water, Charles had been able to listen calmly as Frost had continued: “A good deal of power, but very little idea of how to use it. Which is just as well. If you prove yourself trustworthy, perhaps I shall teach you a few things in time; in the meantime, however, you are admirably suited to the task at hand.”

Said task at hand being: lying back on his sheet of plastic; allowing techs to strap him down; and letting crystal pulses of pain throb through his mind, slowly; only once in a while – at least, lately – reaching white-hot and fast. Electrodes at his temples; the hideous jarring sensation of the occasional needle scraping his skull after piercing his scalp; careful hands and intent eyes of the technicians …. Blue eyes, brown eyes; eyes with cat-slit pupils. The feathered tech had one brown eye and one yellow, and fluffy down instead of eyebrows. His name was Christopher, Charles remembered. It seemed he had been given a promotion: jabbing with needles, rather than washing with water. Bully for him.

"Hold still," Christopher murmured. And there - the needle was placed. "All right?"

He had been the one to speak before - he had an Irish accent. Charles sucked in breath; opened his mouth to speak - but the bizarre eyes narrowed at him and the feathers whisked away.

Something to follow up on - perhaps. Except then he heard Frost's voice. “Do you need anything, Mr. Xavier?”
*I need you to let me go,* Charles thought. It was sequestered behind his strongest veils. A good deal of his power was as well – sent to the bottom of the ocean, like cold water sinking. There lay his memories of Raven – *burial at sea* … and for now, at least, most of his power would lie there with her.

“No,” he said. “Just thinking.”

She curled her lips in what might have been a smile. Then she turned back to the railing and placed both her hands on it.

And before his head was gently moved by a tech, working to affix the electrodes and deciding where to put the needle … Charles looked at Frost, and remembered her statue in the man’s mind. Cold beauty in stone, carved in impeccable detail, with a diamond blazing at the throat.

The crystal crown flared into light. Charles bit back a grunt as the first wave hit. He would play the tributary for now – a creek hinting at a placid pond, hidden behind trees, trickling into an ocean. No need for Frost to know that there was an ocean in him, too.

*An ocean.* The Finder was – and Charles squeezed his eyes shut, gasping. The sensation was almost impossible to describe. Similar to what he had felt with his raven flying to Syracuse – except faster, a hundred if not a thousand times faster. Frost’s mind clattering its diamond claws down the Eastern seaboard, across the southeast – *already there,* Charles’ mind marveled, and … *how far could I go with this?*

*Veil,* he reminded himself. *Veil veil veil …*

He kept his veils up in Frost’s presence; up and at full strength, always. Even linked to her through the mechanism of the Finder, he tried his best to veil. And Charles thought that – in this case – his best was sufficient to deter her from poking around in there too greatly.

Sufficient, until she found a large group of mutants in northern Mississippi and called upon much more power. Charles felt himself gasp at the sight of the icy wall that she built. It was similar to what humans might have seen at the edge of a glacier, during the last Ice Age. Or anyone ideally placed to watch Greenland’s ice shear off and cascade into the sea shortly after the war.

The Finder gathered all the mutants together.

Then the crystal power darted from one individual to another, conveyed greetings, passed along plans – a disgorging of information that left Charles feeling like a funnel. The icy jabs, one for each mutant, were much on the same level as the wake-up call for the students here. *Well.* For Jean and himself, that is. Was it the same principle, on a much larger scale?

“… Yes.”

Frost’s voice, echoing in the lower chamber of the Hive, sounded detached, and a different kind of cold than usual, but … Charles shivered. *She had heard his thoughts.*

*Veil,* he told himself urgently; *veil*… He *had* to hide his thoughts …

The Finder left the mutants in Mississippi, and Frost’s power flew west … to Texas …

“Double it,” he heard her say, crisply. There was a click clack of buttons.

And as he listened to the high-pitched buzz from the machinery, Charles considered. Frost had a diamond shell; the man had a steel bunker. Surely he, Charles, could come up with something better,
to hide his secrets.

*Something to build, at least,* he thought – almost sad … as the Finder swept through him and dragged power out of him in its wake … intent on search, for now; and, undoubtedly – destroy, in future.

Across from him, a tech was turning a dial. Charles gripped down harder on the conducting rods, and closed his eyes. The flash could be seen through his eyelids, though: he heard and smelled the *crackle* of electricity … and it was such a small thing to be proud of – but he held it close to himself nonetheless: no one and nothing here could make him scream.

Frost dismissed him early that day. It was just as well the muscles on one side of his face seemed a bit slack; he couldn’t smile back even if he wanted to. A tech blindfolded him; and such was the cacophony in Charles’ mind that he didn’t notice Jean had come along until the blindfolds were taken off, and they were left at the door of McCoy’s workroom.

“Oh, Jean – hello.” Charles felt slightly drunk. He leaned against McCoy’s door; rapped with his knuckles. “Have you had a good day so far?”

Jean looked up at him solemnly; presented the image – herself scribbling industriously on a piece of paper with a pencil, frame – *yes* … but then the picture melted into one of him, Charles, limp against the door, looking as though someone had clocked him over the head with a brick.

Charles focused in on the image. Was he dribbling from one side of his mouth? “Oh, for –” He swiped a sleeve over his lips, only just caught the frame: *are you all right?* and answered briskly: “Yes, of course I’m all right. And now it appears that we get to work here for the rest of the afternoon – I haven’t seen Hank in a while, now, so this will be fun.” The effects were wearing off; his smile to Jean came easily.

Then he stumbled away as McCoy opened the door – “Sorry, Mr. Xavier!” – and Charles felt Jean’s small hand in his own as they walked inside.

“You want the cot, Mr. Xavier?” McCoy’s eyes were anxious. “You look a little – um. Tired.”

“Oh no, not at all.” Charles sat on a bench, smiling at Jean scrambling to sit across from him. “I’m quite all right. What shall we do this afternoon?”

“I hadn’t really planned – huh.” McCoy scratched his head. “Come to think of it, I’d like to know how the Finder’s working, these days. I’ll ask you questions, O.K.? And you answer? And you can just sit there.”

Charles made a neutral sound, acquiescing, and: “Could you please give Jean something to do, though? Perhaps some paper to draw on – and a pen? Or a marker?”

“Oh! Sure.”

McCoy’s bustle was pleasantly distracting; Jean’s falling to, happily, with paper and three markers of different colors, even more so. It was easy enough to answer McCoy’s barrage of questions, and to feel as though he, Charles, were back in Oxford; watching one student color and fielding the academic inquiries of another – all the while hung over from what must have been a spectacular night out with friends.

Jean gave him a picture: two stick figures, the smaller with red hair; the taller with brown. The clothes they wore resembled nothing in Charles’ experience … but surrounding them both were
birds. Soaring around and around, and off the page.

Charles smiled at her, then folded the picture to put in his pocket. “Thank you – it’s very pretty,” he said; but thought to himself: Someday. Someday soon – we’ll both fly away from here.

Logan fetched them from McCoy’s workroom before the daylight had started to fade. “Well, Jean,” Charles said, pushing the bench back, “you get to meet everyone today.”

“We’ve met already,” Logan growled. He dropped to his haunches, abruptly; Charles had a moment of surprise before he laughed. Jean had jumped down from her seat, reached out, and scrubbed her hands through Logan’s hair. Already askew, the dark tufts looked even more so after she backed off with a giggle. “She’s my stylist, you know?”

Charles found himself grinning. “I hate to break it to you, Logan, but that’s a losing battle.”

“You can’t break anything about me, X man.” Logan straightened. “C’mon – it’s tree time.”

They parted from McCoy – “Thanks, Mr. Xavier” – and walked down the hallway. Charles kept a careful eye on Jean, skipping ahead of them.

“A bit early today, isn’t it?”

“Yeah well. Sun sets kinda quick, now. And I thought I’d give you time to gather my recommendation for the day, Xavier: approximately one and a half metric shit-tons of firewood. Don’t know if you’ve noticed? But it’s kind of getting cold out.”

Charles readied a retort, but as they stepped outside, the cold hit him with the force of a punch. He hissed out a breath between his teeth.

"Told you.” Logan clapped his hands together. “You know the rules,” he bellowed, “go Jean go go go! And she’s off,” he said, lower, as Jean raced into the woods. “Looking better these days, too.”

“Mm.”

“C’mon, X – I’ll help you get some sticks together. Don’t say that you don’t need help. But don’t worry – it’s not because you look like someone scraped you off the floor, although: news flash – you look –”

“Like someone’s scraped me off the floor; yes.” Charles paced towards the woods.

“It’s not that, though.” Logan loped alongside him. “It’s that I was serious about the amount – you might need some for a few days, ’cause a blizzard’s comin’ in tonight.”

“A blizzard?”

“First of the season; yep. We got lucky this year. Last year one tap-danced in around the end of September; lots of long faces then, believe me. As it is –” and he easily hefted a large dead branch from the ground, and broke it into pieces with his claws, “we’ll hole up for a few days – maybe play some gin rummy – and afterwards,” he cocked an eyebrow at Charles, “you and I can go hunting again. Might catch a bear that didn’t make it to a tree trunk.”

But Charles was still stuck on, “… gin rummy?”

“Well. Move that shit around, and you get ‘my rum’ and ‘gin’ – which are my two best friends on
“Oh, Logan.” Charles made his voice gently patronizing. “Did you think that up all by yourself?”

“Bite me, X man.” Logan kicked a log out of the way. “And: no. McCoy did.”

“At least you’re honest.”

“You know it.”

They gathered wood without another word, but the silence was not a hostile one. For Charles, as he picked up sticks, listening to the puff of Logan’s breath, the splintering of branches under his claws and the rasping of his occasional curse was oddly peaceful. It could have been because the forest was so quiet, too. He glanced up at the bit of sky he could see between trees. Lowering, with thick clouds … it resembled nothing more than a pewter plate. Charles shivered. It was a relief to reach a clearing.

“When do you think it will hit?”

“Early morning’s my best guess.”

More gathering, and then: “Hey, hey, keep your shirt on, man.”

Charles had been preparing to strip off his sweatshirt as a firewood carry. “Why, Logan …” and he made his voice coy, “I didn’t think you so modest.”

“Yeah, first off? Hell, no, and not just cause Marie’s said she’ll gut me if I fuck around on her. You’re not that pretty, X –”

“Break my heart –” and Charles gave a theatrical snifflle.

“Boo hoo. More to the point,” said Logan, scanning the clearing’s edge, ”I’m not risking any of you getting sick. Pneumonia, yeah?”

"... I’ve been fine with it off before.”

“I’m not kidding, bub. First blizzard means you get all the winter gear, which is good – but in the meantime, you’ve got me to help you carry.” Logan tucked his branches under one arm; jerked his head. “So keep your clothes on, and let’s go.”

With a mental shrug, Charles got a better grip on his armful and followed Logan back towards the manor.

“Where’s Jean? Shit, I shouldn’t have let her out of my sight – where did she –”

“One moment,” Charles murmured. He called up a sparrow, sent it flying – a twinge from the back of his skull made him wince. But there was Jean, and he sent Jean – we’re going back inside. Shall we meet you on the lawn? Can you see it from where you are?

And he smiled at the image of her reply – the immense double doors, clear as day.

“She’s at the door,” he told Logan, and: “Nice.” Logan returned. “Good trick, Xavier; c’mon.”

They met Jean on the front step. She was looking up at them with a smile that could only be described as … smug. Charles was puzzled – until he saw the huge stack of firewood beside her, and blinked. “Jean – how did you do that?”
For one horrible moment, he had a vision of – of him, the man, striding alongside Jean and helping her carry, but: no … he would never do that. Far more likely to be lying in wait in the woods, lurking – and his mind presented him with the image of a monster leaping out, pouncing, and sticks and branches scattering –

He was almost tempted to ask – did you meet a wolf in the forest, Jean? but Logan gave him a grin, and an explanation. “Telekinesis. Right, kid?”

Jean nodded importantly.

“And that is why she’s my hair stylist, Xavier. I only choose the best. Right?”

Jean nodded even more importantly. Charles’ lips twitched. “Then I might take her up on it, myself. Jean dear –” he shook his head to move his hair, now grown down his neck. “I desperately need a haircut.”

“Nah, X – it’ll keep you warm in winter.” Logan gave him a long look. “I can lend you my razor again, though – cause – and I hope you don’t mind me speaking freely …”

Charles rolled his eyes; then blinked as Jean gestured and the immense doors creaked open.

“… looks like you’ve got your lunch on your face.”

“You’ve made that joke already. And besides - we don’t eat lunch, here.” Charles’ voice was absent; he was following Jean inside, watching her firewood follow her like a splintery comet’s tail.

“Picky picky, Xavier, god.” As they reached the kitchen, Logan dumped his armful outside the door and brushed off his hands. “Be right back. Oh – and you still have my lighter. Don’t you?”

Charles blinked, remembering. “Right. It’s in my room – on the mantelpiece.”

“I’ll just stop and get it, then.”

Logan left. For a moment, Charles fought a prickle of indignation – that room was his space, and for Logan just to waltz in as if he owned it … But: no. Charles sighed, and busied himself boiling water for tea. Really, as far as Logan was concerned, he didn’t mind that much. And it wasn’t as though he had anything to hide.

He let Jean fetch the teabags, keeping his eyes determinedly off the box.

The thin soup – he caught several chunks of venison, perhaps from his deer – heated through fast enough. It seemed no time at all before Charles set a bowl in front of Jean - and blinked at Logan, as he stomped in and slammed the door, and almost threw the razor.

“Um.” Charles poured some hot water into a bowl and plucked out a dishtowel. Whatever his bad mood, Logan was not going to stop him shaving. “What is it?”

“I was just in your room.”

“Did you find the lighter?”

“Yes,” Logan bit out.

Silence stretched, punctuated only by Jean’s slurping her soup. Charles gave some thought to correcting her; then shrugged. Imprisoned, soon to be snowbound in a glorified charnel house in oppressive wasteland; at the mercy of a sadistic telepath and a ravening monster – he shivered. Table
manners seemed unimportant.

But this silence was oppressive.

He finished shaving, rinsed his face and the razor, and offered the latter back to Logan - who glared before swiping it out of his hand.

Charles frowned. “Whatever is wrong, Logan?”

More glaring.

He tried again. “Would you like some soup?”

“No.”

By now, Jean had picked up on his tone; she was looking at them both, worried. Charles sighed. “You’re making her nervous. What is it?”

Logan’s face twisted; from anger to – shame? Perhaps disgust? Charles wasn’t sure, but that didn’t matter anymore, since he heard, “Let me see your ankle.”

“… What?”

“Your ankle, Xavier. Let me see it.”

Charles stared back at him. Then, chin high, he tugged up the left side of his trousers. Pulled down his sock. “Voilà.”

“Tabarnak,” Logan growled, and Québécois, Charles remembered – but he was saying: “Now the other.”

Charles bit his lip. “Why?”

“Because I said so, that’s why. Right ankle, Xavier. Now.”

He obviously knew, Charles thought, bleakly – he had seen the chain and shackle, and now he knew, so a physical veil would do no good. Just as well – he could hardly spare the energy. Instead, he lifted his right trouser leg and showed Logan the weal there. It was hardly as bad as it had been – and even then, it had not been anything serious. Just a scrape, widening and spreading, and now forming a callus. It wasn’t as though it were infected.

“Mother fucker,” Logan breathed, eyes wild.

"Language," Charles said sharply. "Jean's right here."

“I – I –”

He seemed almost incoherent. Charles was taken aback – but a removed, distant part of him said, coolly: *Use it.*

“Surprised?”

Logan had gone still; at Charles’ words, his shoulders twitched.

“Really, this is the EBS. Alternating training and exercise with recreational sadism and the occasional tea break.” He pitched his voice to cut. “I don’t see how you could have a problem with
“I didn’t know, Xavier.”


And at those words, Logan glared. His jaw clenched; Charles was distantly surprised that he couldn’t hear the sound of teeth grinding together. But he kept his tones cool. “I don’t suppose you can do anything about it?”

“No.” He sat still for one moment. “… and I didn’t know. I didn’t tell anyone, Xavier – about us and – and the dinner we had, you know?”

“Oh.” Charles blinked. “Oh – Logan, this isn’t about that.” His own anger evaporated. “Really, this is only Frost showing her controlling tendencies.”

A blink. “She put that on you?”

“Yes, of course.” A pause. “Who else would?”

Logan’s eyes were wide and dark. For another minute, he stayed still – but then in a split second he had gotten up and turned away. He flipped his lighter out of his pocket, shoved it back inside and then took a … was that canister? It had fit into the pocket of Logan's leather jacket. Charles felt a spark of interest as he looked closer. It was made of wood, with particular stylized carvings. Some paint and varnish; not much – and a good thing, too, because the carvings were beautiful.

“What is it?”

Logan took off the lid. “Bear grease. Rendered it last winter.”

“Oh. I meant the container.”

“You like? Then you should see a totem pole, sometime. It’s Haida,” he explained, “a tribe way out in the west of Canada Before. I traded for it.”

“And … you’re showing it to me … because?”

“Because I want you to have it, Xavier.” Logan replaced the lid, and shoved the container into his hands. “Grease’ll help with that chafe.”

“Logan, I can’t take this from you.” Charles bit his lip. “It’s lovely, but …”

“But’ what?”

“But I have nothing to give you in return.”

“Stuff it,” Logan snorted. “You’re helping Jean; that’s enough for me. Keep it or I’ll hurt you.”

“Right,” Charles murmured, placing the container on the table. Jean beamed at them both – and he caught the echoing burble of a thought – present was prominent, and me too … Then Jean got up from her seat, and scurried to fetch the worked metal tea box. She showed it to Logan. Charles heard a dim reverberation of what must have been a deafening: See?

“Yeah. I see.”

Charles gave Logan a sharp look, saw how jaw had clenched tight again, and how he crossed his
arms over his chest.

Then – and it sent a disconcerting prickle up his neck. If there was one thing Charles was not used to, it was the sight of Logan looking … vulnerable? Perhaps it was the way he had hunched his shoulders. Strange …

Dark eyes flicked away from the box and back to Charles. “Put some grease on that ankle every night, X. Or whenever it gets sore.” A muscle in his jaw twitched again. “I’ll dump all this firewood upstairs. You two stay warm.”

And he stomped out the door, before Charles could thank him.

Angel had taken them to their rooms. All the while, Jean had been chattering excitedly to Charles about presents, and Charles had dealt with the wash of words through his mind by … smiling and nodding. He would have felt sorry for tuning her out, but he had a headache.

And he had things to think about.

*Presents.* He stared at the things left on his bed. Angel had lit the fire he had built, chained him up with an affectionate grimace, and locked and bolted the door behind her. The fire was high; he could see everything well enough.

Carefully, Charles considered each item. He gave the bear grease a sniff – though pungent, its smell was not strong enough to cover the spicy scent of the wood. *Cedar.* And Charles smiled at the carvings. Different animals – a bear, a wolf, an … otter? He wasn’t sure. It could be a weasel, or a marmot. He did not know which animals were native to the continent’s upper west coast … whether before the fallout, or after …

Charles shook off the thoughts, and touched one finger to the last carving: a bird. It was easy enough to dredge up what mythology he could remember – only because he knew so little of it. It could be a thunderbird, or an eagle … Perhaps even a raven.

He carefully set the container on the floor; slid it underneath his bed.

Then: Ororo’s cosmetics. He inspected each one. Some he had no intention of using – he’d give them back to Jean – but others would be helpful. Some moisturizer, some lip balm. And … a relief: all the cosmetics, useful or not, were contained in plastic.

Charles put them all next to Logan’s gift. He set down the incense sticks that Jean had insisted he take; then he laid next to them the set of wooden combs.

And then, with trembling hands, Charles picked up Ororo’s book.

He bypassed the cover and contents; went directly for the spine. The leather and cloth of the binding was loose – it was as though someone had tried to mend it, and failed. Charles remembered, vividly, quiet afternoons spent in the Oxford reading room – a pair of sharp scissors before him, a container of heated glue and a needle and thread … but this mending was a shoddy job. A good thing too, because it seemed it had not been intended to repair so much as – to conceal …

Charles exhaled roughly. To conceal the folded papers, snug against the book’s spine.

He caught at them, and drew them out using fingernail and thumbnail. Of his right hand – it seemed his vision was hypersensitive, for Charles saw the firelight glowing on the papers – and the tendons
on the back of his hand casting shadows – and his left hand, wrapped round the top of the book. That hand showed golden in the firelight, too, with tracery of vein and tendon … but with a scar at the base of the thumb, and a rough, thick new growth of thumbnail …

He unfolded the papers, carefully. He heard them crackle; some, it appeared, were rather old. And Charles could hear, of all things, the uneven thump of his own heartbeat, loud in his ears.

There were eleven pages; no – twelve. Each had a date in the upper left-hand corner. Charles scanned them eagerly. They were – “oh,” he breathed – “it’s a map.” All carefully drawn, and just as carefully tinted – Ororo must have used her colored pencils.

Charles heard his own half-breathless laugh, as he tried to make sense of their order. Perhaps by date? The oldest sheet – 1963: June July August September – had in its center a wobbly rectangle. A rectangle with a few semi-circles added to it – and, “the manor,” he whispered, because there was an arrow pointing to a circle, and tower written in red.

Then Charles paused. “Nineteen sixty-three …”

Ororo had been at the manor for six years.

Six years. The papers rattled as he breathed out, unsteadily. At least six years, his mind corrected. For: who knew how long she had been imprisoned, before she had started drawing?

And … Charles frowned. For that matter, how had she drawn it so? For he carefully, logically assembled all the papers … in a grid, four by three … and his mind could not come up with an answer. They were crafted with such attention to detail that the entire was as good as topography …

All done from above. Like an aerial photograph.

“How did you do this, Ororo?”

There was no answer, obviously; Charles shook his head. He tabled the mystery for another time. Then, feeling a strange lump in his throat, he looked for the most recent sheet.

1969 – Q1 2 3. It was in the upper right-hand corner of the grid. It was only halfway full – but cut in half, diagonally, by a stark line. Charles’ eyes flicked back to the line’s origin: dark green, and heavy, running from the manor through an assembly of circles and squares labeled ruin and OK and tower and stadium. The line ran north by northeast, and ended in the most recent sheet – ended in an arrow, and … TOWN?

“Town,” Charles murmured.

Written in red. And circled with such force that the colored pencil had torn the paper.

The lump in his throat was suddenly hot; he tried to swallow, and couldn’t. Carefully, Charles checked the date of the last sheet once more.

“Nineteen sixty-nine. Quarter – one, two, three …”

Ororo’s handwriting had completely changed, from the 1963 labels on the manor. Small wonder. Six years’ worth of writing practice, and a child’s penmanship would improve in leaps and bounds. He remembered seeing such, from the essay books of his own students.

And: north by northeast? There was no key on the map, no way of gauging distance … but Charles hardly needed that to know which town it was. “Syracuse, isn’t it?” His voice was shaking. “It’s
Syracuse, Ororo – and – and –”

And she had worked on the map for years.

Searching, searching – perhaps she had gotten out of the manor at night? Was part of her power night vision? or increased stamina, or speed? But: “six years,” he choked – six years to itemize every single hiding place in a five-mile radius – he saw cave labels, and even an occasional tree trunk – and one that wasn’t a hiding place, surely, for it had been circled in blue: waterfall – *Jean – with the date next to it: 1968 Q3.

“Did you take her there, I wonder?” Charles felt his eyes stinging. “To cheer her up, perhaps. She would have thought it lovely … oh, Ororo; oh, child …”

Six years’ worth of searching. Searching for an escape.

“I could have helped you,” he whispered. Charles touched one hand to the dark green line, almost a shout of color on the blank half of the paper. “I would have helped you – I told you – I promised you …”

And Ororo could have helped him, he realized. “Truly.” He was not so puffed up about his own finding of Syracuse to think that he and only he would have brought anything to an escape attempt. The map was so detailed … Ororo knew the manor and its environs like the back of her hand.

But now she was Sworn. And it would seem that the map was his.

“Twelve sheets,” he murmured. “Twelve – joy for tomorrow. Well.” He swiped a blue sweater sleeve across his eyes. “We can only hope.”

Then, taking deep breaths, Charles angled each sheet to the firelight – one at a time. He focused on every detail, inscribing each one into his memory.

It took quite some time.

When he had finished, though, he carefully folded the sheets again, and replaced them in the book’s spine. That book went under his bed with the other gifts. And Charles lay back on his bed, himself – not bothering with covers. He folded his hands over his heart. Then closed his eyes.

And he did not bother with a thought-fire, either, as he sent his raven flying out from his mind and across the manor grounds. All of the details from Ororo’s map could be combined with his own – and then his raven would see everything. The all-seeing bird, part of his mind whispered; Charles, dreaming, thought to Odin and his ravens, those who saw all, knew all, flew everywhere … For now, for the next short while, he would fly closer to home - but he would go further, and become stronger, until he could fly forever.

It was exhilarating, letting the raven fly so. As he called it back from the forest, flitting like a small black shadow across the moonlit grass, Charles was reminded of the Finder. His own Finder – he was his own Finder. The same principles could apply, perhaps: flinging power out into the blank distance – searching and communicating. He could only improve, from now on out. He would have to practice.

The raven flew through the downstairs door, past the kitchen and into the dormitory hallway. Its intense focus on detail allowed him to see the grain of wooden doorways; the dust gathered between flagstones; the slow white puffs of Jean’s breath in the chill of her room. Charles allowed himself a small prickle of relief – there was no shadow at his door. He hadn’t wanted his power to coast into it.
It was unsettling enough to experience that nauseating concentration of *rage* and *want* from the other side of a door, and with the smallest bit of his awareness ... even with the smallest touch, his raven's focus would have magnified the sensations a hundredfold –

– as it did –

It did. That *want* sucked at him like black quicksand, as his raven shrieked and landed in his mind in the blink of an eye –

– as Charles choked, and gasped, and rolled up on one elbow to stare at his fire.

For the shadow had not been outside his door.

Instead: it was crouched by the hearth, its back to the flickering flames. Silent, unmoving.

Watching him.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Three things!

First off: THANK YOU to all you lovely reviewers! You are the peeps who keep me cranking out word after word after word. If I don’t reply to you in person, please do not take that to mean that I do not value your feedback. I do! I am just Busy Writing Moar!

Secondly: ch. 20 was originally part and parcel of ch. 19. The whole thing got to be so huge that I basically chopped it into thirds. So, for the full effect, read through 19 and then through 20.

But ... before you do? Third, and last:

Um.

*cough*

Remember ... when I said that this fic was ... dark? And that there was violence? And - did I mention that there would be blood, and other unmentionables? Oh. I didn't mention unmentionables. O.K.

Just ... be warned, please. If daaark fic is not your cuppa, do turn back now. Pretty please.

And please don't tell the nice people in my book group. I'd never live it down. :)

“What –”

Charles dragged in a breath; licked his lips. He was parched. He had been flying for so long and with such intense focus, that he could only croak: “What are you doing here?”

No answer.

He clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering. In the golden firelight, he could see the strong lines of the man’s shoulders and arms; the latter wrapped round his knees. The man was resting his chin on his forearms. And staring.

Charles could feel the intensity of that stare – he didn’t have to see the other’s eyes to sense it. And he couldn’t see them, anyway. The man was backlit; his face in shadow.

“What do you want?”

No answer. But a slight shift of the man’s body, this time; and a ripple to the want, wafting through the room like the fire’s smoke. No; worse than the smoke. The chimney had always drawn quite efficiently. Charles felt his breath coming faster, uneven; he used his left elbow to shift his weight back and away – he felt for the plaster of the wall with his shoulder blades. Get away get away from him – He moved his legs –
– the chain clinked

And he heard a soft growl, one that stopped almost as soon as it had started –


“No …”

Charles froze, listening.

Silence.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” He stared at the man. Don’t show him you’re afraid. “What do you want?”

“No …” the man whispered.

Silence stretched again. Charles waited, tense.

There was a glint of something that might have been teeth, in the fire’s light – as the man said, quietly, so quietly:

“No … The question, Professor Xavier, is: … what do you want?”

“What –” Charles knew that his jaw had dropped. He didn’t care. “What do I want? I want you to leave. Is that not clear? Or need I use smaller words?”

“You wanted things from me …” It was as though the man had not heard him. That low voice was rough around the edges … but the words floated to him with a dreamlike cadence. “In my mind.”

Charles felt his stomach turn to ice.

“In my mind, Xavier – some time ago, now … you wanted things from me.” A pause, then: “I haven’t forgotten, you know.”

“Well.” He fought down the surge of nauseated fear. “I’m afraid I have forgotten. Completely forgotten. All I know now, is that I want you to leave.”

He waited. Then added, tightly: “Please.”

“You’ve forgotten?” That voice was dark, somehow mocking. “How disappointing. And with all of my elaborate thoughts on what to do to you, for your little excursion. Hm?” The man uncoiled to his feet; rested his back against the mantelpiece – a lean, dark silhouette against the firelight. “Care to have a look? Would you like to see?” The man laid one long finger against his forehead.

“No.” Charles fought to keep from trembling. “No, thank you.”

“And you’re sure you don’t remember?”

“No. I don’t.” It wasn’t a lie, not entirely. He did not remember much. Most of what he’d done, almost all of what he had said … gone. What remained to him were images: the statues, the tapestry – and sensations – the heat and damp and want … the man’s tears – god –

"I remember, Xavier.” That whisper slinked over from the fire and slithered into Charles’ ears. “You
wanted several things. You wanted to know certain … secrets. You wanted —” Charles only just caught the slight crack in the man’s voice, “— you wanted to touch me with your mouth.”

A pause. Then: “… And.”

Charles felt cold – he remembered, the man remembered everything. His mind presented him with a memory of – of all things – the salt of the man’s sweat; clinging to his own tongue as Charles licked over his collarbone. God. He wrested his mind away from the memory; replied: “‘And’ what?”

“And you wanted me to let you go.”

Charles drew in a quick breath. The man must have heard it, over the pop and snap of the fire, for Charles heard dark amusement coiling beneath his next words: “What if I told you … that I would let you go, Professor?”

He kept his own voice cold. “I wouldn’t believe you.”

“Really?”

“Really and truly. Not for a second. Now, get out.”

“No, I don’t think I will.” And that lean figure prowled – there was no other word for it – over to Charles’ bed. Charles jerked his legs up and away to one side, as fast as he could – for the man sat down. Sat down – the bed creaked – and gave him a mocking smile.

Charles thought his heart would smash through his own chest, racing as it did. “Don’t,” he croaked.

The man raised both eyebrows. “‘Don’t’ what? Don’t let you go? Because I will.”

Then Charles stared as the man’s left hand slid beneath the ribbed neck of the sweater he was wearing. It was dark green, he noted; dark green, of a close knit – with a hole over the heart and a ragged edge at the bottom. It made the man’s eyes look very green, reflecting the firelight. But there was a delicate, silvery chain draped over those long fingers, now, and –

He sucked in a breath, despite himself. The man had pulled out, from beneath his sweater … a jewel on a chain. It was — a crystal, or a diamond, perfectly round and glittering in a silver filigree. About the size of a thumbnail.

A thumbnail, Charles reminded himself sharply, that hadn't been ripped away. It would not do to be enthralled by the beauty of the jewel, or to allow himself to look too long at the duller glint of the metal ring wrapped around the man’s left thumb. The jewel’s chain brushed over the ring; Charles dragged his eyes from them both and stared at the man’s face.

“I will let you go, Xavier. I swear it — by my lady’s token.”

Frost’s. “Fuck your lady’s token,” he muttered to himself, and lifted his voice: “Don’t bother. I still don’t believe you.”

The man bared his teeth in a smile; let the jewel fall. “Take a look, then.” One long finger tapped his temple.

Charles swallowed hard.

“Only briefly, Xavier – and only to distinguish truth from lie. And know you this … if you even try to go further … well.” The smile widened; those teeth gleamed. “You will not care for what you find
Charles didn’t bother to reply. Instead, he sent his brave raven flying out – winging to the man’s mind … and there … there was a beam of light, almost. A clear path, shining through the maelstrom of shrapnel, the first barricade. The raven flew down it, silently.

And it landed on the far side of the river. The river, guarding the man’s thoughts …

There was a figure on the far shore. In front of the metal forest.

What do you see, then? … The man’s voice … it was not coming from the distant figure. Which made sense, Charles supposed … the creature had not said a word the only other time he had met him. But that voice, whispering in the chill of the room where Charles himself remained, reached the raven … and made every single scrap of metal vibrate. The bird saw a bayonet quiver, below, where the metal was clotted with blood … twisted through tendons in a corpse’s neck, lying in the river. What do you see, when I tell you: I will let you go … ?

Charles had done this before. True or False would reverberate – in, and from, another’s mind. Not in terms of sun or moon – darkness or light – any of the tired dualities. No. The closest Charles could come to describing it was … in the sense of music. In tune, or out of tune. A lie was a discordant jangle, though the exact intensity of the dissonance ran the gamut, depending on how much truth - if any - remained twisted into the falsehood … Truth, though: truth would make all the overtones of the mind ring out together in perfection.

Say that again, he sent, in the other’s mind – and the words had not even made it across the river before Charles heard once more … the whisper reaching him from where the man sat on the bed:

I will let you go.

But then: he had hardly needed to hear it twice to recognize the chord: perfect, and shimmering through both of their minds with the sound of absolute truth.

Charles hardly remembered calling the raven back. He was gasping, staring at the man – at the smirk playing around the corners of the other’s mouth … Something was wrong, a warning bell was clanging in his head, but he didn’t care, he didn’t care, because:

“You’ll let me go?” His voice cracked; he didn’t care about that either.

“… If.”

“If” what?

“Four things.” The man held up his left hand, splayed wide … then slowly curled the fingers down, leaving the thumb extended. Charles saw the glint of the ring. “Four very simple things.”

“Name them.” This could go so wrong, his mind gasped, panicking, this is a terrible idea, but Charles shoved all fear and logic and objection aside – the man had told the truth – “Name them. I’ll do them – anything, I’ll do anything.”

Why, why did you say that? his mind shrieked, but: “That won’t be necessary,” the man murmured. He brought his left hand back; slid those long fingers underneath the chain round his neck, and – Charles’ skin prickled. The man took off the ornament, and carefully draped chain and jewel over one of the bedposts.
“Four things, Xavier.”

“Name them.” His mouth was very dry.

“First: that you keep absolutely silent … until I leave this room.”

“All right.”

The man fixed those eyes on him. In the firelight’s glow, Charles thought, they looked like emeralds set in gold.

“Starting now.”

“All –” Charles gulped the word back; nodded instead.

One corner of the man’s mouth quirked up; then flattened again. “Second: that you stay out of my head.” He glared. “Not even a touch. Am I quite clear?”

Charles nodded.

The man drew in a deep breath; let it out in a sigh. There was a strange look on his face. Smug? No, not quite – perhaps … watchful – with a thick coating of the want that had long since filled the room like steam would a sauna. And …

Charles blinked. Was that a hint of – fear?

The man’s eyes narrowed, and the emotion – whatever it had been – vanished. “Third,” he said, softly. “Third, Professor … I want your full attention.”

Easy enough. Charles nodded again.

And almost choked as, in one smooth motion, the man caught hold of the bottom hem of his dark green sweater – and peeled it off.

And there was – oh – oh god - Charles was staring at lean muscle, at lines of ribcage and sternum – at – were those tattoos? Yes, his mind offered, faintly, and scars and terrible, terrible idea … But Charles heard nothing. The rush of blood in his ears had drowned out any thought except – he drew in a shuddering breath – except the memory of how that all of that muscle and skin had felt, pressed beneath him and slick with sweat in the darkest part of the man’s mind –


Charles dragged his eyes up from the line of hair, golden in the firelight, disappearing beneath the waist of the man’s trousers. He blinked, staring; he knew his face was flushed – and the other saw it, damn him, because that sardonic smirk had come back with a vengeance.

Then the man gracefully folded his legs up from off the side of the bed and in front of him, and he was on his knees, but then on his hands and knees, leaning forward whip-thin – like a god damned cat preparing to pounce, and – oh no – Charles could feel hot breath trailing over his own face. He jerked back as far as he could. The chain rattled as it pulled taut – he saw the man’s eyes flick to the side, then back.

“Now,” and that voice sent goosebumps up his arms. “Fourth thing.”

The man smiled at him, teeth glinting in the firelight.
“Take your shirt off.”

Charles’ heart shot into his mouth. He froze.

“Do as I say.” The voice was soft, hypnotic. “Shirt off. Now.”

Then … Charles fought past the thrum of adrenaline; fought not to smile. He’d do as the man said. And he’d show him just how stupid that order had been.

Carefully, he brought his arms in from his sleeves; hugged them to his chest, beneath both sweater and T-shirt. He hooked the hem of the T-shirt over his elbows, shoved his arms back through the sweater sleeves … pulled the T-shirt off through the sweater neck. Held it out over the floor, with a flourish. And then let it fall.

Then he looked back at the man, and raised his eyebrows.

The other’s expression … Charles bit back a laugh, because even with his freedom on the line, the temptation to snicker audibly was almost irresistible. The man’s face had gone from intense and focused, eyes glittering – to confused, to angry, and had settled on that narrow-eyed glare.

Really, that last seemed to be a favorite.

But: “Now, take off your sweater,” the other said through clenched teeth.

Charles made a regretful face, held out four fingers, and waggled them.

The man hissed, grabbed at Charles’ neckline with both hands – fast, too fast to stop with a slap – and – Charles felt his heartbeat thudding in his throat, hot and thick. Suddenly it didn’t seem funny anymore. Nothing did: and the sensations from his incursion in the man’s mind were flooding back, again – that skin, the sweat and heat and the way the other had pushed and writhed beneath him …

Fingers tightened, and Charles heard a rip. His mind winced away from the sound – this was his favorite sweater, the blue one – Raven’s color – and before he knew what he was doing, he had clapped a hand over one of the man’s wrists, and tugged.

The other paused.

Charles stared at him, trying to put every bit of the pleading he felt … into his eyes. Please don’t tear that. It reminds me of my sister – except: no, he would never breathe a word of his sister to anyone, and thank god he wasn’t actually projecting those thoughts -

“You like this one, then?” The fingers of the man’s other hand uncurled from Charles’ neckline; traced four lines of heat across his throat. Charles swallowed hard. “Its color? Your eyes … it makes them …”

The man was staring into his eyes. Charles let them go wide. The other’s breathing stopped.

A distant part of his mind made a note of it.

But the rest … Charles bit the inside of his mouth. He had made his point, but he had his pride – he didn’t want to strip for this – thing. Creature. Even if heat was pooling in his gut; even if his breath was coming short – he only had to obey four commands, and he had.

Then the man leaned forward, and – Charles let his eyes fall shut – he pressed his lips above those fingers on his neck, right on his pulse – flicked with his tongue and Charles felt his own desperate
gasp rattle through his throat.

“I knew it.” That voice sounded like gravel. “I knew it – let me. Here.” Both hands moved to the hem of his sweater. “Let me do this – it doesn’t –” a scrape of teeth over his pulse, and Charles shuddered, “it doesn’t have to hurt ...” A slow, inexorable pull – and Charles gave in, held his arms out in front of him – bent up so he wouldn’t touch the other’s chest. The man’s mouth at his throat vanished – Charles gulped while he had the chance, and while his head was stuck in the sweater and he couldn’t see –

– and then the man had stripped it off him, and all those muscles tensed – his staring eyes gleamed – and he moved forward like a panther, framed Charles’ face in his hands and kissed him.

Charles focused on breathing. In and out. The pressure on his lips was so light – warm and – fluttering? What the hell? He let his eyes blink open, waited for the man to deepen the kiss.

But that mouth moved away and trailed up his jaw.

Blinking into the dim light, hyperaware of strands of hair tickling his cheek, of a sharp line of cheekbone almost touching his own mouth … Charles told himself he was not disappointed. Just surprised.

The yank of the chain on his ankle was a more predictable surprise, though, and before he knew it, Charles was flat on his back on the bed, staring up at the man’s face. Those stark features were twisted in that same strange expression as before … he couldn’t get a read on it. So Charles settled for staring.

The man’s lips thinned. Then he rasped: “Not a sound. Understand?”

Charles nodded. It wasn’t that he was afraid; no. He just … didn’t know what to expect. Certainly not the man leaning forward, braced on his forearms, and brushing his lips across Charles’ cheekbone. Then across the other. Then breathing onto one earlobe – Charles shuddered – and nosing into his hair. Then tracing down to his neck and touching his tongue to – oh that’s right, the mark from the watch chain – he remembers it, even if it’s faded ...

It was easy, then, to corral his thoughts, even with his blood racing through his body and desire turning his mouth dry. This, Charles reminded himself: this was the man that had almost strangled him – twice. That had threatened to gouge out his eyes.

And that had told the truth when he said I will let you go …

And even though those lips were tracing over his collarbone with more confidence, now, Charles laid hold of his power, and sent it to – let’s see – ah. To the impulses that controlled his vocal cords. He simply stood a guard round them, and then let his breath out in a silent rush. Do your worst.

The man couldn’t hear that thought, Charles decided. For he was still coasting his mouth over skin – lightly, carefully. Almost as though he were exploring, rather than acting outright on any desire. It was … strange, Charles thought again. Oddly soothing, though. Relaxing. Perhaps it was because the man was so warm. Every inch of that skin sent heat into his own, where they touched. If he could make a sound, Charles reflected, he would be moaning right now. Moaning encouragement, maybe, as the other moved those lips back to his mouth, and –

Charles huffed out a breath. The man just stayed there. Immobile – well, perhaps moving the tiniest bit. Really, though, it was due to the fact that he was nosing at Charles’ face – perhaps trying to pick
up a scent? Who knew? But nose was moving more than mouth, which, frankly, was intolerable.

*In for a penny.* Charles carefully brought his own hands up, and rested his fingers on the man’s cheekbones.

The other flinched back, eyes wide and staring.

Charles looked up at him. Tilted his head, just so. Tried a careful hint of a smile, and stroked gently with his fingers.

Then he tipped up his chin, and – *oh, he can be taught* – the man followed the cue as naturally as breathing, and pressed Charles’ lips with his own again. *Right. Lesson two.* Charles parted his mouth and tried flicking his tongue out, running it across the man’s lower lip and retreating. The other stiffened, and stayed tense for a long moment … but then mirrored Charles’ own movement. And on the third repetition – *god, what is this, table tennis?* – Charles anticipated him and sent his tongue out to tangle – *yes yes–*

– and the man gasped and jerked away.

Really. *I didn’t think it was as bad as all that.* Charles tried to convey the thought with one raised eyebrow.

“… You did that to me.”

The man’s voice was hoarse, and his eyes … his eyes …

Charles felt his skin crawl. *Don’t flinch,* his mind told him, urgently, *don’t look away, whatever you do –*

Strong fingers clenched into his shoulders and *shook* him. “In my head!” the man snarled. “You did that – why?”

Because I* wanted to,* Charles thought wildly – and settled for staring back in bright-eyed defiance, and making the most obscene motion with his tongue that he knew.

Those eyes flashed, and before he knew it, Charles was being crushed back into the bed by what could have been a machine press – one made of steel, *god* – he had forgotten how bloody strong the man was. Only a small part of his mind could remind him of that, though; the rest was occupied in fielding one sensation after another: fingers clenching and relaxing in his own long hair, keeping Charles’ head at an angle – flexing in the same rhythm as a hot tongue stroking into his mouth, and the same rhythm lower, where – *oh my god*–the man was hard, hard and only just rocking into Charles’ hip –

Charles raked his hands down the man’s back and caught at the loops of his trousers. *No belt* – a distant part of his mind observed, but the rest of him told the catalogue to shut it and tugged at the fabric in order to get the man over, so at the very least there’d be something between his own legs to thrust against, like *that* – *oh* – thank god for his paralyzed voice, because he would have moaned like a whore as he shoved himself up against the man’s thigh, *just like that* –

Another gasp – almost a yelp – into Charles’ mouth and the man jerked away, again. Charles felt like slamming his own head against the wall. *What was the problem? Besides you being completely and utterly ruled by your own stupid cock at this point, Professor* – have you forgotten what – but:

“What are you doing?” the man gasped.
Charles blinked up at him, completely confounded.

*What the bloody hell do you think I’m doing, you moron? Snogging you – a bloodthirsty psychotic bastard – within an inch of your life – or – oh god – because the man had bared teeth down at him, and thrust down hard against Charles’ hip, and – really rather more than an inch, sorry -*

The hands twisted in his hair shook his head sharply; the man shoved at him again, harder. “Just like in my mind, Xavier … but you – you, now.” The man’s face was twisted in rage; he was almost spitting. “Tell me to stop. Beg me to stop.”

Then he brought his mouth down again. And thrust - hardest.

*Oh.*

Charles blinked into space, realizing … this was the man’s idea of payback. *Well.* He ran his hands over the broad shoulders, feeling muscles flex. Honestly, Charles would consider weeping and begging, because he’d always been an excellent actor … certain scenarios at the Rose in Bloom came to mind … but. Not only was there his freedom to consider, but … also?

It was difficult for him to be intelligible with another’s tongue jammed down his throat.

*Not much finesse,* he thought, rolling his hips up and smirking at the choked moan that vibrated through his own mouth. *But points for enthusiasm.* *Let me see …* He sucked on the man’s tongue, and – *god* – the other went *wild.* That grip in his hair would draw blood, soon; and there was really no polite way to explain the grinding pressure at the juncture between thigh and hip except: *dear god,* *if we were actually fucking – and he were topping - that cock might actually stand a chance of hurting me.* *Me,* Charles Xavier, the Oxford Casanova –

One particularly vicious thrust left him gasping against the man’s mouth – and Charles tossed his right leg up and hooked it behind the other’s knees, pulling –

The chain clanked, and the man pulled off Charles’ mouth with a snarl.

“Why – *why* don’t you beg me? You … you *knight.*”

Charles blinked. That had definitely just been spit, on his face, with the *t.* No matter. He’d had more interesting things spatter him during sex.

A detached part of his mind considered. The man looked enraged, eyes wide and staring – with … he shivered. With that desperation lurking behind them … and that hint of fear …

It would not be intelligent to gloat at this point. But … Charles’ blood was thrumming, his heart racing … And: *payback? Really? I’ll show you payback …*

A whisper of thought: *you had your payback already …* He shoved it aside. There could never be enough. *Never.* As long as he was a prisoner, the scale would be unbalanced, the world out of joint …

So Charles looked the man dead in the eye. Widened his own eyes, slid his tongue over his lower lip. Canted his hips up … and … he let a grin curl one side of his mouth, ran his hands down from the man’s shoulders to his nipples … circled them, touched them … and squeezed the tiniest bit –

The other choked – and had that been a … whimper? *Ha,* Charles thought, and *how the mighty are fallen.*
“But –” a hoarse whisper. “How can you …” Those hands in his hair – they were trembling. Charles exhaled hard; let the grin widen.

The man’s jaw dropped. His eyes were wide; disbelieving, desperate. “Why aren’t you crying?”

Charles stuck out his lower lip mockingly, and brought one hand to his right eye. And then he followed the trail of an imaginary tear, slowly, with one fingertip.

And he saw the other’s face go absolutely white.

Not fear. Charles’ mind observed. … Rage.

That tear, Professor. The voice of his thoughts was so quiet …

That may have been a mistake.

But the man was … caressing him. And with such gentle fingers. Massaging up his neck, tracing his jaw, rubbing such tiny, careful circles beneath his ears …

Warm fingertips glided up to the hinge of Charles’ jaw. Rested in the hollows beneath his cheekbones.

Charles blinked, remembering. He had thought, once … the man had pressed warm lips there. On the left side. Almost kissing him.

And the memory of the man’s voice …

... you have a metal filling on the left side of your mouth …

Charles felt his heart stop.

... upper jaw, back penultimate molar.

The man’s eyes glinted.

Here.

And –

– he had silenced his own voice, a distant part of him remembered. That was good.

Because all of him – all of him – every single part of Charles ... screamed as the man ripped the filling out of bone and rammed it straight back in.

The metal of his filling – shattered and reformed into a needle … it was twisting into the root of his tooth, like an excruciatingly slow drill, one point of agony sending spears of pain from his mouth to his eyes, his ears, his brain –

Brain. Pain receptors. Squeezing his eyes shut against the tears – the man had caught both of his arms as they had lashed out, instinct, and shifted a thigh to straddle him completely – god, he couldn’t move – Charles pulled some of his power from voice, and sent it to pain receptors pain pain pain. And even – god …

He felt tears run hot down his cheeks; he breathed in hard through his nose, and almost couldn’t, because his sinuses were full and overflowing ... Even with the receptors dulled - it was so powerful,
corkscrewing through the bone of his upper jaw, now, little by little, ripping through marrow … the pain was still horrible, and he redirected more power, more and more –

All Charles could taste was blood. It was filling his mouth. He turned to spit it out – but there was more, welling up; pouring into his throat and choking him. He heard himself gasping, crying –

Charles’ eyes were shut tight. So he didn’t see the man lean forward, slowly … but he felt his breath, now wafting cool over hot tears.

And then the man started licking up his tears, like an animal, and Charles’ eyes flew open – he screamed and broke free of that iron grip to throw a punch –

The man tossed back his head and laughed. Laughed and laughed – it was horrible, it was cruel … … and it wasn’t as loud as his own scream had been.

“No,” Charles gasped, and – yes – that was the sound of his voice. “No.”

“Yes.”

The other had stopped laughing; his voice had been a growl. And now he stared down at Charles, pinning him with his weight on his hips, holding him still …

Those eyes were dark, and feral – and they flashed before the man swooped down and kissed him again – except there was blood, there was too much blood and kisses weren’t supposed to sound like a shoe sinking into mud and filth, with sucking and plashing noises –

Charles gasped and pulled at the man’s hair, yanking, trying to get him away. It didn’t work. He bit the man’s tongue where it was lapping at the blood inside his own mouth – god – and the man only growled and pushed his hips down, hard –

He was hard, Charles realized, horror surging through his gut. The other man was still hard – and rocking against him, again, in that same rhythm … Then speeding up, as he slid his mouth away and tipped his head back just slightly, jaw slack, gazing down into Charles’ eyes.

Blood and saliva had mixed; viscous strings of it fell gently onto Charles’ lips from the man’s mouth, hovering right above his. The man’s breath sounded wet, hot and urgent and then he shoved his face into Charles’ neck – Charles felt a smear of warm wetness on his throat – blood, his own blood – but then – his stomach twisted and roiled as he felt the man shudder against him, grind his hips down – and … and there was warm damp there, too, a little, and then more, spreading, because –

“Fuck,” Charles gasped, choking back blood and sickness roiling up through his throat. The bastard had just come. Had just come, had gotten off on the blood, the pain and tears – “You – you –”

For a long moment, he couldn’t move. And he couldn’t speak. All he could do was feel – the heat, the rasps of their uneven breaths, the quiver of muscle against him. He had to say – had to – Charles coughed. Monster, he had meant to say. You unholy, inhuman monster. But the words stuck in his throat. He dragged in a breath; coughed again on his blood …

“Hm?” The man’s voice vibrated against Charles’ throat.

“Get – get off me –” and, Charles hated the sound of his own voice – high-pitched and tearful, cracking – “please -”

A warm breath against his neck; a kiss to his Adam’s apple. “Say that again.”
“Please,” Charles choked. “Get off me _please_ –”

“Mmm.” Another growl, almost contented – Charles started to struggle, and shove, and twist his hips – it only pressed him closer to the wet patch. He jerked to one side, brought up one of his hipbones – jutting, he knew, because they had been starving him – and jabbed hard where it might just hurt the bastard –

It worked. The man hissed, just slightly, and shoved himself up on his forearms. He gazed down at Charles, his eyes heavy-lidded, a flush on those cheekbones. He gazed ... for a long time.

Then the man ran his tongue over his own upper lip, tasting the blood still there … Charles caught a glimpse of that lower line of teeth, and – he couldn’t help it – he started shaking. The adrenaline had caught up; his pain receptors were still off and _thank god_ the metal had stopped moving in his jaw –

_The metal._ “Get it out,” he gasped. “My filling – take it _out_ –”

The man stared down at him. “Again.”

For one agonized beat, Charles’ mind went blank. “What?”

“Your mouth.” Those teeth were coated in a slick of blood; Charles saw it as the man smiled. “Put your mouth on mine again, Professor, and I’ll take your filling out.”

He bent, and his lips – bloodstained – were right … right there …

Charles knew that the strange distance to his own thoughts … had to be shock.

That was why he didn’t break away, why he didn’t take all of his power and shatter the man’s mind like a sledgehammer would a lump of coal. That was why he dragged in another wet and choking breath, and tipped his head – just slightly – tilted his lips up and gave the man a kiss.

It was chaste. Just a brush of lips. And the other drew back, breathing hard. And those eyes glowed down at him, blue-green and bright in the fire’s fading glow, as the man trailed long fingers over his jaw, touched his lips – tapped once …

The metal slithered out of the bone of Charles’ jaw, cracked the rest of his tooth … the man quirked an eyebrow and Charles felt something twist and tug. All the pain receptors were off, his mind reiterated, dull. There was no hurt; not anymore.

And that, he realized as the metal floated from his open mouth into the man’s cupped palm … That was another reason. Why he hadn’t used his power to fight back. It would mean taking it away from the pain receptors. And he knew … Charles felt tears well again, felt the man’s fingertips trace them … It would be unbearable, when he did …

“There.” That voice was warm. Charles only dimly saw the man press the tiny metal nugget into the ring on his thumb. “There now. Better?”

Warm words, and so quiet. Especially compared to the laughter, the screaming ...

Charles spat out more blood – and had that been a fragment of bone? “Jean – what about Jean?” he slurred. “She ... I’m sure she heard us –”

“She didn’t.” The man smiled. “She’s sleeping.”

Charles raised his head, just slightly; spared a flicker of power to check. A ghostly imprint of a
sparrow flew to check on Jean … it was true. Her mind had the warm, sluggish quality that he had only ever sensed in the drunk and the drugged.

The bird dissipated before it could return to him. Charles let his head fall back. He didn’t say a word.

The man was still staring down at him; eyes glittering green in the firelight.

“Good night.”

The whisper snagged on blood, where it was drying in whorls and patches on Charles’ face. He said nothing.

“Professor Xavier …” The voice was lulling, caressing; god. His stomach churned. “Good night. And thank you …”

Charles closed his eyes. “You’re quite welcome.”

The man hadn’t expected that. Charles felt him go still. He dragged in another breath, and continued:

“And just to let you know: if you ever, ever do anything like this again …” he clenched his jaw, then finished: “I’ll find some way to end this. To – just to die. I’d rather die than have you touch me again. Do you understand?”

He looked up into the man’s eyes. Those eyes were wide. Something was glowing in them – confusion? … hurt? Holy fuck, he thought with a surge of rage crashing against the remove of shock, you have got to be joking – but: “Do you understand?” he gritted out.

“I understand,” the man hissed. “I understand perfectly. You, good sir knight.” And that spatter had to be blood, and two fingers jabbed into Charles’ sternum. “Knight of the Silken Shield. You have no courage. You have no strength. To lay you down and die -”

“Better than laying me down and humping someone’s leg,” Charles spat. He had listened to instinct – hurt him hurt him, bring him low and hurt him. “You have no staying power. You: the great and terrible,” he curled his upper lip, “adolescent. Pathetic. And you’ll have to inflict yourself on someone else, because, if you ever touch me again –”

Those fingers touched his mouth. Charles stiffened.

Then, a rasp: “I heard you the first time.”

And then …

Charles felt his palms go clammy at the expression in the man’s eyes. As he tipped his head, considering … as he took his hand away from Charles’ face – reached and – unbuttoned? – oh god what is he –

As quickly as he could, Charles turned his eyes away.

But he really couldn’t miss the sensation of a strong hand smearing come onto his face.

It was a difficult thing to ignore, really. His mind catalogued the heat, the smell – and Charles shunted the information away and did his best to stay absolutely still. Over his cheekbone, down to his jaw … and then more, rubbed slick and warm into his throat …
The man wiped his hand off on Charles’ collarbone.

“Remember me, won’t you?” A bloodstained smile. “Think of me … from time to time.”

Silence. Then: “Good night.”

And he bent, slowly, and kissed Charles’ cheek in farewell.

Charles didn’t hear him leave. When he blinked, and tried to raise his head, to look around … well. It took him three tries. But he finally sat up.

He kept the pain receptors muted.

“What do I need to do?” he mumbled to himself. Almost gargled, really. The gap where his tooth had been – he probed it with his tongue – was still bleeding. But … all of the shards and splinters of bone had been removed. “‘S good. But …”

**Antibiotics**, Charles thought, distantly. He would figure out a way for McCoy to give him some. And …


Because – he stared at shackle and chain. He had no way of washing himself, before Alex came to unlock him. And he was covered in blood.

Blood and come. All drying, tacky and sticky, respectively, on his skin.

He could smell it – Charles’ stomach lurched, and he choked back the urge to vomit. He couldn’t reach the bathroom, and he didn’t want to become even dirtier …

But: “I’m not dirty.” He exhaled, ragged. “This wasn’t me. This was him.” He plucked the T-shirt from the floor. “*Fuck him*.”

And he did his best to scrub off what he could.

Then Charles took careful aim, and threw the shirt in the fire. It landed perfectly. Caught fire, and burned.

*Don’t set the place on fire* – he heard the echo of Logan’s voice, and he drew his knees up to his face and choked back a cry. “Oh god – I –”

*You have friends*, he told himself, fiercely. *Friends. Allies.* And he – Charles wiped his face on the fabric covering his kneecaps, ignoring the jab of bone. He had driven the man off. Hopefully. Hopefully permanently.

He had no intention of dying, of course; not here, and definitely not by his own hand. But for all the sick glow in that creature’s eyes, it didn’t know him at all. It wouldn’t know to call his bluff.

*Him*, his mind corrected.

“No,” Charles replied. He felt tired. “*It.*” He stared at his shirt as it unfolded into ash on the hearth. Then he stared at the bedpost. The chain and jewel were gone. The green sweater was gone. *Good.* No traces, no evidence that the monster had anything approaching a human body.

None except that drying on his face, where he hadn’t managed to scrub it away …
But Charles closed his eyes. “Sleep,” he told himself. “Plan in the morning. Think in the morning.”

He rolled to one side, peeled the covers back and crawled in between them. Then he reached down – and took, from beneath his bed, Ororo’s book. Logan’s carved container.

And Charles eased Jean’s drawing out of his pocket.

He looked at them all in the fading light of the dying fire.

And then – only then, holding them all close – did Charles fall asleep.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Bit of a breather chapter again, peeps. Hope that's OK - I think that it's needed, after the previous! :P Thank you so much for your feedback. Enjoy!

The low moaning had been going on for quite some time – a background thrum in his troubled dreams – but Charles only woke when the outside wind spiked into a shriek.

He stared at the plaster ceiling, then cautiously eased himself upright. A book and container on his lap thumped to the floor; he stared at them muzzily. Then Charles let Jean's drawing, crumpled in his hand, fall to the floor as well.

He drew his legs closer, tucking them beneath each other. The chain made soft clinks, hardly audible under the sound of the wind. Pale morning light seeped through the arrow windows. In those watery beams, Charles could see dust motes swirling. It was intensely cold.

Shakily, he exhaled. Watched the white plume of his breath dissipate. For some reason, the cold felt even more intense on the inside of his mouth –

Charles blinked, remembering. “And really …” He nudged around his mouth, experimentally, with his tongue. “How would I have forgotten?

“Unless it’s the pain receptors – still off, I suppose. Jolly good, old man.” Charles felt that some small amount of congratulation was in order, to build himself back up after the tears of the night previous. His tongue found the new gap in his teeth – “hello there, you,” – and –

“Oh,” he mumbled. And the new hole in his gum. He tongued it; gave it an exploring jab. Felt nothing. “Just as well,” because the edges were ragged, and the scab there did not hold for more than ten seconds of prying. “Bugger.” He tasted copper, again; and one hand to the left side of his face confirmed that flesh was swollen and unnaturally hot, throbbing with his pulse …

“You need antibiotics,” Charles told himself, calm. He considered. “And you might be in shock.” He held up his hands to the light – pale, tinged blue around the fingernails, and clammy. “Correction: you are in shock.

“And what do we do for shock? Well.” Had he only been training his students for the field two months ago? Not even two months. Charles shook his head and dismissed thought and memory, inched down on his mattress instead. He propped his ankles on the metal railing at the bed’s foot. The shackle would be pinching, he supposed, but all his pain receptors were off, so: “Proceed. We elevate the feet, to encourage blood flow to the heart and brain. Then we ensure warmth and insulation,” he snuggled deeper into his blankets, “monitor the pulse,” he laid two fingers against his jugular, “and find immediate assistance.”

The words fell into the chill of his room. His very empty room.

“Hm.”

Charles looked at the shackle. It had fallen down his leg, slightly; it was cutting white into the
already-pale skin of his calf. “… Really, I was thin enough, before I came here. Well. Svelte, perhaps. The sleek and beauteous body of a seal.”

He crossed his right ankle over his left and wiggled his toes. “It’s too much to hope that you’ll fall off magically,” he said to the shackle, “so … perhaps Jean could take you off for me?”

He called up his hummingbird. It was pale, insubstantial … weak … but Charles sent it fluttering across the hallway nonetheless. He bit his lip. Weak. He wasn’t weak. He had been mauled and covered in assorted bodily fluids the night previous – which he would consider at another time, when he had less pressing matters occupying his attention – and he had writhed, and screamed … but he was not. Weak.

The intense cold and sharp wind were enough to sap his hummingbird’s energy. It only had power enough to brush against Jean’s sleeping mind once … before dissolving into thin air.

“Huh.”

Charles gnawed on his lower lip, considering. Too cold for his power to fly very quickly, then? Or maybe it was the way his vision seemed to be blurring and sparkling round the edges. That, and Jean was still working through the effects of – of whatever drug she had been given, the night previous.

Why had she been drugged again?

Oh.

“To keep her asleep,” he told himself, “while – that thing happened. To me.”

The … thing. There it was. It was a monster, prowling out of the darkness of his memory, baring sharp teeth at him … It had the lean grace of a puma, the glittering eyes of a wolf …

“And all the self-control of a jackrabbit.” Charles snorted and shoved the monster away in his mind. “I’ll think about you later,” he told it; it growled, and he slurred: “Later.”

Then he stared at his toes a little while longer, humming. “You’re really not much help,” he told the shackle. “But … help. I need to send for help. Which shall it be?”

Charles flicked through the possibilities: hummingbird, sparrow, dove, owl – raven … And then he smiled, remembering. “Likes cold weather; steady, plodding pace. We have a winner.”

He summoned his penguin, matched it glare for glare – “I’ll be fine” – and sent it waddling out his door and down the hallway.

The penguin was only mildly fazed by the steps; it tucked its flippers into its sides and slid down them in a thumping cascade. It had a bit more trouble standing up again. “You’re really very fat,” Charles said, and: “All right – blimey, I heard that from up here.”

The penguin marched past the kitchen and down one hall; then took a turn and marched down another. “Let McCoy be in his workroom,” Charles mumbled, “please …”

Luck was with him, it seemed. He could almost see the shimmer of the room’s heat, compared to the chill of the hallway, as the penguin walked straight through the door and waddled to the pale blue flicker that must have been McCoy. His mind looked rather like the flame of a Bunsen burner.

“Get his attention.”
The penguin took gleeful aim, and then unleashed a storm of pecks. “A peck of pecks,” Charles laughed to himself, as all of McCoy’s thoughts sparked and flared in reaction.

Languidly, Charles wafted a banner into McCoy’s mind. Please come help me. I need you – and sent an image of his own face. Not the way it currently looked; no. For that matter …

“How do I look?”

Charles blinked, back in his room. “Huh.”

Where had his penguin gone? Frowning, he sent out a spark of power – only just caught the impression of the black-and-white bird standing, chubby and irate, at the bottom of the steps. It squawked at him.

“Oh. Well …” he was starting to feel woozy. The spark flickered and died. “Hang on there, and grab McCoy’s foot when he comes round, how about …

“Now.” He ran an exploring hand over his face. “That doesn’t feel right.” It was sticky – he sniffed at his fingers. Blood and come – “I remember that,” he mumbled – and the monster in his mind … purred.

“Shut up,” and Charles dragged up enough power to put a veil around himself – “a real veil,” he whispered, “in the real world …” And he’d have to somehow stage his injury, he realized – before McCoy reached him. The penguin was getting louder and louder in his mind … closer, squawking, clinging to a trouser leg.

It was easy enough. All he had to do was stand up and try to walk.

“Mr. Xavier?” McCoy’s voice, at the door; there was the click and rattle of bolt and lock. “Are you all right?”

“No,” he slurred from his heap on the floor, and: “Help, please.”

The door opened. He heard McCoy gasp.

“’Lo Hank.” Charles looked up and smiled. Left just enough blood around his mouth, and dripping down the pale skin of his throat, to convince. “I hurt my tooth.”

“How?” McCoy stammered, kneeling. Charles closed his eyes and breathed out in relief as his penguin flopped back into his mind. It was tired.

“He was tired.

“Had a bad dream. Then I woke up and jumped out of bed – and I tripped, and my lower tooth’s stronger than the upper one … I don’t know. Can I have some antibiotics please?”

“Of course.” The words were high-pitched. “Let me just – oh shit.”

“’Oh shit’ – wha’?”

“I don’t have a key. To your – um.”

“Chain? This is a chain.” Charles rattled it. “It’s heavy.”

“Wait here, just – wait here and I’ll go get one; I’ll be right back.”

“’M not going anywhere,” Charles said to the floor, exasperated, and heard McCoy run out the door.
The penguin was back. All the birds were nesting down; going to sleep. So his grip on the pain receptors should not have faltered.

Charles gasped – coughed out, dragged in another harsh breath through his nose. *No no no* …

He saw the monster yawn – all those sharp white teeth – and stretch, and get up to walk towards him. It raised an eyebrow. And smirked.

When had it become a person?

“Go away,” Charles hissed, and wrested all of his power to the pain receptors; clamped down as tightly as he could. The monster shimmered in his mind’s eye; vanished in the middle of a growl …

“Good riddance.”

Then all he had to do was stare at the floor and wait for McCoy to return.

Which he did, less than ten minutes later. Charles made McCoy wait for him to change into clean clothes. Not that he told him why they were dirty; oh no.

… And not an hour after that, Charles was safely ensconced in the familiar infirmary bed. It was heated, there, and – even in a daze – he had taken a hot shower, scrubbing hard. McCoy had run an I.V. into his left arm; there was a clear bag of antibiotics dripping into his veins. And then McCoy – bless his naïve little cotton socks – had given him enough oxycodone to fell a rhinoceros.

It made him sleep. But before Charles did so, he considered something. In the one trip he remembered from the infirmary to the manor, they had walked outside – and there had been *want* watching him from above … he suppressed the memory. This time they hadn’t put a toe outdoors. *And just as well*, he thought, since McCoy had nattered on and on about the blizzard as he had helped Charles stagger down stairs and through hallways.

Without a blindfold.

Charles smiled at the cold white ceiling. In his panic and dismay, McCoy had forgotten to blindfold him.

And even with his power thrumming in distracting overdrive … or perhaps especially because of that same power, all of it, brought to bear and electric in his mind … Charles now he had a complete record of the entire route. Safely in his memory.

He would retrieve it upon waking. For the moment, though, he let go of all his pain receptors, and let his power – and himself – sleep.

Charles felt much better rested the second time he woke. Perhaps especially because he blinked awake to the scent of … *fried eggs*.

“Oh,” he said, urgently, and sat up in a rush.

“And good morning to you too.” From across the room, Logan grinned at him. He was draped in a chair, leaning it backwards against a wall. One booted foot was planted square on the bed’s railing.

“Slept a while, Mr. X. Hank’s gonna be pissed with you – he’s the one been sitting here this whole time,” Logan hooked a thumb at two books lying on a steel table in one corner, “and he only just took a break for a nap. But … you know what that means?”
“I don’t know what that means,” Charles said in a rush, eyes glued to the plate – the steaming plate – placed next to the books.

“Means: more for you.” And Logan took the plate and held it out to him, with a fork.

Charles stared. Twenty years of Oxford etiquette, and he was perhaps ten seconds away from diluvian drool. Eggs – was that pepper on them? – and shredded cheese, and bread on one side, and there was –

“Logan?”

“Yeah?”

“Is that an orange?”

“What are you, color-blind?”

“No – I mean –” Charles gulped. “Where did you get it? I haven’t had an orange in … in –” He gave it some thought. In Oxford, apples and pears had been the staples, along with strawberries in their season. The greenhouses were guarded closely by the botanical staff, on the understanding that, if the Queen were to come down from Coventry, she would be offered citrus. Lemon, orange, grapefruit – Oxford over Cambridge, now and forever – “By their fruits ye shall know them,” Charles said, staring, and – why am I rambling about an orange, for God’s sake –

“In?” Logan prompted.

“In at least a year.” Charles shook off the memories. Then bit down hard on the inside of his mouth and held out the plate to Logan. “This is lovely, but would you –”

“Nah, X man – I had some already. And that’s how I got McCoy out of here in the first place.” A grin. “Blatant bribery. He took off like a shot, and not just cause my baby’s wearing a halter top.”

Charles hardly heard him; instead, he was focused on moving his tongue through the new gap in his teeth. He felt cool flesh – well, perhaps some heat, but smooth toughness where a wound had been … perhaps something of a scar.

“Logan,” he interrupted. “How did this heal so quickly?”

“You don’t remember? Archangel’s blood, X. We had just enough left over from – that is to say,” Logan dragged in a deep breath; exhaled sharply. “You just needed a bit. Pretty basic – tooth out, some tearing, bit of infection starting up … but you’re all set, now, as good as we can get you. Might ache for a little while.”

Charles felt removed from himself, his thoughts carefully cataloguing, as he took inventory of the new sensations. Chewing, he thought to himself – chewing would be different, now … but he could focus on the right side of his mouth, or:

“I’ll have to invest in a bridge.” He quirked a smile at Logan. “Perhaps you might recommend a dentist.”

“Hell, I wish. There’s one up in Albany, but he’s a civ, so we try not to drag him down here too much.” Logan gave him an assessing look, eyes dark. “You did a bit of a number on it.”

“Mmm.” Charles stared down at his plate.
“I took a peek, an’ McCoy did fine digging the rest out. I’ve seen some teeth knocked around in my time, and those splinters can get nasty.”

*McCoy didn’t* – part of his mind pointed out, and Charles kicked the memories aside. He would focus on breakfast.

“Right.” A deep breath. “And how long have I been asleep?” *This time*, his mind added, snide. And even with his control, Charles couldn’t quell the anger that surged in him. It seemed to be a pattern: get brutalized, get drugged, get some refreshing sleep – only this time there was an omelet at the end of it. *Joy*.

Logan sighed. “Tuesday today.”

Twenty-four hours, then. Charles picked at the orange, casting round for a subject of conversation. “And has the blizzard stopped?”

“Just a while ago, yeah. Didn’t turn out to be that bad … but there’s still quite a bit on the ground, which gets me down.”

“Why so?”

Logan huffed out a long sigh. “No walkies.”

“… Pardon me?”

A broad grin. “The look on your face, Xavier. Eat your food, c’mon. And by: ‘no walkies’, I mean that my Marie and me have to confine ourselves to the great indoors. Which ah, kind of – crimps my style, you know? I –”

“Logan.” A new voice … and Charles, looking at the door, saw a brown-haired woman stroll in before he sensed her with his power. Ten hours’ worth of controlling the pain receptors must have weakened him more than he thought. He should have realized, though: *my baby’s wearing a halter top*, Logan had said … and, in retrospect, the lewd tone had indicated that he had not meant Jean.

Charles covered his confusion with good manners. “Good morning, Miss – um.”

“ ‘Miss’ nothing.” Logan’s grin got even bigger – and the woman interrupted him with a swat to his tufted hair.

“Quit it. I can speak for myself –”

“I know it –”

“– you know it, and if you don’t shut your big mouth for maybe half a minute, I’ll have to hurt you, and: hello Mr. Xavier.” She held out a hand – a hand clothed, Charles noted, in a peach-colored, elbow-length glove. The glove’s lace looked somewhat worse for wear … and its mate, he saw, didn’t match. She was indeed wearing a halter top – over three layers of other shirts, though. “My name’s Marie.”

He took her hand and shook it heartily. “Lovely to meet you,”

“Likewise.” She had a low voice – almost with the hint of a croak? Or perhaps it was the accent. He knew it from classic films he had occasionally shown his students … Deep South, United States Before – but Charles was fascinated to hear it in person. She had a pleasant face and a friendly mouth that quirked up at the corners.
“Is there another chair?” she was asking Logan.

After a deliberate look around, Logan sighed: “Nope. There is no other chair. Damn; I coulda sworn there were at least three –”

“– before you moved them into the closet. You’re lucky I’m feeling lazy.” Marie smiled as she sat down in Logan’s lap. As gracefully, Charles noted, as if she were Britain’s Queen.

“Aren’t you going to eat, Mr. Xavier?”

“Please, do call me Charles.”

Logan glared. “Why don’t I get to call you Charles?”

“Well …” He blinked. “I’m afraid I was trying to be charming.” With a shrug, Charles took a bite of egg … and social niceties disappeared as he felt his eyes roll heavenward. “Oh God, that’s good –”

“Thank him,” Marie said, tipping her head against Logan’s. “He made it.”

“Nah, thank her.” Logan bumped his chin against her cheekbone; Marie smiled and shook some of her hair out over her skin. “She brought the stuff all the way up from Dallas.”

"I figure, I'm going back to Denver? I can take supplies with me."

“Thank you – both of you,” he said fervently … but. Even though his mind was still sparking off the taste of eggs and – butter, pepper salt – and vegetables, sautéed … he still wasn’t that distracted. “Dallas?”

“Yeah.” Marie sighed; then returned Logan’s elbow jab with interest. “Leave off – he’ll find out in the morning.”

Charles set down his fork. “Find out … what?” He stretched out his power – it flickered, and he drew it back to himself with a wince. Rest, Charles thought. Rest, and recover …

“In the morning,” Logan agreed. “Don’t worry, X; ’s nothing too bad. Not for you, at least.”

Marie sighed, and interlaced her gloved fingers with Logan’s. The two of them watched him eat. It would be disconcerting, Charles thought, were it not for the sense of peace in the room – quiet, warm like the blanket on his legs. Strange. Logan was one of the least peaceful people he knew, here. John as well, perhaps, and …

Charles carefully controlled his memories; daubed at his plate with a piece of bread. He sighed.

“Good?” Logan sounded amused.

“More than good. Wonderful.” Turning back to the orange, Charles finished peeling it and began methodically nibbling away the albedo. “Is there a special occasion?”

“Other than my girl visiting? Nah. Well, maybe just to make you jealous. They eat like this at least once a week down there. Not bad.”

“Ah.” Charles carefully set aside the remaining peel, then offered Logan and Marie a section. They accepted. “And one for Jean,” he muttered to himself, placing it in the pile of peel – “where is Jean, by the way?”

“Camped out with some of the techs. Not much work gets done on snow days, usually … although
the way things are goin’ down, this might be the last free day for a while.” Logan shrugged. “Enjoy it while you can.”

Marie leaned back against him, her eyes falling half-shut. “Mm-hm.”

The two started whispering to each other. Charles pretended not to hear. It wasn’t that difficult – the first taste of fruit had almost made him moan. He savored it, chewing slowly, catching every last drop of juice.

All too soon, it was gone. He sighed. “Any chance of a napkin? Or something to carry these?” He indicated the pile of peel and Jean’s piece.

“Sure thing; come on.” Marie scrambled to her feet. She gave Logan a hand; tugged him up. “Bless your heart, every time I touch you you’re heavier.”

“Every time you touch me, baby …” Logan nuzzled her cheek. Then, “Whoa,” he groaned – and his skin … changed? Charles shivered, staring. What on earth –

“Easy.” Marie slipped away from him. “Come on, Charles – we’ll drop your plate off at the mess, rustle you up a napkin. And you need your winter gear, too –”

“Got a change of clothes for you in the bathroom, X man; go nuts. And also – Marie?” Logan crossed his arms in front of his chest. “He gets blindfolded for this part.”

Marie stared at Logan. Then she stared at Charles. “You’re kidding me.”

“Mm,” Charles said, and fled to the bathroom.

He deliberately ignored all the up-and-down cadences of their argument while he changed; then walked back out into the thick of it.

“Charles –” Marie snapped at him. “Logan tells me you’ve been hooked up to the Finder – how many times now?”

“I’ve rather lost track,” Charles replied.

Logan growled – Marie overrode him: “Well. If you can be trusted with that much, I’m pretty damn sure I can show you where to put a damned plate.”

“Baby –” Logan began, gruff.

“Nope.” Marie walked to the door, graceful as a dancer, albeit a tense one, and opened it. “I haven’t received any orders, directives, commands, or even suggestions concerning one Charles Xavier. Not on paper; not in my head. So I say he’s gonna walk without a blindfold.”

“And I say he’s not.”

“Then it’s a good thing I outrank you.” Marie stepped into the hallway “Come on, Charles – as long as …” Her brow quirked; suddenly self-conscious. “As long as I can trust you. Can I?”

Charles hardly heard her. He was staring at the door.

Then: “Oh. Oh, yes.”

His voice was quiet – he did his best to make it heartier; tried a smile in return. “Of course. I’m the most trustworthy person I know.”
“‘Cept Jean, maybe,” Logan growled. A weighty hand landed between Charles’ shoulder blades: Logan, shoving him out the door.

Charles carefully held his orange peel until they reached the mess; Marie gave him a cloth, there, and he wrapped the remnants; shoveled them in a pocket. Then, heart bounding into his mouth, he followed the other two through a series of austere hallways. All right angles; door after door after door … His mind clicked away, cataloging. Time enough, later, to superimpose this information on that he had gathered on his walk with McCoy – and to calculate exact distances, given the length of one pace …

*One Xavier-pace.* His thoughts were gleeful. This could prove so important – knowing the inside of the manor as well as Ororo had known the outside –

“Here we go,” Marie’s voice rang out loud and clear – echoing. She had opened a door and strolled through; Logan waved Charles ahead with a gesture of mock courtesy.

Charles walked inside, and looked around. A large … locker room was the best word for it, perhaps. Nowhere near as welcoming as those of any gymnasium he’d ever visited, however. Light from long fluorescent bulbs – only one on at a time, as Logan flicked switches – and a cold cement floor. Partitions separated compartments; those same spaces opened onto double benches running to the far wall. There were at least five rows, back to back. Each partition was festooned with hooks – and in the occupied compartments, there were different things hanging from those hooks. Articles of clothing, drawstring bags and – his fingers itched to touch – certain pieces of tech that looked so interesting –

“Winter storage back here – c’mon.” Marie’s voice was fainter. Charles dragged his attention away from the miscellany and jogged to catch up. Logan had disappeared.

Marie flicked a switch, and a fluorescent light flared over a compartment three times as big as the others. It was filled with coats. The hooks on the partitions were full; two racks had been crammed in as well. On yet another rack Charles saw cloaks and scarves hanging. There was a battered plastic tub full of hats and another of gloves and mittens.

“Try some of those on.” She hooked a thumb at the coats. “And I’m gonna look –” she fluttered one gloved hand – “for some more of these.”

“Right.” Charles felt excited; chose to encourage the feeling. Rather that, after all, than gloom over his winter clothes left in Oxford. The fur coat he had obtained through trade; the wool one he had saved a full year to purchase at the Christmas market … Raven’s knobbly attempts at scarves …

He gave a wry smile as he swirled a floor-length cloak off one hanger. It was of a hideous green broadcloth, and quite heavy.

“What do you think?” he asked Marie; she took one glance and snorted.

“I think that some flyer’d be pissed with you if you took it.”

“Right.” Charles felt excited; chose to encourage the feeling. Rather that, after all, than gloom over his winter clothes left in Oxford. The fur coat he had obtained through trade; the wool one he had saved a full year to purchase at the Christmas market … Raven’s knobbly attempts at scarves …

“Try some of those on.” She hooked a thumb at the coats. “And I’m gonna look –” she fluttered one gloved hand – “for some more of these.”

“Yeah.” She went back to sorting through the gloves. “If they’re still refining their control, sometimes things like that help them glide. Not that they’d admit it to your face – ha!” Marie pulled a pink glove out of the box. “Not quite Georgia peach, but it’ll do.”

Her bad mood had vanished. Charles watched for a moment as she looked in the box again.
Georgia. Making a mental note to extract more information from Logan – it would not do to interrogate Marie here, despite the stark ambience – he went back to rummaging.

Charles sniffed. The air was not musty, precisely, but there was the unmistakable sense, hanging round the coats, of their having been worn before. He found one child-sized jacket in light blue, with at least a dozen patches on each puffy sleeve. Charles smiled to himself and folded it up, wedged it down the sleeve of a hooded manteau. He’d take it back for Jean.

After he had found three serviceable coats and matched them with as many scarves, hats and gloves as he could fit in the pockets, Charles followed Marie back out.

“Logan?” she called. “Honestly,” a mutter, “you leave him alone for thirty seconds – Logan? Where are you?”

He turned out to be in the corner diagonally opposite storage. “Heyo. And before you ask –” he grinned at Marie, and swished back and forth something looked suspiciously like a cask. “Need-to-know –”

“– basis; ugh. Your last batch could peel paint, remember? Why not just leave it to Paige?”

“Are you insulting my manly ability to –”

Charles tuned out their sparring. Turned on one heel, and stared.

Something was making the back of his neck prickle.

Something … was someone else in the locker room? He stretched out his power; nothing. Listened carefully; and looked in the compartment across from Logan’s. Nothing.

He edged along the dividing bench. Two more spaces opposite each other; nothing. Two more … still nothing …

The armful of clothing was bulky – he couldn’t say that it was making him sweat, though, because it was chilly in the room. But he was … a drop trickled down his back, beneath his sweatshirt.

Sweat.

The realization uncoiled from his stomach and slithered up back of his throat. He could smell – Charles sucked in a breath through his mouth, but the scent still clogged his nostrils – directly in front of him, to the left, and from here to the other wall …

He could smell the man’s sweat.

Man. Thing. Monster. “Whichever,” he said faintly, and leaned back against the edge of a partition behind him. His head was swimming; he didn’t know why. Shock, perhaps, or memory – especially himself, hooking his fingers into belt loops and yanking the man over by them, just to thrust up against one rock-hard thigh –


The space across was almost as large as storage had been. And in it, there was …

Metal.

Crowbars, ingots, random lumps and scraps scattered around canisters on one side of the
compartment. There were two buckets full of metal casings; Charles would guess that boxes stacked high against one wall contained bullets. He dragged his eyes over the thick chains hanging as a partition, and stared in sickened fascination at the other walls.

Some compartments in this locker room had coats hanging from hooks.

This one had knives.

Well. Knives, daggers, bayonets ... and one pair of ... swords, curved and glittering in the gloom. The entire space glittered – like a deadly constellation, silver in darkness. Charles was shivering in earnest now. He breathed in through his mouth. In. Out. Focus on that. He focused.

And noticed: to be fair, there were other things. There was a bucket in one corner. Charles looked in it – a sponge lay swollen and grey in a few inches of murky water. There were two stained towels by the bucket. There was a coat – dark and somewhat shabby – hanging from a hook. There was a scarf dangling out of one pocket, and – was that a hat on the floor? Something to wear in winter, he saw: cable knit and a dark color.

A lifetime of haranguing untidy students made his response automatic. Charles shifted his own coats to his left arm. Then he picked the hat up.

And dropped it, when he realized it was damp.

His mind flew and catalogued; his power slapped him into realizing: the hat was damp, the towels – he felt them – were damp. All the cloth was soaked with sweat, cooling but not yet cold – is he here is he – The man’s scent reached out sharp claws from those bits of cloth, from the grimy water in the bucket; curled round his throat, choked him. His gasp sounded high-pitched and tinny; Charles didn’t care. He clung to his armful of coats and backed away. Get away –

“Hey X man – come outta there.”

“Right, of course.” Charles backed straight into a wall of solid muscle; yelped in surprise. “Sorry – sorry, I –”

“You –” Logan looked past him, grimacing as his nostrils flared. “Yeah, come out. Come away. Those ain’t for show.”

“What – whose –” Odd, to have to focus on deceiving Logan, when he, Charles, knew so well already … just whose those weapons were.

Logan didn’t say anything more. Just herded him out of the locker room, with Marie on his other side.

They met Alex on the way back to the dormitory. Charles, his power darting out in frantic fits and spurts – is he here is he here? – had sensed him in time for Logan to tie the blindfold. Alex had taken him the rest of the way; Charles had hardly said goodbye to Marie.

He would regret that later, perhaps, Charles told himself as he sat on his bed, head between his knees. But he definitely did not regret that it had been Alex, and not Logan, who had locked him back in his chain.

Alex merely said, “Whew,” fanned a hand in front of his own face, and gave Charles a smirk before leaving. In contrast, Logan would have smelled the blood and come, dried onto the sheets where Charles had rolled in his sleep, and …
… *what would* he have done? *What could he possibly do?*

Gritting his teeth – it did smell to high heaven, good lord: blood and come and the remnants of his own sweat - Charles tossed all of the orange peels into his fire, one at a time. Then, carefully, he folded Jean’s drawing away into Ororo’s book; slid all of his gifts beneath his bed. Logan had given him that bear grease, he thought, massaging some of it into his chafed ankle; he seemed to hate the idea of Charles being chained. But what he would do if he knew the other things …

Charles closed his eyes. The heady scent of orange helped him concentrate, helped him steer his thoughts into different channels.

And helped him conclude: even if his mind was not yet attuned enough to know how Logan would have reacted … it was still strong enough to overcome memories of a monster.

Wednesday morning, Charles half expected to wake chained to the metal headboard and striped with ejaculate. Since that proved not to be the case, he already felt slightly more cheerful than he had for a while. *Perhaps,* he thought: perhaps the man had taken seriously his threat of self-harm. Which was ridiculous, of course – he had absolutely no intention of dying here.

“None,” Charles repeated – under his breath, though, so Angel wouldn’t hear as she closed the door behind him. He strode downstairs to the kitchen. “He won’t kill me and Frost won’t kill me; therefore I certainly won’t kill me.”

It was convenient, though, that, the night before – *no* – two nights ago, the man had seemed so completely and utterly convinced. Charles allowed himself to remember, briefly, those grey-green eyes widening, a ring of white around the iris – there had been sweat beading on the other's brow, he remembered … those eyebrows had been damp, and the eyelashes –

“Enough,” he growled to himself, and opened the door.

He had not expected to be left alone at night – the actual outcome was one positive of his morning. Two additional? The rainbow burst of joy from Jean – *Mr. Xavier look look!* – and …

Charles’ jaw dropped.

And Sean, sitting on the other side of the table, looking as though he had never left.

“Hey, Mr. Xavier,” he croaked.

“Sean!” Charles bounded around the table and wrapped him in a bear hug. “How wonderful to see you! How are you? How did you get home?”

For a long moment, Sean was still. Then he hugged Charles back. Gave him an awkward pat. Charles felt a brief flicker of unease – Sean was bony, his shoulder blades jutting.

“I got back yesterday.” Sean’s voice was hoarse. “How’s it been here?”

“Perfectly well. Jean and I have been working together; we had a bit of a break, you understand, with the snow.” Charles kept his words light as his mind clicked along faster and faster, anxious. Sean’s red hair was dull; his skin looked papery around the temples. “I just met Logan’s Marie, and picked out some moth-eaten coats. How are the others? Ororo and Bobby? John?”

Sean stared at the tabletop. “They’re good.”
Even one touch of Charles’ power was enough to tell him that he had said the wrong thing. *But why?*

“What’s the matter, Sean?”

There was no answer. Charles flicked a look at Jean. She stared back at him, round-eyed – a whisper of *Maybe he misses them too?*

“Well.” Charles softened his tones. “I’m glad to see you back. We both missed you very much. And I didn’t mean to interrogate you,” he waggled his eyebrows, “on your first day back, to boot.”

“… That’s O.K.” Sean looked up at him – and there was a hint of a smile, thank God. “They just - don’t want me to talk much. I kind of hurt my throat, when I fell – so I have to take it easy,” he enunciated carefully, “for a little while.”

How on earth would one make a connection between ‘throat’ and ‘fall’? It took a great effort to control his immense curiosity, but Charles managed it. Surely there would be more than enough time for questions later. “Then I’ll just make you some tea, shall I?”

He split the section of orange between Sean and Jean, and then brewed three cups of tea, tensing up with each one he poured. *For fear and pain and far too far to fall* were wafting from Sean like clouds of smoke. And since Sean had no way of managing traumatic memories – Charles checked the locks on his own *fear and pain and blood and come on my face, God* – it would be far better to avoid any sensitive topics. For the next little while, at least.

“Drink up.” Charles placed the mugs in front of the two children; sipped at his own. “Although I suppose you could have all the coffee you wanted, in Dallas.”

Sean stared at the tabletop. “Not a whole lot, but John – John was happy.”

Charles saw Sean's fingers, spindly and pale, wrap around the mug. The alarm he felt trebled - something was seriously -

“-wrong, Logan. And I'd like to know what.”

Logan spat onto the snow. “You want the short version or the long version?”

“Depends on which has the most information in it.”

A harsh grunt. Charles resisted the urge to sigh. Logan had been as bad-tempered as a mule since Marie had left, “Tuesday night, Xavier,” and: “She says ‘good-bye.’ Unlike you.”

Logan was continuing, though, gnawing on his cigar viciously. “Right. Short version. Kid took a real bad fall, broke his leg in two places. His, ah, mutation” Logan slanted him a look, “he didn’t tell you about it, did he?”

Charles shook his head.

“Hunh. Not like you to mind your own business, X.”

“I have my moments.”

“Yeah, whatever. Marie likes you, you know?” Logan's seeming non sequitur became clear, with, "And she says that you should know a helluva lot more than folks are letting on to you. Something
about you being responsible," he drawled, "and kind, and all that."

"I'm flattered."

"No, she's flattered. You do that a lot, Xavier? Bat those baby blues and bring the ladies running? Well let me make one thing clear," and the cigar stabbed down to Charles' sternum, "X man? Stay away from my girl."

Charles paused, then snorted. "First, she's in Dallas; second, she's more than capable of taking care of herself; and third ... she's rather ridiculously in love with you, you know."

A pause. Then: "Really?"

"Bloody hell - if you need me to tell you these things, you should ask to be reassigned to Dallas. Spend time with her there."

"And miss our epic bear hunts?" Logan grinned, switching the rifle from his shoulder to beneath his arm. "Wouldn't dream of it."

_Epic, my arse_, Charles thought, grumpy. Mid-morning, and for all his telepathic gift winging through the woods in search of game animals ... they hadn't caught a thing.

"Anyway - Sean got a nasty broken leg, and his vocal cords got pretty ripped up because of all the screaming –"

“Screaming?” Charles’ skin had begun to crawl – even though his winter coat was warm. The memories of his own screams plucked at his mind; he set them aside, gritting his teeth. It was only Wednesday; it had happened Sunday night … he just needed time to recover.

“He’s got this sonic scream deal … uh. Kinda hard to describe? Mostly uses it to smash up glass’n’things, incapacitate people. Oh, and he can fly.”

Silence. Charles closed his mouth with a snap. “… Fly?"

“Yep. He trains with Angel. She’s been told to take it easy on him for a while, though. Even with Archangel’s blood …” Logan grimaced. “I don’t like those damn aches in the bones, you know, after you’ve healed it all up. And mine usually go away in an hour or so. Gotta be tough for that kid.”

_Such pain._ He had left crawling skin for outright shivers some moments ago. Wrapping his scarf closer, Charles made a firm resolution: table any discussion with Sean about injuries; make sure he got plenty of food and stayed hydrated; pay quiet attention to him, but back off if unwelcome …

Charles sighed. Young men were tricky beasts - and he himself had been viewed as a bit of an authority on troubled youth, at Oxford. How to reach out to Sean? Perhaps they should take him along on their next attempt at hunting. Hopefully more successful - since the one at present, he thought, checking the action of his rifle, was proving to be a bust.

Or perhaps he, Charles, would trust Sean to open up and talk in his own time. Confidences could not be rushed – especially if the confider was in pain.

Charles had taught and counseled for so many years … that he was tempted to lay a bet with himself, or with Logan. Highest odds on Sean taking two weeks to warm up to him. Middling odds on his spilling his guts in less than a few days. Lowest odds on him refusing to talk, period. Charles knew children, and hardship, well enough; he knew that some secrets begged to be shared. Knew that the
pressure would, eventually, be too much.

So, for all his knowledge, what happened later took him completely by surprise.

One final surprise, then – but not a positive one: what Sean actually did. Warming up, talking things through, confiding – and confiding in Charles? He did none of these things.

Instead, ten days after his return, Sean ran away.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

With the next chapter posting (v. soon) there will be links to ... fanart! :) Excited author iz excited!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In all fairness, Charles thought later … during those ten days, he had been distracted by things other than Sean. Chief among them: his own powers.

Perhaps he had gotten somewhat carried away.

Not truly carried away, though. If that had been the case - if his raven, for example, could have lifted his physical body, Charles would have told it to do so, and to fly him as far as it could: away, away. Into the rising of the sun; back to Oxford; as far and as fast as it could fly … from what eventually happened.

The day after Sean’s return, Charles decided that Ororo’s map of the manor grounds needed a counterpart: an indoor one. Rooms and wings; twists and turns – to say nothing of its underground sprawl – all of these, he would map onto his mind.

And he did. He had been working on it for over a week.

“And maybe one day you’ll even write it down,” Charles murmured, making himself comfortable on his bed. “Perhaps like Ororo did …” He folded his hands over his heart, closed his eyes, and focused on making his breathing as deep and regular as possible. He had changed his routine just slightly, over the past week or so. No longer could he send his raven flying and remain above his blankets, waiting in a lucid dream, back in his room. It was getting too cold.

“Not even November,” he sighed – watching his breath puff white. His fire burned bravely, but he had been almost too absent-minded to gather much wood that afternoon. Even Logan had remarked on it. “Hello, Mr. X?” – with a light cuff to the head. “Anybody home?”

No, Charles would have said, my raven is flying and soon I’ll be gone. With Jean, of course – and – why the hell not – Sean too. Sean could literally fly, after all … so if worse came to worse, he could escape with Jean while Charles created a distraction from any pursuit. They could take any additional clothing they needed from storage; they could eat the meat that Charles and Logan had smoked, two days after Sean’s return.

Flying, Charles’ raven fluttered its wings, and gave him the memory:

“‘Epic bear hunt,’ maybe not so much.” Logan had laid the carcasses to one side that Thursday, in the stable room where he had skinned them. “But nothin’ to sneeze at. Especially given our blizzard, yeah? I’d expect them to have been holed up.”

Charles counted: two opossums, a rabbit and a skunk. Logan had done exceptional work to keep the
glands of the last from rupturing, thank goodness, but: “McCoy will have to test them all,” he said, firmly. “And we’ll have to cook the daylight out of those –” he winced at the – possums, Logan had called them. They weren’t native to Britain. “I can’t say I fancy eating that enthusiastic a scavenger.”

“No worse than catfish,” Logan said. “Meat is meat, and we’re going to run out of it by February. We always do. Tell you what: McCoy does his thing, and we can cut ’em all into strips and smoke ’em. I got a place for it.”

And Logan showed it to Charles. A ruined house, somehow with half a chimney still standing. Logan shimmied up the crumbling stone to check the stoppage he had put in place earlier, then hung the meat inside and built a fire with green wood. It had taken them some time to gather the right sort, and in sufficient quantity – “for once, it’s gotta be wet too, y’know?” – and Logan had taken it upon himself to guard the smokehouse from coyotes overnight. “Though really, if they want to join the party – I’m not gonna say ‘no’.”

The coyotes had not felt so inclined – a shame, Charles thought, since he could have used some fur to line the hood of his manteau. In his thoughts the next day, the memory of the compartment full of coats sparked something in him: escape, wafting at him with the odor of mothballs: escape escape escape.

He chose not to remember the compartment full of knives.

No, Charles had told himself, firmly. He wasn’t going to think of the weapons, wall after glittering wall. After all, winter would bring its own axe down on their necks soon: impenetrable cold and snow. He didn’t know how soon. But he did know that every single day he took, even to plan, was one day closer to bars of ice locking his cage – and locking it for another half year at least.

That resolution had been Friday morning. At Friday’s dinner, Sean had been gone, but “In the infirmary,” Angel had told them cheerfully, and, “He’ll be O.K.”

So Charles had taken that opportunity to have a long conversation with Jean. Had anyone walked into the kitchen then, he or she would have supposed them to be woolgathering, but …

Immobile on his bed, dreaming, Charles smiled at the memory of that talk … now a week past. He was not ashamed to have a six-year-old for a teacher; far from it. No, Charles thought – only question about it was: why on earth had he waited so long – to ask her to teach him in the first place? She had offered. And he needed a shield – to ensure that Frost would never find out his plans … Frost can be evaded. Everyone can be deceived …

Especially if he made his own powers stronger.

Raven … The all-seeing bird … It soared over the wooded hills surrounding the manor; darted round the landmarks Ororo had labeled so carefully. Then, smiling on his bed, his eyes still closed …

Charles sent it flying north and east, soaring away from the waning gibbous moon.

First Syracuse, he thought. Then Albany.

For if he could make it to Albany with the children, then he could bribe someone to hide them. Or – Charles’ smile turned grim – he could find agents of another government – the Free West? Truly? his thoughts whispered, worried, but: “Whatever it takes,” he replied. He could bribe them – with information, if not his own abilities.

Or he could use those abilities to … persuade. He was already planning on using them in every other aspect of his escape. To take one example: Logan had showed him the smokehouse. Ororo had
marked it: *house w/ chimney; used?* on her own drawing. And his raven had presented him with the information, and thus with their exact location relevant to the manor, as soon as the house had come into his sight.

Such knowledge …

Knowledge of the house and grounds, Jean and Sean putty in his hands … Frost looking increasingly distracted over the past week, allowing him time back with Logan and McCoy at unpredictable intervals. It would be so easy to send a message covering his own tracks, telling one of the three that he was with one of the other …

Would he ever have such an opportunity again?

And so his raven’s flights: every night now, from Thursday 23 October to – tonight, the 30th. Tomorrow, Charles realized – tomorrow was the last day of October. Halloween, if one were to celebrate it. He did not, of course; but perhaps he could explain Bonfire Night to Jean. She would be so pleased at the idea of a party – perhaps as pleased as she had been when he had exclaimed over the pendants she had made … made of fire …

His raven, soaring over the vast concrete walls of a stadium – *Cornell’s*, Charles decided, and four and a half miles away … his raven cried out and gave him the memory. Jean’s smile, and –

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*Careful, Mr. Xavier.*

“I’m – um.” Charles tried extending his arm again, wincing. On his shoulder, his owl hooted. Its eyes were as wide as dinner plates. “I’m not sure it likes me, Jean.”

The phoenix was staring at him from the immense tree at the forefront of Jean’s mind: staring, and hissing like a teakettle.

*Maybe …* Jean sounded worried. Her brow was creased in a frown. *Maybe if you just asked him again?* Charles caught just one glimpse of her milk teeth bearing down on her lower lip.

“Be careful, dear. There’s no need to hurt yourself just because I can’t charm a phoenix. I suppose it must be immune to blue eyes.”

*I just – I’m not sure why he doesn’t like you.*

“Ah! Then you do admit it?” Charles smiled down at Jean, deliberately trying to lighten the mood. She had given him permission to visit her mind at the dinner table. She had seemed thrilled at the prospect of teaching him how to make a concealment token of his own – and Charles had admitted to being curious. Would those he created burn with the same fires as Jean’s? Or would they be different, somehow?

He had not thought that the phoenix would behave the way it did. That it would refuse to land on his shoulder – and only slice at his arm with a razor-sharp beak. That it would then fly away and stay away, looking for all the world like a bonfire blazing on one branch of the tree.

Looking at him with distrust.

Charles sighed. “And here I thought I had a way with birds.” The owl hooted softly on his shoulder; Jean gave him a sweet smile.

*You do. He just – well. Maybe he’s just nervous. We could try again some time …*
“Hm.” He adjusted a gauntlet. “I’m afraid I rather need to shield my thoughts from Lady Frost – and soon.”

Why?

Charles stroked the feathers on his owl’s head. “It’s … it’s a surprise. The less you know about it, the better.”

Is it your plan?

His stomach lurched. How had she – “And what plan might that be, Jean?”

Your plan to get the others back – Ororo, and Bobby and John. You already brought back Sean.

Charles thought back, in consternation, to the day the other children had left … oh shite. He had said that, hadn’t he?

Thank god for the Oxford missions: for adaptability and thinking on his feet. “Well, Jean, if that were the case,” he gave her a mischievous look, “you must admit you would be better off knowing nothing about it. That way Lady Frost won’t uncover anything in –” he waggled his eyebrows “– a surprise attack!”

Jean dimpled up at him; Charles was about to grin back, but started and half-turned at the smoky hiss from the phoenix on its branch. “Oh dear.”

Sorry about him being rude. She looked wistful. Maybe he’ll be happier to see you next time.

“Perhaps.” Could the damn thing sense, somehow, that he was … slightly, only very slightly, concealing the truth from Jean? He himself could hear the dissonance of not true beneath the melody of his voice … but Jean hadn’t seemed to notice. Could a phoenix hear music?

And really, when full disclosure of a plan to escape could get Jean killed, one would think the bloody bird would be grateful for this – the slightest of deceptions. Charles fixed it with a glare in return.

Here, Mr. Xavier. I can at least show you how I make them.

“I would like that.”

Except for the faint noise from the phoenix, it was peaceful on the threshold of Jean’s mind. There was a cool breeze that just barely ruffled his owl’s feathers. Charles had long since set down his sword and shield. He watched as Jean picked up a leaf that had wafted from the tree and held it, together with a strand of grass, cupped in her hands.

Find the parts of your power that are best. I have grass because it grows, and a leaf because it shades. When I put them together – Jean did, and Charles felt the back of his neck prickle. The yellow-orange leaf whirled in her hands and flashed into gold; gold threaded over the grass – beaded on it and stretched it out into a length of chain. When I put them together, I have the perfect place for one of his feathers.

“And what do those feathers do?” Charles asked.

It has to do with what he does, Mr. Xavier. He –

“Bursts into flame and burns to ashes; then rises from those ashes alive again – yes?”
A smile. Yes.

“The story of the phoenix is a truly lovely one. There are some fairy tales from Russia Before, I believe, of the Firebird – but it’s not quite the same idea. Rather, resurrection is a common theme in –”

Mr. Xavier?

“Yes?”

… Are you going to pay attention?


Jean smiled back at him; but then her face grew solemn. Then, when he gives me a feather, I put it in the leaf and – I see the burning part. Like looking into the sun.

“Yes.

“I tell the feather and leaf to burn away – and to come back.

“And this goes around another person’s neck … and he or she can control the burning and –”

Charles puzzled over the correct word; ‘resurrection’ seemed far too weighty. “And the restoration?”

Yes.

“And can then connect that cycle … to a memory.”

Yes.

Charles felt another barrage of questions on the tip of his tongue, but Jean gave him another serious look.

Watch.

And he looked up to where Jean had stretched out her hand. The phoenix had flown close – silently, he noticed with a shiver – and had nestled in the grass to listen to their conversation. Charles had no doubt that it could hear her words. Its fiery eyes glittered at him fiercely, but with one – Please? – from Jean, it let one long feather fall from its wings, and flew back to the tree.

I really don’t know why he’s so upset. Here – watch.

She placed the feather inside the leaf. And – Charles squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. Even in her mind … she was right. It was like looking into the sun.

Jean held out the pendant to him, with a shy smile. You can keep this one – take it into your mind, and see how it works.

“Thank you.” He could feel the heat of the jewel, even through his gauntlet. Then curiosity struck him: “What does my mind look like to you, Jean? Here –” he stretched out his hand, “I see a tree guarding a forest. I’ve seen Angel’s neighborhood, and in –” Charles caught himself – “in other places, I’ve seen other things. Mountains, rivers … a castle, once.”

Jean’s eyes widened. Lady Frost has a palace.

Charles stilled. “Does she?”
Yes. It's in the air, on the clouds. I've only seen it - I haven't been there.

“Ah.”

It’s made of ice.

“Of course.” He felt his jaw tighten; then sought to lighten the mood – he could suss more information out of Jean later. For now, though, he was curious …

But you’ve never asked me to your mind, Mr. Xavier.

“Oh – well, you’re always welcome there.” With a twinge of conscience, Charles added, “Do please give me some advance warning, though.” Time enough to – to hide what she doesn’t need to know …

Thanks. A smile. I like the curtains you have for it.

“… Curtains?”

They’re shiny. Like sparkly sheets. A sudden image – Charles breathed in a gasp, for it was as though the tree had rustled all its leaves at once. A woman with red hair shot through with white, and a lined face, hanging pristine white sheets on a clothesline, bending to smile …

“What's that, Jean?”

It’s a good memory. It’s one of my favorites.

Charles had felt an ache in his throat throb up against the backs of his eyes; that was undoubtedly why they had stung so suddenly.

Perhaps it had been the heat from the phoenix: it had flown down again and had fixed itself in the grass between the two of them. It hissed, eyes burning.

“I have to go now, Jean.” He had coughed. “Tomorrow’s a busy day for both of us.” Even though their schedule had grown irregular, Frost had been dialing up the power on the Finder all week. Jean, though, had kept busy coloring an elaborate picture. Charles would ensure that she would stay busy doing just that. “I’ll expect you in my mind – some other day. I’ll make you high tea, shall I? And we’ll have a lovely time.”

An eager smile. Thank you. I’ll see you.

Charles waved to her in farewell, gripping the pendant. Darkness fell gently, edging him out of her mind –

– and then they had blinked at each other, across the kitchen table.

Jean’s grey eyes had sparkled. That was fun, Mr. Xavier – but then Angel had come in, caroling, “Sleepy time for students,” and Charles had rolled his eyes, and the quiet moment had passed.

His raven was coasting on an eddy, but: Go, Charles urged, fly fast – faster … The night was clear and cold – and there was Syracuse, on the horizon. On his bed, eyes closed, Charles nonetheless saw the faint lights and felt the wind on his face. Faster, further, he called, and the raven picked up speed – he smiled to see it fly with such joy.

It called back to him, and sent him a memory:
Late that Friday night, Charles had held up Jean’s pendant in his thoughts. It was so strange, to have a physical motion echoed in his mind … to see armor, and a token glimmering fire at the end of a golden chain … and to look down at his side on the bed, and see the sharp bones of his wrists and the frayed cuffs of his blue sweater.

It had taken him forever to get it completely clean, along with the stained sheets – but Charles had done so. An he was hardly surprised to see the dark blue knit looking the worse for wear.

… But in his thoughts …

Charles tried to achieve the particular detachment of the lucid dream; one of his favorite pastimes from youth onward. He used the same dreaming when his raven flew … now, could he see inside his own mind?

He knew he was seated. He raised an eyebrow at himself – he could see the iridescence of his veils, surrounding him, reflecting bright in the planes and angles of his armor. Odd, to be seated so comfortably in full battle gear … but this was his mind, Charles reflected with a smile. He could do what he liked.

It seemed only appropriate, then, that the room that shimmered into focus around him … was the reading room.

Charles breathed out a long sigh of pleasure. Specifically, Duke Humfrey’s Library, in the Bodleian, with its timbered ceiling and long tables, its balconies and arches and the smell of gilt and parchment … It was more beautiful, he thought, satisfied, than – than the man’s library. Far more beautiful.

Light glowed through the massive window behind him, falling golden and warm over the pendant in his hand. Without a second thought, Charles put it over his head; around his neck –

He felt a line of fire lick at his throat. Nothing like the cold steel, no … it was powerful, but a power he could wield. Charles instinctively knew that to be true. Jean had gifted it to him – just the smallest flicker, but there.

Closing one hand around the pendant, he called up a memory. One he’d never want Frost to see … “Just for practice,” he told himself.

The memory of that kiss.

He, Charles, had feathered his fingers over the man’s cheekbones. Then one tip of the chin had lured the other back from where he had flinched away. Odd, to think of … the man … as one to flinch. As … fearful …

Fearful, and really not that bright. Charles smirked at the memory: the man’s eyes wide and green, staring at his mouth, then up at his eyes, then down at his mouth again. The strong line of his jaw, flexing, as Charles had reeled him in like a fish on a line …

And that kiss …

Charles had traced the man’s lips with his tongue, and eventually the other had lost the steel-tight tension in the lines of his shoulders, and had tried the same thing in response – and it had been tame, really, compared to the next –

Charles touched his own lips with an armored finger, remembering. It had only taken one schoolboy taunt – a curl of tongue and a lusty look – and the other had gone from flinching to fearless in the
blink of an eye. Licking at Charles’ tongue, over his teeth and almost to his tonsils – panting into his mouth like he was desperate for it – grinding heat down against him like a –

“Ngh.” His voice felt thick in his throat. “That memory. Right, I command you,” he spoke to the pendant, “to make this memory disappear – and only reappear when I say the word, um, Kuss.” ‘Kiss,’ in German, he realized – and Charles frowned. Why would he have chosen that? Unless he were remembering the Klimt that his mother had so loved – Der Kuss – its lovers entwined in iridescence and gold …

“Kuss,” he said again, experimenting. And there – a flicker on a bookcase to his right. “Ah-ha.” Grinning, he walked over to the case; picked up a book with a cover dyed dark green. Charles opened it, and – oh – there was the memory.

He blinked. He had almost forgotten just how the man’s fingers had twined into his hair – tightening, then relaxing, stroking through the locks and pressing warm against his scalp – stroking just as his tongue had uncurled hot and wet against Charles’ own …

All the sensations sent goosebumps down his back; he snapped the book shut. Then said: “Kuss,” and opened it … “Amazing.” The pages were blank.

Charles took a closer look. The book’s dark green leather cover now looked oddly dusty, opaque. “So,” he considered, “if I were to change my mind, and instead ask that this power,” he touched the pendant, “shield all of that – um. Encounter? his mind offered, and then, slyly: … tangle? “All of that,” Charles said firmly. “Conceal it, and reveal it again when I say, ‘Küsse. Then …”

Then the leather of all the books on one entire shelf of the case rippled and dulled. Fascinated, Charles tried again. “Küsse.” How interesting – all of the leather brightened and shone, obviously polished … from the dark green on the left, across to where the bindings turned slowly and slowly … red … ending with one cover of vivid crimson on the far right –

And that was enough of that, surely.

Charles walked back to the window. He ran one hand along the back of the ornate golden chair, touched one of the curtains roped off to one side of the glass, and considered. How could he make a token similar to Jean’s? He had made things, after all, in this room – repairing books with glue, and a needle and thread …

Instinct made him look. And – sure enough – there on one of the tables lay his old tools. Smiling, Charles walked to the table. He sat. A pot of glue and a sharp pair of scissors; a needle and thread – beautiful silver thread – and plenty of paper. Paper in square sheets: more than he had ever had to work with at one time in the Bodleian, truly, and of a gorgeous creamy weave.

_Might as well experiment._ “Hmm.” He cut one sheet into several equal squares. Then he folded the corners of one in to the center, making a small diamond.

Jean had said something about the power he should use … The parts of your power that are best, he remembered. “Well,” and his words sounded loud in the silence of the reading room. “That means I need you.”

He had only just finished speaking when his raven flew through the immense window, making the drapes flutter. It perched on the back of the ornate chair and tilted a proud head at him. Throne or, raven sable upon it – the effect of the whole was that of a coat of arms. “Show-off,” Charles laughed, and the raven squawked and fluttered over to him.
“You see?” He showed it the folded paper; it croaked. “I think that if I put a feather from you in here, this token might have your speed, your intelligence, your … well. I don’t know.”

One black piece of down had wafted to the tabletop almost before he asked, but at his last words the raven jabbed its beak behind his ear. “It’s not that you don’t have ability,” Charles said, exasperated. It’s that – I don’t know what this pendant would do, with your feather.” He frowned. “I want it to conceal. I want it to veil …”

Oh.

Heart in his mouth, he rose walked to one of the shimmering silvery drapes. Plucked at it – something made him reluctant to use the scissors – and breathed out in wonder as a scrap of the veil detached, and curled in his palm like a thrumming butterfly. I hope this works. Charles walked back to the table. He wrapped the black feather in the iridescent veil, tucked both inside the paper, glued the paper shut. Then he added a few silver stitches for good measure, and doubled up the thread to make a cord. Only when the raven croaked at him did Charles realize: he had been whispering as he sewed: forget … forget … forget …

“Forgetfulness with every stitch? Well.” He picked up the small square token. “We’ll see – oh –”

For at the touch of his fingers, the paper had flashed.

Now, it was heavier in his hand. It shone bright as opal, with flecks of obsidian in its depths. And the thread had turned into a pliant loop of – not metal, thank goodness, but something like fabric, if fabric could have an electric quality. Wide-eyed, Charles touched the loop – and gasped at the shock that went through him.

“Your speed, your intelligence,” he told the raven. “Your strength. And over it all … ‘forget.’” Forget, and … and what he remembered from his very first waking night at the manor: small and black – you can’t see me in the night – reaching out to Raven from the tower … And now, not two months later, he had this.

Even looking at the token was fascinating. In the golden light streaming through the windows, it sent iridescent spots glimmering over the dark walnut of the table. “Oh, I really want to know if it works,” Charles had breathed. “But how …”

The raven had fluffed its feathers, making no answer. But it didn’t matter. Tucking the token away into one gauntlet, Charles had already come up with a plan.

And that plan … had worked.

Flat on his bed, Charles sighed to himself. It had worked. He had done it. But he still was not sure if he should have done it.

But: it was the night of 30 October – perhaps edging into the morning of the 31st. Charles’ raven screeched as it winged east – further and futher, faster … The night of 30 October. He had tested the token on the 25th, in the morning. And the next afternoon …

Well. Sean had had five days, and the resilience of youth, to help his mind recover. Another screech and there was the memory:

Saturday had begun like any other day. Jean had still been upstairs. Charles, walking into the kitchen, had gone automatically to begin brewing tea. He did not even flinch at the worked metal
box anymore.

But then he had caught the sound of quiet crying, and had turned slowly on one heel. Sean was resting his head on his crossed arms. His shoulders shook.

“… Sean?” Charles placed the mugs carefully back on the counter. “What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing.” Sean gulped, and Charles thought back to his imaginary bet with Logan. Middling odds: Sean spilling his guts in less than a few days – ha – And then his heart caught up with his thoughts, and he winced at his own unkindness.

“Sean,” he said quietly. Moved just as quietly to his side – though not so silently that he would startle him with a touch. Because that was what Charles did: just as for countless other students – crying for dead or dying parents, for burned or broken homes … or only for winter’s cold … Charles sat down next to Sean and wrapped one arm around his thin shoulders, holding him close. “Shh. Shh, it’s all right.”

“No ‘s not,” Sean wept, but: “Shhh. Shhh-sh-sh …” Charles kept going with soothing sounds. He did not flinch away from Sean’s pressing closer. Two shirts and a sweater – it was quite cold, that morning – and still the tears soaked through. “What is it?”

A sob. “I c-can’t tell you.”

“Can’t tell me? Or – won’t?”

Sean gave a hiccup of a laugh. “Won’t.”

“All right,” Charles murmured. “All right.”

For a few long moments he just held Sean, letting him cry. Jean walked into the room; her eyes went wide, and Charles brought one finger to his lips. She did not even need to send an image; instead, she crept to the icebox, removed a withered apple, and left. Stretching out a thread of power, Charles felt her small back settle against the wood of the door. Good - she could slow down Alex when he inevitably returned. He sent her a wave of reassurance, and looked back at Sean.

“Is there anything I can do to help, Sean?” He kept his voice quiet. “Anything at all?”

He hadn’t done so for a while, but now he threaded his voice with gold: trust me trust me tell me … Charles inhaled slightly through his nose – it was more powerful, now; the gold glowing irresistibly. He could feel the thrum of his words, winding trust me around Sean’s thoughts …

“I got hurt really bad in Dallas, Mr. Xavier. I –” Sean gulped. “I fell. An’ yesterday – I got taken to Albany, to the doctor there –”

Charles waited. Made a quiet sound of encouragement.

“They had to reset my leg,” Sean said in a rush. “And it really hurts now –” His face crumpled into tears again, and Charles sighed.

“Oh, Sean. I’m so sorry.”

He fell silent, then, and thought … It could work. It might be helpful, in fact. “Sean?” He kept the soothing and quiet tone foremost, wove trust me trust me through it – gold thread …

“You know that I’m a telepath. Would you let me look into your mind? I might be able to – to take
the edge off some of them. To make the memories less vivid. Would you let me?"

Sean snuffled for a long moment. Then: “Will it hurt?”

“No.” Charles squeezed his shoulder. “It won’t hurt a single bit.”

The reply came in a small voice, almost a squeak. “O.K.”


He had never truly understood that expression, he thought, distantly, as he sent his raven flying straight into Sean’s mind. It gave a hoarse croak – *all clear*, Charles thought, and stepped into Sean’s mind himself. It was usually best, though, to echo children’s words in times of great emotion. It soothed them.

“How will you be fine, Sean,” he whispered, holding up his gauntleted hands and staring into the beautiful water. Sean’s mind was an aquarium – who would have thought it? With a small, closed-off area in the center – for observation, perhaps. Plenty of air to breathe, surrounded by glass walls in the round …

“Amazing …”

Charles caught sight of the stingrays almost immediately. They were floating through a muddied area of the immense tank. “Fetch them,” he told raven – and almost laughed with glee as he saw it fly through water, glass and water, as though both were air. “Then why couldn’t my penguin climb stairs?” he mused, and: “Perhaps because that was a projection through actual space, not mental.” Charles paused, then shook his head. “Or perhaps it’s just stubborn.”

The raven herded the stringrays towards the observation glass. The next thing Charles knew, they were flopping around at his feet, spreading wet onto the concrete floor.

“Sean,” he called gently. “Will you come here, please?”

A strange shriek, muffled behind the glass … and there was Sean, somehow propelling himself through the water. Charles didn’t bother to think about how he was doing it; he’d have more than enough time to consider Sean’s talent later. Instead, he pointed at the stingrays. “I just wanted to ask,” he said, “before I did anything. These,” and Charles checked, “are your memories of your visit to the doctor.” And indeed … all the *pain* and *fear* and an array of medical equipment was patterned in the stingrays’ scales. “I’m going to take the edge off. Just a bit.”

A shimmer, and Sean had passed through the glass and into the observation area – somewhat less gracefully, Charles noted, than his raven. Sean’s voice, in his mind, rasped worse than it had in the physical world. “O.K.”

“O.K.,” Charles agreed. He drew his sword – “This won’t hurt,” he reassured Sean – and methodically removed each stinger. Then he ground the stingers under one of his boots. “That ought to help.”

“Oh.” Sean stared. “That didn’t hurt at all.”

“I told you, didn’t I?”

“Yeah.” A shy smile, and a rasp: “Thanks, Mr. Xavier.”

“No trouble, Sean. Now,” and Charles nodded at his raven, who started nudging the rays back
through the glass and into the tank. “What are you doing today?”

“Training with Angel,” Sean said automatically; fascinated, Charles saw a cheerful orange fish flit by, gleaming in the water. “And then Alex and me are going to lift weights.” A sullen flounder, oddly red-colored, swam next to the glass –

*That one,* Charles ordered his raven; it flipped the flounder through glass and onto concrete as quickly as it could.

This would be harmless, Charles thought, wildly. An experiment, a quick one – and nothing would happen, nothing to hurt or harm. An inconsequential memory – he checked. Alex, glowering at Sean: *Meet me at the gym at five o’clock* – but a small orange sea lamprey, attached to the flounder, confirmed it: Sean croaking to Angel: *I’m going to lift weights with Alex tomorrow; I feel fine* –

Far better to keep comfort than cold looks. Charles quickly detached the lamprey from the flounder; threw the former back into the tank. He held up the fish, and stared into Sean’s eyes.

“Look at me, Sean.” Those eyes were wide – Charles sharpened his voice with *obey.* “Look at this jewel.”

And Charles took out the opal from where he had concealed it in one gauntlet.

“Look at it, and listen to me. You are going to forget about Alex telling you the meeting time,” the opal sparked, “and you are going to forget that I told you to do so, in the first place. Do you understand?”

“… Yes,” Sean said. He sounded dazed.

Acting on instinct, Charles touched the token to the fish. *The actual, physical representation of a memory,* and *take it* *take it* he told the raven’s feather, its black quills sharp in the opal’s depths …

The fish’s vivid red color turned a pale pink.

In his waking dreams, Charles’ raven found things – flew to them, relayed information back – saw everything that could be seen from high above … And its feather reached out power and jabbed at Sean’s memory – Charles bit his lip, amazed, feeling the words, strangely scrabbling – *meetmeatthe five gym o’themeeet* – until the opal flashed.

Then Charles stepped forward, one step, and draped the token around Sean’s neck.

Sean gasped – something sparked … the silver thread shot tendrils into his skin –

And Charles breathed out in wonder, as both the jewel and the rippling silver strand from which it hung … disappeared.

“Put that fish back,” he told his raven.

A shriek was his only answer – loud and harsh, and – “*Oi!*” Charles cried out and just barely dodged a beak aimed at his eye. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

He could hardly hear Sean’s, “Um – everything O.K., Mr. Xavier?” over the cacophony.

For a moment, he had felt powerful. But now, Charles thought, tossing the flounder back into the aquarium – it swam away slowly, off-kilter – and doing his best to dodge the raven’s swoops in what was an extremely enclosed space … Now, things had devolved into farce.
“Everything’s fine, Sean. Let me just –” he closed his eyes, and focused – “get out of your mind, and into the kitchen –”

The kitchen snapped back into view, its colors dingy after the vividness of Sean's mind.

Charles blinked down at Sean, tucked underneath one of his arms.

“Hey,” Sean croaked. And then: “Hey, Mr. Xavier – you were right!” He laughed – first disbelieving, but then genuine. “I can remember … but it doesn’t really hurt anymore. At least, not as much.”

“You’re welcome, then,” Charles gritted out, and: “Thank you,” Sean said, abashed.

At that moment, Jean trotted back inside. She carefully poured the apple seeds into the wastebasket beneath the sink, then went to Sean. And she must have projected: All right? because he smiled back at her, and said: “Yeah.”

“Good.” Charles made tea for them all, doing his best to focus past a sudden headache. And his curiosity … well, he couldn’t restrain it. And why bother? He needed to know if it had worked, after all … He steered the conversation around to their planned activities. “Jean and I,” he explained to Sean, “both work with Lady Frost, these days.” And Sean’s wide-eyed admiration must have made him in turn feel more confiding, because, when asked, he replied:

“Today I get to train with Angel.”

“And then?” Charles pressed.

Sean’s brow puckered. “Then … oh yeah. Then I’m going to go lift weights with Alex.”

“Ah. At what time?”

Charles held his breath as Sean thought some more. “You know … I’m. Huh.” A blink. “I’m not really sure.”

“Then you really should check, sometime before this evening,” Charles replied, throttling his own surge of elation. It worked it worked – I did it –

“That’s a good idea,” Sean agreed. “Thanks for everything, Mr. Xavier.”

“No,” Charles said, grinning “Thank you. For everything.”

“Me?” Sean tipped his head. “What did I do?”

A slam of the door, and: “You got your ass sent back here, moron; move.” Alex plucked two blindfolds from his pockets. “Mr. Xavier, Jean – got these for you.”

“Yes, thank you, but –” and “Hey, Alex, can I just ask you –”

“No you can’t.” Alex glowered at Sean. “Everyone’s in a rush today, so,” and he yanked the blindfold around Charles’ head. “Go to your first assignment.”

“But I –”

“No buts. Go now.”

And really, Alex was in a foul temper. Who knew why? Charles listened to the clatter of Sean’s
footsteps and worried … just for one moment, though. Sean would just ask someone else, he was sure.

In the meantime, he, Charles, had Frost to fool.

The memory made him smile with cold pride, as his raven flew on and on. Frost had been fooled indeed. But Sean …

Memory and dreaming wakefulness, and the thrum of energy coursing through his raven, soaring over the lights of another city … the shift and slide of the layers in his mind made Charles feel disoriented. But: “Albany,” he cried to the raven, giddy. “You did it! Well done!”

The raven cried out to the night sky in triumph. “Now,” Charles shouted, “south – south along the Hudson River –” a cascade of maps, globes, images from teaching and all his students. The Hudson flows south – its mouth empties into Upper New York Bay – now, our archaeologists cannot visit territory under Brotherhood control but perhaps in future – “Go,” he whooped, exultant, “go, find it, fly!”

The look on Frost’s face, if she could see him now – Charles laughed so loudly that he hardly heard Raven’s answering exultant cry as it sent him the memory:

“You - what?”

Frost’s voice was diamond-sharp. Her eyebrows formed two perfect platinum arches, high up on her forehead.

“I went into Sean’s mind.” Charles lifted his chin. “And I modified some of his memories.”

Frost stared down at him, where he still lay strapped into the Finder. Her nose had been wrinkled from the smell; now her nostrils were flared.

“Mr. Xavier.” She gave orders in the manner of a queen. “You will tell me exactly what you did, and why you did it. Immediately.”

It was a calculated risk, Charles told himself. He had to know, now, before he put even more effort into their construction – whether or not his memory tokens worked. And the only way to do that was to run it past the strongest telepath he knew, besides himself.

Something made his thoughts shy away from the idea of asking Jean.

Anyway, Frost would never suspect – since this, after all, was the equivalent of walking straight up to a shark, sticking one’s head into its jaws, and saying - do bite down hard, won’t you? ah yes, there’s a good chap -"

“I –” Charles licked his lips. “Sean was in such pain this morning. I went into his mind – it seems to be an aquarium, by the way. I found some of the most painful memories – stingrays … and removed their stings. I estimate that this has reduced the intensity of the recall by – seventy-five percent, maybe?” He gulped. At this point, it was not necessary to feign nervousness. Frost’s eyes were like chips of ice. “That’s all.”

A long pause stretched.

Then: “Ah.” Frost’s voice was cool, but not the cold fury of earlier. “I see.”
“And I thought – well. I thought I would tell you, because I didn’t want –”

“– me to find out and punish you again … yes.” Her voice crept over his ears; he shivered. “One chain is quite enough.”

“Or …” She looked at him a moment longer. “Perhaps you are just trying to prove yourself – trustworthy.”

Charles felt his jaw clench. “Perhaps,” he agreed evenly. “May I please get up now?”

Frost glanced down at the sheet of plastic, her lips thinning. “Of course. Someone will escort you to the showers,” and, oddly, she took the straps off his wrists and elbows herself. “In the meantime, wait here.”

Sitting up shakily, Charles worked the crick out of the back of his neck. Then stiffened, as Frost said in farewell:

“I shall examine your doings in Sean’s mind, Mr. Xavier. And if I find anything other than what you have said – anything at all … well.” A cold smile. “You shall indeed be punished. Most severely.”

Then all Charles had to do was sit and sweat until he was taken to the showers. After that, he sat and dripped, though clothed, in Frost’s office. Just until she returned.

And he fought back a wild rush of elation when he saw: she hadn’t found the opal. Hadn’t found the erasure. Had been deceived.

Just don’t wreck things now, his mind gibbered at him, and: “Lady Frost?” He kept his voice respectful.

“Well, Mr. Xavier.” Frost sat into the chair behind her desk with a sigh. Charles frowned to himself. She looked tired – and she saw him looking, for her back straightened. “It appears you were telling me the truth.” A mocking smile. “How very good of you.”

He acknowledged the mockery with one wry twist to his own mouth. Then snapped to attention: Frost was continuing.

“Harmless, what you did – and effective, although somewhat crude. At the highest level, you see, one can persuade a stingray like that to take on a different form. You could have swayed it to become a square of concrete in that observation area. While the contents of the memory would not change, its placement in the context of the mind – to say nothing of its texture – would have rendered it ineffective as a trauma. And, incidentally, one far less likely to return to full intensity.” She paused. “Those stingers might grow back, you know.”

“I didn’t know,” Charles admitted.

“Of course not.” Frost smiled – she actually smiled. “How could you?”

“How could anyone?” He thought. “You might throw a wrinkle into Platonic Forms with this –”

“Oh, not Plato.” Frost gave a delicate shudder. “I find him insufferable.”

“Right.”


Frost tipped her brow at him.
He took the plunge. “Could you teach me how to do that?”

“Could.” Her smile became sharp again, vicious. “But will not. No, Mr. Xavier – you do perfectly well as you are, presenty.”

The brief illusion of camaraderie – and how bizarre it had been, truly – came crashing down. A sour taste returned to his mouth with a vengeance, even though he had rinsed it half a dozen times in the showers. “Fine,” he snapped.

“Oh …” Frost motioned him to his feet. “Respect in all things, Xavier – something all of you students seem to be lacking, these days. Perhaps it is the weather …” She fixed him with a piercing look. “Regardless, for all your headstrong stupidity, you are useful in keeping the children well behaved. Do your best with Sean this evening, won’t you? It’s a shame, but some pains cannot be removed with a flick of the mind.”

Charles didn’t understand her, and didn’t want to try. Instead, he seethed all the way back to the kitchen –

– and stopped short as the tech who had escorted him pulled off his blindfold, and left.

Jean looked sad. And Sean was sporting an immense black eye.

“What?” He knew his mouth was opening and closing; like a flounder, he thought wildly. “What on earth?”

“Alex.” Sean shrugged; took a long drink of water. The glass went back on the table; the water left in it now tinted pink.

“What did he do?”

“I kinda forgot what time to meet him at the gym. And nobody else knew.” Sean gave a rueful laugh. “So he popped me one.”

“Oh Sean …” Charles sat down, heavily. “I’m so sorry.”

“Why? ‘S O.K.”’ Sean smiled at him. “You shoulda seen Angel: ‘there was obviously a miscommunication here, Alex,’ and then she punched him. It was great. And now they both have to train with Logan – today and tomorrow.” He took another drink of water. “Ha, ha.”

But Charles upbraided himself all through dinner, and as he walked upstairs. Saturday night was just as cold as Friday had been; he wrapped up tight in his blankets and called out for his raven.

It flew to him slowly, every sulky flap of its black wings sharply outlined against the fire. Logan busy being a disciplinarian would explain him not meeting the three of them, Charles, Jean, Sean, for wood gathering … The small, smoky fire of leftover sticks seemed like an appropriate punishment.

The raven gave a reproachful creeeee.

“I know I shouldn’t have done that to Sean,” Charles whispered. “I’m sorry. I – I didn’t think it through. Even the smallest change …”

If it had been human, the raven’s inclined head would have been accompanied by a sigh. As it was, it merely flew to his armored shoulder – ah, Charles thought, I’m falling asleep …

“We’ll focus on our flying,” he said, holding it close. “We don’t need to make those tokens any
more. Maybe in the future –” the raven nipped him, “ow, all right – maybe not … but for now: flying.”

It spread its wings.

“Yes,” Charles smiled at it. “Syracuse.”

Thus went the night of the 25th. And the nights after, one after the other – his raven had flown … further and further …

And now … Charles lay on his bed, motionless, breathing deep. First Syracuse, then Albany. And now his raven was flying south – a black stone flung from a sling. So fast … so far …

Memory and dreams … the raven’s speed and power … everything was jostling in his head. It was confusing. He knew his eyes had opened in his room – they were dry, so he was staring straight ahead … but his raven’s eyes felt nothing but the cold wind, as it looked, as it searched …

Sunday the 26th. He had trained with Logan, and with a sulky Alex and Angel. Lap after lap after lap – some in the knee-deep snow – and then they had fallen into pace next to a large truck plowing up the road that led to the manor.

Memory, flickering … Charles hadn’t seen a truck in months – fuel rations being what they were in Britain, and then he had been imprisoned at the manor, but: “Hey,” Logan had shouted at the driver, “Step it up, Kitty; damn!” and: “Give me a plane and I’ll step it up your ass!” the driver had bellowed back.

And Logan’s laugh, “That's who I missed! C’mon Kitty, switch up – I’ll drive, and you run these losers’ asses off.”

“With pleasure –” and the driver – a woman, Charles had noticed, with messy dark hair – hadn’t even stopped the truck as she jumped out. Logan swore and ran to vault into the driver’s seat as she watched and laughed at him in turn.

Except then she had turned to them, and grinned a wild grin. “Let’s go!” – and had levitated and zipped ahead and really, that hadn’t been fair at all. Angel seemed to agree, because she had started swearing in Spanish and hadn’t stopped until they had all collapsed half an hour later.

“I could have flown,” she had spat at Logan, and: “I could have kept from smashing that truck into a snowbank,” he had replied, with a virtuous look. “But I didn’t.”

And the driver – Kitty? – had shrieked with rage in the distance, and Charles had had to grin.

The raven flew on. Memories streamed from it, like so many particles in the solar wind …

Monday the 27th. Tuesday, Wednesday – all days of him powering the Finder. The sting of straps at his wrists, his elbows and ankles; the stale smell of his own sweat and the taste of sickness at the back of his throat. On Wednesday he bit his tongue by accident. The blood pooling in his mouth catapulted him straight into memory – he couldn’t help it, couldn’t help it, he screamed and they had to rip the electrodes off his temples as a panel exploded.

Frost’s eyes had been glittering more and more each day, but when he came back to himself that time, smelling smoke and hearing the snap-crack of live wires … the first thing he saw was her eyes

Then – the smell of rubbing alcohol and her voice, retreating – “Reset everything; I want to try another pass,” and: Denver, he heard as a thrum through the other minds, gathered in the room – Denver Denver –

When they carried him back to the dormitory Wednesday, he was dimly relieved that he wouldn’t have to sit in the kitchen. They had placed him on his bed. He hadn’t felt Alex locking the shackle; hadn’t heard anything from the door. Alex had been curt – but that was explained easily. As well as his own relief at skipping dinner.

In the kitchen, he would have had to see the new bruises on Sean’s face.

Logan’s discipline, it appeared, had not worked – and since Alex had been the one to carry Charles back to the room by the shoulders, with a tech holding the feet, Charles had dreamily catalogued the size, and the spacing, of the cuts from teeth on Alex’s knuckles. Children’s teeth. Poor Sean.

But he had slept like the dead, that night And Frost had not called him to the Finder on Thursday – had let him sleep. And Angel had brought him bread, unchained him briefly so he could shower and change … and then let him sleep more. Which had been lovely.

Because then he had been well rested for his raven’s flight. And memory had brought him to the present – the raven had flown through all the events of that week, and only now brought it to Charles’ attention: a fact. Its eyes on him, black and glittering, all-seeing. There’s something you haven’t noticed.

Something important.

The raven was flying so fast, so far up in the sky that Charles felt weak. Lower, he called to it – it was so far away – and it folded its wings and dived – looking, searching … For the past eight nights, every time it returned to him, his raven had slowed outside his door, searching, and had given the hearth a careful sweep with its feathers before winging back into Charles’ mind …

The man had not returned.

Good – the thoughts careened through Charles’ mind, good – wonderful. No abuse at that monster’s hands; no real problems with memory, since he didn’t count a fluke in the Finder; steps forward with his tokens and his own powers – his raven, flying everywhere … the only downside was the new and visceral antagonism between Alex and Sean. Odd, how children’s conflicts could spiral out of all control.

And his raven was spiraling downward now.

Despite himself, Charles caught his breath. The raven had been flying so high that it hadn’t seen the clouds. It flew down through them. Memory, thoughts and power all rushing together in a kaleidoscope. When he was young, Charles had helped with a sheep shearing near his parents’ estate, and this was it all over again – his raven a shadow blade, slicing through grey, damp wool …

The clouds parted, and he saw the sea.

But not just any sea; no. He had found it. Charles knew it – his power, radiating out through the raven like light from the moon, could sense it – whispers from the water, far below him …

And then, looming up out of the darkness …
Oh …

Charles breathed out, on his bed, feeling every last inch of his skin prickle. The towers, gaunt and tarnished silver … some still stood tall. Tall enough to make grim-walled canyons of empty streets; proud enough to guard steel girders and beams, iron poles and coils of wire all rusted and curled. Tall and proud, but so desolate that even he, Charles, who had seen the wreckage of London and Paris both …

Where he slept, where he dreamed, he was crying.

The streets of New York City had long since been submerged. He was not sure if anyone lived there, if anyone could … with fallout and famine on top of the flood. His raven skimmed low; moved over the face of the waters. Charles felt tears trickle down his cheeks, hot into his ears where he lay flat. Moonlight on the surface of the deep, but light that only Charles could see … his power - shining, searching … The clouds lay low and dark. The raven saw no one, heard nothing – there was only ruin and silence.

Still, though: he had found it. New York City.

“You found it,” he whispered. “I’m so proud of you …”

The raven cried aloud. And Charles heard, in the sound, a worn and lonely echo. Too far …

His head swam. Had he gone too far? No, he said – projected – as warmly as he could, and: “You can make it back. Ithaca to Albany, Albany to New York City – now, complete the triangle. As the crow flies.”

Charles felt his raven give an indignant flick of its wings. Smiling in his waking dream, he sent as much power as he could manage – it was so far away, but: “You can do it.” He could do it. “Fly …” Charles whispered. “Come back to me …”

And the raven began the weary return flight. On his bed, Charles breathed deeply; let himself begin to fall asleep – with one part of his mind built into a bright, burning fire. A beacon to bring Raven home.

It would fly through the halls, check for the shadow at the door and on the hearth – and then nestle into his mind with no sound at all. He knew it would be too tired. But once Charles woke, Halloween morning, he would give his raven all the gratitude and reassurance that he could. He would congratulate it on driving away the man – clever thing, to think that it protected him … And he would find out – from its astute insight – what it was that had been lurking under his nose, all week.

Something important.

But even something important could keep for twenty-four hours.

Charles stoked the beacon in his mind for his raven’s return. It was like a lighthouse, blazing forth and making his stone cell shine. In the light, no darkness could be seen, no nightmares could be had … and – surely – Charles told himself, no monster could ever haunt him again.

He waited for his raven. And only fell asleep completely when he felt it land in his thoughts, sigh … and dissolve into nothing. But Raven would be back the instant he needed it, Charles knew …

It would be back. All he had to do was say the word, and it would come to him.
"Perhaps he had gotten somewhat carried away." OH, the meta; it is KILLING me. Yeah, guys - this is part 1 of what was originally ch. 22. Part 2 will be coming, in the form of ch. 23 - real soon. And then a Halloween SURPRISE! :P

Seriously: I hope that 1) the back-and-forth time structure works all right, in this ch., and 2) you don't mind the info-dump - especially WRT Charles’ powers. It's the last big dose of Exposition Fairy Dust that we'll have for a while - never fear!
Chapter 23

Friday dawned cold and clear. “Happy Halloween,” Charles mumbled to himself, rubbing his eyes. He stretched, feeling the satisfying pop of some of his vertebrae. “Raven …” *Raven, raven, fly away home …*

Home was here, for the time being; strange but true. *But not for long.* He needed to make sure his raven had recovered from its flight the previous night – and perhaps consult it on escape plans. Charles rolled his shoulders, tipped his head from side to side – then shut his eyes and smiled as black wings fluttered in his mind.

His raven croaked at him.

“Good morning to you, too.” Charles took a deep breath; exhaled. He pictured the raven in as much detail as he could: its glossy feathers, its heavy beak, its eyes on him, black and glittering.

“That’s right,” he murmured to himself, remembering. “There’s something I haven’t seen – well. First things first.”

He reached out and trailed his hands over the beautiful black feathers. The raven fluffed itself out; then nudged one of his wrists with its beak in reply. Charles checked its pinions. “Everything all right?”

It croaked again, low and rattling. Charles couldn’t help himself – he smiled at its proud glance. “Nothing broken; nothing out of place. You’re right as rain … and after such a flight, too.” He brushed his fingers over the back of its head, feeling the jut of skull. “I am so very proud to count you as my friend. And ally, I suppose.” Charles raised his eyebrows. “Yes?”

Its eyes had an almost uncanny intelligence. They stared at him.

“Proud to count you as part of myself …” Charles placed the raven on his shoulder; it ran its beak through his hair. “Although … maybe you think that I am a part of you. Who’s to say,” he leaned his head against one wing, “that you are not the dreaming one, and I a figure in your mind?”

The raven was silent. Then it pecked him – just a slight jab, but Charles laughed nonetheless. “Too early for philosophy. Anyway, I wanted to ask: what was it? What was it that I haven’t seen?”

A loud *crahk* in his ear; he jumped as the raven flexed its claws into his shoulder and took off in a flurry. Charles waited patiently until it returned. It was holding something in its beak. He plucked at the hard black keratin until the raven relinquished – a Polaroid, Charles saw, smiling. He had been thrilled to have one of the first cameras of that type; his indulgent father had pressed it into his hands – *now send us some good snaps of the dreaming spires, what? –* before his move to Oxford. He had taken photo after photo until he had run out of film – and, years later, had found a cache in London and documented some of the Oxford missions …

This Polaroid was blank. Charles waved it through the air, briskly. “Mysterious,” he said to his raven, and: “Shall I guess?”

Its eyes were watchful.

Charles stared at the image as it began to coalesce. A dark background. A face … the hollows of eyes and cheekbones coming into view first, a pale blue-green … then the darkness of hair –
His heart leapt into his mouth. It wasn’t – him, was it? Was this a warning, from the raven? Charles stared at the picture. Don’t let it be him – don’t let it be him – please don’t let it be him –

“Oh …”

His sigh of relief was shaky. It wasn’t the man. It was Sean.

“But … why Sean? Of all people?”

The raven shifted on his shoulder, with a low crrrrr. Charles looked at the picture again – it had changed, to: “… Alex.”

He thought for a moment. “Is this about their argument?”

It rasped another crrrrr, tapping its heavy beak on Charles’ cheekbone.

“Right.” Charles heaved another sigh. Wrangling sulky children once more; lovely. “I’ll get that sorted at breakfast, then – and tonight, you and I will take another flight … to plan our escape. Agreed?”

It was foolish to wait for a spoken word, Charles realized. But the raven could have at least fluffed its feathers again, or clacked its beak.

As it was, its dark eyes stayed fixed on his, somber.

Charles shook off the strange mood. “Goodbye – for now,” he murmured; then opened his eyes to face the day.

Alex unlocked Charles’ shackle roughly, pushed him out the door roughly, and responded with grunts to any and all attempts at conversation. But really, Charles thought, nettled – if he – a boy – thought to intimidate with snarls and shoves … well. Alex should take a lesson or two from a certain individual Charles could name.

Except that he couldn’t name him.

Charles blinked as Alex fumbled with the kitchen door. All of these weeks … all of his own … what would be the word for them? He had just considered this the night previous. Encounters, tangles, his mind whispered at him, but then tried: interactions? … Meetings?

No. Nothing that smacked of a committee table. Memories from Oxford flashed before him – droning voices, lethargy … no. This was …

Charles sighed. He supposed that this was – a history. He was writing a history… and he did not even know the man’s name, to inveigh against in the margins – a furore Normannorum libera nos, Domine. Instead of the Northmen, and still declined properly: the man’s name.

If he even had one.

With a shrug, Charles walked into the kitchen. If he really wanted to know, he supposed he could always ask Frost. Even the thought made him snort – he hadn’t that much of a death wish. “Or a pain wish,” he muttered to himself. “And on that topic …”

Charles stepped between Alex and Sean. “I’d like to speak to both of you.”

Sean sulked and stared at the floor, bruises both new and old on his face standing out against his pale
skin. Alex glared – *acting like a child*, Charles thought with spark of fury; but he smothered it and made his voice stern.

“Sean, Alex: I have been occupied with Lady Frost’s work for the past few three days, and sleeping for one – but I have seen enough of this situation to know that - in every respect - it is unacceptable. Whatever your disagreements, surely you are both capable of discussing them in a rational, civilized manner.”

Although: *truly*, he thought to himself – with what he had seen of the EBS as an example, there was an entire range to the definition of ‘civilized.’

“This is a - stressful enough situation we find ourselves in. Compounding that stress is unpleasant for your fellows, and unhealthy to you both. By this time tomorrow, I expect you to have resolved your argument – through conversation, not fisticuffs. Do I make myself clear?”

“What’s fisticuffs?”

“Physical fighting, Sean; blows with the fists.” Charles punched one of his hands with the other for emphasis. “Leading to skirmishes, leading to wars – leading to where we are now. So: please don’t do it.”

Sean looked shamefaced – but Alex had turned his poisonous glare on Charles instead. Charles met his eyes with equanimity, sighing inside. Alex had been polite to him in recent weeks, even after their rocky start. But now this …

“A word with you, Alex.” And he took him into the hallway, out of hearing range of the others.

Alex crossed his arms over his chest, and didn’t meet Charles’ eyes. *Coward* – but he kept the emotion out of his tone. “What do you think you’re doing?”

There was no answer. Charles made his voice colder. “Alex. How old are you?”

A pause. Then: “Eighteen.”

“Eighteen. And when were you, ah – Sworn, as they put it?”

“Last year.”

“Last year. Hm. And … when did you come here? To this place?”

Silence.

“Answer me.”

“When I was ten, all right?” Alex’s voice cracked. “I came here in ’61. I worked my ass off to – to control my –” he gestured, and that strange crackle of red-white energy ran over his shirt – “to control this. I just got Sworn, and put in charge of – of all *you* guys, and now he’s mouthing off, and making me look like I can’t even deal with a student – and, and –”

“Alex,” Charles sighed. “Do you even know how old Sean is?”

"I - "

“I would wager – twelve. Perhaps eleven – if he’s tall for his age. You remember being twelve, don’t you? Didn’t you test some bounds of authority, just to see what would happen?”
“No,” Alex snapped. “I didn’t, because if I did, I would get the shit beaten out of me –”

“All right.” Charles cut him off. *Try another tack.* “Do you have any siblings, Alex?”

“Yes.” His voice sounded reluctant.

“And how old are they?”

“Just the one. My kid brother – Scott. He’s, um. He’s eight.”

“Eight years old.” Biting down slowly on the inside of one lip, Charles had the sensation of his mind clicking away, putting together the pieces – “Will he be brought here, do you think? When he’s ten?”

Alex hunched his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“If he were here, and he misbehaved – would you want someone to hurt him? To beat him? To leave bruises on his face?”

“No.”

“And you would never do that to him either. Would you?”

“No –” Alex’s voice cracked again. “I wouldn’t.”

“Then it’s very simple.” Charles considered, then decided to take the plunge. He reached out a hand and gripped his shoulder, hard. Alex shivered.

“Alex,” Charles said, quietly. “Put yourself in his shoes. Treat him like you would treat your brother. Give him appropriate boundaries and rules, but for the love of all that’s holy, don’t beat him. Even if it was done to you – you can rise above it. Put a stop to the stupid tit-for-tat cycle, this ‘you hurt me and I’ll hurt you.’ It’s nonsense, and it wastes everyone’s time, energy, and goodwill.”

Alex was silent for a long minute. He stared at the floor. Then he looked back up at Charles, swallowing. “I don’t know if I –”

“You’re Sworn, Alex. That means they think of you as an adult, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“Fine.” Charles squeezed his shoulder, then let him go. “Act like one.”

“But Logan’s an adult, and he beats people up all the –”

“Does he beat up children?”

“… No.”

“There you have it.” It was chilly in the hallway; Charles crossed his arms over his chest to keep them warm. “You can pick a fight with one of the other Sworn, perhaps, if you feel like fisticuffs. I assume that’s what Logan does.”

“Yeah, he does – you should have seen him with Yuriko, yesterday. It’s like … knife-icuffs. Pretty awesome, the way they can move.”

“I’m sure.” Charles smiled. “So. Less punching, more talking things through. And make Sean run laps if he misbehaves.”
“Fly laps – and that’s Angel’s job.” Alex scrubbed one hand through his hair. “Yeah.” Then he gave Charles a tentative look. “’m sorry, Mr. Xavier.”

“Don’t apologize to me; apologize to Sean.”

A huff. “I don’t think so. I –”

“All right – maybe not now. But think about it, for the future. Sometimes an apology can go a long way towards building bridges.”

“O.K. Look,” and Alex plucked at the steel bracelet on his left wrist. “I gotta go do something. You eat breakfast and I’ll be back.”

Charles spoke before he could second-guess himself. “I’ve been meaning to ask: that bracelet, that ring …” He gestured. “That necklace. All steel, correct?”

“Uh –”

“What are they for, Alex? What do they do?”

Every instinct told him he was onto something; Alex's eyes were flickering back and forth. But then he grinned, and said – carefully and clearly. “Need-to-know basis.”

Charles glared. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“You just said to be more like Logan, man –”

“Logan? Logan’s idea of a fun afternoon consists of a marathon and raw rabbit liver –”

“Mm-mm –”

“- and he smokes like a bad-tempered Canadian chimney, and really, I would pick a better role model for you if I knew one.”

Another grin. “Maybe you’ll get to meet some more. And … soon.”

Then Alex sprinted down the hallway, with a – “Go eat your breakfast –” echoing behind him. And Charles went back into the kitchen, and ate his breakfast. All two slices of it.

That afternoon, thankfully, Logan did not choose to run laps. “Wind’s really picking up anyway, Xavier,” he had grunted. “We’d do better to stay inside.”

“I didn’t realize you were so delicate, Logan.” Charles looked up from the map of Dallas.

“Delicate, my ass. I just don’t want to deal with frostbite right now. Not that I’ll have to for a little while,” he rubbed his hands together, with a madcap grin, “but that’s a surprise. Now, go on, X. Tell me. Enemy telepath’s incapacitated for twelve hours. What are you going to do in that time frame?”

“I’ve told you: confirm all of the enemy’s forces in Fort Worth –”


“You know I haven’t been on the ground there. But I assume that even if Fort Worth has been abandoned, there is still a plenitude of wrecked buildings there, to conceal weapons, supplies,
soldiers.”

“Not enough to make any difference –”

“Not in the long run, perhaps. But if they flank you as you try for the aircraft, then you have a serious problem.”

“Right,” Logan conceded. “Run it by me once more.”

Charles tapped a colored pencil on the map. “So. Here are the ruins of Fort Worth,” he circled it, “and, about sixty miles to the southwest, Glen Rose, where you have the functioning nuclear power plant. Now – you understand, Logan – this has to be exquisitely well-timed in order to work.”

“We’ll be exquisite as hell about it, X man. Spill.”

“It’s a risk.” Charles narrowed his eyes at the map. “Because in these twelve hours, you have to divide your forces into four parts. They each have a role to play. Your army has advanced from the east – make sure that those in Dallas see … hm.” He frowned. “Is there a way – a mutant’s powers, say – to conceal a fourth of your army?”

Logan was jotting down notes. “There’s a way, but the two who can do it only have enough mojo to sustain it for two hours. And that’s when they work together.”

“Two hours should be fine. Your forces are divided into four parts. Write this down – parts – no. Groups one, two, three and four. Group four must be concealed from the very beginning. Send out some fake orders, to be intercepted, redirecting them to – oh, I don’t know. The Gulf – to pick up a shipment of supplies, or something. Conceal them.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Move groups one, two and three around the city and to the north.” Charles scribbled 1, 2, 3, and drew a thick blue line. “Then: make a strike towards Love Field – the operational airport.”

“But you said –”

“I know what I said. The Free West has put several aircraft out there clear as day, as bait.” Charles riffled through grainy surveillance photos. “They want you to attack it: they’ve prepared it as a trap.”

“So we’re springing it?”

“Absolutely. Take the bait – and this is important … Take with all three, but hold it with One. Smash through their lines with all three of the active groups. I’m sure there will be countless soldiers lying in wait for you, concealed, around Love Field. When the armies engage, have your groups evenly spaced – and then disengage Two and Three, and make a run for Glen Rose.” He drew another blue line. “Now – that’s eighty miles from Dallas, so you need to give Two and Three your fastest transport. If you manage to get a plane at Love Field, send it flying with them.”

“Fastest transport – how many teleporters? Cause we’ve only got three capable of more than one person at once – and Azazel’s the best, and he can only do a platoon at a time, max.”

“No,” Charles said softly. “No teleporters here. You need Two and Three to be absolutely visible as they go for Glen Rose. And One needs to be strong enough to hold off most of the Free West’s firepower – until they see …”

“Until they see?”
“Until they see Two and Three running southwest. You see, they will assume that you yourself have a two-pronged attack – that Love Field was one objective, but that the other is the nuclear power plant.”

“In Glen Rose.”

“Yes.”

“O.K. – aim for the nuclear power plant,” Logan said, looking at the map, “and once we get it, should we –”

“No, Logan,” Charles interrupted. “You see: it’s another feint. If you really wanted the power plant, of course you’d send in the teleporters, the saboteurs, and most of your firepower. This is just a feint – you want them to think that you’re going for it.” He smiled. “A little bait of your own.”

“Just hope they’re dumb enough to take it. ‘Cause if you just said it out loud – if we really wanted the plant, we’d hit it with everything – I’m sure they’ll think of it, too.”

“That’s a risk,” Charles conceded. “But you’ll have to hope that they see this as you hedging your bets. Hoping to split their own strength – occupy part of their forces with killing group One, and the other part with chasing Groups Two and Three. To say nothing of actually guarding Dallas proper.”

Logan chewed the end of his pencil. “All right. Feint for the nuclear power plant.”

“Yes. Move quickly enough to be urgent, but slowly enough that any concealed units in Fort Worth can move to attack you. And slowly enough for Free West Command to consider the numbers – for them to calculate how much firepower they can spare from their engagement with group One, in order to intercept groups Two and Three.”

“O.K., so everybody’s either stuck at Love Field or high-tailin’ it down to Glen Rose.” Logan fixed him with dark eyes. “But – what’s the feint for?”

This, Charles’ mind whispered. *This. I love this.* He felt a Cheshire-cat grin spread across his face.

“The feint is to distract them from your *real* objective. Group Four. Group Four, concealed, moves as quickly as possible to capture the great majority of the Free West’s aircraft, where it’s actually been placed. The old airport – to the north.” He circled it on the map. “The derelict one – the one which, surveillance shows, has seen no activity in the past year, hmm?”

Logan grinned back at him. “No activity aboveground.”

“Mmm.” Charles smirked. “What a pity we have metamorphs and heat sensors.”

“For real. They’re about three stories down, there. Underground. How do you suppose we –”

“I’m not sure of your hand-to-hand combat capacities. Suffice to say that group Four should have the teleporters, the metamorphs, any spare saboteurs, and all of the pilots. You have to secure the old airport, and the aircraft there, as quickly as possible – without giving the alarm. Because … you see, once the majority of the Free West army starts chasing you to Glen Rose, MacMurphy will scramble his aircraft to bomb you. And when the call is not heeded – or when too few aircraft answer, the game will be up.”

Logan considered. “So we have to secure the aircraft before the run for the plant really gets going –”

“Yes.”
“– but not so soon that the alarm gets out.”

“Exactly.”

Logan drummed his fingers on the map. “Tricky. Like you said: it has to be timed really God damned well. But if it is, X man … if it is …”

“A double feint.” Charles smiled. “In the words of the immortal Sun Tzu: ‘Offer the enemy a bait to lure him; feign disorder and strike him.’ They think that they are luring you – well, their luring you is part and parcel of your luring them in turn.”

“Sun Tzu. The Art of War, right?” Logan paused to enjoy the look on Charles’ face – and then threw back his head and guffawed. “Surprise! I can read after all.”

“I never said you couldn’t –”

“But don’t worry, X. I only read that sucker ‘cause Lehn – someone told me to. Boring as hell.” Logan gathered the pencils and snapped a rubber band around them. Then he folded up the maps.

Charles watched, feeling strangely bereft.

“I don’t suppose you can tell me …” he began. Then he fell silent.

“Tell you what?”

Charles shrugged. Digging for more details about the Dallas campaign would do little good, surely; Logan had resisted subtle hints and outright nagging all afternoon long. He cast about for another question.

“What happened to the nuclear warhead that you stole?”

“Relocated.” Logan fished out a cigar; lit it. “Repossessed. Liberated. But not ‘stole’.”

“Hairsplitting.”


“Oh.” Charles blinked. For some reason, he hadn’t expected that. “I must say, with your policy of total war in regard to soldiers, I assumed that a nuclear weapon would –”

“We don’t do it, X. And we won’t. Not ever.”

“Why not?”

“Ancient history.” Logan’s voice was curt.

“All right. So …” Charles continued, cautious, “What are you actually doing with it?”

“It’s being picked apart by some scientists down in the Carolinas. Hopefully we’ll be able to get a few power plants up and running with the fissile material. But we need a bit of peace and quiet to do that.”

“And thus: Dallas.”

“Dallas,” Logan agreed. He looked out the window for a moment; sighed. “Where’d McCoy get
I suppose we bored him.” Charles got up and straightened his bench. The setting sun was painting McCoy’s workroom with a warm light.

“Nah, that’s right. Forgot – he’s on inventory.” Logan shot Charles a sly look. “Keeping track of all our shit. Fun things startin’ to happen, Xavier … and guess what you get to do? You get to go pick up sticks! C’mon,” and the mockery disappeared in a good-natured grin. “Let’s go.”

Following Logan out the door, through hallways and then outside – even with the sharp snap of the cold air into his lungs … Charles felt a curious sense of wellbeing. Perhaps it was due to his long sleep. Perhaps it was because – tonight, he would start planning his escape, and it would be perfect, with his raven … He followed Logan to the treeline. Perhaps –

“Logan!!”

Charles whirled, startled. Then he saw, flying towards them – flying, his mind gasped, and: incredibly fast – Angel.

She landed in a rush, sprinted the last few feet over the snow to them both, where they stood staring.

“Hey - hey, slow down, slow down, Angel – what’s up?” Logan stopped her with a hand on her arm. “What’s going on?”

Angel’s dragonfly wings whirred. She gasped for breath. “Sean, it’s Sean - have you seen him? Have you seen him anywhere??”

“No,” Logan said carefully, voice tight. His dark eyes had gone wide. “No, I haven’t. Why?”

“He’s gone,” Angel choked. “I was supposed to take him to the edge of the low pressure system,” she waved a hand at the sky, “’s coming through, and –” she gulped, “and Alex said he was with Hank, and I went to see, but Hank said Sean’s schedule had him supposed to be with you all day, and – and –”

“And he’s not,” Logan finished.

Charles stared. Under the brown-black stubble, Logan's face had gone white.

Then he closed his eyes. Inhaled – Charles saw muscles clench in his jaw and neck – and exhaled. “Where’s Alex?”

“Searching inside,” Angel gasped.

“And Hank?”

“With Alex.”

“Go get Alex right now. Now, Angel.” Logan’s voice was quiet. “Tell him that I told him to meet me outside. Tell him that it is extremely important – that he meet me outside. Here.”

Angel’s eyes were huge; her breath was coming in fits and starts. She gulped; nodded.

Logan paused, and then ground out: “And tell Hank to sound the alarm.”

“I –”
But whatever Angel had meant to say was cut off – cut off, Charles saw in shock, as she gasped and doubled over, clutching at her left wrist. “Ow,” she squeaked, “ow ow that hurts –” and Logan slapped a hand to his brow with a yelp.

Then a wave of ice pulsed through all their thoughts – Charles only barely shielded himself from the worst of it, but the other two swayed where they stood. And then there was silence – only punctuated by Angel’s hitching breaths. Logan had pressed the heel of one hand against the bridge of his nose; gritting his teeth. He growled deep in his throat.

“How’s happened?” Logan started, “what –”

“Both at once. I’ll never get fucking used to that, God damn it – well.” Logan stared at the manor, jaw flexing. “That’s that. No need to tell Hank, but get Alex, Angel – right now.”

Before he had finished, Angel had jumped into the air and whipped away, lightning fast. Charles watched as she flew straight up and landed on a third-floor balcony of the manor. She landed running, and then vanished from his sight.

He turned to stare at Logan. “What’s happened?”

“What’s happened?” There was a bitter twist to his mouth. “Sean has pulled some stupid-ass shit – and run away. That’s what’s happened.”

Charles felt his breath catch. “Run away? How – how do you know that?”

“Roll call anytime but morning? You can’t have missed it. That only happens when someone’s run away – and it looks like it’s Sean. Done a bunk. God damn it.”

“Run away.” He had to repeat it; he felt numb, and not just from the Finder’s sweep. “I know he had been having trouble with Alex, but to run away …”

Logan had tilted his head up and sniffed at the air. “And when we’ve got another storm comin’ in.” His eyes flicked back to Charles. “And this trouble with Alex – that’s what got the punk and Angel runnin’ laps with me, yeah?”

Charles nodded. “Yes. He – Sean, I mean – he missed an appointment at the gym, or something,” he stuttered, “last Saturday, and since then Alex has been beating him up.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Logan muttered. “Kid that insecure, of course he’s gonna see any question to his authority as far, far bigger than it is. Alex is new, you see,” he tilted an eyebrow at Charles, “new to EBS command, new to kid-wrangling.”

“And you’re an expert? Kid wrangler, I mean.”

Logan tossed his cigar into the snow; spat after it. “I guess not. Not when I didn’t see this one coming.”

“But – you won’t be …” Charles gulped. “Who’s going to be punished for this?”

“Sean, when they catch him.” A low growl. “And Alex, cause it was on his watch. I wouldn’t have thought Sean the type, to think it through that way – you wanna hit someone hard, of course you run. Ends up being much worse for those with the responsibility,” he gave the word a mocking bite, “to see that it doesn’t happen.”

“And what happens to those who run?”
Logan’s eyes were shuttered. “Not as much – but. But, Xavier. They have to watch – what happens to their Monitor.”

Charles’ mind flew back over what Logan had said to Angel; his blood went cold. “You called Alex here –” and he flinched from the sound of his own voice: accusing. “What are you going to do to him? Torture him? Maim him? The great and all-powerful EBS, torturing children –”

“God damn it, X, shut up!” Logan’s voice cracked. Charles stared at him, astonished; his face was twisted in pain. “You don’t know – you don’t know –”

“What don’t I know?”

“You don’t know shit, Xavier. I need to get to Alex – before someone else does. Try and protect him, I suppose.” Another bitter twist to his mouth. “And ain’t that a joke …”

“‘Someone else’ …” Charles felt his skin crawl. “Who?”

Logan looked over Charles’ shoulder. “Cavalry’s coming. Party’s starting. You need to get back inside.”

“What?”

“Back inside. You.” Another cigar, lit; it trembled until Logan stuck it between his teeth. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

“Logan,” Charles hissed. “I’m an adult – I’m not just some child to be pushed around. I can help you. I can help find Sean – and quickly, too. You just said there’s a storm coming in – wouldn’t it help if I could find him?”

Logan stared at him for a long moment. Then he jerked his head in a nod. “O.K.” There were voices coming up from behind Charles; crunching footsteps. “My best guess: you’ve got five minutes. Go nuts.”

“All right.” Deep breath in; in and out. Charles rolled his shoulders, and stuffed his hands in his coat pockets. “Catch me if I fall over.”

“If you – wait, X –”

But Charles was no longer listening to him. Instead, he had leapt into the air with his raven. It called out to him – and he told it to fly and search. He would look at every spark of life with far more attention than he had the night before. One spark would be Sean – and once he found him, he, Charles, would decide whether or not to bring him in or better hide him.

Raven, Raven, Charles whispered – Raven … It was so fast, so beautifully shaped – pitch black against the darkening sky – and it could see everything – everything – the forest and the streams, rocks and stumps and caves, everything marked on Ororo’s map – including stadium and garage and houses – then on the road to TOWN? – past it – “past Syracuse,” Charles heard his own voice, mumbling – heard a gruff voice, “What?” – but he couldn’t pay attention to it, because the raven was flying around Syracuse in a huge circle – stretching out a net of gossamer – it can be packed into a marble it’s small so small a nanometer thick you can’t see it – and no Sean – but … there?

Sean? …

His raven screeched, so loud that he was sure anyone could hear it – Frost might hear it, and: “Shh!”
Charles gasped, and jerked his head up –

– his head, lying on a rolled-up coat. And his back and legs felt freezing cold. “The ground, Logan?” he grumped. “Really?”

“You were drooling on me,” Logan replied. But when Charles made a move to sit up, he tossed out a warning hand. “No – stay down.”

Charles took stock of his surroundings. Simple enough: he was lying down behind a bush. “Logan?”

“Yeah.”

“Why – why’d you put me here?”

“Cause you aren’t supposed to be here, X.” Logan tipped his head to one side. Charles noted that he had tucked the cigar behind his ear. “Private party.”

Now Charles was desperately curious. “Let me up, Logan, and I’ll hide behind a tree.”

“No.”

“Fine.” Ignoring Logan’s warning hiss, Charles straightened and walked over to a massive oak. He leaned against it. “See? Nobody noticed.” A look out from behind the tree confirmed, indeed, that none was looking in their direction. None … out of … Charles felt his eyes widen.

There were at least ten mutants there. He recognized the dark-haired woman – Kitty – who had driven the truck … but he did not know anyone else. An even number of women and men, different colors and sizes – one woman’s hair was purple, and one blond man was – holy shite – at least six and a half feet tall. They were carrying armfuls of wood out of the forest, stacking them in a teepee shape.

He dragged his eyes away; gave Logan another reassuring smile. “Nobody’s paying any attention at all.”

Logan grimaced. “That’s only because –”

A swish and whirr cut him off – Angel landed in one swoop in front of them and gasped: “Logan –”

“Tell me quick.”

“I couldn’t find Alex – Hank’s with Lady Frost, but Alex – I – I –”

“All right. Take a deep breath, Angel; that’s it, good.” Logan folded his arms across his chest; looked grim. “Alex’ll just be doing his own thing, I guess – but you, Angel – you gotta find Sean first.”

“Oh, Logan …”

And Charles, with a strange feeling in his stomach, saw that Angel was crying bitterly, tears pouring down her face. “I don’t want to.”

“You have to.” Logan’s voice was gruff. “You know what happens if you don’t.”

Charles interrupted. “What happens?”

Angel hiccupped; she hadn’t seen him there. But Logan bared his teeth. “If we don’t find him? It’s not that he might freeze, although: news flash – he might freeze. It’s mostly because if he gets far
“Can that happen?”

“Yes it can. They’ve got agents in Albany; they’ve got two working satellites for each of ours. And they’ve got a copter and a team somewhere around here – always on the move. We can go and take it out, and they’ll have another placed next week, the fuckers.

“It’s how we lost Yuriko – there.” Logan pointed at the milling group of mutants – indicated a slight woman with black hair tied back in a knot. “They got her and took her to Denver; stuck her in a lab. Only for a little while, though – I mean, it took her two years to break out of here, but only four days to break the fuck outta there. And she took about twenty of ‘em with her. Long story short? We brought her back, she finished up, and she got Sworn. The Free West made her more loyal to us than I ever could.”

“Who was her Monitor?” Charles asked, watching – Yuriko. His mind appended the name to her face; filed it away.

Logan grimaced. “Me.”

“Oh. I’m – sorry.”

“I’m not,” he shrugged. “She learned from it – she’s one of our best, now – and I bounce back really fucking quick. But Alex, and Sean … I mean, fuck. Especially Sean. His leg …”

Logan shook his head, and turned back to Angel. “You have to be the one to get him, Angel.”

“I told you –”

“And I’m telling you now. You’ve been working with him; he won’t run from you.” Logan's voice had softened, turned gentle. “And … better you than anyone else. You know? You can catch him – without hurting him.”

Another sob, quickly swallowed. Charles watched Angel wipe her hands over her eyes. She looked up at Logan. “Like you caught me?”

His smile was sad. “Yeah. I scared you – right? I jumped out from behind a tree –”

“Rraaargh!” Angel hiccupped, and sniffed back her tears. “You sure did. How – how the hell did you catch up to me, anyway, when I was flying? I never did ask you.”

“Trade secrets.”

“No, really.”

“Really?” Logan waggled his eyebrows. “Drove out in a jeep with some of the others. Got within sight – and I had always wanted to try, so Marie tackled Jean-Paul - him over there, see?” He pointed at a man with long white hair. "Then she went and picked me up, and let me tell you: flying is the shit. I am so fucking jealous of you.”

“I would think –” Angel was smiling now, “I would think that you’d be too heavy.”


“But …” She swallowed, and whispered: “But afterwards …”
“I couldn’t help that.” A pause. “Hell of a person to run into on the road.”

Silence.

Logan broke it, with an attempt at a laugh. “Although – you know? I’ve always wanted to tell him. That big-ass sword? The really, really big one? Is fucking stupid. I mean, too big a swing and he could cut himself in half.”

A longer pause. Charles had watched the entire exchange keenly; his mind cataloguing at the speed of light. So he was hyperfocused on Angel’s face, especially on the horror lurking in her eyes, when she whispered:

“I still have bad dreams about it.”

Logan opened his mouth to reply –

– and Charles, still watching Angel, saw her flinch as her hands flew to the steel chain hanging around her throat –

It hadn’t choked her. Not like the watch chain choked you, Charles’ mind told him – but there was a thin red stripe on her neck, now, where the metal must have flashed hot.

So it came as no surprise when he heard a distant scream.

Then another.


Charles stepped out from behind the tree. Squinted up – he could hardly see anything, since night was falling. Except … there.

There was someone running on the roof. And – someone else, running after. One shorter; the other tall – one half stumbling, and the other gaining, gaining –

A red-white flash – half the mutants on the ground gasped.

“Stupid, Alex,” Logan gritted out – he sounded anguished. “You stupid, stupid kid – oh fuck –”

Another flash – and then a third scream, by far the loudest –

– and cut short.

Angel whimpered.

It was getting rapidly darker. Charles could hardly see anything. Just one shadow, looming over the smaller one … And then it stooped, and – “Damn it, I can’t see. Logan – Logan, what’s going on?”

“What’s going on?” Logan took the cigar from behind his ear; re-lit it with deliberate flicks of his fingers and lighter. “What’s going on, Xavier, is that we have maybe another five minutes – maybe ten – before the real party starts.”

“You keep saying that.” Charles forced a smile. “I’ve been disappointed so far.”

“Well, you’ll live with your disappointment – which is more than I can say if you get caught outside. So.” He blew out smoke; stared at Charles. “Did you find him?”
“What?”

“Before. When you did your thing –” he wiggled his fingers at his temple, “and conked out on me. Did you find Sean?”

“Oh.”

Charles felt his own eyes widen. He had almost forgotten – and he could swear, now, that he heard his raven’s reproachful croak – but he had found Sean. Hiding in what felt like some sort of … sports facility? Outside Syracuse.

But … should he tell? Or should you lie, his mind whispered, with: Can you trust them? They’re just going to bring Sean back – was that the truth about the Free West’s agents? And what happened on the roof – who who who was on the roof –

“Please, Mr. Xavier.” Angel’s voice was small. “Logan’s right. If you know where he is, please tell me, so I can go fly and find him …”

Charles opened his mouth to speak –

– and there was another scream – horrible, long and drawn-out – and –

– on the ground. On the ground, his thoughts shrilled, and: close too close-

“I’m not afraid,” he hissed, and sent his raven flying. It cried out and soared high – circling once, twice – and stayed far away from the actual figures crashing through the forest … but not so far that it missed who they were. There was the red-white pulse of Alex’s mind – flashing, though – erratic and – panicking? But he was being pulled, almost dragged through the woods, and by …

Shivering, Charles directed the raven away from the roiling cloud of metal – iron filings – sharp and vicious and raging. It had whipped into the woods like a chainsaw. It was storming away now, taking Alex to … Charles analyzed their trajectory, and flinched.

The man was dragging Alex to the stable.

Charles yanked the raven back to his mind; it landed with a squawk.

“Xavier -” Logan said – his eyes were wide.

Had he been saying his name for a while, now? Charles hardly knew. Instead, he licked his lips, and croaked: “Yes?”

“We were talking about Sean,” Logan gritted out. “Did you find him? Because we need to know where he is.”

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“Please, Mr. Xavier,” Angel whispered, tearfully – and that decided Charles.

He met her eyes squarely, and said: “Outside Syracuse.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Charles saw Logan twitch in surprise – he hadn’t thought me capable of it; ha – and remove his cigar. He ignored him and kept going. “He was in some sort of – well, not a bunker. But an enclosed space, cement, with one side open for viewing. Fences going to and from it. It was on the side of – of what looked like a diamond, where some type of sport is played.”

“Baseball diamond – a dugout,” Logan breathed. That explained it – Charles only knew cricket.
“Oh, Sean loves baseball.” Angel spoke over him. “I promised to take him to a game – after he was Sworn, I mean …”

“That would be too long to wait,” Logan said with a tight grin. “Tell you what: I’ll take you both to a game myself, after Dallas. All right? Baseball diamond outside Syracuse, Angel. You’ll know it when you see it – Xavier, can you give her a heading?”

“Pardon?”

“A sense of direction, man – then as soon as she’s got it –”

“I’ll go,” Angel whispered fiercely. “I’ll get him. I’ll bring him back safe, Mr. Xavier – I promise.”

“All right,” Charles said. He felt drained. “I’ll have to touch your mind.”

Instantly, Angel stepped closer. “Go ahead. I trust you.”

He let his eyes fall shut, and sent her the owl. So Raven can rest – although it was calling out to him … The owl fluttered above the clouds of Angel’s mind, and Charles considered. How best to do this? He thought a moment, and then attached a small magnetic compass to a ribbon. Then he fixed the compass on one point; fused the dial to the face … gave it to the owl.

And watched the owl drop it into Angel’s mind.

“Wow,” she breathed. Charles opened his eyes to look at her. She was staring at him, her mouth slightly open. “Mr. Xavier, that’s amazing – Logan, I know exactly where – I’ll just start now, and –”

“No.”

“What ?”

“Not now, Angel. Too late. You’re gonna have to wait a bit more.” Logan’s voice was tight. “Or – at least ‘til you get a gun and hear a speech.”

Angel and Charles both followed Logan’s eyes. Charles heard the sound of Angel’s teeth chattering; he himself felt sweat break out in the small of his back.

Because: there was the man. Striding out of the forest, wearing a shabby black coat, with a knit cap covering his hair. His face looked shadowed and stark, even in the firelight. It had been ten days since he had seen him, Charles knew. Ten days - and still … his mouth went dry.

From fear, he told himself. Fear. Nothing else.

One of his hands held a duffel bag. The other held a cigarette. Of all things, Charles focused on the red-bright ember at the end – its arc from one side to the man’s face, its flare and a cloud of smoke –

The group of mutants had gone still. Even the huge one – the man with long blond hair – was motionless.

Then the clank of the bag broke the silence – tossed on the ground, a good distance from the immense stack of wood. A tilt of the man’s head and the mutants started moving. Some went to the bag first – taking out what looked like middling-sized guns, checking the action, walking away and speaking to each other. Others … others walked up to the man and started talking and – how?
Charles’ mind quavered. *How do they just – do that?* But he was replying – Charles saw the white flash of those teeth – and a shorter woman with spiky black hair nodded, flicked her fingers –

*Electricity,* Charles’ mind supplied, shocked – *so to speak* – or was it plasma? Whichever type of power, it hit the stack of wood with a *whoomph.* In less than a minute he felt the heat from the bonfire, even though he was standing at least thirty feet away.

In its orange-red light, the man’s face looked like a skull. He offered the woman a cigarette. She took it; lit it with a spark of that same power, spoke a few words. The man nodded, and she walked off with a jaunty salute. Then, staring into the fire, the man plucked his own cigarette from his mouth and exhaled a long stream of smoke. With his skin starting to crawl, Charles saw something.

Perhaps he was projecting. Seeing those hands through others’ eyes; others who were closer. However he was doing it, though …

Charles saw that those fingers were bloodstained.


The big blond man was walking towards them. Charles almost felt his own eyes bug out – nothing that huge should be that graceful, but he was. Walking closer, and Charles didn’t have time to hide before he was in front of them.

“Logan … *bonsoir bonsoir.*” The new voice was a low rumble. “Long time no see.”

“Not long enough.”

“Mm.” The blond turned to Angel, then glanced at Charles. “Who’re these, eh?”

“Fuck off, Victor.” Logan’s voice was cold. “Take your oh-so-frightening, oh-so-overgrown ass out of my space and away from my friends.”

“Friends.” A grin. “Nice. And won’t your little friends be oh-so-happy when they know: boss wants you.”

Logan tensed. “What?”

“You heard me.” The blond – *Victor,* Charles thought. He catalogued the name, the powerful limbs and more powerful odor, the mane of hair and bizarre eyes. Victor smiled at Logan – *shite,* he had fangs. And he was still talking. “Gotta get you a gun, and have a little talk. I’m sure you can bring your friends,” Victor said graciously, “if you want.”

“I don’t want,” Logan spat.

“Suit yourself.” Victor turned on one foot and strode back to the fire.

Charles couldn’t help it. His gaze flicked from Victor to the lean figure of the man, taking a deep drag from his cigarette and watching the fire with narrowed eyes. “Logan?” he said. “I can go back inside now.” A swallow. “If you want.”

“Not anymore, Xavier. Now they know you’re here.” And indeed, the Victor had lowered his head, was speaking to the man and gesturing. Feeling sick, Charles saw those eyes land on Angel, pause, then flick over to Logan –
Then the man looked at him.

And in any other world, at any other time, Charles might have been amused to see him start in surprise – almost … twitch.

Because he did.

And Victor looked at him, curious.

But then Logan gasped; made a wrenched noise and doubled over. “Logan?” Angel’s voice was sharp. “Logan, what’s wrong – are you O.K.?”

“No,” he wheezed. Sweat stood out on his brow. “My bones – oh fuck, I am pretty fucking far from O.K., sweetie –”

“Don’t call me ‘sweetie,’” she snapped. “And if this is some stupid power play,” she glared over at the fire, “yeah, you heard me right, Victor – I called him stupid. C’mon, Logan. C’mon, Mr. Xavier.” Angel grabbed them each by an arm and tugged. “It’s cold here anyway.”

“Angel,” Logan choked, but,

“It’s all right.” Charles kept his voice calm, though his heart was pounding up through his throat. “Logan, it’s all right – I’m an adult, not a student. I chose to stay out here. On my own head be it.”

In far too little time, they were right by the fire. Logan, rubbing at one shoulder, growling; Charles determinedly staring into the flames. He could … feel the man – right there, right to his side at a ninety-degree angle, perhaps five feet away. Well. Perhaps ten. It was a very large fire. Angel had walked straight up to him, Charles saw, and taken two of the weapons from the duffel bag.

“What does it take … to erase Angel’s fear?” He honestly felt confused. “Because … Well. Look, Logan.”

The man was speaking to her, almost snarling … Charles looked out of the corner of his eye to watch a muscle in that jaw flex, strung tight as wire, and those eyes flash as Angel determinedly raised her chin.

Logan looked. “Whew. Yeah, I wouldn’t do that if I was her.” He rolled his arms, winced. “But to answer your question: find someone she cares about and hurt ‘em. Then she’ll go from sweetie pie to kicking your ass in thirty seconds or less.”

“She cares about you. That’s lovely.” Charles smiled. It was difficult to smile, with the fire burning so hot, so close. And with all of his power focused on keeping fear and panic at bay. He could practically taste the adrenaline being dumped into his system – run run run–

“So tell me: do you have metal involved in your skeletal structure in some way? You mentioned your bones, and I’ve see your claws, and,” he gritted his teeth, “I know that – that man can manipulate metal, to some extent –”

“You know,” Logan bit back a laugh. “I know you know, Xavier. Ever since he beat you to a pulp for going into his library, ‘n almost killed you with what I assumed was the pull cord of a lamp.” He gestured around his throat; he wore no steel necklace, Charles noted, distantly. Logan continued, snarling: “What the hell more did you do to get on his radar? What? Because – I mean, look. You look.”

Charles did.
It seemed the man had calmed somewhat. Angel was listening and nodding. She gestured – Charles flashed to Ororo’s map and found their current position. Angel had pointed north-northeast – Syracuse – and then pointed back at Logan and Charles –

And Charles broke out into goosebumps at the sight of those eyes, vivid green and glowing in the firelight … at the way that gaze snapped to his own, and then he saw the lower line of teeth, bared –

“What did you do?” Logan’s voice was rough. “’Cause you’re on his God damned radar now, X – and believe you me, that is not a place you want to be.”

“I …” Charles swallowed hard. “I –”

“Here you are.” Angel had walked back to them; she held one of the weapons out to Logan. “Standard stun.”

Logan checked the action, sighted along the barrel. Kept his voice determinedly casual. “I figured. So what’s up?”

“Lady Frost is coming soon. He –” Angel’s throat jumped; she raised her chin again. “He says that Hank’s coming with her – just making some adjustments to the Seeker.”

“Right. You ask him if you could go already?”

“Yeah, but he said I had to hear Lady Frost –”

Charles only kept half an ear on their conversation; he stared into the flames. The adrenaline – fear, his mind whispered – was truly becoming ridiculous. His hands would be shaking, were they not clenched into fists in his pockets.

“Well –” a low voice puffed against his ear, and he almost jumped out of his skin before seeing that it was the huge blond mutant. Victor Creed. “Well well well …”

“What is it?”

“Hm.” Creed grinned at him, slowly. His eyes were flat – completely black, Charles saw with a shiver, and those teeth looked very sharp. “Just wondering what sort of … person you are, friend. And your name. What’s your name?”

For all his hideous looks, his voice was polite.

“Charles. Charles Xavier.”

“Hnh. British?”

“That’s right.”

“Well,” a drawl. “Pleased to meet you, Charles Xavier. My name’s Victor Creed, but you can call me Victor.”

A huge hand drifted into Charles’ frame of vision; he bit down on his lower lip, shook hands as impersonally as he could. “Charmed, Mr. Creed.”

“‘Charmed’ is right, Charlie. Whew.” Those strange eyes had gone wide; Charles saw pale eyelashes flicker. “… Merde.”

“What is it?” Charles darted a glance to Logan and Angel – if Creed decided to attack, or anything of
the sort, they were still talking and thus couldn’t help him –

“‘What is it?’ I’ll tell you. Or – no … I’ll ask you. And what I ask is this, Charlie: … do you smell
what I smell?”

Creed dragged in a deep breath through his nostrils; exhaled gustily. “Well?”

Charles sniffed. “I smell woodsmoke. There’s a fire,” he pointed, “right there. In case you weren’t
sure about the source.”

“No,” a drawl. “I don’t mean that smell. I mean ... well. Just watch.” He laid one massive hand on
Charles’ shoulder; it took immense effort not to flinch away. Then Creed turned just slightly –

– and the expression in those eyes turned his blood to ice.

Yeah, some of Stryker’s fucked around with my bones … but I could always see, and smell – and
what I smell now, is –”

“I know what it is,” Charles bit out. One brush of his mind – only the smallest tendril of power – and
he had flinched away from that black sucking whirlpool of want.

That was the man, Charles though, distant, who had held him down, on his own bed, not two weeks
ago. Had held him down, had ripped out his filling – and had gotten off on the blood, and screams,
and tears. And had marked his face and neck … with come. The memory of that scent hit him like a
punch to the gut; Charles swallowed hard.

“Oh.” Creed’s voice – still in his ear, damn it – had drifted upward. “Oh … hey. Now that’s
interesting.” Back down to a whisper. “… Does he know about that?”

“About what?”

Creed sniffed – but at him, this time, Charles realized in horror. At his neck, then a little ways down
– shite – to his armpit, and even though he was wearing three shirts and a thick coat, he was
sweating intensely. And who knew what Creed was smelling, besides sweat? His stomach lurches;
his throat felt tight. “Back off –”

“’s O.K. – I’m just … checking something.”

“Perhaps you didn’t understand me. Back. The fuck. Off.” And Charles laced the words with as
much obey as he could, without alerting Frost.

“All right, all right.” He held up his hands. “Stay cool.”

“Get away from me.”

“I’ll get away,” Creed said peaceably. Then added: “I might just let him know, though. That all
right? Just – clear some things up for you?” Sharp lion’s teeth flashed in a grin. “Shall I do that?”

“No –” Charles choked, but it was too late. He tried not to watch as Creed strode off, but couldn’t
help seeing that he walked over to the man and started talking, low and confidential - oh God oh no
– he shouldn’t look, he should look away …

But Charles kept staring, strangely fascinated by the way Creed’s blond hair had caught on the man’s
knit cap – by how the man’s eyes flickered between the two of them, by how the lines of muscle – visible even beneath that ratty black coat he was wearing – drew up tighter and tighter.

Creed paused, tilted his head towards Charles, and whispered in the man’s ear.

And Charles felt his eyes go wide as the man dropped his cigarette.

*Look away.* Charles covered the motion instantly, looking back at the fire. He wasn’t going to stare from the corner of his eye, he wasn’t going to think about what Creed might have said … And that had been perhaps the only awkward movement he had ever seen the man make – in the real world at least. He had been completely clumsy in his own mind, when Charles had forced him onto a bed, and not thinking about that either – and besides, look at him now. Gracefully bending to retrieve the cigarette, beckoning Creed closer, and down –

– and Creed howled as the man ground out the cigarette in his eye.

He struggled, but the man had clamped a hand on the back of his neck. The snarls of pain sounded bestial; Charles couldn’t take his own eyes away from the sight. The other mutants had fallen silent too, and were staring. The man threw one hard glance round the bonfire and then pulled Creed away from it, into the darkness.

The cries kept going, even when the man had stopped walking – just inside the treeline, from the sound of it. Charles stared into the fire, feeling sick. He couldn’t help but overhear the group to his left –

“– every fucking time, I swear.” A sigh from the woman with messy hair – Kitty, Charles remembered. “You’d think Vic would finally quit it.”

“You think he has a memory beyond the short term?” The slightest woman – Yuriko. Her voice was matter-of-fact; its chill thus all the more striking. “But – it doesn't matter. Give Victor some time and a regiment to kill in Dallas and he will be content as a spring pig. Until the spring, perhaps.”

“Right, you mention that to the boss, why dontcha?” The woman who had started the fire flicked her own cigarette butt into it. “I’ve done my job for the night. ‘Cept for this new one, of course.”

“And I’m in the middle of mine. I’ve phased fucking half of Blue Group’s supplies – I was on schedule, damn it, even if I had to take enough meds to kill a horse. And now this runaway’s gone and fucked it all to hell –”

“Sean,” Charles interrupted.

The women stared at him.

He tried a half smile, then let it fall. “His name’s Sean.”

In the silence, the yelps of pain – ten feet away, Charles thought, and: please let it stop soon let it stop – sounded very loud.

“Right,” one said, flatly. “And you are?”

“Charles Xavier.”

“Nice to meet you. My name's Jubilation; you can keep your opinion of it to yourself.” She put her hands on her hips. “And what do you do here, Charles? Why haven’t I met you before?”
"Because he's been too busy running laps," Kitty said, under her breath.

Charles felt his face turn hot. “I -”

“Contain yourselves, ladies. He’s a student.” Logan had broken off his conversation with Angel; his voice was harsh, carrying. “Not supposed to be here, I know, but he kind of insisted.”

“The more fool him.” Yuriko’s voice was soft, and her eyes, in the firelight, were like hollows in her face. “Logan. He needs to be inside.”

A gusty sigh. “Yeah, I know –”

“– or he will have to join the Monitor in the stable. Is that what you want, Charles?”

Charles’ mind flew to Alex – and Sean, soon to be chained in there together. He was under no illusions … he remembered the chains hanging from the ceiling, the tools, the drains set in the middle of every floor. “No, thank you,” he replied, faintly.

“Then you should be taken back – ah.” Yuriko had looked to her left. “There. Young McCoy will take you, after Lady Frost has spoken. Shall it be so, Logan?”

“Yeah, why the fuck not,” he began to growl, but,

“Logan,” Charles breathed out, urgent, “and Angel – don’t talk to me, don’t mention me –” and before the others could ask why, or snarl, or curse or do anything, Charles did what he realized he should have done long ago. Why didn’t you do it? his mind howled, and how could you have been so stupid?

“Just – shh,” he muttered to himself. “Let me concentrate.”

He summoned up a veil – a real veil, in the real world – wrapped it around himself, and focused all of its energy – so limited: smaller than a marble, a billiard ball – you can’t see me in the night any night this night. He wrapped the veil close, watched Frost, as she walked into the circle of light – and tried his best not to think, to feel, or to breathe.

Frost was wearing gorgeous white furs. Her blonde hair shone like the palest gold in the firelight; her porcelain features were set and stern. She walked closer – almost to the edge of the fire – and fixed them all with a look.

“Brothers and sisters …”

The group of mutants murmured a reply. Frost inclined her head and continued:

“You know why you all are here. On this night, before the beginning of the battle so important to our Cause, we cannot afford to let even the smallest and weakest of us all fall prey to the Free West.”

She kept her face impassive; her eyes burned. “Or to cold, or to hunger – or to anything else that we all face every day.”

You don’t look cold or hungry, Charles thought, nastily – but focused on maintaining the strength of his veil. Beside him, Logan’s breathing was deep and regular … so regular that Charles knew instantly that he had to be controlling it. One of the mutants he didn’t know was gulping in air so quickly that he looked more like a fish than a human. And Angel wasn’t faring much better.

“Thus: tonight. The child’s name is Sean Cassidy. Some of you know him; some of you do not. He
uses his voice as a tool and a weapon; he can fly with it. He will have flown far. Find him before the cold can take him, before the Free West can take him … find him, and then rest easily.

“The Finder confirmed that he is near Syracuse,” Frost continued. “I shall direct you.”

And with that, she took a band - of some synthetic material – from McCoy’s hands. McCoy, who was standing right behind her, his face white. Frost held the band to her forehead; McCoy tied it in the back.

It should have looked stupid. It didn’t. No, Charles thought: it looked like a diadem.

Frost closed her eyes.

Charles felt a small flicker of power; his physical veil shielded him from most of it. Then a stronger pulse. Another … He stared at the band. He had seen it before, but where? The infirmary, his mind whispered, the morning after – after that time the man attacked you. Well. After the first time the man had attacked him. And Charles had thought that strap part of the chair in the infirmary room … there had been wires running from it …

It was a weaker – far weaker – version of the Finder. The Seeker, Angel had said – and indeed … Carefully, Charles sent out his dove, cloaked in shimmering veils. It began to fly along the path the Seeker was laying down, through the woods, up the road …

Began, and then it had to stop. Charles frowned. It wasn’t that the dove was weak; it was that he could not maintain his veil and send something. Not without deploying more power … and then Frost would see him …

His dove returned, warbling miserably. “It’s all right,” Charles whispered to it, shivering, and, “Come on.”

The dove flew round the circle. It brushed against Creed, where he was lurking on the other side of the fire. Directly across, shielded from Charles' sight by the flames: an impression of hulking strength and a mind that smelled like an abattoir. Charles shuddered. “Come back. Come on …” The dove fluttered its wings; warbled again. It sounded afraid. But why?

Cautiously, Charles sent it winging away from Creed and Frost, further around the fire – but it balked with an anxious chirp, beating its wings in a silent flutter. It took him only a split second to realize why.

The man was standing directly behind him. Not as close as he had been – that one night … you have a metal filling on the left side of your mouth … but close enough for Charles to feel warmth on the back of his neck, faint compared to that of the fire, but there …

“All right,” he whispered to his dove, heart pounding. “Just – just stay there for a moment.”

Could the man see him? Surely not – the filling had been pulled, after all, and he wasn’t wearing any other metal – except. “Shite,” he breathed. Except the rivets of his jeans. He flattened his palms over the two on his front pockets –

– and flinched as they grew warm against his flesh.

“Not this,” Charles mumbled to himself. “Not this, not here.” For the dove had fluttered closer – “come back, I need you,” he whispered – and it saw the want – desire, hungry-prey lust slithering hands around him … warm hands …
God—the man’s hands had been so warm, in his bed. Charles swallowed back a rush of saliva, shivering. So warm: brushing against his waist to strip off his sweater, twined into his hair and tugging, and gentle on his jaw and cheekbones—

“Before he ripped out your filling,” he muttered, and: “pull yourself together. Fuck – *fuck*, come on. And come back here,” he ordered the dove, sharply; it chirped once and flew back into his mind. “There.”

“There.” Frost’s voice was cold but exultant—and for one horrible beat, Charles thought she had heard him. But no … the Seeker had stopped, and just brushing the veils of Charles’ mind lay a bright and chilly beam of light. It stretched out, flat, into the distance. Charles knew without touching it that it would reach Syracuse; whether or not it would be of any use was another question. It was watery and wavering, even here … You could do better.

“Shh,” he hissed at his mind— the owl in particular. Puffing itself up, and at this time of all times, the nitwit. “Wait ‘til she goes—”

And Frost had raised her arms. “Go, with my blessing. Find him. Find Sean, and bring him back to me—and we will all fight tomorrow’s battle. Together.”

The mutants murmured in reply, indistinct.

What was distinct was the man’s voice, ringing out from behind him. Charles flinched, but kept the veil strong.

“Flyers – go ahead. Runners – we’ll hit the main road first and then go through the campus. North by northeast, twelve degrees twenty minutes.”

In the fire’s light, Charles saw Angel’s wings beat into a shimmer—and then she darted up and was gone. Kitty drew in a deep breath, exhaled—a strange vibration, and she was gone too. Jean-Paul— strikingly handsome, with chiseled features besides his flowing white hair—cracked his knuckles, smiled, and flew away as though it was natural as breathing.

*Perhaps it is, to him.* His thoughts were getting tired; he only just registered Logan muttering, “You there, Xavier? Get inside ‘n I’ll see you when I see you,” before he joined the other mutants—a bloodied Creed included—and vanished into the darkness. Charles heard distant snarls and curses, and the running crunch of feet on snow.

Then he turned back and almost yelped as Frost seemed to look right at him.

“*My prince,*” she whispered.

Charles began to shiver. The man moved, behind him— *dear God he’s close*—and only just brushed one sleeve of Charles’ coat with his own, as he strode past him and—

Charles blinked. The man had knelt down before Frost.

She stared down at him, eyes glittering. Then she stretched out one hand, and placed it on the man’s head. She blinked— *once, twice*—her jaw tightened just slightly—

And then she released him. Then man let his chin drop to his chest. Charles heard him drag in a breath and release it— *what did she just do?* his mind whispered, avid, and *go go*—touch him to find
“No,” Charles said to himself. He felt heavy, all of a sudden – heavy and so tired … “I’ve done enough prying for one bloody week.”

The man had risen to his feet. Frost was speaking to him, her voice low. Then she laid her hands on his shoulders; squeezed – smiled at him. And turned to leave.

McCoy was right behind her. Charles saw the stiff line of his back – saw it get even more rigid as the man held out a hand, and said something. It was too quiet to hear over the crackle and roar of the flames.

Frost had gone. So Charles was not as upset as he might have been, otherwise, when the man turned McCoy in his direction with a hand on one shoulder – and pointed with the other. Straight in Charles’ direction.

Then he let his hands fall to his sides. Stared at Charles, darkly. Shivering, even with the huge leaping flames in front of him, Charles felt very much alone.

Those eyes reflected the firelight … like those of a hunting cat. Charles swallowed. Or … and his mind wafted a memory to the fore: the man at the foot of his bed, tensed to pounce … firelight turning his skin amber, making his eyes glitter like emeralds set in gold …

The man touched the ring on his thumb.

Then he blinked, turned his head to one side – and Charles saw his profile for one brief flash, stark against the black of the night. Then he stepped from the light into the darkness, and footfalls crunched, faster and faster until the sound had faded.

Charles made a noise in the back of his throat.

Then he dropped his veil.

“Wow,” McCoy gasped, “you really are there – that’s amazing! How did you –”

“Nothing’s amazing, Hank,” he groaned. “Alex is caught, Sean’s going to be caught – the battle’s starting tomorrow, and I’m freezing –” He was caught by a fit of shivers. “God, I want to go home –”

“Well, come on then.” McCoy skirted the fire, walking to him. He reached out an awkward hand; clapped Charles on the shoulder. “I have to take you inside.”

**Oxford home**, he thought, miserable, but said: “And Frost?”

“Lady Frost has gone inside already.” A grim look. “She’ll stay up until they get back.”

Then he couldn’t use his power to break Alex free – although he couldn’t anyway, if Alex was chained … he wasn’t Jean, after all. Charles caught his breath; coughed to clear his throat.

“Come on, Mr. Xavier – inside.” McCoy sounded concerned. “You might get sick.”

“No.” He tore away from the restraining hand. “I have to see Alex.”

“You – what?”

“Alex. He’s in the stable –”
“Oh –”

“– and I have to see him –”

“No, you have to go inside! You can’t break any more rules – I can’t break the rules, or they’ll put me in there again, and –”

“Hank.”

McCoy closed his mouth with a snap. Charles looked at him, bit his lip … but then – *do it* – he said what he knew could not be unsaid.

“Are you really such a coward?”

A muscle jumped in McCoy’s jaw. The firelight made his glasses gleam. "No.”

“Then let me do this. Wait here and I’ll come back. I promise.” And it was truth, Charles knew – he heard it ringing from every word.

“*No,*” McCoy said.

“*Hank –*”

“I mean: not by yourself.” Behind his glasses, his eyes looked terrified. “I’ll go with you.”

The walk through the forest should have been more difficult, given that it was pitch black. But Charles used his powers to sense roots and rocks – his hummingbird flitting at his feet – and McCoy …

“I can see in the dark,” he said, shortly. “Aren’t I lucky?”

“Is that – your ability? Your mutation?”

“Part of it.”

Charles had made no reply to that. Hadn’t even considered what the other parts might be, until they reached the stable – an ominous shadow in the waning moonlight. And – “Shite,” Charles breathed, because of course the door was locked, and he couldn’t pick it –

“Alex?” he called softly. “Alex – are you there?”

They waited, tense. Then Charles heard a clank, and a shuffle. And: “Mr. Xavier?” quavered from beneath a barred window on the left side –

“Oh Alex,” he breathed, and ran to the window. It was not much of an opening – just a long horizontal stripe – and only just within his reach. He grabbed at the bars. Rust flaked onto his gloves. “Are you all right?”

A pause. Then: “… No.”

“But you can talk – you can hear me, Alex: is there a way you can get out? Can you blast the door, with your power? Or a hole in the wall?”

“If he can’t,” McCoy murmured, “I can tear those bars out –” but: “Yes,” Alex said.
Charles stared at McCoy, feeling his heart race. “If you can –” he hesitated. Then took the plunge. “Then do it, Alex. Knock this place to rubble,” his blood surged at the image, “and we’ll get you out of here. We’ll escape – we’ll all escape – tonight. Now.”

McCoy’s eyes were luminous behind his glasses. Charles grinned at him. Then he waited for the first flash of Alex’s power –

And waited.

“… Alex?”

“Thanks, Mr. Xavier.” Alex’s voice was dull. “But I can’t –”

“‘Can’t’ nothing, Alex – you just said –”

A gulping sob. “I can’t move. I have a chain on me.”

It clanked.

Charles thought desperately. What would he do with that goddamned chain around his ankle night after night, if he had Alex’s power? Simple enough: “Bloody hell, just blast it off. Aim for the links, keep the power away from your legs, and it should be –”

“No.” Alex’s voice cracked.

He kept going – “It’s on my arms. The chain, I mean – it’s on my arms. My ankles … my ankles …”

And Alex started to cry. “He caught them with a crowbar, and they – they look – he broke them…”

It was a good thing, Charles thought, distantly, that he hadn’t eaten much that day. Otherwise it would all have come up against the stable wall.

As it was, he just managed to choke back a dry heave, then another. He spat against the wall and coughed. “God. This place …” Charles leaned his forehead against the stone. “This place is hell.”

McCoy, next to him, said nothing. But Charles could hear his teeth clattering together. He spared him a look – McCoy had only been wearing his normal clothes and white lab coat, all this time. His fingers were turning blue. “Oh, Hank … What are we going to … What can we do?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Xavier.” He sounded as miserable as Charles felt. “We could carry him, or something –”

“No.” Alex’s voice, from within the cell, was stronger. “No – don’t. I got – I got myself in trouble, with this. With beating up Sean. You were right, Mr. Xavier … I wouldn’t treat my brother that way. So this – this is –”

“Don’t you dare say that this is what you deserve!” Charles felt rage hit him like a punch to the gut; he redirected it to his voice. “That is not true! This is just – sadism, pure and simple -”

“But I’m – I’m in his shoes. Aren’t I? Sean’s – like you said. I hurt him. And now – I’m hurt … it hurts …”

“It shouldn’t be that way,” Charles whispered, shuddering. He rested his head against the stone wall; he could feel tears hot on his cheeks. “Nobody should have to suffer like this. Like you children – all of you, oh God –” Memories: Jean’s pain and Sean’s pain; Ororo and Bobby and John tense and miserable at the breakfast table; Hank screaming as his fingers were broken; Angel weeping in the
light of the fire …

“You’d better go, Mr. Xavier.”

“No, Alex, I’m not leaving you –”

“Hey Hank? You there too?”

“Um.” McCoy cleared his throat. “Yeah.”

“Get Mr. X back inside, will you? Drag him if you have to.”

“I hope I don’t have to.” McCoy looked at Charles for a long moment. Then he bent, and – unlaced his shoes?

“Hank?” Charles wiped his eyes. “What are you doing?”

McCoy fished a bottle out of one pocket of his coat. Rattled it. “I’ve been giving Kitty painkillers for her migraine all day. I still have some.” He toed off his shoes. And – he had terrible frostbite, because his feet were blue –

Charles stared. Then he had to blink rapidly, and stare ... up. Into McCoy’s face, now upside down, since he had executed a leaping sort of flip that let him grab the stable gutter with his prehensile toes. He passed the bottle from one hand to one foot, then eased the foot to one side, found the bars –

“Alex, I’m pushing some painkillers through. They’re pretty powerful –”

“Wait,” Charles choked, “what if he takes too many –”

“– and there’s only enough in there to knock you out for twelve hours – even if you popped them all at once.” McCoy nodded back to Charles. “You want to space ’em out – and not too quickly. If he comes back and you’re unconscious, he’ll know something’s up.”

Silence, from inside the cell.

“Just take one to start.” McCoy hoisted himself even higher; reached one arm through the bars. There was a rattle as the pill bottle dropped. “That’ll help with the pain right now. Take another –” he glanced to the west, “when the moonlight’s gone from inside, O.K.?”

Alex croaked: “O.K.” Another rattle. “Here goes one.”

“And – and when you hear him coming back, take all the rest and hide the bottle. He’ll start with you, and if he thinks you’ve passed out, he’ll stop.” McCoy paused. “It’ll be all right.”

Straining his ears, Charles heard Alex … still crying.

But McCoy was speaking right into the cell, face pressed against the bars. “C’mon, man. It’ll be all right. Hey, if an egghead like me can get through it, you can get through it. You’re tough. All right?”

Silence. Then: “Yeah,” Alex rasped.

“All right.” McCoy paused. “We’ll see you.”

“Yeah. I’ll see you guys, too. And – Hank? Mr. Xavier?” A pause. “Thank you. For – for coming here, I mean. I was scared.”
He still was. Charles could almost smell the fear.

Then it spiked from all three of them, as something snapped in the woods. “Just an animal,” McCoy gasped, and: “Oh God,” Charles said, heart pounding.

“You guys had better go. Get back to the manor. Oh, and McCoy?”

“Yeah?”

“Two bottles of bourbon says that Angel’s the one to find Sean.”

McCoy didn’t hesitate. “You’re on.” He dropped to the snowy ground, found his shoes and began shoving his feet into them.

“Alex,” Charles pitched his voice to carry. “I’ll tell you right now… You’re going to win that one.”


“Get lost man, hurry up.”

“O.K. – we’re going, we’re going.”

And with a glance at Charles, serious, McCoy turned and began to trudge in the direction of the manor.

Charles gave the bars one last look.

Then he tugged his coat tightly around himself, and followed McCoy, walking away through the cold snow.

Only on the threshold of his room did Charles break the silence that had stretched between them.

“With those feet of yours …”

“Yeah?” In the dim light of his candle – they had stopped in his workroom for it – McCoy looked exhausted.

“You could rip things apart. You could get out of here – if you’re locked in. Hell, when you came to get me when I was hurt? When I called you? You could have torn my chain out of the wall.”

He was silent.

Then he said: “I’m not locked in, Mr. Xavier. Not anymore.”

Charles let his coat fall into a heap on his bed. Then he sat, dully, and watched McCoy close the shackle around his ankle. Lock it.

“Mr. Xavier …”

“Hm?” Charles didn’t feel like talking. All he wanted was sleep – without dreams. Because his dreams … well. They would not be pleasant. Of that he was sure.

McCoy dragged in a deep breath. “I’m sorry. For – for everything. For not being more brave.”

“Oh, Hank.” He sighed. “You’re brave. I’m brave, Alex is brave – hell, we’re all brave, just to keep
on breathing in this place. But I should not have said what I said to you, earlier. You’re not a
coward, Hank – and I don’t think you ever will be.”

He heard the click of McCoy’s throat as he swallowed. “Thanks, Mr. Xavier.”

“Go get some sleep.” Charles tried a smile. He didn’t think it convincing, but the other smiled back.

“Alex will be fine,” McCoy said, walking to the door. “We have one bag of Archangel’s blood left.
I’ll have it ready to go for him tomorrow.”

“Mmm. That’s excellent.”

What was also excellent, Charles thought, was that he managed to keep his voice neutral. He felt sick
to his stomach. He felt like screaming.

Instead, he said: “Good night.”

“Good night.”

The door closed behind McCoy. He heard the scrape of the lock; the slide of the bolt.

And Charles had time to stare at the ashes of his fireplace. To think. Sleeping was out of the
question. So, apparently, was escape. At least for now, he told his raven, and: we’ll consider our
plans later. All right?

It made no answer. Just fluttered its wings on the golden chair, and stilled.

Sean had pre-empted him – Sean, Charles reflected, bleakly, had had his own idea, of
miscommunication and confusion, and had used it just as well as he himself would have. Except …
“‘I wouldn’t have stopped flying. Or, well. Running.’

Why had Sean stopped? Had he had second thoughts? No, Charles told himself – then he would have turned around and come back, perhaps even before he was noticed. Had he thought to spend the night in that dugout? Surely not … one could break into a basement in any town. Perhaps even a heated one.

Had … Charles swallowed. Had his injuries gotten worse? Sean had wept for the pain in his leg as recently as Sunday. His voice had still been hoarse at breakfast. And if he used his voice to fly, then … if it gave out …

A vision of Sean, weeping and in agony, swam into his mind. Charles gritted his teeth. “No,” he whispered fiercely. “I promised them.” All the children, he remembered with a sharp pain. He had promised to keep them safe, to keep them from harm.

“I’ll watch, then.” He curled up onto his bed, searched his mind – called up … ah. Called up a
nightingale. “Welcome to the aviary,” he said softly. It was plain brown, with a white breast and a
reddish-brown tail. It flicked that tail at him, and burbled a few notes – “That’s right.” Charles gave it
a tired smile. “You can sing, while you’re waiting.”

He sent it flying out the arrow window – flying to the stable. It brushed against Alex’s mind – still
that red-white turmoil, throbbing in pain … but muted, just slightly, by the drugs. That’s good,
Charles thought, emptily, and: “Go ahead.” He sent the nightingale to the lintel above the stable
door.

It perched there, and began to sing. The sounds were really very beautiful. Almost enough to let him
rest. Perhaps it would do the same for Alex.

Charles closed his eyes, listening; then murmured: “Let me know when he – when Sean –” – and fell asleep.

Charles woke up the instant the nightingale’s song stopped.

Tense, he stared up into the darkness of his bedroom. Then he closed his eyes and reached out.

The nightingale had fluttered up into a corner of the stable. There was Alex’s mind – the red-white throbbing slowly, now – sluggish. And there – “Sean,” Charles whispered. His mind was a flicker, blue-green threaded with yellow … but if a light could flicker in a hoarse way – muted – that was what Sean’s was doing. Perhaps it was due to his injured voice.

Or perhaps it was the power of the metal cloud, manhandling him into a cell on the other end of the stable, obscuring Sean’s thoughts.

“The other end of the stable,” Charles murmured. “As far from Alex as possible, of course.” Heaven forbid the children comfort each other. No, that would be too civilized.

The nightingale sent him a trill of song. Charles refocused his attention. The rage of that mind had focused into a purpose – oh God don’t let him start now - Charles heard his chain clank as he got out of bed on unsteady legs – it will take me some time to get back there.

Because … and the realization made him calmer, somehow. Because he was going back there. He would find the man; confront him. He wasn’t afraid of him – liar, sang his mind, but: “Shut up,” Charles hissed. He would interfere because he had promised the children. Because – and his stomach gave a guilty twist – because he had instigated this entire mess, fiddling with Sean’s memory.

But mostly because he had promised … that they would be safe.

Right. His thoughts were cool, controlled. How to do this? He called up – still less than a billiard ball, good …

“Even though you’re very fat,” he told his penguin. It hissed.

Charles smiled. “Go to Jean,” he said. “Wake her up – but gently; no pecking. I need to speak to her.”

For once, the penguin was not recalcitrant. It waddled through his door and across the hall – flip flip flip – Then it walked to Jean’s bedside, and flapped its flippers. “A little louder, maybe,” Charles murmured - so it rocked from foot to foot; and honked.

Jean woke. Mr. Xavier? she sent, sleepily. What is it?

“Good evening, Jean,” he said, projecting the words at the same time. Standing in his room, hands in his pockets – the chain a cold weight around his ankle. Any passerby would have thought him speaking to empty air. Charles sighed. “I need your help with something.”

Is it the token?

“No, dear, the token works splendidly.” Even the memory of his opal, though, made his stomach twist in guilt. “I need something else.”
What?

Charles took a deep breath. “I need you to undo the chain on my leg, and open my door.”

… You have a chain on your leg?

He closed his eyes; laughed shakily. She didn’t know. He had forgotten that she didn’t know … “Yes, I do.”

Why?

“May I explain later, please? This is very important. I don’t have much time.”

A brief hesitation; but then Charles heard a click and scrape from the door. Unlocked, unbolted; good. “And the chain?”

The metal on his foot wobbled. It’s heavy.

“Yes, I know. Can you try anyway?”

… Could I just break one of the little metal bits?

So he could walk to the man with a shackle around his own ankle – Charles bit back a hysterical laugh. “I’m sure you could, Jean. But I really need the shackle off.”

I’ll try –

“I know you can do it.” He thought – and then inhaled. “Ask your phoenix for help, Jean. Say,” he swallowed. “It’s not for Mr. Xavier. It’s for Sean.”

I’ll ask. One second …

A pause.

Then Charles felt his skin prickle, as the shackle on his ankle creaked, opened, and settled gently onto his stone floor. “Thank you, Jean,” he breathed. “And thank your phoenix too.”

He helped me – just like your birds help you.

“That’s right.” He staggered over to his wardrobe, shucked off the jeans – those rivets – in favor of sweatpants. “Do you like the penguin?”

Yes.

“I’m glad. Is it all right if it stays in your room for a while? Just by the door.” To guard her, he ordered the penguin; its sharp beak clacked in reply. Guard her. Keep her safe –

It’s all right if she stays. A pause, and then: Mr. Xavier?

“Yes?”

Where are you going?

He exhaled, shakily. Gave himself one last check – no metal anywhere – and replied: “I need to go check on Sean.”

A pause. Then: He’s not in his room. Why isn’t he in his room, Mr. Xavier?
Charles swallowed – and took a moment to thank whichever tech had kept Jean from the alarm, the anger that must have enveloped the Hive, Frost’s office …

“He had to fly somewhere tonight, Jean. I’m just checking on him, to make sure he’s all right. Now, listen to me,” he threaded his voice with listen and obey. “Stay in your room, hm? The penguin will keep you company – but it’s important that you stay there. Try to go back to sleep.”

A longer pause. Then: You’ll make sure he’s all right?

“Yes.” Charles closed his eyes. “I promise.”

Because – really, he thought, sliding his arms back into his coat – what was one promise more? Of all he had made since he had been brought to this place … of all he had broken … “But I won’t break this one,” he whispered.

Good night, Mr. Xavier.

“Good night, Jean. Thank you. And sleep well.”

Charles checked on the penguin. Guard her – make sure she stays safe. Half of him – well, more than half – expected the penguin to unleash the avian equivalent of a wet raspberry … but it just stayed at Jean’s door. Staring at him, beady eyes wide, like a stubby little sentinel.

“Good,” he said. Then he cast out his mind to find the nightingale –

“Oh, shite!”

His nightingale twittered a question at him. It had a beautiful, lovely voice, but how did it not tell him that the man had left the stable? Sean was there - he checked - and Alex … but the whirl of shrapnel was gone and that idiot of a songbird –

It trilled mournfully. “Hurt feelings?” Charles hissed, “Are you serious?” He called the nightingale back – it sang out in sorrow – “just what I need, a diva for a lookout –” and then, gritting his teeth, Charles summoned his raven.

It launched itself from the golden chair in his reading room - shot out of his mind and straight into the sky. The back of his neck tingled at its power – “… God,” he whispered. This was the part of him that had flown through the man’s dark and dour castle of a mind. This was the part that had found New York City. This was the part that would never be afraid.

“Find him,” he told the raven, and it swooped down with the same gossamer-thin veil it had used in Syracuse …

There.

But … Charles shivered. Not outside. Not anymore. The man was … in the library.

“But … why –”

The raven was curious, too. It flew to the manor, glided through one of the library windows – soundless, a black shadow – and perched silently on the carved mantelpiece. Charles stretched out to sense the man’s mind … there was the rage and a sickening thrum of blood beneath everything, but … He blinked. Stamped on the whole, on the surface, was that orderly design. A repeating pattern, the silver-steel blueprint …
And methodical movements, in the library. He was organizing something.

“This is just – I don’t even –” Charles went to his door, bit back on his instinct just in time to keep from touching the metal of the handle – and looked closer, gritting his teeth. Jean’s opening the lock had sprung the catch, thank God, so he was able to swing the door open by gripping the wood.

He started to walk down the hallway – but then – might as well be sure – he slipped out of his shoes and socks; left them tucked right inside his door with his coat. “Not going outside, after all,” he murmured, and: “this way you can be absolutely silent …”

And he was. Treading carefully down the flagstones of the dormitory hallway, then the next one – the dark one.

All too soon, it seemed, he was standing in front of the massive oak door.

Charles probed at the gap in his teeth. No metal there, not anymore. He wasn’t wearing any, he hadn’t touched any … The raven crrrr’d, sly: the man was – at the table. Charles bit his lip. Writing something.

“Surprised he’s even literate,” he whispered to himself. But, he read that book to Jean, his mind whispered back, and: “Quiet,” he hissed.

Then, closing his eyes, Charles wafted the raven closer. It looped round the library, glided towards the man’s mind from a blind spot – please let it be a blind spot … And the same thoughts were there: ordered patterns, flashing silver now, a tight lid on the slow boil of rage and prey.

He breathed a sigh of relief. There was no want, there. Not now. No desire, no lust – good. It would not do to have such a distraction. For – and Charles felt his lips quirk in a wry smile, despite his fear. He knew he could bring that want back in a flash: like tossing a match on an oil slick. The man would go up in flames, and Charles could cross his arms and watch, if he wanted to, with just one flutter of his eyelashes – if he wanted to – … if you wanted to.

Memory slid hot hands into his guts, and squeezed.

“Oh.” Charles’ heard his own voice, just a whisper. It was faint. “Oh …”

Want. The man wanted him. Badly. “Not just,” Charles croaked; his tongue suddenly seemed too big for his mouth. “Not just ‘badly,’” – no. Wanted him, with an edge of insanity to it, like fire. Like death. Even though – and the memories were cascading through him, the entire shelf of books in his reading room upended, the volumes falling open on the soft carpet – thudding like his heartbeat. Even though it seemed the man … had no idea of what even … to do.

Oh God. Charles bit back a hysterical laugh. No idea what to do, only knowing half-crazed lust – if that wasn’t the simplest scrip for: ‘have someone canny shag you rotten, prefatory to leading you round by your cock – and call me in the morning, there’s a good lad,’ then Charles wasn’t standing on his two feet, one door removed from something that wanted him – wanted –

He shivered. Pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. Could he do it, though? Could he do this sort of thing? Not in reference to technique, no … heavens no. That wasn’t the question. The question was … what did he, Charles, want?

“I want –” he croaked. Some control, perhaps. To not walk round in fear of being mauled. But … he
had that, it seemed – Charles frowned to himself. He had threatened to end his own life if the man ever touched him again. And it seemed the brute had bought it, for he hadn’t so much as laid a finger on him in ten days …

Except for his coat – his coat brushing your arm this evening, at the fire – his mind whispered, feverish. He was watching you there – did you see him? Did you feel that? Creed could smell it – and you could smell it too, even though you said you couldn’t –

“I couldn’t – I didn’t – oh, stop.” Charles breathed through his open mouth; his throat felt dry. “Stop.”

So: the man could be manipulated. He had been already; easily, too, with only that one threat. Charles blinked. ‘Easily’, if one overlooked the pain he had gone through to get to that point – he probed at the gap in his teeth. But … the way the man had gripped his hair and moaned, grinding against him and gasping – desperate … he had wanted so desperately. Wanted something … something, it appeared, that he hadn’t known to exist. And that – that white-hot and clumsy a desire, that complete ignorance …

… That would be so very easy to manipulate.

Ignorance. For ‘innocence’ was the wrong word. Nothing that smeared come on a person’s face, and stared like it wanted to lick that come right back off, afterwards – nothing like that could be an innocent.

Charles stared at the door. He didn’t need any observer to tell him that his own eyes were glittering like a raptor’s. Very easy to manipulate … He knew how good he was at it – at sex. “Fucking,” he whispered at the door, curling his mouth around the word; ending it with a slow slide of his tongue from the back of his front teeth out over his upper lip …

And he wasn’t a child. He was sick to death of being treated like one, lumped in with the other children …

His raven croaked at him. Somehow, it had flown through the door. To his shoulder. And he hadn’t even noticed.

It ran its beak through his hair. And in his mind’s eye, Charles saw Alex and Sean. Sean – and Ororo, Bobby and John … Jean.

“Oh …” He sighed, and stroked the feathers on the raven’s head. It was right. This wasn’t about his own abilities, his own ego. And not about power, or control …

Or, if it was, it would only be just enough control … to keep the children safe. An exchange. The man would promise not to hurt them. And Charles would promise to –

“Go on, say it,” he told himself. He folded his arms across his chest. “You, the Oxford Casanova. If you can’t turn that man’s world on its ear in one night, then all of your years of practice will have been for nothing. So …”

Charles stared at the door. “He promises not to hurt the children – to keep them safe, when I can’t. Not to go haring off and ripping Alex and Sean limb from limb, to take just one example … He promises that. And you – well.” He swallowed. “You promise to fuck him six ways from Sunday.

“Right.” He adjusted his shirt collar. Ran his fingers through his hair. Pinched above his cheekbones – except there was hardly any flesh left there to pinch, and, “Really, this is not a bloody staff party, you idiot – all right.” Charles fixed his raven with a look. “Time for you to go.”
It tipped its head at him.

“I’ll be fine. Believe me …” Charles smiled tightly. “In this? I know exactly what I’m doing.”

Raven blinked, black eyes glittering. Then it nudged its head beneath Charles’ chin.

He pressed his lips tight, swallowing at the brush of its warm feathers on his throat – and at the disappearance of that warmth, as the raven shimmered into nothingness.

“Right.”

Without his raven there, the hall seemed very dark and cold. The metal on the door gleamed at him.

“Right. Well,” he whispered. “It’s cold here. But – I’ll bet a sov it’s warm in there. So.” He straightened his shoulders. “Go on, then.”

And – before he could think twice – Charles reached out and curled his fingers round the wrought-iron handle of the door.

He swallowed hard, as he felt all of the blueprint’s silver-steel lines, and all the molten metal bubbling beneath it – snap to attention and focus on him.

Charles waited, tense.

Nothing happened.

Nothing except: that awareness corkscrewed closer, tightening – and he clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering, told himself: “Go on, do it,” and laid his other hand flat on the door. Flat against the cold metal coils and loops.

Then, quietly, he knocked.

Silence.

“Come on,” Charles breathed. “You’re curious, you want … You want me, come on. Open.”

He hadn’t used any power in his voice. He had sent his raven to sleep. No … no power at all …

But even so, Charles felt only resolve – resolve, not surprise – as the heavy door creaked open, and let him in.
HALLOWEEN SURPRISE iz FAIL SURPRIZE. Sorry for being late, peeps!

Links to fanart will be posted v. soon, in an edit. Check back, and I'll totes post 'em again next chappie. I just gotta slap this up & run run RUN to a - a thing. That I have. WORK.

But I wanted to give you this ridonkulous chunk o' prose, b/c I Loff You.

Part of Charles’ mind, that which always took note of his surroundings, observed: there was no fire in the fireplace. Also, a window was open. Which meant that it was rather cold. And a chill breeze was ruffling the papers on the table – maps, it appeared, and memoranda.

That part of his mind, however, put paid to the catalogue within five, perhaps ten seconds – and moved on to something more pressing. Namely: escape routes.

Escape routes within reach.

He had sidled around the door, through the doorway, wanting to touch as little metal as possible. Then he had faced the heavy wood and pulled it shut. Thinking about how the whorls of metal looked different in the library’s light. Thinking about the weight of iron and oak.

*Not* thinking about the gaze he could feel burning into him from all the way across the room.

That is, until he turned around.

Then … all his mind could say was: *find an escape route, and: you closed that door yourself* –

For even though the door had opened for him, Charles had tugged it shut with a soft *thump*. And now he couldn’t take his eyes away from … His mind reiterated: *you shut the door yourself, and you did this to yourself, and it’s looking at you …*

*It?* “He,” Charles mumbled inwardly. “*Remember?*”

As if he could forget. As if he could possibly avoid remembering. The *want* had first spiked when he had bent his head to look at the door handle – Charles thought his hair was too long, now, to show any of his pale nape – to say nothing of his shirt collar … but perhaps it had been the line of his back, or shoulders, or something unquantifiable.

His mind refused to catalogue it.

And now the man was looking at him, and that same *want* was … well. There was no fire in the fireplace. But Charles could picture one burning on the other side of the room, its smoke curling round tables and chairs, undulating across the floor to twine around his wrists and throat … to lick at his pulse …

*Looking* … Charles tightened his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering. Instinct kept his fingers on the
door handle, even though he had turned to face the room; then his mind caught up – *metal handle* – and he yanked his hand away.

The man raised one eyebrow.

Tipping up his chin, Charles crossed his arms across his chest. Then he raised an eyebrow in return, and curled the corners of his mouth, a half-smile, half-smirk. *Why not?*

A smile tugged at the man’s lips as well.

Charles blinked in surprise –

– and thus didn’t see the candelabrum flying from the fireside table until it had slammed around his throat and melded into the metal on the door. *Oh. That’s why not.*

He was proud that he hadn’t screamed, but his gasps were loud in the cold stillness of the library, as the wrought iron flexed and coiled round his neck. Just like a spider. *No* - not enough limbs to it, and could he count them? He couldn’t – and oh *God* – the man had uncoiled from behind the table and was stalking across the room towards him. Charles wet his lips, tried to speak. The metal wasn’t throttling him – *not yet*, his mind whispered – but the words dried up on his tongue as the man stopped not an arm’s length away.

It was horrible. He could feel it – the force of that glare, hard and glittering as a knife’s edge. Like the candelabrum – or the writhing mass of metal that had been a candelabrum – but sharp…

Perhaps this hadn’t been the best idea after all.

“Who was it?”

And that voice was sharp, too. Icy.

Charles looked away from those eyes, wrapped his arms closer to his own body. He was shivering. *The open window*, he thought. *Nothing more."

“For god’s sake, stop kidding yourself,” he muttered desperately, and: “What?” the man snapped.

Charles’ eyes flew back to him. “Nothing.”

“Then answer my question.”

He swallowed hard. “Could you repeat it, please?” And when the man bared his teeth at him, Charles tipped his head to one side – only as much as he could, which wasn’t much. “Um.”

Scrambled after the words; remembered. “*Könntest du – bitte – wiederholen?*”

A low hiss. “*Du. Du unverschämter Welp –*”

“*Könnten Sie das wiederholen –*” Charles gave the pronoun some force, even though his voice was trembling. “… *bitte*?”

The man’s mouth twisted. “Who was it?”

“I don’t quite – follow?”

“*Herr Professor* Charles Xavier … who brought you back to your room this evening? Because whoever did so obviously did not secure you – and thus,” a glint from those teeth, “is due an official
reprimand.”

“…. From Frost or from you?”

“My lady sleeps.” Those eyes narrowed. “And you, Xavier … once more, you go where you are not meant to go.”

*Keep distracting him – oh god Hank, Hank* – He shrugged, though it took considerable effort to do so. “It was interesting. This evening, I mean. Outside.”

“Mn.” The man’s voice had roughened. “You saw, then, what happens … to those who try to escape.”

“I didn’t see Sean.” And as soon as he said it, Charles could have bitten off his tongue – but: *too late*, his mind groaned, and: *you idiot …*

“So you did see the other one. Alex Summers. Didn’t you?”

*Summers – a fine name.* A name for a warmer time. The prickling in his eyes was from – he didn’t know. All Charles did know was that he would not say another word until he was sure he could control himself. *Be careful*, his thoughts hissed – and had he heard his raven? *Watch yourself. It’s making you uncertain – the want,* now clotting around him, hot and urgent – *and you cannot. Be. Uncertain. No mistakes.*

“You saw him, didn’t you, Xavier?”

Charles stared straight ahead.

“And young McCoy was with you.”

*Don’t blink.* He kept his breathing even. The man was watching intently, eyes glittering. *Don’t give him a reaction.*

“I saw your footprints outside the stable.”

Charles blinked.

“Ah yes, Professor. All those footprints, in the snow. You really ought to pay more attention to covering your tracks.”

His mind presented him with the image of his token – opal and obsidian, its iridescent band twisting around and into Sean, in the boy’s mind … Charles bit his lower lip.

“Then it was McCoy?”

“Yes.” His voice was hoarse.

“Mn.” The man tipped his head to one side; the metal around Charles’ throat flexed and twisted; he fought not to panic and glared into those green eyes instead. How the hell was he going to seduce the brute if they were right back to the old ‘chasten Charles, chain Charles, choke and maim Charles –’? *Stupid bastard.*

Those eyes were fixed on his. They had widened somewhat. This close, Charles could see the scar between lip and nose. It was not so much a mark as it was an absence of stubble. *Red …* Suddenly, Charles’ own chin and jaw started to itch. He gave in, reached up casually past the metal, and
scratched. Look, you fucker … Not afraid of you.

The man’s lips twitched. “Feeling all right?”

That solicitous tone made Charles’ skin prickle. “I’d feel better if this were off,” he said shortly.

“Well. Let’s see …” The man brought one hand up and traced a finger through the air, a good half foot from Charles’ face – but one coil of metal loosened and twisted, and acquired a razor-sharp edge that scraped beneath one of his cheekbones –

Charles jerked away, gasping; the other smirked. “No?”

“I meant the chokehold, you bastard –”

“Ah.” The smirk widened. “No – that stays on.”

Charles could not think of anything to say. He settled for glaring, heart pounding into his throat. Could the man feel his racing pulse, through the metal? Probably. He couldn’t think of a way to use it –

“It stays on – unlike your chain. Chain and shackle cannot hold you; lock and bolt serve no purpose ... What need I do, Xavier, to keep you in your place?”

Charles stayed silent.

The man’s voice was … Charles’ skin began to crawl, because he was speaking gently, even though what he said was: “Do I need to break your legs? And – order them kept broken?”

A surge of adrenaline left him light-headed. “Like you did to Alex?”

“Not precisely.” Another smile. “Those were his ankles.”

Charles stared in horror. “You – you are an absolute sadist, you know that?”

“Xavier …” and the man stepped forward. The line of his body was casual, but all of a sudden menace bristled between them like spikes. Charles bit down hard on his tongue as that voice, soft, continued:

“Did you come here to favor me with your opinions? Or are you so careless of your own life that you would choose to return here, where you were told never to step foot again?”

“I came here –”

The man waited. Then: “… Yes?”

“I came here to …” Charles squeezed his eyes shut. He could smell the rust from what had been the candelabrum; could feel his own sweat beneath it. His face itched, and the damp on his forehead was cold in room’s chill.

“‘To’ – what?”

Do it.

“I came here to – ask you something.”

Could the man detect a change in his own voice? Charles had thought it even. His heart, though … it
was hammering away in fear and – and – *I’m finally doing this* –

Those eyes had narrowed into jeweled slits.

Charles waited. And when no word seemed forthcoming, he licked his lips. “So. May I – ask you something?”

The man lifted his chin. Even unshaven, the line of his jaw looked regal – *not fair*, Charles’ mind whispered. *But*, his thoughts catalogued, sour grapes – the illusion was broken, at least, by the rank smell of sweat. Charles felt his nostrils flare. The smell was almost palpable, this close – probably from running. The man had left off his shabby coat, and the knit hat was gone. He was wearing scuffed leather shoes now, instead of – what had he been wearing, for the chase? Boots? Cleats? Something other than those shoes, surely, but Charles hadn’t looked, and –

“Well?” That voice was cold. “Ask.”

“Um.” Charles dragged his eyes up from the man’s shoes, back to his face. It looked carved out of granite. “To ask. Um.”

That jaw tightened.

A distant part of Charles’ mind sighed. This was becoming ridiculous. *Just spit it out*. What was the worst that could happen? He could die, admittedly … but he could have died any time this creature had touched him, and each time Charles had lived …

Charles lifted his own chin. The man wasn’t touching him now. Hadn’t laid a finger on him.

*Say it*, his mind urged. *Wipe that arrogance off his face.*

So Charles made his voice low, and gave it an edge of … honey. *If honey can have an edge*, and:

*make it drip – do it –*

“My question is: Do you still … want things from me?”

Silence.

One could not say, Charles thought, that the man had frozen where he stood. He had been immobile before.

*No*. What happened was: his stillness took on a – different quality. Those grey-green eyes, fixed on Charles … and all that attention, again, ratcheting round him – the power tightening like a vise –

Charles looked away first, fighting not to shudder. *Let him think you’re afraid*, his mind said, and:

*good job. Very strategic.*

The metal against his throat was growing warm.

“Say that again.”

*Do it.*

Charles looked straight back into those eyes, let his own go wide. “Do you still want. Things. From me? Because,” and he ran his tongue over his lower lip, and saw the man twitch. *Ha*. “Because … I’m offering them.”

“Things … like that kiss. You remember that kiss – don’t you?”

Even if he hadn’t seen those eyes gleam - like cat’s eyes in the dark - he really couldn’t have missed the want slamming into his mind like a door might into his face. Charles huffed out a breath, sucked in another. “Do you mind?”

“Mind what?” the man rasped.

“You – your thoughts – they’re rather, ah, intense.”

And he realized his mistake as soon as the man went white.

“No –” Charles gasped – “no, I didn’t mean – I didn’t look – I know only because you’re projecting them really god damned loudly –”

But the man had bared his teeth and stepped close, pressed his hands on either side of Charles’ neck. The wrought iron writhed and Charles swallowed hard, fought not to scream. “Stop,” he said, instead, desperate, “stop it –”

“Only because my lady has need of you, Professor,” the man whispered. His breath was hot, so close, and his eyes ... Grey green blue, different colors, Charles thought, and all of them quite mad. “You think to taunt me? You, who in your bravery would rather die than have me touch you again?”

“No – I didn’t –”

“Then let me tell you something, Xavier. My lady has informed me that you are of some use to her. And thus: you must be left alive for the entirety of this campaign. After, though …” and the man clenched one hand into a fist, and slammed it against the door next to Charles’ head, “after, I shall ask for you to be given to me. And then …”

The man drew in a deep breath; exhaled – then leaned close and whispered into Charles’ ear.

“Then … I shall take you to that place you saw tonight … and I shall take my time, killing you.”

A pause.

“And, since you will die there anyway, you will die with me having touched you again. Because I will, Professor – I’ll touch you, I’ll taste you … I shall take whatever I want from you, there – before I kill you. And believe you me: at the close, you will be begging me – to end it all. To end you.”

Charles’ mind considered. Strange: the words seemed to be more of a hot, wet slither than anything with information attached. Or perhaps it was because he was lagging, in putting together the meaning. Words mean things. He’d consider them, but he was trembling …

“Now,” the man whispered. “Do you have any other questions for me?”

Charles couldn’t find the words.

“Well? Do you?” A snap of teeth next to his ear, not touching but - too close – Charles flinched. “Do you?”

“No,” he croaked. “No – I don’t.”

The man leaned back. There was no smirk, now. His eyes stared into Charles’, glinting – his face
looked, if anything … hungry.

“Good.”

And then – Charles blinked, dazed. He had turned his back – turned and walked back to the table … casually. How could someone be casual, having said – what he just said? How could someone just as casually release the grip of the choking metal, and move it back to its table – the iron twisting and re-forming into a candelabrum in mid-air – and let that someone else thump back against the door and slide down, gasping …

Without asking, “Are you all right?” or: what’s wrong? … or: did I hurt you? Without asking anything; without saying anything … just going back to sorting papers, matter-of-fact. Placing some carefully in a carrying case; placing the majority aside in neat stacks.

The stacks were weighted down with metal. Random pieces. Huddled on the flagstones of the threshold, his back pressed against the oak door, Charles watched the metal float as the man worked.

It was one thing, to have Sean preempt his plan, however nebulous, for escape. Confusion, misdirection … deception …

But he hadn’t, Charles’ mind offered, shivering. The man’s words hadn’t been any stratagem. They didn’t form a plan. They just seemed to be – from his point of view – facts. Fact: the man would go fight in … or – lead? … the battle in Dallas. Fact: if the EBS won, the man would come back, and – ask Frost? For permission? Permission, to drag him, Charles, to a prison in the woods, chain him up, beat him, break his limbs – and intersperse those tried-and-true favorites with … rape.

“Just to spice things up a bit,” he told himself, woozily, and choked back an hysterical laugh, “oh god.”

“Xavier.” A growl. “Be quiet.”

Charles flinched. The man’s voice was hardly audible over the rustle of papers. But – oh, Charles hadn’t thought he had spoken aloud. Suddenly, he didn’t feel light-headed as much as purely miserable – he drew his knees up to his chin and wrapped his arms around them, trying not to cry –

Oh for fuck’s sake, he snapped to himself – his mind offered an image – the stable – chains – and he cringed. Not that, no – he needed to try to plan – Charles shivered. He could speak inwardly. Pretend he was talking to his raven.

Or …

Taking a deep breath, Charles closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he was in his reading room. Its light welcomed him – sun streaming through the vast window to fall gold and amber on the books. It was beautiful and warm. Charles sat down in his golden chair with a sigh. His armor made no sound. At least, no sound louder than the susurrus of many wings … fluttering, flickering, as his birds came to perch on bookshelves around him.

“Well. Good evening.”

They all looked solemn.
“I know.” Charles sighed. “That really didn’t go well at all, did it?”

A rustle through the room. Some of the birds swiveled to look at the owl; it hooted and shoved its head under one wing.

“Oh, it’s not due to any one – person? Hm. Individual. It wasn’t any individual’s idea. I daresay we all came up with it.”

This time the birds turned to look at the nightingale – who was craning its head to gaze into a tiny mirror, tucked in the corner of one shelf. And trilling. Loudly.

“Mm. Almost all of us. But … now what? Now what should I do?” Charles shivered, even in the room’s warmth. “Any ideas?”

Silence fell. Except for the nightingale, he noted with a sigh. Bloody bird couldn’t seem to take a hint. “But you don’t give up, do you?” Charles mused. “And even thought you can’t do much else … your music is rather lovely.”

The nightingale stretched its wings, opened its beak and sang, rising into the air and beginning to glide round the room. “All right,” Charles said, and: “All right, thank you. No encores necessary,” and: “You twit, why don’t you just –”

His raven interrupted with a loud *crahk*.

Charles blinked.

The nightingale fell silent, landed on a table, and looked at the raven – at the imperious tilt of the bird’s jet-black head. Then it flew over to Charles’ left shoulder.

“You’re saying,” he began, carefully, looking at his raven. “You’re saying that I should – I should …”

With one gentle flutter of its wings, the nightingale began to sing again.

“Oh.” Charles gulped. “The voice. Golden words … words … well. What’s the worse that could happen?” He thought for a moment. “I suppose he could cut out my tongue – oh, hush.” The nightingale had broken off with a chirp, and shoved its head against the hinge of his pauldron. “It’s all right,” he said, soothing. “Shh …”

For a long moment, he just sat in the chair, thoughts quiet. “Shh.” He kept his armored hands as gentle as possible on the nightingale’s soft feathers. “He won’t hurt you … I promise.”

The words caught in his throat. “I promise,” and his voice cracked. “I promised them. So: come on.” Charles blinked hard, trying to keep the tears from falling – one did, but no matter. “Come along with me, good Sir Nightingale, and we shall see if your song does – what my strategy hasn’t. So far.”

Charles squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, he saw how all of the birds had gathered close. They fluttered over his armor and settled on the chair. And from his right shoulder, Charles’ raven brushed its feathers against his face.

He inclined his head to the raven; tried to smile. “Thank you.”

Then Charles lifted his chin. “All right. When I open my eyes again, I’ll be back in that library. And –” he touched his nightingale’s head, “we’ll do what we can do.”
“All right?” Charles murmured, opening his eyes.

“Xavier …” A cold drawl, from across the room.

“Oh.” He blinked. “Sorry.”

A snarl – and Charles looked over at the table. The man had thrown a steel-plated pen down on the wooden tabletop; it clattered. He was glaring poisonously at Charles now. “Only a few moments, and I will be at leisure to remove you from this room – but in the meantime … why are you talking?”

“Why?” He considered. The fear and the man’s earlier threats were a distant background throb – but one that had to be pushed aside, now, or he would be left shuddering on the flagstones. “I – I wanted to speak to you.” He shrugged. “For a moment.”

Silence. When Charles looked again, he saw that the man’s eyes were wide and furious.

And – interesting – there was a shade of confusion on his face. One that quickly cleared, as he snatched at the pen, viciously, and held it up. Its sharp point glinted in the light.

“Why shouldn’t I send this through your throat right now?”

“Change of routine?” Charles shrugged again. “Or: Frost needs me alive for the campaign. Either should suffice.”

A long pause.

“And have you forgotten already, Xavier? What I told you I have planned for you, at the end of that campaign?”

He swallowed. “No.”

“No … Then, if that does not suffice to keep you silent – what else might I do to you?”

“Well,” and Charles straightened, dusting off his sweatpants. Quietly, carefully, he let the nightingale fly into the room. Fly, fly – he whispered to it. Directed it to the carved mantelpiece – and sing – but quietly … Don’t let him know you’re there …

The nightingale obeyed.

“Well,” he continued. “Why would you wish me to be silent? Remind me.” He put his hands into his pockets, and – oh god oh god – walked a few steps closer.

This snarl was different, edging into a hiss – and the man’s shoulders were wound tight as steel cables. “Professor. I wish you to be silent, because – I have a battle to begin. In less than twenty-four hours.”

“Oh.”

Charles considered him. At one point, the man had obviously shoved both hands through his own hair – it was disordered. The smell of sweat had lessened, somewhat; the room had only gotten colder with the first of the three windows open. All the papers had been cleared from the table. He must have put the loose stacks away in the desk; the carrying case was closed. There was – oh – why hadn’t he seen it before? There was a bottle of Scotch on the table, and a tumbler beside it. Charles’
mouth watered. There was some in the glass – *just a sip* – and he really really wanted it –

He pulled his eyes from the alcohol with a physical effort. Looked at the only paper left on the table.

*Oh.*

The man had been writing on the map of Dallas.

It was with a sense of deep unreality that Charles saw – scratches, from this distance – his own markings on the map. Had it only been that afternoon, that he had written them? The heavy blue arrows, the numbers. His own strategy, given enthusiastic form and scribbled onto paper. His excitement with Logan. *This. I love this …*

The unreality turned into a leaden lump in his throat. The man had his, Charles’, plan. Suddenly, part of him wanted it back. It was his idea, and now the other would use it – take the credit for it – *steal it –*

“Will you be in Group Four?” Charles asked. It was the most glamorous one. The most exciting. He pictured it to himself; breaking into an abandoned airport, knocking down defenses and flying the prizes straight into the sky –

He heard the man make a quiet sound of contempt. Startled, Charles focused back on him. His lips were pressed tight; the scar showed, prominent.

“That’s right …” A flick of the pen at the map. “You came up with this. Didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Very clever of you, Professor. Very clever indeed. Not quite thorough enough; lacking some imagination. But –”

“What?” Charles felt his back stiffen. “What do you mean? What part of it isn’t thorough? And a double feint - how is that not –”

The man’s teeth were showing, very white, as he grinned. And – truly, Charles thought, faintly – those teeth weren’t pretty. There were too many of them.

“Let’s say you’re in command, Xavier, and you’ve just captured almost all of your enemy’s aircraft. And then they’re called up by the enemy commander. What will you do?”

“If I’ve taken the aircraft?”

“Mm.”

“I – I will – um. Hope I’ve managed to transport them all by that time. One of the mutants – Kitty, isn’t it? She had mentioned ‘phasing,’ this evening – is that –”

The man exhaled, upper lip curling. “You’re not supposed to know these things, Professor.”

Charles had made it to the table; he shrugged. “One can’t help but overhear. Especially if someone is being very loud.” Kitty had been loud, he remembered. Perhaps it had been her headache …

The man had narrowed his eyes. “I say differently.”

“Ah.” Charles looked at the table. Then – carefully – he flicked his thoughts to the mantelpiece. The nightingale was singing – and … he felt his breath turn unsteady. The golden threads of its song
were weaving through the room, glinting in the light … twisting through the *want*. The *want*, Charles noted, that was still there. Still everywhere. But … and he looked back at the man out of the corner of his eyes. He appeared to have found some measure of self-control. The orderly patterns were flashing across his thoughts – the silver-steel blueprint …

*Bully for you,* Charles thought, irritated. Of all times to *keep* from falling into a cauldron of lust – it would have to be the one time someone was trying to seduce him.

Although … Charles knew he wasn’t really trying. Not yet.

He tipped his head at the chair across from the man. “May I sit?”

The other’s jaw dropped – just briefly, and then he closed it with a snap. “*No,*” he snarled. “*Go back* –” a swat of his hand in the direction of the door, then a vicious: “*Go back to your corner, Xavier. Sit down there. Sit.*”

“*Like a good dog,*” Charles drawled, and watched the man’s eyes flash. It would not do to goad him too much – but perhaps some more spirit would not go amiss. What had being polite gotten him, after all? Nothing but blood and tears. And a bit of come, yes, but the whole point of this practical exercise was to obtain that through other –

Charles slammed the door on that thought and told his inner catalogue to *shut the fuck up, please* – less analysis, more mindless flirtation – *go*.

“You don’t know me very well,” he told the man. “I’m rather more like a cat. Curious. And I wonder – let’s say you’re in command, at Dallas. You’ve just taken almost all of your enemy’s aircraft, et cetera. What will *you* do, that I haven’t done?” He let his lips twist into a smile. “That I haven’t – already considered? Go on –” and *ha,* the man’s eyes widened at his tone. “Surprise me.”

Silence, for a long moment.

Then – in a low voice: “You don’t think I can, do you? You don’t think I can surprise you. You consider yourself so very brilliant, Professor, that you believe none in this blighted world could think of anything you haven’t thought of already.”

The man’s tone was bitter. Charles clenched his teeth. Checked the nightingale – the golden threads were being edged by the *want* – with its strong undercurrent of rage, oozing dark as an inkspill …

He looked back at the man and widened his own eyes. Caught the other’s half-blink.

“I don’t know.” He made his voice low – just the tiniest bit throaty – and … Charles took a deep breath. *Risk it. Do it.* He leaned against the table. Edged one leg up. And, with one flex of his quads – *all that running paying off, lovely* – hoisted himself up in turn, to sit.

All, he was proud to note, with only his right hand having to leave its pocket. Although … he supposed he was lucky it was an immensely heavy table. Solid oak. His penguin would understand. Penguin would sympathize. And the adrenaline was making his mind gibber, so it would be best to let years’ worth of practice at flirting take over –

“I suppose I have my foolish moments.” Charles let his left leg swing, idly. “*Like anyone else.*”

The man made no reply.

Charles flicked a glance at him – and, unexpectedly, his stomach lurched.
For, suddenly, the man looked strangely … young. Eyes wide and staring. Lips slightly parted. His hair tufted in one place, where he hadn’t smoothed it – a flush just starting on his stark cheekbones …

Charles deliberately took his left hand out of its pocket. Stretched, kept the movement elegant – look at my wrist – took a corner of the map and tugged, just enough to slide the paper along the tabletop a few inches. The man’s fingers weren’t pinning it; in fact, the steel pen came along for the ride.

**Go ahead.** Charles then shifted all his weight to his right arm, leaned forward. At that angle, the man should have a lovely view of his neck; perhaps even down his open shirt collar. He flicked his eyes to check, and – **there, now …** Those lips had parted further; the breath had picked up speed.

“Well …” Charles made his voice even lower. “Tell me. Here you are –” he shifted his weight again, reached out and took the pen with his right hand. The man did not even protest. Smirking to himself, Charles scratched to get the ink flowing, then slashed one black line for – presumably – the EBS army. “Here you are, the scourge from the east.

“And …” he tapped the pen on the old airport where he had circled with blue pencil that afternoon. “Moving forward, oh, an hour or so, Group 4 has made it here – unseen, and now –” he moved the pen between two fingers and flicked his thumbnail against the nib, hard. Ink spattered. “Now the aircraft are yours, Commander. So. What do you do with them – that I haven’t considered?”

No answer.

Charles looked at him. Kept his voice dulcet. “… Commander? Hello?”

The man blinked. Then shook his head, hard, nostrils flaring. “Stop that,” he gritted.

“What?”

“You’re in my head.” Grey-green eyes were snapping with anger. “Stop. Get out.”

“Oh –” Charles huffed out a breath. “I’m not. Whatever you’re thinking, you came up with it – all by yourself. And speaking of which: what’s this imaginative idea? Go ahead. Surprise me.”

The man hissed a breath through those teeth – all clenched together. “My idea, would-be Commander Xavier? This.”

And he shoved Charles’ left forearm out of the way – Charles only just caught himself – snatched the pen, and drew a vicious black circle near the old airport. A much smaller circle than the blue one, though.

Charles waited. Then raised an eyebrow. “And what’s that?”

“That, Professor,” the man said softly, “is the extent of the area in which my lady, through the Finder, controls people’s minds.”

Charles felt a chill skate up his spine.

“She has refined it to the point of: three hundred swayed, one hundred controlled outright. With you to draw off –” those teeth were bared, “she assures me it can be … six hundred. Six hundred, bowing to her suggestions … but absolute, total control – with you assisting – of two hundred.”

His own heartbeat was thumping in his ears. Charles shrugged. It was difficult. “So what?”
“So …” A drawl. “The Free West’s aircraft total roughly three hundred and fifty, Xavier. Spies have reported ten in plain sight at Love Field. The remainder, we know, are underground. Thirty-eight of those are in poor repair, leaving only about three hundred able to fly. And when Black group takes the old airport … and with my lady in the Finder …”


“Exactly.” The man leaned forward; those eyes glowed green up at him. “I have only a few mutants to fly them – and not even the best. Kitty will be phasing as fast as she can. But we’ve recruited civilian pilots from Madison to Montgomery. Seventy-five. Azazel will teleport them in. They’ll fly seventy-five planes; my people will fly twenty-five more. The Free West pilots of those aircraft – we kill. And the rest …”

A shark-like grin. “My lady will control the rest.”

“… And?” Charles’ lips felt numb.

“MacMurphy will call the aircraft, and we’ll answer by bombing every single anti-aircraft gun he possesses. And perhaps some of the other defenses. Or the rearguard of his forces, on the road to Glen Rose.” A quirk of one eyebrow. “I have not yet decided.”

Charles stared into the man’s eyes. This close, he could see flecks of blue in the green and grey …

“Well, Professor?” Another grin. “Have I surprised you?”

“Hm.” Charles pursed his lips; saw the man’s glance flick down to them; then back up. That’s right –

“I’m supposed to be seducing him – those pilots oh God – “If I might offer a suggestion or two?”

Green eyes narrowed; the grin had gone. “… If you must.”

“Be careful, is all.” Casually, Charles reached out – curled his fingers around the pen and tugged. The man let it go – and Charles heard his throat click as their fingers brushed; yes – there now … He braced his left hand on the table, flat; pulled himself forward to hover over the map, as smoothly as he could.

And if that movement brought his throat close enough to feel the man’s breath, hot on cool skin – well, who was Charles to object?

“First …” he murmured, and looked down into the man’s eyes. Those pupils – God - it’s working it’s working –

“You see – with the Finder’s influence running only to this extent,” he tapped the pen on the map, “a good two hundred of your aircraft will be confined to a very small area. So if the Free West lands an anti-aircraft shot or two, or ten, you are almost certain to lose more than one plane per round.”

A pause.

Then: “Oh.”

The man’s voice sounded like gravel.

Charles smiled to himself, then continued. “Secondly … you might consider what will happen to Groups 2 and 3.” He skated the pen down from Fort Worth, gave the man’s hand, blocking the pen’s path, one quirk of an eyebrow – then switched hands and reached over the other’s forearm to circle Glen Rose. “Admittedly, the Free West will be thrown into disarray by the volte face of their air
force – but.” And Charles gave the man a serious look.

It was wasted, he noted, amused. The other was staring at the pen, where Charles held it in his left hand.

He cleared his throat. The man’s eyes jerked up to him. “But,” and Charles quirked a smile at him, “I’m sure I needn’t tell you: never underestimate the ability of a good fighting force to rally. MacMurphy might decide to cut his losses with the aircraft and throw everything into pursuing 2 and 3, and finishing them. I also assume the nuclear power plant is defended. 2 and 3 could be caught between Free West forces ... surrounded ... so: be careful.

“And third: Group 1 is going to get absolutely pulverized, on Love Field.” He raised one eyebrow. “So don’t put anyone you like in it.”

The man was silent.

“Here,” Charles said, gently. “I’ll just write you a reminder.”

And he did, the steel nib scratching loud in the silence. The breeze from the window was freezing cold – a good thing, Charles thought, since he felt so god damned overheated. He worked to control his breathing – spared a flicker of thought for his nightingale –

– and almost choked. The entire room was filled with gold threads of birdsong; thick as syrup and clinging to everything in sight. Perhaps, he thought quickly – perhaps that’s enough for now.

The nightingale chirped, and stopped. But, Charles told it: do start up again, if – ah. If you see the need. If you feel the situation is getting intolerable ...

It warbled in agreement. He switched his thoughts back to the map. Finished the note with a flourish – and a deliberate smear over the wet ink – and signed it. C. X.

The man was still staring. Charles tipped his head slightly, to try and meet his eyes. “Is something wrong?”

“How ...” His voice was rough. “You wrote with that – with that one, too.”

“Ah.” Charles capped the pen, held it out to him. “I’m ambidextrous.”

The man blinked slowly. “Oh.”

“It’s really quite convenient.” He let his smile widen – look at my lips, come on. That’s it ... “Except, of course, for the ink. With the left hand,” he explained. “It can smear.”

And Charles brought his hand up to his mouth and deliberately tongued at the ink stain.

A strangled sound – and Charles knew what it meant. He had heard it, after all, before. A catch in the throat like that – and eyes staring from across a table, a chair, a bed ... eyes gone that wide?

It meant that all of the blood south of the man’s sternum had gone straight to his cock.

Might as well ensure it. “Ah, curse.” Charles spat into his other hand, scrubbed at the ink stain. “I do so hate when that happens.”

“When ... what happens?”

“Ink stains.” Charles widened his eyes innocently. “But it should be all right. Just as long as it didn’t
get on my cuff. It didn’t—” and he held his left hand out, angled down as though he were asking for it to be kissed at a ball … wrist hovering just in front of the man’s chin. “Did it?”

“I—”

“Would you mind?” He tipped his head to one side. “Looking?”

The man looked dazed. Then, with a visible effort, he focused on Charles’s cuff. “It …” His throat moved as he swallowed. “It looks—fine.”

“Are you sure?” Charles purred. Slowly, he raised his hand—so that his fingers were poised to cup the man’s chin. Do it. But, his mind added—and if a mind could be breathless, his would be—do it slowly … time it carefully … gently …

He tipped his hand closer—just slightly … but: there …

That stubble scratched. Charles had known that it would, but it seemed so oddly mundane that part of him wanted to laugh. And that part won out. More of a breath than a laugh … certainly not a snicker … for he was stroking the man’s jaw line with his own fingertips, and the other stared at him with half-lidded eyes, tipped his face into Charles’ palm and … rubbed just slightly. Like a cat.

“Oh …” Charles breathed. “Well. What’s this, then?”

“I …” The other voice was hoarse. “I don’t—” The man looked almost drugged— but closed his eyes when Charles stroked across his lower lip with a thumb. “Oh … wait.”

“… Why?”

For the blood was starting to sing in his veins, a thrum that said: it’s been too long—too long—and:

reel him in. You know you can. Do it. Do it—

“Why wait?” Charles made his voice throaty. “What if I said I wanted you to kiss me? Right here?” He ran his tongue across his lower lip, watched the man’s eyes almost cross. “Right now?”

“… But … you don’t.”

The poor thing sounded confused. Charles let his own desire curl his mouth into a smirk. “Oh yes I do …”

“No,” the man croaked. “No, you—don’t—Wait.” He flinched back, away from Charles’ touch. “Stop.”

“But—”

“Stop!” A screech of the chair on wood; the man stumbled to his feet and stared at Charles, eyes wide. “You—you—”

Then he sucked in a breath; hissed it out through clenched teeth. “You were in my head!”

“No I wasn’t,” Charles snapped, frustration coiling tight in his body. He could spring, perhaps, from here—get one foot on the floor, use the table as leverage. What had gone wrong? Irritably, he reached out for his nightingale—

And froze.
It was gone.

The nightingale was gone – but where? his mind shrilled, and: oh. Golden tendrils looped and wafted out the window – the open window. Oh god oh shite. Had the bloody thing had gotten bored and gone out to sing to the moon?!

Singing … He looked around the room – before his blood went cold. There was hardly any of the nightingale’s music left in the library; none of that seductive power … Only the red-black throb of want … and rage.

He darted a glance back at the man. He wasn’t expecting him to look so furious; but … those green eyes had gone wide: wild and dangerous. “I wasn’t,” Charles started. “I wasn’t in your head. You want this. You want me – that’s what you’re feeli –”

No, he wasn’t expecting the anger, or … the fear that he saw in those eyes.

And Charles definitely wasn’t expecting the man to backhand him across the face.

Not following the realizations: he’s angry, and oh god he’s afraid – and following on their heels. So to speak, his mind added, but it couldn’t speak, because it hurt –

“Oh god.”

After the ringing in his right ear had stopped, and the ceiling had solidified from a blur into plaster moldings, Charles eased himself up on one elbow. He moved his limbs experimentally. Unbroken, excellent; still unchained, good; still in the library, hm; and now staring at the carpet.

“Why did you …” he began.

“Shut. Up. Xavier.”

Charles closed his mouth. The right side of his jaw hurt. If it had been the left, the space where his penultimate molar used to be might have been sore … but as it was, only the right was injured. And his dignity – but that didn’t matter anymore, did it?

Nothing really mattered. That had to have been why he dismissed thoughts of the nightingale, of its magic, and of all of his other birds. Except – perhaps – Raven’s courage.

With that last, Charles pushed himself to his feet and took two staggering steps, until he was right in the man’s personal space, where he had stepped back against the second of the three windows.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

Up close, the man looked astounded for a split second – then bared his teeth at Charles and leaned forward, threatening – but Charles did not budge, and hissed:

“You - I cannot believe you! Here I have been trying to be polite, trying to engage you in a civilized conversation, and you conclude that I’ve been snooping inside your head? And swat me like a bug? What the bloody fuck is your problem?”

“If you want a bloody fuck, Professor, then all you have to do is keep talking.”

Charles’ mind flashed instantly to an excessively ghoulish image; he shuddered, shoved it aside, kept going:
“You punch and choke; you take those weaker than yourself and torture them – you torture children,” he had to take a breath; did so; firmed his voice again when it had wavered, “Children. Do you have any idea, how disgusting that is? How … uncivilized? To break children’s bones, to use children in a war –”

“And that is why I brought you here, surely.” The man’s eyes glittered, furious and dangerous. “To consult on etiquette –”

“Civilization,” Charles snapped, “is not. Etiquette. It’s something – it’s perhaps mankind’s most noble idea. The idea that certain dog-eat-dog behaviors can be set aside, that torture and pain and death are not the be-alls and end-alls of humanity –”

“The ideas that you put forth, in other words.” The man’s voice had turned icy. “This sounds so familiar, Xavier. ‘Civilized’ is what you say it is; ‘savage’ is what disagrees with you. Thus – thus eugenics, ja? Thus Britain’s precious empire – now tell me …”

And this time the man was the one to touch - taking Charles in hand, fingers clamped in an iron grip on his jaw. He shook, lightly. For one humiliating second, Charles’ mind gave him the picture: himself, as a pet, being chastised – but the man had murmured:

“Tell me. How has your precious civilization benefited you recently? Perhaps your own queen’s treaty with us? In which she has signed away all mutants in her country – any my lady should pick … signed them away like cattle … Merely because they are – not human, you see. Not worthy of the protection of your queen’s governance, of that most beauteous gift of civilization.”

The man paused. When he continued, his voice was even lower, and his eyes were glittering. “Tell me: were you involved? In the studies, at Oxford, at Cambridge – that determined just how not human we mutants are? Before that treaty was signed?”

Charles felt sick with shame, but: “No.” He jerked his head, trying to escape the man’s grip – the other held on, relentless. “No. I was too young. I was too busy, raising my – students,” he caught himself, “and teaching. Besides, I - I wasn’t on the committee.”

The word clunked into the room; immeasurably petty and stupid. Charles heard its sound, and he blinked back a stinging in his eyes – especially when the man began to laugh, cruel.

“Committee. A committee on humanity … perfection. But then again, who am I to hold it in contempt?” The grip on his jaw flexed down to his throat; Charles drew in a jagged breath and closed his eyes. “After all … it brought me you. Didn’t it?”

“Yes.” Charles infused all the bitterness he could into his voice; even so, he felt the man’s hand twitch. “Brought here, where I can only sit back and watch, as you torture children.”

“Why this worry about the children?” The man’s voice dropped into a whisper. “When you should worry, very much, about yourself, hm?”

The hand at his neck moved round to the back of it; clamped like a weight. And – Charles’ breath caught in his throat, and he bit back an undignified whimper of fright as the man slid his free hand down … slowly … and – oh god – set it like another weight. In the small of Charles’ back.

And forced him to step forward.

So close – Charles gritted his teeth. So close, here really was no way to miss the man’s quickening breath. That or – or the way he was rather ridiculously aroused, and pressing against Charles, and … shite, the sensation made Charles both shudder and … somehow, crazily, fight not to snicker.
Because if the man had been sporting this hard-on through their entire argument? Charles would have to re-evaluate his opinion of the other’s self-control, intelligence, et cetera—

“And what’s so funny now?”

That voice rasped across his nerve endings. *What the hell.* Charles gave in, bared his own teeth in a smile, and twisted closer himself. Set his hands at the man’s waist. He couldn’t miss the gasp – *ha* – and he felt the other’s pulse jolt as he placed his own mouth against that thin line of throat—

*Thin.* Charles flexed his fingers. For all his strength, the man was really quite surprisingly … thin. Like a wire. “Wiry,” he mumbled against skin, and heard – *felt* – the other swallow hard.

“What.”

“Nothing.” Charles murmured. He breathed out; felt the man twitch. “Just thinking.”

“Just like I’m thinking,” and the man loosened the grip on Charles’ neck – only to sling the same arm there, instead – catch Charles in the crook of his elbow and press him forward into his own throat. “What I want to do with you, when this battle is over.” A sigh; Charles felt it buzz against his face.

“Thank you for the thought. You’ve told me of it already” – but the man ignored him and whispered:

“Civilization. Britain. Oxford and your queen. I will have to see … if I can make you weep for all of them. Hmmm?” He rocked his hips forward, and Charles had to gulp back a rush of saliva.

“Indeed?” He spoke into the man’s jugular; that pulse was racing. “If it’s additional philosophical discussions, perhaps I should look forward to it.”

A moment of silence, but then:

“Oh, Professor,” the man breathed. “You think you’ll be able to speak? How quaint. How … civilized. You honestly think that I won’t have you blinded and gagged?”

“Blindfolded and gagged, or blinded and with my tongue cut out. Be consistent.”

“No …”

That voice was low. Almost a … purr.

“No … You’ll keep your tongue.”

When his mind caught up with the innuendo, Charles’ gut twisted. But: “Somebody’s actually gone and read a book, I see,” he said, vicious, and scraped his teeth along that neck. The man twitched. “Since we last discussed tongues.”

A *growl*; Charles ignored it and brushed his lips up to that line of jaw. It was difficult. The crook of the man’s arm at the back of Charles’ neck meant that he had to nudge his face past those long fingers, splayed out near his cheekbone, in order to move at all. Whispered: “Did it have sufficient illustrations? Perhaps a diagram or two?”

A pause. Then: “Do you want me to start now, Xavier? Do you have that much of a death wish?”

“Well …” The man’s stubble was rough against his mouth. “My death wish? It comes and goes.”

Charles tried a flick of his tongue. In another life, he might have grinned at the man’s gasp. Here,
though … all he felt was the fear that was threatening to break free the instant he lost control of himself.

But for the moment, he had control. He did not need any help from any person – or bird – except perhaps his raven’s courage. *Raven*, his mind whispered, and he slid his mouth to the man’s and angled it in a kiss –

Except the man snarled into his face: “Try it and I’ll have a few more of your teeth, Xavier –”

“Now,” Charles interrupted, “that. Why even say that? Why threaten with violence, when …” he brushed his lips against that thin mouth, “when I’m offering this to you? Hm?”

Their hips were still flush; Charles could feel every minute movement there. His words were having some effect. *Very good*, his mind concluded, cold; and he continued:

“Whatever you’re thinking. Whatever you want to do with me – *with* me, not *to* me. Just to be very clear: I’m not talking about torture. I’m talking about sex. Whatever you want … I assure you, I’ve done it already. And I’ll do it with you.”

He tongued at the corner of the man’s mouth. “I’m … offering. Just think. You wouldn’t have to ask your lady for permission to do anything; you wouldn’t be left alone,” he rocked his hips against the man, “and cold after you’ve finished killing me. How long would I last, hm? A week? Two? Tell me. Surely you’ve thought about it.”

A pause. He felt the man swallow.

Then: “I –” The man’s voice rasped in his throat. “I don’t know.”

“Liar. You’ve calculated how long you could keep me alive, I’m sure. But let me tell you something about myself.” Charles let his head drop; rested his brow on the man’s chin. He could feel puffs of hot breath in his hair. “I know that … personally? I would prefer a living body in a bed to a dead one hanging from a hook somewhere. And I know …”

He closed his eyes. “I know that I don’t want to die.”

“But how –”

The man’s arm was a warm weight around his neck, one large palm was splayed over the small of his back. And that voice sounded … uncertain, suddenly. Charles let his eyes flicker back open. All of his instincts flared.

“But you said you’d rather die. Than have me –” the click of another swallow. “You said you’d rather die than have me – touch you again.”

The penny dropped.

“Oh my god, Xavier, brilliant,” Charles muttered to himself, disgusted. Then he leaned his head back. Said: “That’s what this is about. You honestly think that torturing me to death is the only way you’ll get to have sex with me – that’s it, isn’t it?”

“I …” The man sounded dazed. “What?”

“Oh, you fool,” and Charles gave the man’s waist a hard squeeze with his fingers. “You absolute idiot.”
A pause. Charles felt a growl building. Rumbling into: “Professor –”

“Sorry,” he said blithely, leaning back against the crook of that arm; giving the man a quirk of a smile. “But you do know that I was bluffing. Don’t you?”

“… What?”

Reduced to monosyllables again; excellent, his mind whispered. He nudged his cheekbone against the man’s biceps. “Move this arm, please. Away. I need a bit of room.”

Slowly, staring, the man obeyed. The stare went wider when Charles made a pleased noise, moved his own hands away from that waist – and draped both arms over the man’s shoulders. He interlaced his fingers, gave the other a coy look. “I was bluffing.”

It looked as though it was beginning to sink in. Those eyes were wide, very green. “About?”

“About death. I’d rather die that let you touch me again!” He imitated his own voice and rolled his eyes up; then flicked them back down and grinned. “Very well done, don’t you think? And you believed me. Which – to be fair – makes sense, because you really don’t know me very well.”

The man looked concussed. “You were lying?”

“Yes,” Charles drawled. “That’s what bluffing is, you know. Or – feinting.” He indicated the table with a tip of his head. “You understand it very well on a battlefield – it’s the exact same thing. Come on.”

And Charles backed away, exhaling shakily despite himself, at the library’s cool air on the front of his sweatpants. It wasn’t as though he had come or anything – and, bless, the man hadn’t either – yet, his mind whispered – so it wasn’t as though things were damp, precisely – but the contrast of the room’s chill with the heat of their bodies pressed together was still striking.

The other thought so too, surely, because he made a protesting sound in the back of his throat – and another, as Charles slipped his arms free. “It’s all right – come on, then,” he coaxed. “Come on.” A hand on the man’s back – lightly, resting lightly – be careful, his mind whispered – was enough to steer him to the chair. Charles pushed gently at one shoulder; the man sat.

Charles gave him a minute, then hoisted himself back on the table.

“What are you … What,” the man started – and … would he even remember any bargain made, fogged to this extent? His eyes were still dazed, and frankly, in his state, Charles was surprised he had even managed the short distance back to table and chair.

“I thought I’d speak to you again here. We were having such a civilized discussion, after all,” Charles said brightly. Before he hit you so hard that you fell to the floor, his mind observed, coldly; Charles shivered, and shoved the thought – and the pain still throbbing in his jaw – aside. Focus on this. You can do it. Half an hour more – and, and perhaps some … things. And you’ll have what you want.

“And that’s what civilized people do. They negotiate – when they both want something.”

“Really.”

“Yes. I want something. And here it is: I want you to promise me that you will not torture those children; not now, not in future. And you want something from me … Don’t you?”

Silence.
“And to arrive at a reasonable bargain – we negotiate.”

Perhaps sitting down helped, Charles thought. The man looked more coherent now. Those eyes glinted at him; the daze was gone. “I tend not to negotiate, Xavier.”

“Hmm, yes; I didn’t think you’d be the type – but.” Charles leaned back on the palms of his hands. “There’s a first time for everything. And it might be amusing to you, to try this – civilized a practice. The only thing that could make it more so would be to add the ultimate social lubricant –”

And the innuendo flew past the other; no surprise there. Charles gave a mental shrug, and continued:

“Alcohol. Which is to say – what say you we discuss this over a drink, like civilized people?” The Scotch was right there on the table beside him, after all. Charles could almost feel it, holding out its little amber hands. Waiting to be picked up.

The man looked at him for a long moment – then a smile quirked up one side of his mouth. Charles couldn’t help it; he shivered.

“Professor Xavier,” and the voice was a low murmur. It caught on each of Charles’s nerves and sent his skin prickling. “Don’t tell me that this was all a ploy to get a drink.”

“And – what if it was?”

The man, listening, let his smile widen; those teeth – god – Charles pushed past the visceral twist of fear and made his own smile wry. “It’s one of the things I miss the most. About Oxford, I mean: I did enjoy … being with friends. Drinking with friends, and talking about – things.”

“We’re not friends, Xavier.” The voice was pleasant.

“Well, no, but we have been talking about things. Tactics, torture; sex and politics. We could try sports, perhaps; religion. Cooking. Men’s fashion. Or we could just have a drink and –”

“I’m rather detecting a theme in your blather.”

“Really, I can’t help the beauty of my own voice –”

“Professor,” the man interrupted. “Having a drink is civilized, is it?”

Charles snapped to attention. “Yes,” he said, fervently. “Yes, it is.”

“Mm. Then perhaps I should try it.”

And the man reached for the Scotch and the tumbler; poured himself perhaps three fingers’ worth – there was still some there, from before, Charles noted, and: oh god he could smell it –

Then the man took a long sip, watching Charles. Charles blinked at him. He really didn’t know how to savor the stuff, he –

“Well, that’s a drink. And I don’t feel any different.”

“It’s not the actual alcohol involved – it’s the ritual. The – social aspect of it, perhaps. Involved in negotiation.” Charles’ fingers itched. “Here, let me have that glass and I’ll –”

“Ah.” The man raised a finger. “This glass is mine.”

Charles stared, mute. His face must have looked pleading, because the man’s mouth twitched. “The
ritual of sharing alcohol is your epitome of civilization, then? As concerns negotiation?"

“Yes.” He licked his lips. It was cruel, the way the man’s fingers rested on the tumbler, tapping.

“Well. Then let me try a civilized gesture.” A narrow smile. “For you, Xavier.”

Then he held the bottle out with his left hand – Charles stared – and deliberately moved it, and poured – oh.

Pathetic, really, but Charles had to swallow hard. The waste of it, and the taunt … pouring alcohol on the floor when he wanted it so. Deliberately mocking him. He felt his shoulders hunch, just slightly.

But he wouldn’t show that he was upset. Instead, he shrugged. “You know, there’s a special ring of Hell for people who waste good Scotch.”

The man set the bottle back on the table with a clack. “Oh, I think I’m assured a suite in Hell by now, Professor. And for rather different reasons. But …” And his voice was affable. “Why do you call it a waste?”

And he inclined his head towards the floor.

Charles blinked.

The voice was still pleasant. “Go on, then.”

“I …” Charles swallowed. “I don’t – follow?”

“And you seemed so perceptive.” A smile. “Xavier – try on this civilized ritual, why don’t you? Walk over here, kneel down, and lick – up – every last drop of that alcohol. From the floor.”

The smile widened. “And while you do that? We can – negotiate.”

Charles knew that the thunder in his ears had to be from shock. He knew he had options: storm out, sneer, roll his eyes –

– call his bluff –

That smile – a smirk, really … The man thought Charles would yield. He thought he would give up and back down and – oh fuck yes I will call your bluff, you arse. Just watch.

“Hm.” Charles slid off the table and grinned. “You truly do not know me – not at all. For you understand,” and as he walked around the table, tapping his fingers on the wood, he watched the man out of the corner of his eye, “you must understand that – to my Oxford friends and companions, the first rule of dealing with one Charles Xavier is: never, ever underestimate what he will do for alcohol.”

He reached the spot, looked down at the floor. Then at the man, whose eyes were wide with shock. You weren’t expecting me to do this – well. Just watch. Gracefully, he sank to one knee. Then added the other.

Then he frowned. “You know? Although stone is worse, wooden floors still are not that easy on the knees. May I lie flat?”

The man jaw dropped, just slightly – and then he snapped it shut. Blinked. And rasped: “Do what
“Right.” And Charles smiled up at him, and lay down on his stomach. “Here I go then. Oh come to me, you nectar of the gods,” and it really was not difficult at all. The smell of the alcohol was lovely, and its taste was even lovelier, and the floorboards were clean. That must have been why the man had changed his shoes, Charles thought. He hadn’t wanted to scuff the floors. How civilized.

And on that civilized note, Charles took care to make his licks of the Scotch sound as loud and as filthy as he possibly could.

There were worse ways to get a drink ... especially one as lovely as this. Scotch, with a fine, woody aftertaste. Charles gave the floor a long, wet swipe of his tongue and, carefully - since he was curious, he might as well admit – he stretched out a tendril of thought. No sign of the nightingale. No other bird in sight. But then he reached for the man’s mind …

Really, the fog of want in the room should have a hint. No more rage, no … or, at least, not as much of it. But in his mind … that want had reached the force of a wildfire or a gale. Given the season, perhaps ‘blizzard’ – but no, Charles thought. That wouldn’t be hot enough.

He tongued at one of the cracks between floorboards, sucking, and heard a strangled sound from above. Charles pulled up his head, licked alcohol off his lower lip, and looked inquiringly at the man. “Negotiations?”

The man didn’t say a word. He only stared.

Charles smiled. “I’ll start, shall I? I’ll set out what I want first, and then – continue here,” he tipped his head at the floor, “while you reply. So.”

He propped his chin on his hands – knowing that his eyes were wide and blue. “You’ve already locked up Alex and Sean for their egregious misdeeds. You’ve seriously injured Alex, and I don’t know what you’ve done to Sean. I want you to promise – not to harm them any further. No beatings, no torture, no nothing. Call what you’ve done enough for this misstep, and do not do anything more. Clear?”

The man stared at him. “Yes.”

That voice … Charles trailed his fingertips through the remaining alcohol; fought to keep them from trembling. “So. Now you say what you want. Go ahead.”

“I want –”

He waited. “… Yes?”

The man dragged in a breath, exhaled in a rush. "You."

"What about me?"

“I want you – I want to –”

Charles folded his arms under his chest. So much for not trembling. “You want to fuck me? Is that it?”

Wordless, the man nodded.

“Right. Fine. You can have what you want – just the once – and Alex and Sean go on their merry
He slanted the man a look, then went back to the puddle of alcohol.

The man just sat there and breathed, rasping, for a long moment. Then, however, Charles heard: “But they have to go to the front.”

And: “No.” Charles jerked his head back up. “Children in a war – it’s not safe, it’s barbaric – it’s –”

“Uncivilized?” The man’s smile was grim, controlled – even though his voice was hoarse. “Un –”

Or perhaps not so controlled. He had to grind the heels of both hands into his eyes, take deep breaths in and out, and stare into space – away from Charles – before he could continue. It took quite some time. Perhaps he had counted – up to fifty in English, auf Deutsch, Charles thought snidely – po russkiy –

He frowned. Why had he thought that? But the man was speaking, and he said:

“To you in Britain? Consider, Xavier: I have children in my army who can kill soldiers from twenty, thirty, fifty feet away. I have children who can electrocute, drown, incinerate, and even flay their enemies. Weapons, each and every one.”

The man looked back at him, intent. “And you argue that I should let them play games on the grass? Just to be civilized?”

“I – I –”

It was deeply unpleasant, Charles thought, to be the wordless one. To have someone else watching him stammer, watching with the glittering eyes of a hawk. And really, he had just agreed to fuck him for the children’s safety – it wasn’t fair to turn and redeploy them at the drop of a hat. But what more could Charles do? How could he convey it? when, at the moment – starving and exhausted and buzzing from adrenaline and alcohol – he could not even articulate his thoughts to himself?

He only knew that it was wrong. Deeply, unquestionably wrong. Sean’s pain, Jean’s clouded eyes … all the children, grim-faced and old beyond their years … sitting together in the kitchen the first morning he had met them. Huddled in a group, wincing from Frost’s icy touch on their minds … And this man was using them in a war, one that would warp their minds beyond anything he could do –

Without thinking, Charles groped, blindly. He found the man’s left shoe, and grabbed at it. “Please,” he said.

“‘Please’ what?”

“They’re children – please. Just – just because they can kill, doesn’t mean they should. They’ll grow up …” Wrong, his mind said, but: “They’ll grow up not knowing anything else.”

The man was silent for a long moment. Then he said, quietly. “Be that as it may – I cannot win this war without them, Xavier.”

A pause. “That’s the way it is.”

“It doesn’t have to be –”

“Yes.” The voice was flat. “It does. Your kingdom of Britain has peace in its time – bought, I might
add, with your person, and with those of others like you. There is peace there. I understand that they
even have food in the winter."

There was a thread of something in his voice – was it wistful? No, Charles decided. Impossible.

“But here … here there’s still fighting, and while there’s fighting, anyone capable will be at the front
lines. Fighting, to keep the rest from dying.”

Charles rested his brow against the shoe, felt his cheek against the cool floorboards. “And will we
die, if we don’t fight?”

“Absolutely.” The voice was grim. “Here’s something for you: when I return, you may read through
the records.”

Charles’ interest prickled. Reading, and: “Records?”

“Of - camps we’ve liberated; people we’ve rescued –”

“Liberated,” he echoed, bitter. “Rescued. In this glorious war of yours.”

The man was silent.

“I’ll give them to you to read, Xavier. And –” a faint sound that might have been a laugh. On any
other night, in any other place, from any other person. “I won’t even demand anything for your
doing so.”

Charles closed his eyes. Suddenly, he felt so tired … But – what more could he do? What more
could the man want? He had already agreed – his mind caught up. Oh god you agreed to fuck him.
Of course – but hearing it echoed in his mind was – terrifying …

Just the once, though, he reassured himself – and …

… wait.

He swallowed.

“What if,” he began. Then paused. He decided to roll on his back; look up … but when he did,
Charles shivered. His shoulder blades were flat against the floorboards, and he could feel the
remnants of the alcohol dampen his shirt. Looking up, he saw where the man had rested his elbows
on his knees, and was gazing down at him.

Those eyes moved down from his face to his neck and chest … and stopped on his abdomen. A
lower lip caught between teeth. That was unexpected. Charles glanced down. His shirt had ridden up
just slightly – he could only just see a flash of pale skin. Who cares? Charles folded his hands and
placed them right where the man was staring.

Those eyes flicked away, back to his face. And then the other raised an eyebrow. Inquiring.

Charles spoke carefully. “What if I asked you … not to keep them from battles; no. But – to protect
them? To make sure they don’t get – hurt. To give them people to talk to; to counsel them. And what
–” he finished in a rush, “ – what if I asked you not to make them do anything too.” He bit his own
lower lip. “Too brutal?”

A long pause. When he spoke, the man’s voice was quietly cutting. “Do you honestly think that I
have time to coddle children in the middle of a war?”
Charles clenched his jaw. “You could delegate it. Logan could do it – he’s good with children. Marie. There have to be others like them – others who care enough to – they could. They could all take turns.”

A pause. But then the pause stretched. And Charles, darting a look up, saw the man’s face … closed off. Considering. Thinking – oh god it could work – be careful be careful –

Charles hardly dared breathe.

“There’d be no guarantee,” the man said, softly. “There’d be some risk.”

“A compromise, then,” Charles replied. “Protect the children to the best of your ability, and I will accept an element of risk. As long – as long as that number includes Ororo, Bobby and John. And Sean, and Alex, and Angel. And Hank, here - you can't harm Hank .”

“Anyone else?” The man’s voice was waspish.

Charles’ mind raced, and then stopped with a flash. His penguin, standing guard in front of a door … The memory, the image made his throat ache, terribly.

“... Jean,” he whispered. “Protect Jean.”

A long silence. Then: “Jean Grey belongs to my lady.”

What? But he couldn’t think about it now – Charles tabled the mystery for later, then sat up and turned, staring directly into the man’s eyes. “The others, though. Will you protect them?”

“If I do, Xavier … If I agree to do as you ask …” Those green eyes were cool, half-lidded. “What will you do in return?”

“Well.”

Charles swallowed, tried to cough. His throat was dry. “Could I have some more, please?” he asked, pointing at the Scotch.

Instantly, the man tipped some into the tumbler, held it out to him. But it wasn’t the alcohol that gave him a rush of courage, no, Charles thought. It was the slightest tremble in the other’s hands – one he hadn’t been able to hide.

Charles did not even think of trying to gauge the want in the room. Surely he had the general idea.

“What will I give you?” He drained the glass, then held it out. And when the other reached to take it, Charles snaked a hand around his strong wrist. “Anything.”

The man stared.

“Anything,” Charles repeated, in a whisper. “When you return. Whatever you want. Whatever you want … us … to do together. Whatever you’ve thought of, whatever you’ve ever dreamed of … We can do.”

And at the wide, disbelieving stare of those green eyes, Charles felt a surge of triumph. He bit down on it, controlled it – only smiled, sleekly, and asked: “Might I have another drink?”

Nostrils flared. The bottle scraped across the table. Then, eyes glittering down at Charles, the man held it out –
– and poured a few fingers’ worth of Scotch over his left shoe.

Charles’ feeling of triumph evaporated. *No surprise there,* his mind said, and, just: ... *oh.*

Because, no matter what he told himself, it was another level of significance – to lick someone’s shoe clean, rather than just the floorboards –

“Go on.”

Perhaps closing his eyes would help. Soft darkness, red-black. But that voice was in the darkness, too – just as soft: “Really, Xavier ... if you can’t lick there, however will you cope with –”

The voice fumbled. Charles cracked his eyes open. The man looked furious with himself, and flushed across his cheekbones, but ground out: “However will you cope with other things?”

“It can be ... vexing. Can’t it?” Charles said, gently. Curled his lips around the words: “When one finds one’s tongue is tied.”

He paused, watching the man glower. Then he smiled, and laid a deliberate hand on a bony knee. Raised an eyebrow at the other's start, even though the man quickly controlled it.

“Have you thought about this, much?” Slowly, Charles eased himself back to the floor – flat on his stomach, heart hammering in his chest, but: *show him. Show him what he’s getting into, the bastard. Render him speechless, reduce him to a puddle, scrape him back together and make him do what you want* –

“Have you thought about – wanting this? Wanting me down in front of you, getting ready to lick …” He lowered his voice. “Your shoe?”

The man’s eyes were wide and staring. Charles waited for a reply. When none came – *no surprise there* – he gripped the man’s leg through his trousers, squeezed at muscle strung tight, moved the same hand down to his ankle.

Then Charles took in a deep breath. *You can do this.* Bent his head, touched his tongue to the shoe; tasted leather and alcohol. Paused for a moment, looked up …

And as soon as he was certain he had the man’s complete attention, he began.

One flick over the leather, then another; a longer lick, then a long and slow slide of the flat of his tongue … Charles heard the man’s breathing stutter to a halt, and he smirked to himself.

But he kept his voice cool, “Now …” and punctuated his murmurs with licks. “You’ve put me into a rather awkward position. Figuratively. You see: it’s so difficult to convey my thoughts in a polite manner - and using mere words, to boot.” *So to speak,* his mind squeaked, watching in horror, but Charles soldiered on.

“You told me to do this … but why, I wonder?” He swirled his tongue over the toecap - leaned back and, in a detached way, considered the way his saliva gleamed on the leather. Then Charles licked the Scotch off his lower lip, and slanted another glance up at the man.

“I’m curious. Why have me polishing up your footwear … when you could have me choking on your cock?”

And that sound, he smiled to himself, was one for the ages.
The man had turned his face away, squeezing his eyes shut. One strong hand had a death grip on the table’s edge; the other on the arm of the chair. Charles flicked that hand a glance; its knuckles were white. Thankfully, the chair was wood and not metal – although … he pursed his lips, thinking, even as he pushed himself gracefully off his stomach and moved forward on his knees. Although: it would be quite amusing – to see what, if anything, the man would melt, explode, shatter, or otherwise destroy when he, Charles, really got going.

He gently shouldered his way in between the man’s legs, considered. Laid both hands flat on those thighs, felt the lean taut lengths of muscle. Charles raised an eyebrow, flexed his fingers. “You must be quite a runner,” and really, of all the juvenile lines to use, surely that would take a First – but –

But. He grinned. The man’s arms were trembling and his shoulders shaking. Charles could almost hear the other’s neocortex shorting out. He stroked his fingers down to bony knees, exploring, then slowly massaged up, higher and higher, tracing his thumbs parallel and bringing his fingers together on the metal belt buckle. Which left his thumbs – hm. He pressed them in and down, right over the hard line of the man’s cock – and backed off, grin widening, as the other choked and gasped –

“Well,” Charles said. “Now what?” He took care of the belt buckle with a flourish – although really, the more graceful gestures were being wasted here, with the other wild-eyed and almost hyperventilating. Charles touched the button and zip and –

“Shite,” he hissed. The button had flashed hot for moment. He looked up at the man’s face. “What is it?”

He paused. All he could hear was ragged breathing. Not his own – he was perfectly in control, but …

Charles carefully looked at the white-knuckled hands gripping the table edge, the chair. Considered the rigid lines of the man’s jaw, the tendons in his neck drawn as tight as all of his muscles … The cataloguing part of his mind started to think – while the rest of him sent up one hand to slip beneath the man’s shirt, stroke over the ridges and planes there. Hm. Part of him wondered what the problem might be; part of him kept the children and their fate – this bargain – foremost in mind … but if Charles were completely honest with himself, he’d have to admit that another part of him was just touching, stroking … like he might pet a cat … and that his mouth was starting to water.

“What is it?” he murmured again.

And Charles’ mind presented him with the answer: He’s afraid.

“Oh.” He blinked.

What to do?

Thank a glorious life for experience, first – and second: deploy the soothing gentleness. Some of his lovers had been flowers more delicate than others, so all Charles had to do was reach into memory and try not to laugh.

“Shh …” He leaned forward and rested his cheek over his hand – one above the shirt, the other beneath. Then he brought his free arm up alongside, sneaking between the man’s body and the chair – so that he could end up almost draped over that cock. “What is it?” Charles moved slowly with his free hand … gentle caresses up and down the other’s side. He frowned for an instant – he could feel ribs through the fabric – but then he shook off the distraction. “Talk to me,” he urged, gentle. “Say something. What’s wrong?”
“I –” A shuddering breath, “I don’t – I haven’t –”

“You don’t know what to do?” Charles kept his voice soft. “You haven’t done this before? Well. You are in the best of luck, aren’t you? And in the best of hands …” He reached up and touched the man’s shoulder – gave a gentle squeeze to the hard masses of biceps and deltoid, passing over the bumps of bone – massaged down over a pectoral –

The other groaned, from deep in his throat – sounding almost drugged. Charles saw those tight-strung shoulders loosen.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” he said – and shite, that had been a mistake, because the man jerked upright and glared.


Hm. Perhaps an experiment? Charles held those green eyes with his own gaze. Try it.

“My fine fellow … I have a few souvenirs from a trip through your mind that say very differently.”

Amazing – he could feel rage tighten up all of those muscles at once. And the man’s eyes had crystallized into sea ice, and Charles caught radiating from that mind: kill –

But: “No,” he chided. Then he bore down on his left hand and rucked up the man’s shirt with his right, bent his head and swept his tongue over hot skin in one swift movement. “No …” Charles breathed. “I can feel it, here,” he tongued over muscle, “You want to kill me for reminding you … of course you do.

“But remember: I wanted things from you in your mind; I took them.” He skated his teeth over and down, then – ah, there – he saw the man’s left hand, clenched around the armrest, out of the corner of his eye. So Charles darted over and licked the ring on that thumb. “You wanted things from me, in my room … and you took them. And I’m not going to apologize, because I do not believe you know what an apology is – and until I receive one, I’m not giving one.”

He paused, taking a moment to catch his breath. Concentrated … and: ha. The rage had gotten choked off in a welter of confusion: lust-prey-mine all twined round by: what-did-he-just-say?

“So,” Charles flung back his head and enunciated clearly. “I’m not going to apologize.”

Then he smiled – let it spark in his eyes. “I’m just going to suck you off. Now: sit back.”

The man stared.


Those eyes had gone wide and drugged-looking again, and the taut line of jaw had slackened. Then, as though it was physically painful, the man let his back touch the chair.

“More,” Charles encouraged – and suddenly the man let himself fall back in place, as though he were a puppet with its strings cut. “Good.

“That’s it. Relax. Relax. I’m not going to hurt you …” It was like luring a wild animal, he thought; a wild cat at the zoo. “Shh … This won’t hurt – not a bit.”

Charles felt himself almost purr as he bent back to licking. The man’s skin tasted – not clean, unfortunately – but not too disgusting either. He must have washed at least a bit after the chase that
evening, which was good … but not with soap. Perhaps he had just rolled around in the snow. That seemed like a thing he would do, the lunatic.

While his mind was clicking away, Charles kept up the soothing cadences: “Just enjoy it. Relax.” Then he thought to direct a bit more. “Take a deep breath … In.”

The other obeyed; shuddering. “And out,” Charles ordered, and the exhalation was just as jagged. “Again … and again … good.

“Now – just keep breathing, there’s a good chap.”

And there – that got a reaction. The man’s head snapped forward from where it had lolled back. He glared down at Charles, his eyes burning, snarled: “Don’t patronize me –”

“Fine,” Charles murmured. “I won’t. As long as you …” he bent to lick the man’s abdomen again, and smiled to himself at the way all of the muscles went tight at once – “As long as you keep your promises … and …”

“ – and - what?”

Really, he sounded as if he were being strangled. And he, Charles, ought to know. Letting his mouth twist into a sardonic curl, he raised his head back up; looked into the man’s eyes. “And stop behaving as though you think I’m about to molest you. It’s not flattering.”

“I –”

“You are not very articulate presently, so I’m going to ask a few simple questions. First … do you want me to stop?”

He laid a palm flat over the man’s trouser placket. “Yes or no?”

“Nn … No.”

“Then …” a caress, and the other almost whined, high-pitched in the back of his throat. Like a dog. Sit, Charles thought, viciously, and smiled to himself. “Then: you want this?”

“… Yes.”

“Say ‘please.’”

A pause. Charles could almost hear the other grinding his teeth. “Go on,” he said, grinning. “Say it.”

"Please."

“Fine,” Charles said brightly, and flipped open buttons, pulled down the zip. “Although really, this is metal. You could do this – oh –”

He felt his eyebrows climb up his forehead. “You’re …” Charles peered up at the man’s face. “Are you Jewish?”

“… What?”

“Hm. Never mind.” Perhaps a subject to discuss later. Along with – no briefs? Really? “That must chafe terribly,” he murmured, keeping his fingers busy – tugging cloth out of the way. “Unless … oh. You ran all through the forest and thought to do some paperwork before going back to your torture schedule – but we can’t have blood on our precious maps, can we? We had to wash, didn’t
we? And no sense in having to do extra laundry, if you have to scrub yours in the bathtub too, and…"

“I –”

“Shh,” Charles breathed out; the man gasped above him. “I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking … to myself.”

And – to be honest … he sighed. To be honest: he was rather avoiding this issue at hand. Or the pending issue. At hand and mouth. Oh, stop it, Charles told his mind, annoyed, and – matter-of-fact – swirled his tongue over the head of the man’s cock.

The man yelped, and – “Oof –” Charles took a knee to his ribs. “Oi,” he said, indignant. “Hold still.” He pinned one thigh under his arm, did the same to the other – then licked up and down, and felt the man’s body jolt beneath him.

“Oh –”

“Keep breathing,” Charles murmured, and took the other’s cock in hand, gripping tight round the base. Licked once more – and … Charles frowned to himself. This was not going to take long. In fact, it would be over exceedingly quickly unless – he squeezed where he gripped, and heard the man moan. Unless he did that, and a few other things.

He applied his mind to the problem as he casually sucked again – caught some pre-come and shrugged to himself, swallowing. What best to do? Bring him off quickly, get the entire thing over with? Or draw it out?

Charles sighed around the man’s cock, eased forward so it only just brushed the back of his throat. He curled his tongue – and laughed at the strangled cry from above him. Just wait … but what to try first? So many options … And really, it wasn’t as though he had a discriminating audience, Charles thought, as he moaned deep in his throat and tipped his head to take it all at once – all, come on – he changed the angle – come on – and … there.

Strange, because he had done this more times than he could count, and this was still – this –

He drew his mouth off with a slurp. Everything was slick enough, so he started moving his hand in languid strokes, giving himself time to catch his breath.

That had been – well. Not odd, but … he hadn’t really expected –

“Never mind,” Charles told himself. He twisted his hand – eased his mouth around it, tongued between his own fingers, just for fun, and hollowed his cheeks. The man had moved from groans to growls – but at that last, he rasped, “Oh … please,” dragged up from his throat, and Charles smirked.

One could stand to hear more of that.

He repeated the motion – another “please –” and he repeated it again – ha. He can be taught. And more than just the one word, Charles realized, skin prickling, as the gasps dissolved into a litany of pleading – in more than just English and German, how interesting –

He did not come close to losing track of time, not as he had with more memorable lovers. But he stayed occupied for a few moments, keeping a disinterested catalogue of the man’s reactions – and noting the ever-increasing tang of his sweat in the air. More musk really, this far down – Charles hummed, let go where he was gripping to make more room for his mouth, and squeezed the man’s sides with his hands. Musk, and nothing but bone and … muscle … well. He supposed that this sort
of arrangement could prove interesting, in the short term, provided fate wasn’t kind enough to arrange for the man to meet a gruesome end – after he had finished seeing to the safety of the children, of course – after finishing –

Ah. Well. Not a respectable amount of time, by any means – but at least Charles had kept him from coming for more than thirty seconds altogether. He placed his own hands on the sharp hipbones to his right and left; pressed down so the man wouldn’t jostle him, and sucked as strongly as he could, took him deep – and … there.

And: all right, his mind said. … All – right?

Really. That’s quite enough.

He was not surprised, Charles told himself. He wasn’t. It had just – been a few months, perhaps. He had squired mostly women in August, and of the one man, he hadn’t seen more than a pale and shapely shoulder … To be swallowing like this, now … gulping down come so that he wouldn’t choke –

Charles hadn’t choked for years. And he didn’t now. Instead, after taking a moment to suck everything off, to lick things clean, he dragged his mouth away, breathing heavily. He was sweating – he could feel it trickling down his back – and he felt he could indulge himself the tiniest bit, for a good effort.

So he laid his cheek against the muscles smoothing down to the man’s waist, and just – breathed. Tried to get his own heart rate back to normal – it had been the effort. An excellent effort.

Truly excellent, if the man’s breathing like a winded racehorse was any indication. That and – Charles cracked an eye and peered to the side. That and the hands, shaking as if palsied. And – he peeked up.

There we are.

That and the look on the man’s face. Poleaxed, with a side of awe. As though Charles were god on the seventh day. Bow before me, Charles thought, smugly, and yawned, turning to muffle it against the man’s abdomen.

Then he pushed himself up, wincing as his knees cracked. He scrubbed at his mouth with the back of one hand. “There,” he told the man. His own voice was perfectly smooth and controlled, and as he leaned over, one hand on each armrest, Charles felt he could indulge in a smirk. Especially since the man was goggling up at him like a drugged spaniel.

“Now … normally, that’s just a bit of a warm-up, but …” and he slid a hand down and palmed the man’s cock.

Those eyes widened comically, and Charles’ smirk widened. “See? Fairly done in for a while, I think.” He leaned in close. “Now? I’d like to see you fuck me with that.”

For a long moment, they just stared at each other. But then the man tipped his head back, just slightly. His eyebrows climbed up; Charles saw the sweat at his temples, the red hair darkening to brown … And then a glint of teeth, as the man exhaled, not quite smiling - with the rasp: “I thought I just did.”

Charles stared. “You –” A short laugh. “You can’t think that –” How adorably naïve, was on the tip of his tongue, but …
Suddenly, the taste of the man’s come in his own mouth was intolerable.

Charles pushed off the chair, turned on one heel and grabbed the bottle of Scotch. Hands shaking, he poured the very last of it into the tumbler. Swished it around his mouth, to clear the taste –

Rustles and other small sounds from behind him indicated that the other must be cleaning up. Trying to look presentable. *There’s a losing battle*, his mind hissed, and: *bastard.*

Charles felt the instant that the man rose from the chair. There was a long line of heat at his back – closer, then closer. A pause. And then a finger traced down his neck, dipping into the back of his collar, and Charles wheeled round and swatted the hand away. “That’s enough.”

The man said nothing. Only stared.

Charles gritted his teeth. “I’m tired now.”

Still no response.

A snarl of frustration clawed up into Charles' throat; he swallowed it. "I'll just go back to my room then, shall I?"

The other's voice was a low rasp. "I'll go with you."

“No, I –"

“ – need someone to lock you up, yes.” The man indicated the door, tipping his head slightly. “After you.”

Jaw working, Charles bit down on his anger – and … fear, his mind whispered. But: no. He was not afraid – not of someone who could be made to writhe with a single touch of tongue.

He lifted his chin and walked to the door. Then straight out, and down the dark hallway.

He heard those shoes tap behind him. His own bare feet were freezing, Charles realized, biting his lip. And – and the other was walking where he couldn’t see him …

Charles turned and looked.

The man was just a shadow, tall and angular. Watching him. And the barest hint of moonlight from the high arrow windows made his green eyes glow like lamps in the dark.

“All right –” for all of his earlier fear and panic had returned in a rush. “Stop that.”

“Stop what?"

“Staring.” Charles lifted his head high; gestured imperiously. “Either come up here and walk by my side, or turn around and go back.”

Those eyes glinted. Then the man walked up to him - this time keeping his shoes silent. He kept going, then half-turned, waiting for Charles to catch up.

Charles took a few steps longer than normal, and then they fell into step beside each other. As if they were walking through a park. A park with stones for trees, stones for grass, black darkness and silvery arrow windows for a sky …

It was with a sense of falling that Charles saw the door to his room. He edged through it, and stood
awkwardly in the middle. *Awkward … awkward nothing*, he thought, furious. This was his space, and for the man to be sliding through the door behind him and easing it shut – well. It sent his heart hammering into his throat, for one thing. For another – what was he supposed to do? Change his clothes – while the other watched? Wash his face, brush his teeth?

*None of the above*, he decided. He walked over to his bed, and flopped down on it. “I need to sleep, and you –” he sharpened his voice. “You need to fight a battle tomorrow. So … work your metal magic and piss off.”

“You do need sleep.” That voice floated through the dark; the moonlight was almost gone, and there was no fire. Charles, listening tensely, heard the clink of metal. Then felt the shackle – and warm fingers – close round his ankle.

“You don’t need to use your bloody hands for that.”

“I know.”

Charles’ feet were cold. Which made it all the more unsettling as the man pressed them between his palms. Enclosing one foot at a time, fingers curling round his toes - was he warming them? *Fuck no* -

Wordlessly, Charles tugged his feet away.

A small pause - and a rattle as the man tested the chain’s security. Then … Charles rolled over – instinct told him *you’re presenting your back you’re pre – turn over* – and sat up. Crossed his legs beneath him – the chain pinched – and stared up into the man’s eyes.

Up – and then across, as the other moved silently, to sit on his bed -

“No,” Charles snapped. “Not there.”

“Fine,” the man murmured. He knelt by the side of the bed, and – stayed there. Looking up into Charles’ eyes.

“Fine.” His own nerves were strung tight as piano wire. “Go away.”

A pause. Then: “May I ask you something?”

Charles almost burst into hysterical laughter. It took all of his control to rein it in, drain his voice of all emotion and, bored, reply: “Go ahead.”

“Will you …”

The man bent his head. Then he looked back up, and – Charles blinked.

He was holding out the ring.

“Will you wear this for me?”

Charles gaped. “What? No – no, are you joking? Absolutely not.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” Charles hissed, “I’m almost positive it has pieces of my tooth in it.” And it did, he remembered, shuddering. He had licked over it, had *licked* that ring – earlier in the night. There had
been little flecks of white embedded in the metal. His mind had catalogued them: *ivory.*

“All the more reason for you to have it. Take it, as a token from me.”

And here began the tripe of courtly love – how the fuck had the blighter latched onto it, anyway? ‘My lady’ this; ‘my lady’ that; tokens at every turn …

“No,” Charles said firmly. “I don’t want it anymore. It’s –” he grimaced at the words about to drop out of his mouth: “It’s yours. You can wear it, and – and think of me.” He laced the words with bitterness. “Think of me – from time to time.”

He saw the flash of white teeth in the dark. “I hardly need it, to think of you … Not anymore.”

Charles chose not to favor that remark with an answer.

The man held the ring up to the faint moonlight. “Although … I suppose it does remind me of you. Very beautiful. Very fragile –”

“Fragile?” Charles spat. “I am not fragile. You try to break me, and not only will I *not* be broken, but I will hit back and turn your mind into rubble. See if I don’t.”

“I won’t break you, Xavier …” That voice was lulling in the dark. “I promise.”

“You had better keep all your promises.”

“Mmm. Perhaps it will be easier to do so, wearing this ring. Because …”

And the man rose up off his knees – just enough to lean in and reach Charles’ ear with his mouth.

Tense, Charles waited.

“… Because?”

“Because … Ah, *Lieber Professor,* it reminds me of you in one final way.”

Charles looked down as the other slid the ring back on, and couldn’t keep from hearing, couldn’t stop the words from slinking into his mind … as the man whispered to him, breath hot against his ear:

“Because … it can be such a tight fit.”

Charles mouth went absolutely dry, before he kicked out with his chained right leg. “Bastard.”

The other had dodged the blow easily; his chuckle came from the floor – sounding rusty, unused. “Shhhh. Settle down – you need your sleep.”

“And I’ll sleep *so* much easier knowing that you’ve – finally figured things out,” Charles spat. “You did find a book. A picture book, I’m sure. T for ‘token,’ T for ‘tight’ – did it have an index, then, or did you read the whole way through?”

A pause, then: “No book.”

“No book?” He let the contempt he felt spike out from his voice. “Then do *please* tell me. Where did you come by your oh-so-exhaustive knowledge of sex? I’ve been nothing but impressed with you, so far.”
A longer pause.

When he spoke, the man’s voice was quiet. "I've seen it."

"Seen it?" Charles let out a derisive laugh. "How adorable a voyeur you must have been. And where, pray, have you seen it?"

_Frost_, his mind supplied, _Frost and the man you don't know - on the velvet bed._ In the depths of the castle, in the darkest places of that mind ...

Charles waited, almost curious, despite himself.

But when the man spoke again - even more quietly ... all he said was:

“War.”

A scoff: “What do you –”

And then Charles blinked. “… Oh.”

But – and he thought of what he could say. Soothing: _that’s not all there is to it._ Scientific: _what did you see, anyway?_ Sarcastic: _no wonder you’re such a sensitive person, my friend_ –

Or he could meet the man’s eyes, and reply:

“Do you see, then? Do you understand - why I ask you to protect those children? If they must fight your war?”

Silence.

Then: “I do.”

Charles took a deep breath. “And will you? Will you promise me?”

He stayed as still as he could, as he watched the man’s face – all pale angles in the dark. Charles watched it draw closer, then stop – where the man stopped, kneeling at the side of the bed.

And the man said, quietly: “I will.”

Charles swallowed.

“Well,” he said.

He bit his lip, and realized: he was so very tired. So tired that he didn’t put anything into his voice – emotion or power, or even much effort … when he said:

“Then – think of me. From time to time.”

Charles paused for a moment. Then … slowly, deliberately … he reached out with his left hand. Laid it alongside the man’s jaw – touched his thumb to the scar.

And Charles leaned forward, and kissed him.

It was nothing much. Positively chaste, compared to what his own lips had been doing … earlier. The man made no movement to deepen it; his eyes were closed. For a moment, Charles wondered – with the smallest spark of humor – had he forgotten?
Charles tried flicking his tongue over the man’s lower lip and – *ah, he hasn’t* – was startled into the smallest gasp, as the man made a hoarse sound in his throat, opened his mouth and pressed closer – strong hands gripping the blankets at Charles’ sides, twisting.

Charles kissed him back for a long moment, breathing deeply. Breathing, and – suddenly, blinking back the sting in his eyes. Trying to see in the darkness – any hint of light whatsoever. There was none.

Carefully, gently, he placed a hand on the man’s sternum. Felt the angles of bone beneath the shirt. Pushed, and broke the kiss at the same time.

Then he leaned back. And watched as the other kept his eyes shut, for a long moment. Closed … until dark lashes fluttered – and Charles saw the last bit of moonlight glint in the man’s eyes. His eyes, staring into Charles’ own …

Someone dying, Charles thought, distant – would look like that. Would stare as the man was staring. As though he wanted Charles to be the last thing he would ever see.

Charles closed his own eyes and sighed. He moved away from the edge of the bed; leaned back against the plaster wall.

He only heard the slightest whisper of a click and scrape. Lock and bolt.

When he opened his eyes again, the man was gone.

And when he slept, Charles dreamed.

His reading room was dark; he could hardly see the bookshelves. Long familiarity with the room, though, showed him those same shelves adjusting and shifting, moving in their own dream dance - as they tended to at night. From his golden chair, Charles saw a new shelf being prepared. Dark wood - walnut? Mahogany?

... growing out of the wall like branches from a tree ...

He sighed, and reached for the raven on his shoulder.

"The others are sleeping, too?"

A *crahhk*.

"But you're here." He swallowed. "Thank you."

The raven ran its beak through Charles' hair.

Charles stared at the new bookshelf. At the volumes wafting through the air - sorting themselves into a row, starting in the lower left-hand corner ...

"I got the last word, I think," he told his raven. "But ..."

He gazed into the darkness.

"But I don't know if this will end up being a mistake. Or not."

The raven nudged at him again.
"Well," Charles said, sighing. "I have you. And your fellows - oh. How is -"

But he had been anticipated. Charles saw, dimly, an image of his penguin: standing stalwart guard at Jean's door.

"Good."

Another pause. Then he blinked, remembering. "And that nightingale - I swear," he felt a surge of anger, "it left me and flew to the forest, the idiot -"

The raven stroked its beak along the back of one of his armored hand, and Charles saw: the stable. Alex's mind, red and white; Sean's, blue-green threaded with yellow.

And on the lintel of the door ... his nightingale, singing - weaving gold and sleep around them in the night.

"... Oh."

*Start up again*, he had told it. *If you see the need. If you feel the situation is intolerable ...*

The nightingale had found one such, it seemed. And had begun to sing, to make it right again. He closed his eyes. Felt his raven lean against his head.

"They'll be all right. Wherever they go, now ... Whatever happens ..."

Charles sighed, and let the dream fall away - like leaves from a tree; his raven flying with him to the dark of deeper sleep.

"...They'll be safe."
Here is a bit of a ramble before I get to the chapter proper. First off, if I have not yet replied to your review - please please PLEASE know that it is NOT because I do not appreciate it! I do, so very much! Your reviews are what keep me chugging along - and what kept me going through this (pretty rough) beast of a ch. 25.

I am excited, because I have had the immense privilege of seeing several talented people do fanart for "Nine Eleven Ten." And also: a music mix! I wanted to thank them all, here & to give you guys links to all Teh Pretty Sights and Sounds.

So: here is ART, arranged by Theme!

***** Charles and his Aviary *****

Ribbun
Charles! with a thought!bird

SwiftMint
Nine!Charles – with his Raven
(though you may leave feedback here)

***** Charles at his (traumatizing Finder-fuel) Day Job *****

NOTE: this art got taken down. Shaishda, I would love a copy, if you ever see this!

Shaishda
Charles, from ‘Nine Eleven Ten’

(any point after ch. 17 - Charles! in the Finder. Warning for: a bit of nudity)
& the above in close-up!

***** Erik the Red *****

EsotericTrash
Erik the Red (from ch. 1)

Takmarierah
Erik the Red (ch. 14, again!)

***** Aaaand: Everyone's Favorite Couple! *****

Takmarierah once more!
You Were Told Never to Come Here (from ch. 9. Warning: strangulation)

… and:
Did You Remember It? (from ch. 12)

Shaliara
This. Is. WRONG. (Charles and Erik - in bed! From ch. 16. NSFW.)

and last, but definitely not least:
They'll be safe. They'll be safe. They'll be safe.

Charles focused on the words – their shape and slant. Third person plural, future tense. Gender neutral; he had always wondered that, about English. No indication of age, or specific number in the group concerned. Group. It could be a group of as few as – two. "They" could be two people – two individuals like himself and – and ... the other, now gone off to Dallas and presumably getting ready to chop soldier after Free West soldier into mincemeat.

"You're going to have to fuck him when he gets back, you realize that?" Charles whispered. Then … he couldn't help it. He laughed. It rebounded off the lowest walls of the Hive; high-pitched and tinny.

"Really, Mr. Xavier. Control yourself."

Frost's voice cut like a blade through the electric hum of the Finder and the low static of the communication systems.

Shite. Shut up, Charles thought to himself, desperately. And: "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

Veil, for the love of all that's holy. Sink the rest; sink everything deep …

Charles blinked away the sweat running into his eyes. He had been called to the Finder that morning, after what had felt like only the smallest moment of sleep. Perhaps it had been his … exertion, late the previous night, that had drained him so. Except, technically, the person who had been drained was – no, and he yanked his mind from that path, savagely. Don’t think about it. If Frost should find out —

… What would happen, really?

Charles took a moment to consider. She might not think anything of it. She had certainly thought
nothing of unleashing her precious prince on him after restoring the memories Charles had suppressed … had it been not even a month ago?

"A little month / or ere those shoes were old / with which she dragg'd me from my home –"

"Xavier –"

Sorry, he tried, but it came out as an inarticulate mumble. Charles squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn't help it. Stress brought out the strangest things in people: whether rearranged scraps of Hamlet – and really, one wouldn't use shoes to drag, Professor Xavier – or drooling gibberish, or thoughts about –

Charles stared at the reddened darkness of his own eyelids. Swallowed hard against the saliva pooling in his mouth; flashing to those eyes and the sharp line of jaw – hipbones jerking up against Charles' grip – the incoherent gasps as the other had come hard, heat pulsing against the back of Charles' throat. It would have been too much for anyone else, but Charles had been able to hold him down, control him and ride it out –

… What was he doing now? Those papers in their case, the map of Dallas tucked safely away … Charles let his eyes flicker open. How cold would it be, in what had been Texas, on November first of any given year? The man might have had to retrieve his coat and hat. Had they been in his compartment, near the storage area? Because if that were so, then the man had undoubtedly taken along those swords, and several crowbars, and daggers and knives and perhaps even a bucket of bolts –

A crackle from the Finder, and Charles arched his back, trying not to yelp. He quickly scanned the Hive – his hummingbird thrumming and electric, like everything else … Jean was not there. Thank God.

Jean had accompanied him, that morning; thus his worry. Charles had only just glimpsed a tech taking her by the hand before he had been strapped down on plastic, tied three times over on his shins, cuffed on his upper arms. He had not been able to move to get a good look – but out of the corner of his eye, he had seen the thin metal tiles of the lower level wall quiver and slide … and then they had clattered over and over, up and away, just like a train station timeboard …

The tiles had concealed what looked like a cold incarnation of one of Oxford's strategic planning areas. Memory had pricked at him like a knife. His students would always joke about the "war room" – a grand epithet for what had been nothing more than a seminar table piled with maps, wedged up against a chalkboard with different colored chalks, and a wireless and – in one corner – a squat water dispenser that someone had nicked on a visit to Cambridge.

In contrast, this war room – the EBS war room – possessed an ungodly amount of tech. Charles could hear it, could smell it even if he couldn't see it. He had glimpsed McCoy fiddling with an instrument, before the man with feathers had wrested his other arm to the plastic. Then McCoy had sidled up to Charles and squeezed his shoulder once, before going to answer someone's shouted question.

The war room was crammed with mutants, and even … Charles shivered. Even a human or two. Or three – no, he realized, blinking – more than that. He'd lost track of them – the Finder was slicing at the edges of his mind, like a paring knife at an apple –

"God," he gasped, and exhaled in a rattle as the crackle and buzz peaked, then abruptly faded.

"Five minutes." Frost's voice was sharp.
And everybody moved again – talking loudly, testing instruments, checking calibrations, arguing … Nobody offered to untie him.

*But,* Charles considered, wearily … at least Jean wasn't there to see it.

*Veil,* he reminded himself. *Veil … sink the rest, down into the dark of the deep …*

A stranger had fetched him that morning. Blindfolded him, and marched him to the Hive with Jean. No sign of Angel or Alex; no flicker of anyone else he knew.

Except Frost, of course.

The blindfold had been taken off and Charles had been quickly directed to the Finder. Things had changed, it would appear … so even as he had catalogued the different sounds and smells – the changing layout, for God's sake … Charles had darted back into his own mind and taken emergency measures.

Raven had watched: perched on the golden chair, solemn and intent, staring as he had run between two of the tables. *Where to put it – where to put it …* It would not do to be too obvious. Nothing beneath the oculus, for example – right where another glorious beam of sunlight shone down into his thoughts. Nor in front of the main window … the chair was there already …

*No.* Instead, Charles had chosen a random spot between the tables. The carpet runner being somewhat threadbare – *good* – made it easier to call together the smallest of his aviary – diamond brooch, sparrow, hummingbird – and set them to unraveling the weave. He began from the other edge … and before Charles knew it, there were the flagstones, beneath the carpet.

He had pried one up.

*Just like ice fishing,* the briefest impression. *Like in Banbury. The pond, and the bear there too …*

Charles had not even had to look. For there was the water – a dark subterranean sea. And it was thus completely and utterly easy to picture his power … veils and veils, endless ells of silvery fabric … more and more, wafting through the reading room like air taking on semi-solid form … unspooling into the dark wet, dampening and drifting down until all were lost from sight.

The sensation had been odd. He did not feel weaker; certainly not. But he knew … that the Finder could only find a part of his power, now. Even if it demanded all of him. There was no way – "*No way,*" he had told himself fiercely – that it could penetrate the reading room, invade the sanctum of his thoughts, find the correct location, unravel the carpet precisely … and …

Just for safekeeping, he had set a lock on the flagstone. Then another. Then – "*Why bloody not?*" – Charles had gestured over the stone and turned it into stained glass – a rondel of darkest green, edged with a white and red Greek key, with an indigo bird in the center.

"You've never looked more beautiful, darling," he had told his raven. It had clacked its beak at him. "And it's not as though anyone besides myself will ever see it. For this – " and the three smallest birds were weaving the carpet back together – "will hide it from even the best."

Coming back to himself, where he lay staring up at the ceiling of the Hive, Charles had to smile. Was 'the best' Frost? Perhaps; perhaps not. He knew he was better. Not in telepathic tricks, maybe – not yet … but in terms of raw power …

And now she would not know. Frost would only see one hapless Charles Xavier: a pretty little creek
trickling into a pretty little pond. She would not glimpse the true extent of his abilities …

No: it would rest safely in the deep, locked in such a way that only he could access it. Even another telepath might have difficulty unraveling the carpet; tracing the Greek key correctly in order to open the three locks. And if some oaf like the man happened to bludgeon his way into his, Charles', mind … well. The aviary would led him a merry chase, pecking – and he would leave as blind as Oedipus, with the raven's screech sending him on his way –

"It is time."

Charles shivered at Frost's voice. It was cold, yes. But also … eager.

All of the Finder's energy had been channeled towards – roll call, Charles had thought to himself, almost giddy with adrenaline and fear – roll call, for hundreds of mutants and what felt like thousands of humans, and that had only been to start. And now the communication consoles had crackled into louder static, and Charles felt his eyes go wide as he heard:

- Roger that Foxtrot Whiskey George, checkin' in, let's hear it – and golf-one golf-two golf-three golf-four - and another fizz -

"I want that as intelligible as my own voice," Frost ordered. "And …" a cold laugh. "Great minds think alike, it would seem. Ballistics."

"Ready."

"Mapping."

"Ready."

"Jessie?"

"Yes, ma'am –" and that was a mutant's voice, Charles instinctively knew – and it made his skin stand up in a thrill, because it – she? Jessie? – was somehow speaking … not just over the radio, but into it … through it … on a similar frequency …

"Can that signal be boosted at all?"

A pause, and then, booming: -TROT WHISKEY ABE – GO – ALPHA-ONE ALPHA-TWO –

"Too loud," Frost snapped, and: "Sorry!" A squeal of electronics, and the list continued, softer but clear as crystal: alpha-ten, over –

– right all set – give me visual on Love Field – Foxtrot Whiskey Tom, report in –

"We hacked their communications last month," and Charles would have jumped, were he not strapped down, at McCoy's excited voice puffing right in his ear.

As it was, he restrained himself. "Obviously."

"Sorry, Mr. Xavier –"

"Hank," Charles exhaled, sharply. "Give me some room. I –" I want to hear, his mind whispered, but: "I need to concentrate," he said instead.

Because: "Black group?" Frost asked.
"In place and accounted for."

"White and Blue?"

"Yes."

"Red group?"

"Standing by."

"… Red One?"

And McCoy would take that moment to mumble another apology. Charles did not hear the tech's reply to Frost; instead, there was only the sound of McCoy's footsteps, retreating.

"Mark time," Frost's cold voice. "Enemy telepath has been inactive for four hours, twenty-five minutes thirty seconds and counting – mark. Marie –" and she sent a spike through the Finder – all the way up – all the way up to Denver oh God oh God because Charles was expecting it to hurt, as it had – on Wednesday – had it only been this past Wednesday? –

But he felt nothing. Nothing except the brief brush of Marie's mind … somehow like a void … he shivered. And not just at Frost's icy satisfaction: "Well done; stay in place. Do not let Proteus or Fade out of your sight."

Marie's exasperated sense of – obviously – came through loud and clear over the Finder. Charles caught the brief impression of Frost's eyes, narrowing; a flash of thought – the insolence – and – oh. Oh …

He gulped back a wave of nausea. It was starting again: the Finder, powering up, gnawing at his mind like a hungry rat. His thoughts were bumping up against Frost's … and hers were so cold that his froze and fractured.

Charles had to admit it. Her voice … her control … He bit down on his lower lip, hard. Frost's control was admirable. The Finder flared and crackled into action. The crown was glowing white-hot on her brow – but the calm of her voice did not waver, as she said:

"No sense in waiting any longer."

A pause, then:

"Go."

And that had been completely anticlimactic, Charles thought.

He stared up at the ceiling. Drummed his fingers on the plastic. Tried to catch sight of Frost, from the corner of his eye.

A voice from the war room: "White, Blue and Red groups have reached Love Field."

A pause. Charles heard sounds over the radio – rattling, crackling and the occasional whoomp and shriek. What was happening? Perhaps ground rockets, or machine gun fire? Or, knowing mutants: actual fire? His mind flashed to John - so reckless, so aggressive … he would love it if he got to send a wave of fire at the enemy – be safe, John; be safe be safe –
"Red group has secured a bomber."

A long pause.

"And another bomber. Joanna is down – no, no: wait. She's back up."

Then the same tech's voice tensed. "And … Black group is in."

"… Good."


He brushed her mind with a tendril of his own thoughts; felt his eyes widen …

For Charles saw, as though from a great distance: the figure of a woman. Small and slender, with her arms upraised, and standing in the center of … white.

White ice: cold and crystalline, spreading like frost on glass, spiderwebbing on the surface of the soft darkness and turning it into a snowflake writ large – larger and larger … and then more of them …

Charles drew back, shivering – just in time to hear a comm console explode in static:

– hot damn, reel 'em in – all groups all groups Love Field on my mark, fresh fish –

– cut the chatter alpha-two – close up formation George and Abe – cover all your ground units, keep it tight – Tom air units mark eleven o'clock prepare to fire –

"Black group is ready, ma'am."

"Stand by. Move out White and Blue."

The orders spiraled through the Finder, even as the woman – Jessie – repeated them into the radio. Charles felt his teeth beginning to chatter. All Frost's words, floating through the air like snowflakes – a dim echo in the war room, but present at Dallas, wafting over Love Field …

He sucked in a breath at a sudden dizzying flash: a bird's-eye view of a ragtag army. Two parts of it splitting off and starting to run. And the group left behind on Love Field, reforming in a rough square - there were mutants flying above them. Charles saw a flash that must have been Angel. She was flying next to the blue-orange reverberation of Sean - their light made his eyes water. Sean - he must have been given Archangel's blood. And Alex, too - where's Alex? Charles scanned the field below. There was Alex's white-red mind, next to one that felt vaguely familiar - had her name been Jubilation? The two were perched atop some structure, shooting plasma bolts. Protect them, you bastard, he thought at the man, furiously. It would never be heard over the battle's roar, but Charles repeated it anyway, casting the thought towards the deadly vortex in the field's center: Protect them -

White and Blue group were being protected, at least. Two bombers wobbled up off the ground and peeled round to guard the mutants sprinting off the field. Charles saw bursts of white-orange machine-gun fire

– shit they're mixing it up – orders, sir–

And a voice – Charles gasped. He recognized it from news reports, from when he was a boy. It was –
"Dear God," he whispered. "It's MacMurphy."

MacMurphy, commander of the Pacific Theatre in World War Two.

Charles felt his jaw sag. It was one thing to see his own strategy implemented in real time, and on a battlefield bigger than he had ever seen on any Oxford news vid. Charles swallowed hard at the explosions he heard, echoing from the radios in the war room. It was a completely different thing … to have MacMurphy opposing him. Not some Cambridge don on the other side of a table in a room too small – MacMurphy …

Opposing him … and taking the bait.

– Abe and Tom, repeat: all Abe and Tom ground units follow. Flank to the right and left – I want the jeeps on their tail, damn it, and fast –

– fucking hell! – and – cut the damn chatter alpha t –

– fucking Magneto sir I've got visual –

A pause and crunch of static.

– repeat visual visual –

Even in the static and crackle lacing the room – even with the Finder beginning to hum, and Frost's power looming, rearing up like a frozen tidal wave – Charles blinked and frowned. Who –

And then shivered as he heard: - George units – attention all George units – all ground all air mark Love Field quadrant one right in the god damned front line fire at will – and – ice that motherfucker –

"Ice?" Frost's voice was even more distant. "… Well."

And – delicately, quietly …

"If you insist."

Then the Finder pulled, and his mind inched closer to the vortex. No control there, Charles thought, and it would have all of me – all, with its sharp teeth. Veil, Charles told himself, shuddering – and he checked all the locks on his power reserve. In place. Well. Do what you will, my precious lady –

Only his aviary heard the venom in his voice. His sparrow gave an anxious cheep.

His mind was rappelling up the glacier – he could see, though just faintly, through Frost's eyes. There were her fine-boned hands, curling round the Finder's rail.

"Black group." The command ran through the Finder and hummed in the air. In … warmer air? In an enclosed space, Charles felt: a stuffy one. And there was a group of perhaps fifty mutants there … thirty of them clustered together behind a ragged front line of twenty. Twenty: scattered and breathing heavily. Charles tasted a copper tang of blood in the air, and – despite everything – felt a grin break over his face as he touched a familiar mind – Logan –

– shit X man that you? –
"Xavier," Frost snarled. "I will have no distractions from you. Watch and be silent –" and then she breathed out a harsh laugh, "watch and learn."

There was movement – a flurry in Dallas – underground, it's the old airport underground – a dim reverberation in the Finder. A tangle of blood-red vapor – and the number of individuals abruptly tripled. Almost tripled, his mind catalogued frantically, and: … humans. Not all mutants – humans – but one mutant that –

Charles had a sudden flash of memory: a man? a devil? but devils don't exist – Whatever this was, though – it had a mind that he almost couldn't pin down. It was somehow … Charles couldn't describe it. It contained the possibility of being in two different places at once.

Schrödinger's mutant, Charles thought – and laughed.

He would remember that laugh, later.

For Frost whispered: "Now. Now –"

– and, of all things … his smile was still stretched over his face when the Finder reached out electric claws and ripped into his mind.

Oh God it hurts –

The smile was stretched – his teeth were still bared in it as Charles had to arch his back again – he didn't scream, he wouldn't scream, but ropes of electricity tightened on his thoughts, drawing out power and funneling it to Frost – who was cold, so cold as she held out her arms and flexed all her fingers, and sent a whirlwind of ice flying from her mind …

The rest was flashes, really. Brief impressions. All filtered through Frost's eyes.

A veil of cold cascading onto the old airport – its image, and somehow its superstructure, its levels and tech, and all of the individuals in it snapping into focus crystal-clear in the Finder – but blurring with the falling ice, ice as fine-grained, thick and pervasive as sand –

Enough minds hesitating – wait was what that what's happening did you feel that? – for Frost to send a quiet suggestion – hold still – to all of the pilots – three hundred, just a suggestion, but still: three hundred … "How did she …" Charles whispered to his raven; his raven, who was huddled under his chin, feathers torn by the cold wind. He did not finish, because of the three hundred all were alive, but then a full third of them –

– died.

Charles did not cry out as he saw them killed. Their lives flickering out like tiny flames snuffed. It had not been the Finder, not Frost; nor, his raven croaked softly – nor had it been his own doing.

Had it?

Dear God no -

No: it had been those in the group, the fighters – was that Yuriko's presence, lightning-quick and deadly at Logan's side? Humans and mutants in the EBS, descending in one vicious swoop upon hangars the size of vast warehouses … full of aircraft, full of pilots held immobile in a dreamy daze before dying. And then the pilot's places in the aircraft taken, by humans - seventy-five, and mutants – my people will fly twenty-five more…
Charles could only dimly remember the man's intonation: *my people – my people will fly ...* Could only vaguely use his own senses. He was still lying on plastic, he was gripping the conducting rods with all of his might, he was tasting copper and bile – because the Finder was ravaging his mind, and Frost was pulling power out of him – pulling as much as she could find, clawing. The *deer*, Charles' mind whispered: *a deer, and two opossums, a rabbit, and a skunk* – he had shot and killed them all, with Logan, and he had had to pull out their viscera, bloody ropes that had steamed in the cold, and this was what it must have felt like …

"But at least they were dead," he slurred. Wave after electric wave – and *God* ... The rest of the Free West pilots ... Their minds were caught by the White Queen's power. Almost two hundred humans, kneeling before her throne of ice. She was freezing them, molding them to do her bidding ... but to Charles ... 

To Charles, their minds felt like the needle-scratch of mouse claws. He had once held a small mouse. It had been warm and grey – and it had been dying, trying to crawl out of his hands. Charles had only bitten his lip once, looking, before he had said the *cat was just doing his job*, Raven, and had snapped the mouse's neck, brittle as a straw.

Another image wavered into his mind, from Frost's mind, through the Finder. Vivid: one hangar, two, then three: pilots in uniform silent and vacant-eyed; humans and mutants with no uniform whatsoever calling out to each other as glass and plastic panels slammed shut. The rattle and hum of engines, the stench of gasoline ... the bright red blood in pools on the hangar floors ...

"Wait," Frost said, cold. A particularly focused swipe of the Finder's claws: and Charles saw information. A jumble of spoken words superimposed on a schematic, dragged from a frozen mind – and then Frost lit upon a mutant mind and dumped everything into it ... And – *it's a girl, younger – she can taste things with her fingertips; how interesting* – the mutant's mind was a rush of *oh it's me she picked me* – and Charles felt his own mind starting to fracture.

It was too much to hold. The individual level – the girl had run to what felt like a control room, and was jabbing at buttons – *they taste like fear ...* and a level up: the two hundred pilots, all frozen and waiting; all of Black group, tense and coiled – *there's Logan again, and he's next to Bobby – oh hello Bobby you're safe – good* – and one last level up: the battle in its entirety – mutants and humans racing to Glen Rose; mutants and humans and blood and sheer *chaos* raging on Love Field –

*Too much ...*

"I need more from you, Xavier!"

"I –" Charles gasped. He could only see white, threaded with crimson. *The locks. Power down, sunk deep in the sea; it's locked – should I – should I* – but he couldn't let Frost find out, so: "I don't know if I – oh *God* –" he let the cry rattle out from his throat at a yank from the Finder –

"Jean." Frost's voice was level again. She spoke rapidly to a tech. "We've run up against the limit – fetch Jean. *Quickly."

*Wait...*

It was on the tip of his tongue, to shout: *Wait!* and to give the order to his raven – his raven, who had swooped to the concealing carpet in his reading room, and who was now hopping up and down, ready to tear through the threads. Ready to open the locks and let the entirety of his power rise from the sea ...

*But I only just hid it ...*
His raven screeched at him.

"No," Charles mumbled, "she can't find out, she – can't –"

He sensed Jean being rushed to the other plastic sheet. Charles blinked woozily. All the details of the battle at Dallas were being forced into his mind like cloves into an orange, and he still sensed Jean taking the needle, touching the tech's fingers whey they rested gently on the bow in her hair – and taking a deep breath, sliding the needle into her own scalp –

A sudden image: the phoenix, fiery and terrible, crying out – but Jean's voice was separate from it, and she was saying: I'm going to help you, Mr. Xavier!

"All – all right?"

Charles felt drunk. He didn't know what to think. Except to know: the phoenix was furious – and how strange, his raven was raging as well, shrieking at him – but did it matter? For the Finder stayed battenning on his mind, but then it sank its greedy teeth into Jean, too – and –

– he gasped.

And Charles could breathe again.

"There." Frost exhaled. "And just in time –"

Static from a console, then a voice: Dan group Frank group Ben group all units up and go: enemy force hauling ass down 67 south – deploy deploy do you copy –

A flare from the Finder; and from the console crackled a voice that Charles knew was controlled by Frost: Roger that – stand by –

And with Jean helping … Charles blinked up at the ceiling. It was far up – distant, metallic … but everything else was coming back into focus. He could taste blood in his mouth; he could hear the thundering of his own heart. No fear of an aneurysm now, though, for with Jean helping …

… it was almost easy.

The mutant girl in Dallas pressed buttons – Charles' mind felt the rumble and shake through the Finder, as vast hidden panels rolled back. Fuckin' A, Logan breathed, and Bobby whooped, but there was no time to listen, because all of the planes were taking off and flying.

– Dan Frank Ben – loosen up formation, you're tighter than the White Queen's ass -

"I am going to kill you for that –" Frost's voice, soft and dreamlike.

Charles, immobile on the table and staring blindly into the Finder's maw, saw every crystal spike in her thoughts and whirl together into a vast radiating star of snow … And with his power, now joined to Jean's as well, it was easy to keep hold of all two hundred pilots, and to wheel them round in the sky …

– Dan Frank Ben check your bearings – south by south west what the fuck are you –

Then MacMurphy's voice, tightly controlled: Dan group delta-one delta-one – Commander Burke, what's your operating number –

"Dear me …" Frost sounded half-asleep.
"... poor Burke is dead ..."

"now Burke – do you copy –

sir they're heading towards the city –

Roger that – MacMurphy’s voice was still calm. How could he be calm? Charles wondered ... Calm ... calm ...

Especially when Frost flexed her fingers ...
You're welcome. And don't worry. In her white robe, even with the fierce phoenix embroidered on its front, Jean looked very young and small. The first time I saw this, I was scared too.

Charles laughed a bitter laugh. "Saw a city catch fire?"

No. Saw – things happen. From the sky. Lady Frost says it helps her concentrate –

"Lady Frost," he blurted. "Is she – is this –" Charles shook his head, trying to overcome the barrage of sensory input from the fire. "Is she doing this?"

With the Finder. This is her projection. Jean looked round, eyes wide. I mean … I think it is. It's never been this big.

It was big, Charles realized, struggling to comprehend. It was immense, yet amazingly detailed. He peered down. On closer inspection he saw how things were not quite arranged to scale, as they would have been in a landscape painting. Instead, scenes overlapped. It looked as though a dozen panoramas had fought for supremacy, and then decided to declare an armistice and share the stage.

Even from this distance, he could see the aircraft whirling round a strangely flat projection of Dallas. The gouts of flame from anti-aircraft guns. Bridges collapsing into smoke and rubble. Wavering black spots, then fire crackling up the city walls like spikes of orange-red frost … The overall effect was dizzying and disorienting: sensory impressions from the Finder laid onto a map, and the viewpoints of all touched by Frost's mind superimposed onto that … and …

Charles felt his eyes almost cross. "Jean?"

Yes?

"Is Frost … is Lady Frost still using our power?"

Yes. At least, I think so. She must know we're here – maybe she feels us. If she's using our power, maybe it's O.K. that we watch.

"Teamwork," Charles snorted. "How kind of her."

It is. Normally she'd be really mad.

"Why?"

Because we're in her projection. And, Jean's voice was careful, we didn't ask.

"It's not like she asks anyone – those pilots. Angel," he seethed. "Or even you –"

But she's in charge.

"Indeed she is." He could almost taste the bitterness in his own voice, as he watched the walls catch further fire. "My lady does seem to love her authority."

She loves snow. Jean pointed. See?

Charles squinted. And there, above the projection of the city … there was an immense cumulus cloud, white and puffy. Strange, because the snow falling would normally come from a cloud slate-grey – unless, Charles told himself, sour: unless one were as vain as a peacock, and concerned about the image one had while sending shock and fear and pain wafting down from heaven onto the people on earth … so gently …
"Oh, Jean." He heard the misery in his own voice. "I wish you would close your eyes."

Why?

"People are dying, dear."

Not our people.

"Well." Charles scrubbed at his face with his fingertips; tightened his grip on his shield. "We'll have to talk about that later. Remind me, when this is over. All right?"

All right, Mr. Xavier. Jean's voice was small. Then she brightened. Look!

Charles followed her pointing finger.

And his breath caught.

There.

He could see Love Field, even from their present distance …

Charles shivered, once. But all over his body – the armor-clad projection of his body, even trammelled round by the Finder as it was … every inch of his skin prickled –

"What is wrong with you?" he whispered to himself.

Why should he be staring at – at that familiar cloud of metal, dark and seething as it was? It was alone in front, placed squarely in the center of the field. Other mutants behind it, and flanking … And even from this distance, the cloud whirled with flashes of silvery steel, unrelenting and deadly –

"What are you …" he began. Then he shook his head, hard.

Why should he, Charles, want to move closer?

Why should he want to see?

"All it would be is – is fighting." He shrugged, determinedly moved his eyes away. "The biggest bully on the playground." More flames crawled up the projection of the city fortifications; Charles felt his mouth twist, bitter. "What a pretty picture."

He watched for another long moment. The anti-aircraft guns were destroyed; most of the other defenses had been pulverized. The pilots' minds were still a distant mouse-claw scratch against his own; much more of a presence in Frost's, perhaps, but she did not seem to care. Or … Charles frowned. Or perhaps she did. The snow had stopped, and the white cloud formation was rapidly moving towards them. He checked his sword – it lay sheathed at his side. Sword and shield, and his armor was strong …

Jean was smoothing her small hands down the front of her white robe. Then she patted her hair into place.

"Really, Jean," Charles sighed. "You look fine. Just as fine as – ah, my lady!" He made his tones deliberately plummy and swept a mocking bow. "Thank you for your warm welcome."

"Why, Mr. Xavier …"

And Charles pressed his lips tight. In the projection, with the full strength of the Finder, Frost's voice
hit every frequency audible to the human ear – and some not – and vibrated with power. Cold as 
winter – yet … amused. Laughing, perhaps. His stomach twisted. Laughing at him, for:

"What a noble knight you make," she said, softly.

Frost stepped off her cloud onto theirs. Ice solidified beneath her diamond slippers. She pulled up the 
trailing sleeves of her crystal dress, let their folds caress her fingers. At least, Charles thought she did. 
He could not keep his eyes on her for very long stretches: she blazed with the glory of the evening 
star.

And: "Jean," Frost said gently, bending her head. The crown upon it glittered at Charles, so brightly 
that he had to squeeze his eyes shut. "Are you feeling all right?"

Jean nodded solemnly.

"Thank you for your help, sweet." A white hand – nails tinted blue – brushed one lock of Jean's hair 
behind her ear. "How glad I am that you were here to rescue Mr. Xavier."

And the look she shot Charles was sly. He stared back, indignant – manipulative bitch – and then 
cought Jean looking up at him too, with a tremulous smile, and LOVE clocking him on the head as 
heavy as Guernica framed in gold.

"Damn it," he hissed, but smiled back at Jean. Shot daggers at Frost with his eyes. She merely 
flicked her diamond glance between them both, her face sleek and smug, and turned to watch the 
battle.

"It proceeds well."

"Well indeed," Charles sighed. "If this sort of thing is to your taste."

"To my taste … ah, Mr. Xavier." Frost tilted her head, let her pale lips curl up at their corners. "Such 
a wine is perhaps all the better for its age."

Charles rolled his eyes; Frost saw him do it, and her laugh cut the air, sharp as glass. "It will be over 
soon."

He chose not to answer her. Instead, he gazed down at the city. "I thought the civilians were meant 
to be untouched?"

"Jean," Frost ignored Charles, inclining her head again. "Why don't you fly home now?"

"Can't I keep helping you? Jean sent, her face upturned.

"Of course. But I need someone to watch Jessie, and Hank, and everyone outside. I can't have anything go wrong, now, and since I'm here, and Mr. Xavier is here .... This is something special, just for you to do. Do you think you can? Even while still you're helping, outside?"

Charles clenched his teeth as he saw Jean square her shoulders. Yes! I can.

"You are so dear to me." Frost swooped, low, and - Charles blinked - bestowed a gentle kiss on 
Jean's round cheek.

He thought he heard something ... creak.

Or perhaps he just felt colder.
Frost withdrew. Jean scrubbed at her cheek with the back of one hand.

"Now, that's just rude." The White Queen tsked - then laughed. "Fly away home, Jean. We'll be there soon."

'Bye, Mr. Xavier -

"Soon, yes," Charles tried to keep his teeth from chattering - fly away home fly away - "Be well, dear." Don't watch what happens. "I - oh!"

For Jean had floated up in the air, slightly - just above the cloud - and then had vanished in the blink of an eye. "How ..."

"She's a very talented little girl," said Frost. "Isn't she?"

"To stay wired up to this war, and to monitor all your worker bees, simultaneously? So very talented."

"Now, Charles. No backtalk. Not when we're so close."

The battle beneath him shuddered back into focus; some kaleidoscope of jagged glass, ice - shards slicing through fire, and people dying. "The civilians. In my strategy - I -" He shook his head. "I made it so that they could ... stay untouched. These feints were outside the walls."

"Mm. Really - they were all told to find shelter." Frost's smile was unchanged. "There are so many there. Bomb shelters - left over, you understand, from the war. And still in pristine condition. Dallas only just missed being a nuclear target due to weather patterns."

"Really."

"I believe the strategic understanding was that a simple firestorm would leave the state just as incinerated as any bomb. It had been an exceptionally dry winter."

Winter, Charles thought, dully. The exchanges between the Soviets and Americans had come to a head in early December of 1950 … almost twenty years ago, now. Nineteenth anniversary, he thought. Mum and Dad and his rabbit: nineteen years dead … But – the bombs; yes, they had fallen on so many cities … But not Dallas. Interesting. I wonder how –

Charles paused.

His brain caught up with Frost's words.

Wait.

Charles turned to stare at her. "'Strategic understanding' … How do you," he swallowed, hard. "How do you know this?"

Frost's face was motionless as she stared down at the battlefield. Then she turned just slightly, and met his eyes with her glittering diamond gaze. "I remember it well. So much happened in a mere five years, in Russia that was. My prince was brought to me in 1945. One war ended, and I taught him to speak again. Cold peace reigned, and I taught him to read … I watched over him as he grew, and as he was prepared for his destiny.

"And he watched with me, as another war began."

Silence.
After a long moment, she shrugged. "It was quite some time ago."

"You're from Russia, and the Soviets were the ones to --" Charles spoke rapidly, to keep ahead of his nausea, "are you telling me that the EBS was involved in --"

"Do not speak of what you do not understand. And no." Frost's lips drew back from her perfect white teeth as she turned back to watch another section of the walls crumble. "The Brethren and the Sistren will never use nuclear weapons; simply because of what we have seen done. How we have suffered, Charles."

The dissonance vibrating through his teeth could have been her words or the artillery below. "Suffered --" Charles spat, but,

"Yes. We were invited to this land – to New York State that was – by an indigenous mutant resistance group, in 1955. We agreed, and we settled; we had wanted to live in peace. But alas, it was not to be."

"Not to be?"

"Not on terms that would leave any of us alive; no. And my dear friend Stryker saw fit to ask us to leave … with nuclear weapons. Low-grade, but sufficient to make our first winter here unpleasant in the extreme."

Charles was silent.

"Fortunately," Frost concluded, "we neutralized his remaining nuclear stockpile in early 1956. And then, in some happy coincidence, the headquarters of his precious CIA was destroyed. My First Quarter Gift to him, that same year."

She leaned forward slightly - Charles realized: for a better view.

"He never did send a thank-you note."

No reply would come to him; Charles choked on his words. Why bother? He shuddered and turned where he stood, casting eyes half blind over the immense landscape below and behind them – Then he blinked.

"What's that?"

Frost was still watching Love Field. "Pardon?"

"That." Charles indicated the black stain behind them. Southwest, his mind offered. Far southwest. Spreading across the ground like ink. "Do you see?"

Irritation flickered across her face as she turned to look.

"Coming up on Glen Rose," Charles said, blankly. "From the other side."

A hiss of breath from Frost was the only warning he had – – before the projection shattered like a mirror – exploding into shards of color and light as other sounds cut in: voices and the crackle of the radio –

And Charles gasped, back arching on the plastic, straining at his bonds and only just wresting his
head round to look at the Finder.

Frost had gone ramrod-straight from where she had been leaning against the rail. Her face was drained of all color. "Report."

"My lady?" Jessie at the comm station: her voice was confused. "The anti-aircraft guns are down; we're starting on the last wall –"

"I know that we are starting on the last wall – I am directing the jets bombing it." Her voice was like ice. "Send the aircraft not controlled by me away from the city, south south-west, mark –"

Another voice: "But Lady Frost, Red group is holding –"

And the voice was cut off as – as the Finder reached out and snapped its teeth – Charles fought back the urge to vomit, for there, so close, a mind had folded in on itself into unconsciousness, like a table with its legs chopped off.

"All he did was disagree," Charles began, but: "Enemy force to the southwest of Glen Rose," Frost snarled. "Send all available aircraft. Alert White and Blue –"

Charles heard the clack of buttons; the beep of machines. Then a high-pitched alarm, like a teakettle rising into a shriek –

"Pan, put a cork in it. My lady," Jessie said: "we confirm visual: enemy force numbering – oh shit, visual estimates two divisions, proceeding around Glen Rose –"

"White group, Blue group – abort," Frost said. She had found a calm voice again. "Abort, abort; retreat to Love Field and join Red group –"

A crackle from the comm:

– Abe and Tom ground units, the cat's out say again the cat's out. Hold your positions. Abe and Tom air, leave off defense and support ground –

– Sir, the walls –

MacMurphy's voice: the walls are gone – we'll build em back tomorrow - George group concentrate your fire –

– Reinforcements have passed Glen Rose – going up 67 sir I have visual –

"Report: White and Blue will be surrounded in ten minutes and counting, my Lady –" a gasp from the war room, "what are your orders?"

Frost paused. Her eyes had fallen shut. Charles only heard the slightest echo through the Finder, a whisper in the room.

… force southwest my prince …

His mind flew away from the thought of the other – in the middle of the field –

And then: "We will not have this chance again. We cannot retreat," Frost whispered. Her eyes were diamonds, staring. "This close … this close, but we cannot retreat – to teleport so many at once –"

Charles saw the map, suddenly. The map he had drawn on with Logan, scribbling and thinking, talking and laughing – his mind flew from Dallas to -
"Fort Worth," Charles gasped. "All of them can fall back on Fort Worth – hide in the ruins –" *there is still a plentitude of wrecked buildings there, to conceal weapons, supplies, soldiers* – his own words, he remembered.

"Yes," Frost hissed: "All groups – all groups retreat to Fort Worth. Draw a perimeter; once all have reached it, set the perimeter line on *fire* and open a chasm –"

The war room burst into noise and action; orders given and confirmed, machines rattling and radios buzzing. Charles stared at the ceiling – so *tired*, he was so tired … And there was no relenting, as Frost flew all the blank and staring pilots in their planes over to the Free West reinforcements …

"White and Blue are retreating –"

– *shit shit* visual on bogey Dan Frank and Ben I have visual from 67 south –

– *shoot them down* –

– *enemy forces are now moving north* –

– *god damn it* –

"Black group has left the old airport. Red group is –" a hitch, "Red group is –"

– *George increase* your *god damned fire* I want that motherfucker's head on a *pike* –

"Red group is surrounded!" Jessie yelped, and: "No," Frost gasped, "no – *break it* –"

"And …" The air in the war room crackled with tension; Charles could smell sour sweat. "Joanna has broken enemy lines; Victor too – and – and *there*," Jessie breathed out, "Red group is going through; the flank is holding –"

"Save some for an endguard," Charles croaked.

Frost whirled on him. "My prince *is* the endguard. Kill them," she breathed out to empty air, eyes blazing, "my son, my sword: *kill them all.*"

And … judging from what little could be heard from the radio, over the noise of the war room - the shouts and the screams …

… the man did.

Charles stared up at the ceiling, dully. Perhaps it would be over soon. Once everyone had reached Fort Worth. Once the EBS had set up a defensive line and, presumably, set it on fire. *Maybe Logan will do that*, he thought, and: *ha.*

His head hurt. He heard someone crying; he hoped it wasn't Jean.

"May I –" he swallowed. "May I have some water, please?"

Nobody was listening.

"Please," Charles groaned, "please let me up. Make it –" he tried to move; couldn't, "make it stop …"

"Black group has prepared the perimeter –"
Of course, Charles thought: that group had had the teleporters. The aircraft under Frost's control were relentless against the Free West reinforcements. Charles had caught a brief glimpse of those new soldiers' thoughts, through the fading of the Finder – his mind was starting to close down. Fear, and pain, and, he realized: ... speaking Spanish. "Oh," he whispered. "From Mexico. They must have driven all the way –"

"Red group is five minutes out; White and Blue group ten –"

Ten minutes. Charles closed his eyes. Opened them. He did not want to be awake for ten more minutes. Not a minute more –

And Frost screamed in pain.

"Red One is down!" Jessie shouted; and: "No, no – he can't –" Frost gasped – "I've lost contact – Xavier –" she wheeled on him: "Xavier, I need you –"

"I can't," he croaked.

"You must."

It was the Finder that he felt, but Frost as well – ice running through him, spearing him and making him fight not to faint. Charles squeezed his eyes shut. In his reading room, he saw his books growing white fuzz – frost – ice crackling over the floor and freezing the table legs to carpet – She had frozen over the hidden rondel, thank God, but his birds were flying in frenzied circles, screaming –

"No," he cried out, and there was the White Queen in his mind – in my mind, she's in my mind, "stop – please stop –"

In his mind, she blazed. Her hair crackled around her shoulders; her fingers were tipped with diamonds, curled into claws. Her crown shone brighter than the sun, blinding him. "Your power, Xavier. Give it to me."

"No!"

"Only the smallest – ah." And Frost smiled, teeth glittering – all of her glittering, like diamonds, as she caught at the air in his mind, and – she had fastened her diamond fingers on his bird, the brooch of a bird – no, Charles howled to himself – no no –

"This will do well." She held the bird in one palm, raised it up high.

Charles watched in disbelief, as the tiny jewel refracted and changed into a hawk. Or an eagle – a huge bird of prey, made of diamonds and propelling itself from Frost's hands into the sky with a shriek that could tear minds in half.

"What did you –" he gasped, at Frost's side in the projection, "what did you do –"

"What I have done," Frost whispered, exultant, "I will undo. Later. And only if you obey me."

"I – I –"

It was the worst feeling in the world: his own power, his own creation – wrested from his control and flying with all the White Queen's might. Forced to see the battle's end with her eyes.

The diamond hawk plunged down from the sky, swooped round the familiar presence: metal, a dark cloud – but dull now, and throbbing with pain –
– and Charles could see it clear as day. The man was on his back. His hands, holding their swords, were clotted with blood; his hair was matted to his scalp with blood; his face was a mask of blood. *Red*, Charles thought, mind going blank with shock: *red* … "Red One," he whispered, but: *my prince my prince* – the hawk was crying out with Frost's voice –

Eyes opened, stark white and green against red. *My lady*… a thought, a whisper, but it rang through the Finder like a bell.

Charles, on the table, squeezed his eyes shut and bit down hard on his tongue. *Veil*, he told himself. What he had just felt; his reaction - *no* -

*We take the city another day – arise, arise* –

Those eyes were empty. *I …*

*Will send you help. I will send you help, my prince – look to the west* –

Charles saw, through the Finder, a storm cloud on the western horizon. It grew rapidly, started flashing with lightning, until there was ... there was someone flying, bringing the thunder and the rain.

But the man was speaking, through the Finder … and into the sooty air on a field between Dallas and Fort Worth. Rasping, through what sounded like blood in his throat:

"No."

*She flies to you! Rise up, my prince – she will guard your retreat* –

"*No –*"

*You must retreat: we take the city tomorrow. Do as I command today. Now.*

"But not," the man choked, "*Not her … I promised …*"

Charles felt Frost's sudden confusion. And – "*oh, shite,*" he muttered to himself, as his mind confirmed it through the Finder.

The flying mutant, the one bringing the storm, was Ororo.

Frost was making the hawk scream orders at the man … from a slight distance. Perhaps she did not wish to dirty the diamonds with his blood. The thunder and lightning were very loud. So it was easy enough for Charles to send his raven flying beneath Frost's notice, darting in black and invisible – *smaller than an eight-ball you can't see me* – to croak in the man's ear:

"You promised to keep her safe."

Through the Finder, Charles heard the man's breath catch.

He whispered it aloud, made his raven say it too: "So keep her safe. Follow her. Catch her if she falls. *Get up.*"

*My prince my prince arise – to Fort Worth, go* –

But the man was staring into space. Listening for him, Charles knew instinctively. He hissed in a breath and made his raven press close to the man's ear. Blood caught in its feathers.
"Go," Charles croaked. "Do as I say, you absolute idiot --"

And those eyes widened, white and blue-green against the crimson splashed on the man's face, as he rolled to one side – oh and just in time – was that a grenade? – and took off running.

On a broken ankle, Charles observed through the Finder.

No: on two.

Serves him right.

His mind was receding from the projection. The diamond eagle was flying through the air, screaming. All the aircraft pinwheeling through the sky – she'd better find someplace to land them, and – not my problem – smoke and flame and explosions, and he lost track of time.

Heard only: "Everybody's in." Jessie.

"Set fire to the perimeter." Frost.

And: Mr. Xavier – Mr. Xavier can you hear me? Mr. Xavier?!

– before his raven spiraled back to him and took him flying: up and up, further away, until everything they saw faded to white.

Charles woke to the feeling of coolness dabbing at his forehead.

He blinked, shifted – and immediately winced. Everything ached.

A plop and trickle from one side, combined with an astringent smell … someone was bathing his temples in water and vinegar. He knew it well; he had done it himself, in the field, on the Oxford missions. Just to cool the injured, to bring down a fever. Something soothing.

"Who –" he croaked. "… Hello?"

"Good evening."

Charles stiffened where he lay. On a cot, his mind told him: not his room, but in a different place.

The cloth returned, and a quiet, "Hello."

And the person dabbing at his brow was Frost, and thus he had no intention of –

"Do relax, Charles." She sounded amused. "I won't hurt you."

"Not – anymore," he hissed.

"You're tired." Water plashed from the cloth being wrung out over a bowl. "I didn't hurt you before. Not so badly. Did I?"

"You …"

Charles couldn't find the words. How to describe someone who had just orchestrated a massive battle, mind-controlled hundreds of innocent people, ordered death and destruction and - and mentally flayed one of her subordinates?

"Hush, now." The cloth was back at his temples. And there was - he shivered - a breath, warm on
the chill dampness of his skin, sliding warmer into his ear as Frost whispered, "Save your imprecations for someone who cares."

Then he heard a shuffling sound, and a clink, and Charles felt porcelain at his lips. He took a grateful drink of water before remembering that it was Frost – and he narrowed his eyes, got ready to spit it back out –

"Thank you, Jean."

*Oh.*

Charles held out a hand. He felt Jean's small fingers grip his, hard. "Hello," he whispered to her, and: *I'm glad you're all right, Mr. Xavier …*

*Not all right,* he thought to himself. *Pretty damn far from 'all right.'*

"Language, Mr. Xavier."

And Charles swallowed hard. Bit his lip, concentrated, and drew a wavering veil back up over his thoughts. Iridescent and thin, but there.

"That's better," Frost murmured. "Jean? You take this water away, now."

... *O.K.*

A long sigh covered the sound of Jean's footsteps shuffling away. "Why she would speak to me in that way, I have no -"

"How much did she see?" Charles croaked.

There was silence from Frost. Then: "Not too much."

"*How much -*

"Nothing, after she left. When my prince began his best work."

The man. A metal maelstrom turning soldiers into pulp of flesh and blood; if Jean had seen that - *felt* that, in the Finder - how she would let him read a storybook to her -

" - and so, she cries, and I can't have that." The cloth smoothed over his brow again. "Surely, you understand?"

"I didn't catch - I don't understand." Charles tried to focus, swallowing against the bitterness at the back of his throat. "I feel sick."

"I'm not surprised. At the end, you were sending me enough power to compensate for Jean's leaving, and then some."

Part of Charles was relieved that Jean had been taken away. Another part of him was ... He wasn't sure.

Some combination: hollow, and terrified.

He fumbled in his mind; winced away from flashes of pain; checked the Greek key. Carpet; key; seals: all intact. *Thank God.*
"And so, we'll have to work on your control."

"My ... control?"

It was dark in the room; he couldn't quite see Frost's features. But he heard her smile as she continued.

"To increase your utility with the Finder. Although: you must understand ... I still do not entirely trust you. Even though your actions today were exemplary in their attention to detail – and even though your little bird is completely charming."


Cautiously, he looked in his reading room. And he shivered. There was the huge diamond hawk, staring at him with blank sapphire eyes. None of his other birds could be seen.

"I've returned it to you. Do you see?"

"I …"

Charles bit his lip harder. Then he decided – and he couldn't say why, later. Only that some instinct made him growl: "Keep it."

Another pause. Then Frost's voice, delicate: "I beg your pardon?"

"That bird – keep it." He felt so tired, and sick to his stomach. "I don't want it anymore." *Not like it is now.*

"Really ... What a shame." Frost was almost purring in the darkness. "But if you insist ..."

Charles called his raven. Silent and dark, it winged its way out of nothingness and flew towards the diamond hawk in a rush.

"You may send it back to me. I promise it shall have an excellent home. So useful, and –"

*Get out,* Charles hissed, and Raven flapped its black feathers at the hawk.

The diamond bird chirped, strangely small for its hulking body, and flew out of his mind, straight into Frost's. And the surprise impact made her shut up – which, he thought bitterly, was one advantage to the gesture.

"Ah, Xavier." She sounded breathless. "What a lovely creature."

"Are we done?" He knew he sounded exhausted; he didn't care. "Will you go now, please?"

A pause, then: "Very well."


He heard Frost *tsk.* "Certainly not, Xavier. She needs as much rest as you do. I will alternate you in the Finder, in the time to come - but I will be asking more of you. It would not do to have a repeat of the rest of today's events. You had lost consciousness, you understand. You have to build up your stamina."
"Events … what happened?" He pushed himself up from the cot with one elbow. "Is it over? How did it all end?"

Frost had risen; her voice came from above him. "We have regrouped at Fort Worth – but the Free West reinforcements reached Dallas before we could stop them. Two divisions," she sighed, "joining the division and a half remaining to them. We had managed to destroy half of one on the battlefield today. And our relative numbers of aircraft have quite reversed, which is excellent. But …"

How many in a division, again? Charles shut down the thought, dully. Rather more than in a platoon, that was certain.

"But," he said, instead. ". . . but. It's not over. Is it?"

"Oh, my dear Mr. Xavier . . ."

And for one nightmare moment, Charles thought he saw a diamond smile glitter in the dark.

"It has only just begun."

And that, Charles thought later, turned out more true than he would have thought possible.

The battle that began the campaign marked a high-energy point of sorts. From there, EBS forces in Fort Worth set up camp and consolidated for a few days. And that gave the Free West time to rebuild some of Dallas' walls, working for seventy-two hours straight. When groups Red and Black, White and Blue took the field again, two divisions of Free West troops met them. And that, Charles reflected, as he watched through the Finder, was far more of grinding, number-telling battle than the previous had been. Without surprise or surprising tactics, it appeared that the EBS was at a significant disadvantage.

Charles wondered very much, then, why the Free West kept making foolish mistakes. Walking straight into ambushes, making ill-advised night sorties, allowing their supply lines to be cut . . . For the last indeed happened quite early on, and with the EBS' newfound air force putting paid to any food drops, the campaign became – after only one week – a classic siege.

Perhaps it was the dullness of such a siege, Charles thought, that led the Free West into such error.

Then he observed Frost leading a skirmish, with Jean hooked into the Finder . . . observed Red group being deployed, and heard the howls from the radio: there there kill him all units fire –

Oh. Charles had blinked, listening. It appeared that the man was being used . . . as bait. Practically every other day.

They must truly hate him, Charles thought, removed from any emotion. The Free West, that is. Although, considering the point academically, it was interesting to wonder which the Free West would run out of first. Hatred - and bullets - or food?

When he was not being used in the Finder, Charles stayed occupied with mundane tasks. A different tech came to wake him every day. It made sense; Angel and Alex were at Dallas. A week and a half into November, a bottle of cod liver oil had appeared on the kitchen table. The implication had been clear enough. Charles dosed himself methodically, once every morning – reserving his energies for persuading, cajoling, and finally bribing Jean to take her daily sip. Not with his food – she had the most of that anyway. Instead, he told her stories. Each morning, after a spoonful of the oil, Jean would drink her hot water and eat her bread, listening to Charles' voice, watching his hands weave patterns in the air.
Each day Charles began a story at breakfast. A tech would blindfold them and take them to the Hive. There, they would work well, Charles would work. He insisted on Jean's being used as little as possible — to refine that control you mentioned, he lied to Frost, and she only smirked at him knowingly. But she did as he asked. He would rest, strapped down on the plastic, waiting for Frost's orders as she contacted each command center, each force group — and on red-letter days, each mutant member of the army in turn. The strictly human portions she only briefly greeted before moving on to others.

"It's disconcerting," McCoy had explained. "The cold feeling. You know?"

"Human groups …" Charles had stared at the war room's table, with its carefully labeled forces in play. Same sorties, same exchanges … very little progress in the second week of November.

"Yeah. Most of the Midwest militias — we even have the Iron Brigade, from Michigan before. They came all the way from Sault Sainte Marie. Some of the Dakota tribes, and a big group from Québec. Most of the Maritimers are with the ship —"

"No — what I mean is … Why would they fight for — for … Why not fight for the Free West?"

McCoy had shrugged. "Different groups, different reasons."

Reasons. Charles would stare at the ceiling when the Finder was not using his mind. He would consider what those reasons might be. On most days he would then plan the conclusion of Jean's story, to be told in the evening. Other days he would imagine his own history of the present events. For example: On the Monday of the Fourth Week of November — he began inscribing in his imagination — C. XAVIER, in the largest, most ornate capitals … Did Stare at the Ceiling, and Nearly Expire from Boredom. Again.

But Frost did not use his power much, that day. She waited until the night, and a surprise attack on the Free West flank that reduced a good twenty of their tanks to twisted heaps of metal. And then Charles was secured in a room off one of the Hive's many hallways. He disliked it intensely: its sterile smell, its blank white walls, and the fact that it had an electronic lock.

"Not that you've been trying to escape recently, anyway," he whispered to himself, staring at the smooth white door. Then Charles had to consider: should he escape? He knew that he could. But would Jean be safe, with winter's cold descending in full force? With the Finder active every day, would his veils be sufficient to hide them both? And once they reached Albany, what then?

… And if Charles ran away, would the man go back on his word?

"You could jet back from Oxford and shag him silly on alternate weekends," Charles mumbled to his pillow. "Dirty, dirty weekends." Then he sighed. "Or, you could get some sleep and think about it tomorrow."

For at least the Hive was heated. Perhaps that was worth the electronic lock.

Despite the sour taste in his mouth from that last thought, Charles had slept soundly. And the next day, Tuesday the 25th, he was let out of the white room and sent to the mess hall with all the techs. He had accepted a bowl of watery oatmeal, held it out to have some cinnamon sprinkled on it. He sat across from Jean, and carefully passed her the apple he had been given: piece by dry piece.

"I wonder," he murmured to her, "whether or not they have more food in Dallas."

I think so. Jean chewed with a pensive look on her face. Otherwise they would get too tired to fight.
"Mm. Did you sleep well, Jean?"

Yes. It's warm here. She paused. But I missed having a fire.

"I did too." Firewood gathering had been haphazard at best, during November so far – the techs supervising could not be bothered to stay out too long. Escape, Charles' mind nagged him: the opportunities were multiplying by the day – why don't you escape? –

He shoved the thoughts aside. Even though he had slept well, he was strangely irritable. No matter. "What shall we have for our story today?"

… I liked the opera one, from last week.

"Ah." Charles had told her the tale of Turandot, falling back on fairy tales for the portions he could not remember. But now, "Let's see … here. 'The Magic Flute' – *Die Zauberflöte*. It has a handsome prince and a princess held captive; a kind magician and a wicked witch. And," he said with mock import, "a man who thinks he's a bird. On some days."

Really?

"Really. On other days, he's a bird who thinks he's a man."

Jean had curled her fern smile at him from around her mouthful of apple. Charles had tried to smile back.

Only later in the day had he realized the reason for his odd mood. Charles had been pacing round the lowest level of the Hive, flicking glances at the quiescent Finder. Frost had left at noon; she hadn't told him why. Perhaps a diplomatic dinner, Charles thought, nastily – and his mind had presented him with image after luscious image of feasts … until he had paused, frowning, as he heard … music.

"Why music?"

Idly, he had walked towards the sound. One of the few doors on the lowest level was open. The music was coming from – Charles leaned against the door with one shoulder, and looked inside. He saw an old vid screen. It was cracked in one corner.

A few mutants – and one human – were sitting quietly on chairs. A news program was playing. From – Charles concentrated. It was in French, so it must be a broadcast out of United Europe. Brussels had escaped major bombing, if not the fallout from winds east out of London … so the United Nations had reconsolidated, and reconstituted, with the U.E. as a result.

… *et ce triste anniversaire est également un jour d'espoir, puisque l'on peut espérer que la guerre finira, et que ce que furent les États-Unis trouveront la paix* –

"Bit late for that, mec," Charles had muttered, but: "Shh …" One of the mutants had hushed him.

And Charles had listened to the music pouring forth from the broadcast, and had folded his arms across his chest. Had stared at the floor, at his scuffed shoes. His leather shoes from Oxford … one run away from being worn completely through. *You'd need different shoes, for an escape.* Charles shook his head and focused on the music.

For it was truly beautiful. He had sung a choir at Oxford as a young boy with a clear soprano – and then in the one post-war choir as an alto. When his voice had finally settled into an unremarkable low tenor, Charles had bid a carefree farewell to all choral obligations. Except the few efforts each year,
that required all faculty and students to participate.

One of which was the Great Litany sung in procession, during the long service for peace. Every year, on 25 November, commemorating the beginning of the Third World War. Rote and repetitive, himself in line with his fellows, inching around the cathedral and breathing in the cloying incense and candle smoke.

*From lighting and tempest; from earthquake, fire, and flood; from plague, pestilence, and famine, / Good Lord, deliver us.*

*From all oppression, conspiracy, and rebellion; from violence, battle, and murder; and from dying suddenly and unprepared, / Good Lord, deliver us.*

And then the long roll of the saints. If he were singing now, Charles knew that they all would have shuffled back to the nave and taken their places in choir. He would be kneeling, wedged between Fletcher and Davis. The boys on the *decani* side would have been singing solemnly, *Hear our prayer* in response to different founders: *St. Francis, St. Dominic, St. Ignatius.* But then the priest would intone: *St. Francis Xavier,* and Charles would be blinded by a dozen gap-toothed grins.

The children thought it was the best joke imaginable. Every time they sang it. Especially if they sang out of tune.

This music was very tuneful, though. Charles felt his eyes sting as he listened. His mind searched and presented him with the information. Fauré … a beautiful requiem, quiet and melancholy. *Lux aeterna luceat eis, Domine.* "Let eternal light shine upon them, O Lord," he muttered, and: "Damn it, Professor −" He dragged a sleeve across his eyes.

"Here."

One of the mutants pressed a square of cloth into his hand.

Charles didn't like the techs, much – they treated him with such reserve, and they had watched Jean tortured at Frost's discretion before he, Charles, had stepped in. But he took the handkerchief anyway. Wiped his face.

"Thanks," he said, gruffly. And handed it back.

"No problem," the tech said, staring at the screen. "And cheer up. Thanksgiving's in two days - we'll watch Stryker's speech. It's a hell of a lot funnier than this."

Which, Charles noted, was not at all true.

Stryker's speech began in a patriotic fever and rapidly devolved into spittle-flecked imprecations and ringing endorsements of genocide. No – what was funny about the speech was the drinking game associated with it. At least … the people drinking seemed to be enjoying themselves.

– to combat their Socialism and their Fascism, their atheism and their idolatry, the *filth* of their degenerate acts –

"*Drink!*" howled the mutants in ragged chorus, and the room's lights glinted off upended tumblers. Then glass clacked back down to the floor, and groans succeeded gulps.

"I am so drunk," one of the younger girls announced, importantly. Despite himself, Charles felt his lips twitch. He remembered that stage.
"Oh man," the brown-haired woman - a tech, wasn't she? - slurred, staring down at a sheet of paper in front of her. "I'm not just so drunk, I am so damn close. Come on, Stryker baby. Give me 'our Free West shall triumph.' Gimme gimme gimme –"

Enough alcohol there to pickle her liver. Charles peered over her shoulder. On the paper was scrawled something that looked like … a Bingo card. Old United States style, though – in a square. Not a British one.

Stryker was practically shrieking into the microphone. Detached, Charles watched him shake his fist. The transmission was full of static, flawed – and the leader had obviously been made up for the camera … but still. Charles raised an eyebrow. Compared to his image in the children's book, the President of the Free West was not aging well.

– and our Free West – shall triumph! –

The tech in front of him crowed aloud. "Victory! Victory! Full glasses – everybody chug, chug!"

There were groans of protest, but the rest obediently drank. "I am so drunk," the same girl giggled, leaning crazily against the wall, and: "Yes, we've gathered that," Charles sniped.

He left the room and the frenzied speech behind, considering as he departed – that if worst came to worst, he could drink everyone in the EBS under the table, and make his escape while they were still busy watching the ceiling spin.

Pathetic, Charles thought. And did not stop to consider: whether he meant President Stryker, the mutants … or himself.

November wore into December. The siege dragged on. Charles helped power the Finder in the morning – roll call – and watched sorties and skirmishes in the evening and at night. Finish it, he found himself mumbling, staring at the ceiling each day. "Finish it. Let this all end …"

But it did not.

He had a constant headache. The nights he was not chained in his dormitory room, ever colder, he was left hooked to the Finder or locked in one of the Hive's holding cells. Since the pipes in the dormitory had frozen, Charles hardly had a chance to bathe. The other techs seemed to be using the showers in the Hive whenever he was unchained. He most often brushed his teeth in the mess hall, under guard. Thus, he only occasionally caught a glimpse of his own reflection. His eyes looked almost eerily wide and blue in the hollows of his face. And his hair hung in a curtain, ragged and brown – one behind which he had no hope of hiding.

No hope, no escape … The unrelenting pain from the Finder's razor edge, opening old wounds every day. Frost, looking more and more disturbingly serene as December progressed. Day after day after day.

Charles was only let outside once a day at most, to gather firewood. The nights were getting longer; dusk fell four hours into the afternoon. Even if he could evade the Finder, he thought, escape would be a problem. Little light, and it was so cold …

It was not cold inside the Hive, late in December when he was shaken awake well past midnight. And escorted to the Finder. "Of course," Charles slurred to himself, exhausted. "For a good night's work …"

He had stepped into Frost's projection, half expecting to help fling round confusion or fear in an EBS
surprise attack. But instead Charles was the one surprised, as he gazed into the peace and quiet of a Texas night.

Frost had even projected the sound of the bloody crickets. Their cheeping echoed across the plain – a great stretch of prairie grass in front of Dallas. Charles inhaled the fresh air, and listened more carefully. Crickets … and footsteps –

"There you are."

And there she was, gliding towards him. Charles firmed his shoulders; fought the urge to bow. A month and a half of toiling for the White Queen, and one would think that kowtowing would become instinct. For others, perhaps. Charles lifted his chin and stared her down. Not for him.

Frost halted a short distance away. Charles could see where her diamond slippers had left tracks of ice.

"Isn't it a lovely evening?"

His skin started to creep. Perhaps it was the pleasant cadence of her voice – such a tone, he had learned, heralded nothing but pain. "Mmm," he replied. Noncommittal. Safe.

… cowardly, his mind whispered, but Charles told it to shut up.

Frost was smiling at him. Her skin was pale and perfect in the cold light of the moon; her lips looked almost blue. "Walk with me."

Charles fell into step beside her. In the Finder, he saw mutants' minds illuminating their bodies, creating the glowing silhouettes that surrounded the two of them. The human minds glowed as well, but not as brightly. All were sleeping, it appeared. Well. Most. Charles felt the thoughts of a few mutants standing watch as Frost led him out of the army encampment. He recognized no one.

They walked farther, until the camp behind them became one glow – like a bank of candles shining in the night. Then they reached a strange sight: marked with death and destruction in the Finder – the emotional bleed from earlier – a hollow that might once have been a parking lot. It was full of wreckage: cars standing on end, warped remnants of tanks – and even … had that been a bomber? Probably, Charles thought to himself, sighing. The twisted metal almost felt alive. It was purring, or oddly warm, in the Finder – making the entire lot seem like nothing more than a dragon's treasure trove …

And Charles froze as they turned a corner. For there, lying beneath the plane's twisted wing, was the man.

Or at least: his presence. Charles saw the tangle of metal shards, quiescent; even a hint of the silver-steel blueprint. The metallic patterns seemed to be struggling to overcome the darkness of fear rage – but: "… No," Charles sighed. He didn't want to hear those thoughts. He didn't want to touch the other, now soaked through with blood ten hundred times or more.

He blinked, and the Finder presented him with the man's image. Or what Charles thought was his image. It was almost too dark to see. The plane's wing cast a shadow; the lean form was curled on itself, tucked up next to the wrecked fuselage. Charles could not see to touch –

He shook his head, hard; drew his gauntleted hand back from where it had reached.

Just as well. It wouldn't do to wake the man, anyway.
Frost seemed to agree. For she had walked to the man and gestured above him – a light dusting of snow and ice settled on his form, and …

Charles saw the other begin to shiver.

"Ah, there …" The White Queen's voice was quiet, coldly caressing. "Dream – dream, and wake to war … Oh," She had turned, and was smiling up at the night sky. "There she is."

"Who?"

"Jean." Frost gathered her dress and walked away from the plane. "Come along, Mr. Xavier."

Charles stayed still, biting his lower lip. Cautiously, he reached out with his thoughts. The blueprint had vanished; the metal shards were growing sharper and more deadly in sleep, writhing together in their dark tangle …

Without thinking twice about it, Charles summoned the dove. "You're brave," he whispered to it. "Go on."

The dove warbled at him, fearful.

"Go on," he breathed. "Just a touch. I'll be right here – you can fly right back." His throat was tight; he couldn't say why. The dark metal was coiling in on itself, threaded through with crimson lines of blood – "Quickly," he told the dove.

Then added, "Please?"

With a warble, the dove fluffed its feathers in Charles' hands. Then it flew softly over to the plane, landed on the ground. It hopped once, twice … fluttered up, and then landed gently, above where the man's hands were tightly clenched together. The dove rested on his sternum, over his heart.

Or where it would be, if he had a heart. Charles very much doubted it.

Still, he waited until a touch showed the blueprint unrolling, covering the metal cloud and letting its patterns drift and sway with the night breeze. "There." Charles crooked a finger at the dove – it sprang up and flew back to him as fast as it could. "Was that so terrible?"

He held the dove beneath his chin. It was trembling. Yes, it seemed to say.

"Hush now." He stroked its white feathers. "Go to sleep. Go back to sleep – if I need you, I'll call you back here –"

"Here, Xavier." Frost's voice, from a distance, sounded irritated. "Do hurry."

"Sorry." Charles ran to catch up with her; managed it in two minutes. "I just – I was lost back there. Those cars and tanks – everything tangled up." He shivered. "Rather like a labyrinth."

"Quite." Her reply was disinterested; she had focused on the sky. Charles followed her gaze.

"Is that …"

"Jean." Frost smiled. "Yes, it is."

"What –" Consternation gripped him. "It's not safe for her to be flying like that – not in front of every single Free West observer on the ramparts. Their telepath must be active – what if it sees her?"
"Oh, Mr. Xavier …"

Frost turned to look at him – and in the moonlight, she was every inch the White Queen.

"The whole point is that they see her."

Charles blinked. "… Why?"

"You'll find out." That perfect smile. "Tomorrow."

His pulse was beginning to bang in his ears. "If you won't tell me, my lady," he spat, "then why the bloody hell did you bring me in here in the first place?"

"A walk by the light of the moon, of course." A cold and satisfied laugh. "As one last test. For if you have not guessed how this battle will end, Mr. Xavier, I know they never will."

When he was taken out of the Finder, for the first time since the campaign had started, Charles fought the techs. He landed three good punches – even breaking some teeth – before he was subdued and locked in the now-familiar holding cell.

So he was not there to witness Jean calling the roll with Frost.

He was not there to see Frost dress her in a white robe.

And he was not there to see the fiendish-looking teleporter take Jean away.

Shouting had done no good, nor had pounding on the door. Charles had cursed, and slammed his hands against the wall, calling for someone, anyone to hear him. But none of it had helped.

Finally, he could only slump in a corner of the room, head in his hands.

It had been his idea. *I'd set up the rumor of another telepath, to lure MacMurphy to the remote location of its capture.* Another telepath, he had said – so casually – proposing himself as the bait, as a joke, a joke –

And now Jean was the bait.

The next twenty-four hours were among the longest of his life.

Charles deployed flickers of his power to the hallways, then up and out of the West Wing to the dormitory. He placed a thought-fire on the threshold of Jean's room, so he would know the instant she returned.

And when four techs came to escort him to the Finder – came with what looked like those stun guns from the stable … Charles went with them without a struggle.

He let himself be tied down and hooked in. He did not meet Frost's eyes.

Instead, he watched with her, as the mass of flickering light – mutants and humans, allies all – surrounding Dallas … clustered at one point, right next to the city walls. Intensified …

– and then the projection stopped.
"Done," Frost whispered. "It is done."

Charles could hardly hear her, over the shouts and shrieks that had broken out through the war room. The radio was crackling – but with EBS signals, EBS voices. Charles did not hear MacMurphy.

But then … somehow, he knew the commander wasn't at Dallas anymore.

The din in the Hive was deafening. Charles allowed himself to be untied; got to his feet, and staggered away from it all. He looked for a place to have some quiet. Found the one unlocked door on the lower level; opened it.

There were empty chairs, and the old vid screen, blank. Charles stared at it.

His reflection stared back at him – gaunt, hollow-cheeked. Pale as parchment, with dark circles beneath the luminous, staring blue eyes. He saw the image bite its lower lip, and bring shaking hands up to brush its hair away from its face.

Then Charles turned on the vid screen.

Another United Europe broadcast – the French low and quiet. Somber. And – somehow, the U.E. had a vid crew making a recording. Or perhaps a Dallas civilian was providing it. Or maybe …

Charles let his thoughts die away.

Except one: the thought-fire which flared in the dormitory – and he breathed out in a ragged rush. Jean was back. He touched her mind, lightly – back and unhurt – only slightly sleepy.

"Sleep well," he whispered to her. And Charles drew the cuffs of his sweater over his hands, and daubed at the tears on his face. The yarn was still unraveling. He would have to do something about that.

Perhaps when he could see again, though. Perhaps when he was not weeping. But, he told himself: it was out of relief – relief that Jean was safe.

Certainly not from watching one flag taken down from a building’s spire. And another raised in its place. That was merely history, and he would not weep for it.

No. Charles kept his eyes dry, and his thoughts controlled – as, on that cold 20th of December, he watched the surrender of Dallas.

Frost's triumph. Battle's end.

Chapter End Notes

The translation of the U.E. newscast, from 25 November, is: "... and this sad anniversary is equally a day of hope, for one can only hope that this war will finish, and that which was the United States will find peace ..."

The poem Charles remembers, watching the Dallas conflagration, is T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." Specifically, the end of 'III. The Fire Sermon.'

The litany Charles remembers singing in choir is called the Great Litany in the Anglican
tradition. Sometimes the Anglo-Catholics (I think) append to it the Litany of the Saints. I forget whether or not St. Francis Xavier is in there - but if he were to be included, he would probably be placed with the other order founders / missionaries in the litany order.

Here is the Litany of the Saints, in Latin: L. of the S.

and here is a clip of it being sung in English, in procession at Notre Dame University. Note the carrying of the flags and relics. (And do click to 1:13; before that, it's a priest talking.) MOAR litany!

Finally, here is the "Agnus Dei" movement, from Fauré's gorgeous Requiem mass. Please click to the 2:00 mark, in order to hear the transition to "Lux aeterna luceat eis" - "let light perpetual shine upon them." It's the start of a beautiful sequence.

Fauré
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Breather/eeeeeevil cliffie; lord, I thrive on 'em. :P :P

Also, there iz MOAR of teh fanart pretteh!

KayKay!

Charles observing the Battle of Dallas
Poor Charles ...

maimo!

Charles' raven ordering Erik to move his hot, tormented/conflicted, and now in-desperate-pain self.
Idiot, idiot, idiot!

aaaand ...xgogolex!

Erik fantasizing about Charles ... yow! NSFW!
Le beau corbeau ...

(now with bonus mousie & shark combo! d'awwww!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In retrospect, Charles was not surprised he recalled the bargain when he did. The only surprising thing about it, he thought, was that it had taken him such a long time to remember in the first place.

Or perhaps not too surprising. He had had other things on his mind, after all. Jean – her stories, her well-being. His own hunger, gnawing at him day in, day out. And … the largest thing on his mind? The Finder. Perching on his mind, like a particularly greedy vulture.

And now it was the next day. The first day of the great victory, complete with shower, bread and cheese for breakfast instead of slop, and a visit to a benevolent doctor at high noon. Charles only wished he had trumpets to sound in fanfare.

As it was, he stared up at the smooth grey surface of the MRI tube, not even three inches from his nose, and dragged in a deep breath. Exhaled. Don't panic. Panicking and starting to thrash about would mean that the whole series of images would have to be repeated – and the doctor had been kind enough to come all the way from Albany …

"All right, Mr. –" she had looked at a clipboard. "Mr. Xavier – am I pronouncing that correctly?"
Without waiting for an answer, the doctor had beamed. "No metal here – it could kill you. Take anything metallic out of your pockets. You don't have any on your clothes, do you? Nothing in your body? No implants I should know about?"

Charles had begun turning out his pockets well before his mind had caught up with the doctor's words. And … no, he did not have anything metallic on his clothes. Or in his body.
And really, he ought to know.

*Metal* ... in his body.

"... works with magnetic fields, you see, so it's important that we –"

"I know how an MRI works," Charles said. His lips felt numb.

"Well." The doctor, short and squat, now looked miffed. "Then you know how important it is that you hold still. Don't move, don't speak. Do either and we'll have to put you through the whole procedure again."

She helped him up on the table and watched as he lay back. Then: "Here." The doctor handed him a small piece of plastic; oddly shaped. "Some find this too tight a squeeze, so if you feel it's too much, this is a panic button. Press it and we'll stop everything – but do your best to stick it out, all right? This is important."

Then Charles stared up at nothing as the doctor and her assistant moved the table into the scanner. A hum from the surrounding coils, and the clanking that Charles remembered began. He had only seen one used a few times, in Oxford's hospital ... but the design had fascinated him. Also fascinating: the immense amount of noise it made. But he was not going to make a sound, inside it. Charles blinked up at the tube. *Just breathe.*

At least he smelled clean, now; breathing was not difficult. Mutant and human alike had made a mass exodus from the Hive mere hours after the battle's end – and a hasty clean-up and, presumably, a debriefing. He had been shoved unceremoniously into the white room, let out only the next day after the morning had gone, to see the doctor. Charles had not been able to hear anything – no sound of mutant or human, celebrating the battle's end. The *campaign's* end ... *Over,* he thought, shivering. It was over, and now ... something else would ...

Charles dragged his thoughts away from that path. The clanking and thumping was very loud. Something to do with those fields, he supposed, being generated ...

*Magnetic fields,* and he remembered the doctor's cheerful voice: *No metal here – it could kill you.*

*He could kill you* – but: "No," Charles whispered to his mind, not moving his lips. *He doesn't want me dead.*

Of course not. The man didn't want him dead, because he wanted to fuck him. And then ... and then ... *Then what?* Charles's mind whispered in turn. What about after the man fucked him? Would they – talk? Compare notes on the Dallas campaign, perhaps, or discuss the children? Have civilized conversation, perhaps over snifters of brandy?

Or would they just fuck again?

Staring at the grey plastic inches from his nose, Charles felt the first drop of sweat trickle down his neck. It felt cold. How many times would he have to ... He, Charles, had said: *Whatever you want ... Whatever you've thought of, whatever you've ever dreamed of ... We can do.*

"Oh god," he said – between his teeth, careful not to move his lips. "What have I done?"

Variations on that question occupied his thoughts for the next little while. He'd rather that, after all,
than watch images of – of what the man might want. Pictures, scenarios, shimmering before his eyes in excruciating detail on the inside of the MRI chamber …

"What have you done?" Charles whispered again. "What you had to do. To stay alive."

For his life was just what the other had originally wanted. His life. Charles as a body to use however the man would: the chattel in a bloody honeymoon. A cloistered week in that stable; perhaps two weeks, if he had held on that long. A time for screams, a time for pain: a romance that would give tender love a bit of a miss while rolling on relentlessly to Charles' death. And what was to say that the man did not want something … similar, now? Albeit something that kept him alive a bit longer …

Charles kept his breathing even. He was no blushing – or bleeding – bride. Or groom. Never.

But his breath hitched as an image swam into his mind's eye, vivid, lurid, with the intensity of an oil painting. Himself, as gaunt as he was now, but with grey skin. Grey, except for where chains around the wrists had chafed red; except for the numb blue of his fingers. Arms above his head, crossed. Those chains strung from a hook in the rough-hewn stable ceiling; himself, dangling from them, stark naked. Black stripes of blood on his skin.

And then – oh, of course: the other easing into the image like an afterthought: running hands over Charles' body, framing his face to kiss him – and Charles was not surprised to feel a chill in his gut, because that was exactly what he would have felt had the man actually been sliding those long fingers through blackened slices in his abdomen, then tugging, just slightly, and licking at the blood in Charles' mouth as he pulled out –

God. Charles bit down hard on his own tongue. Had he picked up that image in passing, from the man's mind? From the vicious tangle of want? Well, it didn't matter whose the memory was: he, Charles, was stronger. Stronger than any figments of his imagination, and stronger than that sadist and his fantasies. He could keep that bastard under control. Hell, the man had practically knelt down and worshiped him after only one session of fellatio. What would he do once Charles actually let him –

… he was going to have to let him …

"Stop panicking," he hissed. Even though he wasn't quite panicking, per se. Even though he hadn't pressed the button –

And Charles exhaled with a shudder as the doctor and her assistant rolled him out of the machine. McCoy was there too, now, he saw. He waved a few fingers at Charles and then went back to examining a particular sort of monitor – perhaps part of the MRI. Another unfamiliar piece of tech. Ordinarily Charles would have itched to examine it; at the moment, though, he was focusing on his own breathing. *In and out. Don't panic.*

"There!" The doctor was smiling. "That wasn't so terrible, was it? You did splendidly."

"Oh, three loud cheers," Charles muttered. The doctor didn't hear him; she had trotted over to the monitor. She placed a hand on McCoy's shoulder; Charles assumed she was giving a tutorial of sorts.

He looked over at McCoy – who was nodding, and then getting up from his seat. Charles was taken aback by a sudden rush of anger, sour on his tongue. *For you - *for you I'm going to bed down with that monster - you made me do this I hate you -

"How are you feeling, Mr. Xavier?"
Charles forced a smile. "I've been better."

"Yes, well," and McCoy adjusted his glasses, "there's no sign of any intracranial hemorrhage, which is good. I mean, the things the Finder was doing … I've never seen the levels that high, so I was worried about you —"

_Not worried enough to intervene_, Charles thought, savagely; but held his voice to a disinterested: "Mm."

" — but everything's O.K. Nothing to worry about —"

"There's acute malnutrition," the doctor interrupted, "nervous exhaustion, and anemia to worry about. But then …" and she bounced back from the monitor, dusting off her hands. "All of you seem to have some assortment of the three. Except Ms. Frost."

Charles blinked at her as he slowly sat up. "Um."

"We call her Lady Frost here, ma'am." McCoy sounded serious.

The doctor shrugged, then smiled. "I'm just a lowly human – and besides, I'm off the clock. I'll call her what I like."

"Lowly?" McCoy's voice turned earnest. "Humans and mutants are equal. It's in all the treaties – and even the articles of confederation have a clause that states —"

"Oh, bless." She reached up and patted his cheek. "It looks well and good on paper. But it's just as well I have nothing to make anyone sit up and take notice – or I'd be stuck here with you. Wouldn't I?"

"Well," McCoy began, but: "You seem an excellent physician, ma'am," Charles said. "Is that 'nothing'?"

The doctor turned slowly to look at him, staring. Then her assistant cleared his throat sharply. The doctor blinked, and: "Oh," she said, flustered. "Mr. Xavier, you are quite the flatterer, aren't you? But you won't escape a prescription," she wagged a finger at him. "Namely: more food, more sleep, and these."

She fished a bottle out of a voluminous shoulder bag. Held it out to him. "Iron supplements. Try to flatter your way out of that."

Charles blinked back at her, feeling dull. He hadn't intended any sort of flattery at all. Only the truth.

But the doctor was still talking. "And I understand that food is a problem. It always is, for all of us, I know – but you need to remedy it, and quickly. Ten winters I've visited, and this is the worst beginning I've seen." She looked up into McCoy's eyes, fierce. Charles was suddenly reminded of his penguin. "You can start with this," and she fished a wax-wrapped square out of her bag. "I brought it from home." She hit McCoy's chest with it; Charles heard a _thwap_. "It's turkey and cranberry preserves. Leftovers."

"Oh." He sounded faint. "Thank you."

Charles looked at him – and noticed, with a twinge, that McCoy was just as emaciated as he. He probably had not been sharing his food with Jean – she was not that plump – but he was taller than Charles, and the students apparently received priority …
Except: no, Charles remembered, tiredly. He had been eating the same gruel in the mess hall with the others for the past month. Eating with the Sworn, bumping god damned elbows with the Sworn … but still not trusted, it would seem. For McCoy held off on unwrapping the sandwich until he had removed the blindfold. Until Charles was chained again, shivering in the cold of his room.

"Here." McCoy held out the sandwich. "You can have it."

"Nonsense, Hank – she gave it to both of us." Charles had seen how McCoy's hand was trembling; he made his voice sharp. "You eat your half, or I'll have to hurt you."

A snort. "Mr. Xavier … right now? I honestly don't think either of us could hurt a fly."

"What a shame." Charles took half of the sandwich, and sank down onto his bed. "I could use the extra protein."

He bit down, sighed at the explosion of taste. So to speak. Charles grimaced. Cranberry preserve had rolled down the back of his hand, like nothing more than a viscous trail of blood. He determinedly suppressed all thoughts besides what a nice sandwich, and licked up the tart stickiness.

"Mmf," McCoy said, and: "Indeed." Charles smiled at him. "I suppose cranberry is native to this side of the Atlantic – the closest I've tasted to something this tart is gooseberry. Or perhaps crabapple."

McCoy had eaten his half in a flash; Charles himself took only a moment longer to eat all of his. Then he watched as McCoy went to the bathroom sink and poured himself a cup of water. The pipes were still almost frozen, so the mug took quite some time to fill. Then Charles heard him downing it, and saying: "Turkey's a bit dry."

"Right." Suddenly, his mouth was dry too. There was the sound of more water, and McCoy drinking again. "Um. Could I have some, please?"

"What?"

"Could I have a drink please, Hank?" Charles' head ached. "Then you can go do – whatever you need to do."

"Oh." McCoy sidled into the room; he looked sheepish. "Sorry, Mr. Xavier. Here."

And Charles sipped at the icy water, trying to make it last while McCoy nattered away.

Eventually, he interrupted. "I don't suppose there's any chance of you taking me outside for firewood? I don't have any here," he gestured at the fireplace, "and I think today is going to be quite cold indeed."

"Yeah – I mean, the broadcast out of Albany has a low front coming through tonight." McCoy shrugged. "Not sure when."

"Ah," Charles felt strangely blank. "So … how can I …" He bit his lip, then spoke in a rush. "Could you bring me some firewood, please? And – and a candle or two? I would like to at least try to stay warm."

Try to stay warm, he told himself. Try to have light, by which to read, his mind added.

What went unsaid … Charles shivered.

I don't want him to find me in the dark.
McCoy had made noises of agreement before he left. Charles estimated that an hour passed. Then two. He huddled under his blankets and listened for footsteps. He set out flickers of his power in the hallway, down the stairs. On the threshold of McCoy's workroom and – and the library – and then Charles told himself not to think of the library and instead focused on keeping his feet warm.

The shackle on his ankle was still cool, even beneath the blankets. He knew that if he let his foot into the open air of his room, the iron would become ice-cold within minutes.

"McCoy," Charles heard his own teeth chattering. "Come on, Hank. Don't forget."

But all that happened over next few hours was that the room grew more and more dim. It made sense, Charles supposed. The solstice was at most two days away. He knew it would either be the twenty-second or the twenty-third … he wasn't sure which.

"It could be tomorrow," he told himself. "Joy." For the day would be so short, and the night so long – and the next night, and the next … Even more time to –

*Don't think about it.*

Charles stared at his palms, instead, where they were curled in front of his face, holding the blanket close. He would think of something else. Anything else. Perhaps he could try to figure out whether the solstice was tomorrow or the twenty-third. Since Third Quarter had been on a twenty-third, he could just count the days forward.

It was difficult to concentrate. His thoughts kept flitting every which way, just as his eyes – despite all his attempts at self-control – darted from the dwindling bars of daylight on the flagstones … to his door.

When there was a knock, Charles did not jump, and did not yelp. He yanked the blankets close, yes, and stared at the handle, but –

But then his mind caught up. A knock? Why would the creature –

"Mr. Xavier?"

Charles blinked. "Angel? Is that you?"

"Yes! Oh, Mr. Xavier – we missed you, we all really missed you –" a rattle of the door handle, and a burst of laughter. "Dios, I forgot – I don't have your key anymore. Let me just run get it and I'll be back."

"All – right?" Charles shook his head; he felt dazed. "Whatever you think is …"

"I'll be back!"

And he heard the sound of running footsteps fade away.

How had she not set off his power, deployed as it was in tiny guardian lights both upstairs and down? In consternation, Charles called up his sparrow and sent it flying. It fluttered into the hallway and circled one of the flames.

Both bird and light were weak. So weak … "No," Charles whispered. "No, no –" as the light flickered and died, and as the sparrow faded away into nothing.

He cast a frantic eye to his aviary, in his reading room. The sparrow was there, along with the others
— but all were huddled together on the cushion of the golden chair. Well. All except his penguin, who was pecking at the ice still covering the flagstones.

"That bitch," Charles hissed. *Frost.* He had forgotten. He touched the carpet. It was sodden and cold, but the locks he had hidden were still all shut tight. Furious, he looked up and down the room. Certain books had traces of water damage on their spines. The great window still had frost on its panels.

And all of his birds were frightened. Even if the penguin were making a great show of being otherwise, Charles could see how its black button eyes had not left him since he had landed in the room.

"Right." Folding his arms over his chest, Charles pitched his voice so that the aviary could hear it. "Hello, all." He saw his raven poke its head out of the pile of feathers. He gave it a deliberate smile. "Don't worry. I'll have you all warm soon, even if I can't start a bonfire in a library."

Because *this,* he thought, setting his gift to glow in the room—this explained his faltering power in the physical world. The chill on his birds, his reading room's scars … it had to have been Frost, and the Finder, and: *you'll recover,* his mind reassured him.

"Hurry, though." Charles squeezed his eyes shut tighter, where he lay curled beneath his blankets. What if the man arrived before he had finished? What if he, Charles, needed to incapacitate the other? In order to escape … in order to resist … "You'd be too weak," he whispered, clenching his teeth against their clatter. "You can't be weak. You can't be weak."

He repeated the mantra to himself, sending his power curling around the books, warming his reading room even as his room in reality grew colder, and colder, until—

— there was a warm hand on his shoulder, shaking.

"Mr. Xavier?" sounding worried. "Are you all right?"

Charles pulled himself back to his bedroom with the feeling of dragging his feet through mud.

"… I'm all right," he croaked, and: "Angel."

She gripped his arms, looked ready to start in on a hug — but then drew back, eyes wide. "Mr. Xavier, you're skin and bones. And you look — you look horrible."

"Oh," he said lightly, "I'm hurt."

"Are you, though?" Angel looked near tears. "Has Lady Frost — what has she done to you?"

"I've just been working, Angel. The same as you." Charles lifted his chin; tried a smile. "Except I worked from the peace and quiet of home. I can't imagine either were to be found in Dallas."

"Maybe not before, but now it's — it's over."

A pause. Charles held his blankets close. He did not want to sit up; Angel was fine where she bent over him. His mind catalogued, though more slowly than usual. Her black hair was much shorter, only just long enough to be put back into a knob of a ponytail. She looked very tan. He supposed she was full of stories about the war, the campaign — probably just itching to be asked.

But he was freezing cold — and so tired … When Angel had run to fetch the key, he hadn't spared her a thought. Had devoted his energy to his birds instead.
"Oh … the key. "Could you please unlock my chain?" Charles scrubbed a hand over his face. "I need a drink of water."

"Shit, I'm sorry!" Angel hurried to the foot of the bed. "I forgot —" and with a rattle, he was free.

Charles got out of bed by degrees, fetched his bathroom mug, and filled it with another concentrated effort. The pipes were almost back to frozen solid. When he inched back into his room, trailing the blankets he had taken as bathrobe and cover combined, he saw Angel staring into the fireplace.

"I —" Her voice sounded small. "It's almost time, for — for tonight. I want to get you firewood and food and a god damned pony, Mr. Xavier, but they're expecting me at the field."

His mind had stuck on 'tonight', but he kept his voice steady: "What's tonight?"

"Celebration at the old college stadium. Honestly? I don't know if I want to see it. I mean, everyone's been talking about it, saying it's going to be amazing … but they're bringing all the prisoners there —" she said in a rush, "and that makes me nervous."

Charles did not know what to say. He settled on holding the blankets tighter.

"But that," she explained, "is why McCoy couldn't come back. He's helping with transport and setup. But he asked me to come and check on you."

"Oh." Charles felt empty. "Right."

Silence stretched, broken only by the creak of his easing back down onto his bed. Then: "I wish I could — oh," she brightened. "This'll cheer you up. Tomorrow's Fourth Quarter. What do you want for Quarter Gift?"

"Quarter Gift?"

He stared at his hands where they were folded in front of his face again. What did he want? Escape … except here he was, lying back down on his bed and waiting to be chained again, because he felt almost too tired to stand. And it was so cold …

"Hand me a coat, would you? And my gloves?"

"But —"

"They're in the wardrobe, Angel." He took care to keep the snappishness out of his voice. "The manteau with the hood, please. Only because — well. It's going to get colder this evening. They say a storm's coming."

"I'll bring you firewood as soon as I can tomorrow morning. I promise." Angel handed him the coat and gloves; shakily, Charles donned both. "But — for Quarter Gift? If I have to fly all day tomorrow to get it for you, I will."

Charles buttoned the coat — and his fingers snagged on the torn neck of his sweater. The knit, as dark a blue as Raven, coming undone … "A sewing kit and some candles," he said, decidedly. "That will give me something to do besides read. Some alcohol, this time. And a book of fairy tales." He looked up at Angel. "So I can give Jean something."

Angel's eyes had softened. "She'll love it, Mr. Xavier. I'll be sure to find one with some good illustrations. And Jean's O.K., you know. I thought she'd be too young for the party, but she'll be there. I promise I'll keep an eye on her."
"Make sure she stays warm." He bit his lip. "And that she doesn't – see anything – if the prisoners are –"

"All right," Angel interrupted. "I know. I'll make sure she's all right."

Silence. Charles lay back down, focusing on his hood. The way it shielded his vision – he didn't have to look to the side if he didn't want to … He only wished for some fur to line it. Perhaps with a sewing kit, he could make a good lining. As long as he could trap a rabbit or two in January.

His mind flashed to the image of the deer hanging from chains in the stable; he flinched and rubbed the heels of his hands into his eyes. The wool of the gloves scratched. "Well," Charles pulled the blankets up around his shoulders. "You had best be getting to the stadium. If they need you there."

"Yes." Angel stood. "It starts at sundown."

"And you're sure Jean's all right?"

"She's with Lady Frost, at the old admin building. I gave her – Jean, I mean – some pudding I brought from Dallas. They had a cafeteria at their headquarters. And I would have saved some for you, Mr. Xavier – honestly – but I thought …" She looked miserable. "I thought …"

"Thought what?"

"I thought you'd be with Lady Frost too. Helping her; getting ready … honestly? I thought she'd have you sit next to her tonight. I mean – at Dallas …"

Charles waited. When she stayed silent, he prompted, tiredly: "What about Dallas?"

"… Those of us who knew you, knew it was you."

"What do you mean?"

"When we feel the Finder – Lady Frost feels like snow. Cold and ice. But sometimes … Alex and Sean, and Ororo and Bobby and me, and even John, you know? Sometimes … we felt the Finder, and we thought we could see birds flying."

Angel gave him a tremulous smile. "And we all knew it was you."

He would not weep, Charles told himself. He would not. Nor, however, would he say anything – something seemed stuck in his throat. So Charles just settled on smiling in return. It was difficult.

Angel looked as though she wanted to wrench him into another hug. Instead, she swallowed hard and bent to fix the chain back around his ankle. "I wish you could come to the party, too."

"Poor little Cinderella, kept home from the ball …"

A laugh. "If the shoe fits."

"Oh –" Charles snorted. "Oh really, Angel, that was very good. Just tell the others not to mix beer and hard liquor. The results are disastrous."

"How did you know …"

"Well, what's a party without alcohol?"

Angel grinned. "You're right. But this'll be mostly vodka. The Russians are coming!"
"That sounds rather like propaganda."

"I guess I've seen a too much of it this past month. See Queen Frost," Angel made her voice dramatic, "and all is lost; Erik the Red will kill you in your bed, dun dun dunn. Man, I wish you could see the look on MacMurphy's face, when he –"

She stopped.

Charles waited. "When he' – what?"

But: "Oh, Mr. Xavier …" Her eyes were wide. "That's it! You can see! If you want, I mean – I wouldn't want you to do anything you didn't want to do –"

"What are you talking about, Angel?"

"Your birds." She tapped at her temple, grinning at him. "Send one along for the ride, and you can see what I see. I'll be Cinderella's pumpkin coach."

"Indeed? You're far more like the fairy godmother, here, doing such a kind thing for me. Who else would it be? Not Frost, god forbid."

"More important – who's the handsome prince? You see anyone you like, you let me know, cause I got dibs on the prince. I want a palace and servants and a new dress and –"

His smile now felt fixed in place; a rictus. "Well. You'll excuse me if I do nothing of the sort, but …"

"But you'll come along?"

He stared at the cold stones of the hearth. No warmth here, and only the thoughts of what was to come … anything for a distraction.

"Yes, Angel – I think I will." A pause. "Thank you."

It did not take much time at all to be accustomed to the sensation of perching in Angel's mind, peering out at the world from behind her eyes. The sensation had been dizzying, at first. His raven had recovered from the chill, mostly … so it could not have been from that. But Charles had remembered: the Finder had worked this way, and Frost. Seeing through the eyes of others … Surely he could do a far better job than a merciless machine and an even more ruthless Lady.

He kept his touch feather-light in Angel's mind. _Am I hurting you at all?_

"Nope!" Her voice echoed oddly, rebounding through the bones and tissues between her mouth and her mind. "I'll let you know, though, if I have a problem. You want me to drink anything for you?"

_Really, I'm not so much of a lush that I must corrupt the young._

"Geez, you sound like my papi. 'S not corrupting if I want it!" A pause. "Huh. That might have come out a weirder than I thought."

_And you're not even drunk yet._

"Shut up. Good thing, too – flying when you're sloshed is pretty tricky –"

_You're doing a fine job._ Charles made his voice warm, in her mind.
"I bet your birds say differently."

It was true, Charles realized. With a flare of amused guilt, he pictured his raven; smoothed its ruffled feathers. "Come now," he told it. "Be polite."

"It's O.K., Mr. Xavier – I don't mind." Angel did a loop-de-loop in the sky; Charles felt his eyes almost cross, where he still lay on his bed. It was a bizarre sensation, soaring alongside someone else. When his raven had flown to Syracuse, to Albany and New York, the effort had been dizzying … Now, though, it was like trying to see through three pairs of eyes at once.

"There's the stadium. I'll land, and then you'll feel better." Angel laughed at him. "Landlubber."

Charles had a retort all ready to go – but felt his breath leave him in a whoosh as she circled the stadium. Seen from above, it glowed like a banked fire, red-orange in the center, in the gathering darkness. Red-orange and white, because someone had somehow powered up two of the massive LED panels.

He could see everything.

See, and hear, as Angel called out greetings to other flying mutants, all circling through the sky. Then she fell like a stone – Charles yelped, and heard his raven squawk – and, laughing, she glided the rest of the way. Landed running on a stretch of gravel, waving to even more.

There were so many of them, Charles realized, dazed. Hundreds of mutants, and more pouring into the stadium by the minute. Although, to be accurate, surely there were hundreds of humans there, too; thousands, perhaps. Through Angel's eyes, he saw some drab outfits, some colorful – an entire array of ushanka that made him think the Russians had arrived. Cheerful voices everywhere, some almost giddy – shouts and shouted directions, as the milling throng clustered around tables set up on one end of the stadium. Tables drawn a respectable distance from …

Charles shivered. From the immense bonfire in the center of the field.

"I know, right?" Angel sounded awestruck. "I didn't know there was that much firewood in the world."

The blessings of fallout, Charles thought to himself. Dead trees everywhere – though the die-offs were more due to various blights, now, almost twenty years down the road and counting. The EBS was lucky, he reflected. The forest surrounding the manor had to be verdant enough in the summer – and even its evergreens looked healthy, now. Perhaps there were mutants with a gift for horticulture. Green thumbs. Maybe literal green thumbs.

The forest was healthy – but the stadium looked half a ruin. The other glows Charles had seen from above were individual fires, set devil-may-care amongst the seats. He could count at least thirty, burning on what looked like an immense concrete crescent. Part of the stadium, he supposed – interesting. Unique. Surely the view would be excellent from up on high.

"If you want to go – flying, Mr. Xavier," Angel said, "feel free. I mean, you don't have to stay by me the whole time."

Jean, Charles supposed, would not approve. Settling his raven into strangers' minds, willy-nilly. But … He bit his lip, where he rested on his bed. Better flying and eavesdropping than watching Angel pick up what looked like a small pie of some sort, from a table groaning under the weight of food – food – and – oh god she was starting to eat it, and his stomach sent up a fierce growl.

But he kept his voice polite, even amused. I'll leave you to it, shall I? Thank you for your escort, my
"No problem." He could sense that she was grinning, and - and thinking of a kind word, just for him.
His gut gave a savage twist - for you I'm doing this - don't patronize me, but Angel was saying: "I'll bring you some of this food tomorrow morning, O.K.? Food, firewood, your Quarter Gifts – although those might be a little later -"

*Don't put yourself out on my behalf*, Charles sent. *Just - have fun.*

Angel laughed – and Charles called his raven out of her mind, and sent it flying.

For a moment, his field of vision lurched, dizzyingly. Charles focused on the idea of the Finder, the concept … I have my own Finder, he told himself. *I am my own Finder.* His mind could do anything, anything, he knew …

Well. He drew his raven back from where it had almost flown into a massive kettledrum. Anything, but perhaps with a bit of practice first.

And … he steered Raven closer. A kettledrum?

"Makes sense," Charles whispered to the cold darkness of his room. "What's a party without a little music?"

The musicians – a motley group bristling with instruments – had set up shop and begun in five minutes flat. *Or sharp*, Charles thought, winging away. Perhaps they were tuneful, but he was not sticking around to hear.

No: instead, he kept his raven circling high up. Well away from any food and drink. The sight would be enough to drive him full distracted – and the sight of others enjoying it … He sighed. *Well.* Surely he, Charles, was not so petty to begrudge a bit of celebration to those who had earned it. To those who looked just as hungry as himself. Mutants and humans clustered round the tables; mutants and humans talking over the stadium benches; several groups dancing in clusters on the field, and more musicians joining in …

The raven fluttered and squawked at a sudden surge of energy from the stadium. As though all the thoughts of everyone there had focused, all at once –

*Oh.* Of course, Charles thought sourly. There she was.

Frost was walking through one of the main entrances. She was flanked by mutants – and what looked like humans, dressed to the nines. Or whatever the expression was, Charles thought, in their respective cultures. Russian, he saw instantly, and Chinese - from Zhōngguó, he corrected himself - Japanese … but then an assortment of others that he could not place.

"But Raven taught that," he whispered to himself. "Teaches that. 'Cultures of the World.' To the lower forms …"

*Raven…*

Where was she now? Charles folded his arms together, curled up to meet them, shivering. It was almost Christmas, in Oxford. If he were home, the two of them would have gone to markets and bazaars, concerts and celebration after celebration by now … Charles would have brought his mulled wine. Raven would have attempted a different pastry. She made a new one each year, trying to find a specialty – one she could bring to parties. And each year proved a more spectacular flame-out than the last. In the year of plum pudding, the flame-out had been literal.
His raven was croaking at him. "Sorry," he mumbled, and: "What is it?"

Raven fluttered into the air. Landed on a dignitary's shoulder and – only just casting a bright, jet-black eye to Charles for the go-ahead – eased into the elderly man's mind.

A jumble of thoughts in – Charles squinted, trying to concentrate – was that Yiddish? German? He wasn't sure which. But: no, it was Yiddish, because he caught a thread of anxiety that all the food would be *treyf* –

He lightened his touch. The man hadn't detected him, and Charles wanted to keep it that way. He watched through older eyes, running them over Frost's face and feeling a shiver of fear – *even amongst allies*, he thought to himself, *what a surprise, my lady* – and then –

"Oh, Jean." Charles blinked into the darkness. "There you are."

Jean was wrapped round and round in soft white furs. She had snuggled into Frost's arms, seated on her lap, where the older telepath was now enthroned in majesty upon a well-placed chair. At a corner of the stadium, with the concrete crescent to her left, and the undignified hubbub of the food tables shielded by the bonfire. The musicians and dancers had moved round the fire clockwise – Charles saw Jean lean to point at them.

Frost tapped her hand, delicately, and Jean drew it back, abashed. He could not hear she whispered, then, but he was sure it was a variation on "We don't point; it's rude."

Charles was not sure if his raven could see red. *He* did, though – he was enraged – and the elderly man shifted from foot to foot, uneasy – perhaps because the *shaynah maidele* reminded him of his own fourth granddaughter, and to have such a one as the Queen possess his fourth granddaughter would be the greatest misfortune that honor could be –

"Be careful," Charles told himself. "Be invisible. Nobody can see you." He coiled his fingers tightly in the blankets. "Think of this as – good practice. In self-control."

He repeated the words to himself, a mantra, as some semblance of order to the festivities became apparent. A group would approach Frost's chair. They would offer her a gift. She would make gracious gestures and hand the gift to an underling – if indeed it was portable – and engage the group's leader in conversation briefly. Then another group would approach, and the process would be repeated.

They did not mention this, in the history books, Charles thought. Pomp and circumstance, pride and triumph, the luxury and loot of defeated enemies … it all got a bit repetitve in the end. Boring. He looked through the old man's eyes round the throng of people, close to the throne.

And then he blinked. There, penned in the front two rows of benches, were men in blue uniforms. Blue uniforms, with … his raven sharpened its vision. With orange birds embroidered on the front pockets. Some of them with medals; all of them wild-eyed and staring, surrounded by mutants with weapons.

Charles saw Victor Creed, huge arms crossed over his chest, pitch-black eyes glinting. He shuddered, and dragged his raven's attention away. Focused back on Frost.

Frost and – another surprise, like a slap. Seated on Frost's right hand – directly beneath the old man's nose, which must have been why he hadn't seen at first – there was MacMurphy.

"Dear god," Charles whispered. He had recognized him, from the primary sources he used in his advanced history tutorial – *Wars and their Leaders*. "God …"
MacMurphy looked like he was hanging on to his own self-control by a thread. He did not take his eyes off the rows of Free West prisoners. The prisoners who, Charles realized, were sending up fear and despair like smoke. As strong as the bonfire's smoke, even far from them as it was …

Frost had her own fire, crackling away merrily in a polished oil drum in front of her. She inclined her head and offered MacMurphy what looked like a crystal goblet. He shook his head, rigid; Charles saw Frost smile languidly, and take a sip herself.

The old man who was his host felt nothing but satisfaction at the sight of MacMurphy so placed, Charles was disturbed to notice. But then – he riffled through an array of memories, mostly connected to the Second World War. It seemed that the diplomat, envoy, whatever he was, came from Eretz Galut. The so-called Land of Exile, carved out of the Central Asian steppes - a refuge for the Jews, one that they had conquered themselves, after Jerusalem had fallen victim to the bombs …

It seemed that the older man thought MacMurphy a convenient stand-in for dictatorial brutes of any stripe.

"I hate to break it to you," Charles murmured, "but there's another one. To your left. Blonde and beautiful, medium height – ice-cold bitch –"

But a spike of panic from the older man made Charles sigh and stop. Self-control. Self-control. Be discreet. Be –

And then a roar from the crowd made him forget any mantras or words.

Any thoughts, as he heard the noise get louder, and louder – as he sensed a burst of fear-anger-hate from the Free West prisoners – as he saw MacMurphy's shoulders stiffen.

As the man walked into view from around the fire.

"Oh."

Charles heard the word puff out with his breath, into the frigid air of his room. Strange, to be four and a half miles from the man in one sense, but only a few meters in another … A few meters separated them, and the flesh and bone of the old envoy, whose mind was a luminous beam of awe– and fierce pride, and the words, reverberating: Ari Binyamin.

Ari Binyamin.

"What does that even mean?" Charles grumped. "Forget it. Out," he told his raven, and it flew out of the old man's mind. "Not MacMurphy –" fear and hatred were bubbling up from his mind in a toxic fountain, "and definitely not Frost." Charles paused, thinking. "Not Jean either. Try – try that one –" a broad-faced grinning Russian. "He might at least get drunk before the night is out. But, then, I shouldn't stereotype -"

Raven landed in the envoy's mind.

"Or – well. Looks as though he's gotten a head start."

The mental equivalent of alcoholic fumes made it difficult to concentrate. Charles, squinting through the Russian's eyes, wondered if that was why the man – Red One, his memory whispered, Red One – was wobbling slightly.

No. Not wobbling, precisely. Limping.
The raven watched, silent, keeping even the smallest feather from moving. Watched as the man limped up to Frost's throne, eased around the oil-drum fire in front of it, and knelt on the cold ground. Charles saw thin lips press into a white line. He had been favoring his right leg, and now it was bent.

The man held out a large triangle of cloth to Frost. A flag, Charles realized, folded up. He only just caught the glints of orange on the blue before Frost took it from the man, smiling, and gave it to Jean to hold.

The noise had reached a fever pitch. It sounded as though every single mutant and human in the stadium was screaming at the top of his or her lungs. It made concrete and metal reverberate. The line of the man's jaw was sharp, prominent, as he stared up at Frost. It looked as though he were … waiting for something.

Then Charles watched through the Russian envoy's eyes, as the White Queen stretched out both her hands, and placed them on the man's head. He saw MacMurphy stare, his hatchet face twisted in something between disgust and fascination.

The man had not been wearing a hat, Charles saw. Frost's hands were slender and pale against the red-brown stubble of his hair. Stubble – he had cut it. Or had it cut.

The raven peered closer. Shadows beneath his eyes, and the stark lines of cheekbone and jaw were as pronounced as the line between his eyebrows, as – as he squeezed his eyes shut? As Frost blinked – once, twice, and as her own lips thinned, then curled into a smile –

– and as she released him. Charles saw the man's shoulders slump, saw him exhale. Frost was speaking to him, still smiling; he dragged a nod, then got slowly to his feet.

Then the man limped to stand at her left hand. Squarely between Frost and the Free West prisoners. Standing, and staring straight ahead, his eyes smudges beneath his brows.

Charles fought to keep from screaming. The bastard hadn't died, or been killed on the way home. But, "Really," he hissed to himself, "what did you expect? A convenient metal-related accident? Someone to shove him in an ice-fishing hole, somewhere? For him to take a vacay to bloody Mexico, for god's sake?"

No. The man had returned, and the bargain was still real, and – and Charles fought not to hyperventilate. The Russian hosting his raven was interpreting it as a need to piss, and some things were truly better left to the imagination.

The procession of envoys and gifts had stopped, at least. And now – oh, damn, Frost was getting up to make a bloody speech. At least she had deposited Jean back onto the throne, curled up in the furs, falling asleep. And there was Jessie, from the comm station – Frost had a hand on her shoulder. The mutant must be her own sound system, just as he was his own Finder … for Frost was speaking, resonant words of triumph and pride, and even though the White Queen's voice echoed through the stadium, Charles did not want to hear it.

After several long moments of reciting the periodic table – and that confused the envoy, no doubt – Charles gave in to his own sick fascination, and distracted himself by looking at the man. So. A haircut, yes. Quite a bit of stubble; almost a beard, very red in the mix of LED and firelight. He was wearing a leather jacket, almost tattered; dark trousers and a black turtleneck. The raven focused, saw what looked like jagged cuts up the right side of the man's face. One pronounced nick through his earlobe. But then Charles lost sight of them as the man turned to look at Jean – reached out to tuck one of the furs beneath her chin.
The surge of hatred from MacMurphy was dizzying in its intensity.

And perhaps the man could – could smell it or something, for those green eyes flicked up and locked on those of the commander of the Free West – and Charles saw the man's lips part, and there was the lower line of teeth, he remembered that look, oh god –

"Look away," he muttered at MacMurphy. "You want all your limbs to stay attached to your body? Look – away – oh and she's finished, excellent timing, your Ladyship."

For Frost had inclined her head, and gracefully taken her seat again, picking up Jean and holding her close. Frost looked up at the man, into his eyes – then turned to look at MacMurphy … Smiled at him, and spoke.

Oddly, MacMurphy grimaced with what would have been a smile, on any other night. Charles saw the man's shoulders go rigid. What …

"Oh, shite – hey you, stop –"

The Russian envoy was moving, moving and calling out. Charles saw a group of men, clad in bright colors, knee-length jackets and high boots, wearing ushanka all … the group raced over from the musician's circle to the envoy. Raven heard the words boomed and sloshing through his skull – Russian, but the sense was that Lady Frost would be offered a gift from their delegation, a gift of –

"Dance, oh joy." Charles urged the raven away. "Come on." It hovered in mid-air, croaking. "Yes, I'm tired too – but I don't need to be passenger to any calisthenics. Hm? I –" Fatigue sharpened into a jabbing pressure on his mind, where he lay in his cold room. "Oh, I'm so tired …"

The raven creee'd at him.

"No, it's all right. Just a few more minutes, maybe," he slurred, "and you can fly back."

The Russians were gathered in a circle and kicking up their feet. Charles did not recognize it. He would know the kalinka; he had seen émigrés dance it at Oxford, with one of the company, blank-faced, rattling a can with coins in time to the beat. This, though …. A circle dance, of some sort … maybe? He had never seen so many dancing together before. Never so many … never as loud, as boisterous … as happy …

The emotions bleeding from the Free West prisoners were choking him. Charles sent his raven flying higher, then swooped down, through instinct, and looked over to the man. He was watching the dancers too. Leaning away from Frost's throne; shifting his weight onto his left leg.

Only a meter away, hovering, Charles' raven could not miss Frost's gesture. But she can't see me – ha. He was hidden, he was safe –

He was puzzled by the White Queen's holding out a pile of white fur – white fur and Jean, Charles realized, warmly wrapped but still being placed in the monster's arms – and Frost looked away dismissively, and the man bowed.

Then Charles watched the other limp from the dais and start making his way through the press of people. Odd, Charles reflected, sending his raven to follow at a safe distance. One would think that people would be eager to congratulate such a one, given their delirious enthusiasm at the presentation of the flag. But although there were smiles and nods, the man did not have to push to get through the crowd.

Instead, everyone – humans and mutants, envoys and common folk and even children – backed
away. Making room.

"Handy at a party," Charles mumbled. Like a magnet that repelled things, a big one. "Crowd control. You might consider that as an alternate career choice. If gore and mayhem ever pall."

The man took a while to cross to the other side of the stadium. Odd. Charles was used to that vicious metal cloud moving with the speed of an executioner's blade – but now the pace was slow, almost careful. He stopped at one of the tables. The raven saw him gesture with what looked like a question. He was given a bottle; he transferred it to one pocket. "Must be deep, those pockets," Charles told himself, and, "no, I am not jealous. I'm getting alcohol tomorrow. Angel said so."

Then, after a brief moment, an elderly woman there, wearing a *platok*, pressed something cloth-wrapped and round into the man's free hand. The other gave her a brief smile –

Charles caught sight of those teeth, and felt his skin prickle. When he had pulled the blankets tighter, he found his raven again – and the man had almost vanished from sight.

"Oh, come now." Charles sent the bird skipping from mind to mind; then eschewed that puddle-jumping and sent it soaring after the man by itself. "Works perfectly well." Even in the dark of a stadium tunnel, even in the brief flare of light outside, as someone that looked like a guard threw out a question, saw who it was and grinned – half abashed, half frightened.

Four and a half miles distant, Charles thought, and he could smell the fear. Puffing from the young guard, as present as the white steam of breath from the three figures – the guard, the man, and Jean. Then only from the latter two – and his raven almost lost sight of them as the man walked straight into the darkness of the forest.

"Fine time for a walk through the woods," he grumped. "Come on, focus," to his raven, and: "where on earth is he –"

But then realization hit him, like a punch to the gut.

Jean had fallen asleep. So Frost must have told the man: *take the child home and put her to bed* – Jean's bed. In her room. Right across the hallway from his.

"Oh god," Charles choked – and his raven screeched at him and started flying back, desperately. "Oh god oh god –"

*Whatever you want* ...

The man had returned.

*Whatever you've thought of, whatever you've ever dreamed of...*

The bargain was still real.

*... We can do.*

And now he, Charles, would have to pay for it.
A bit o’ translation, where relevant:

treyf = not kosher

shaynah maidele = pretty girl

*Ari Binyamin* = 'Lion of Benjamin’ ... at least, I think so. Not quite sure. If anyone wants to correct me, please do! ETA 25 November 12: thanks, Rena! (Corrected from "Arei Binyomin." Our of "Aryeh" and "Ari," I chose the latter - scans better for something further down the line. :D)

27 April 12: thanks to taishel for the *babushka / platok* catch!
Chapter 27

It seemed only a split second before the raven flew back into Charles' mind with a smack, screeching in panic. Calm down, Charles thought, and: "Calm down," he choked. "Deep breath, take a deep breath —"

Except he couldn't. He couldn't draw breath. He was trying, but his chest felt tight, and air sliced shallow into his lungs like a frigid blade. The white wisps of air went far too quickly into the room … but not enough, not enough —

His own wheezing sounded very loud. "I can't … I can't …" Can't escape, his mind finished for him, coldly. It was too late for that. The chain was heavy around his ankle; and even if he were unbound, he could hardly stand – let alone run. "Why didn't you run when you had the chance?" and his own voice cracked, almost tearful. "You – you're fucked, you know that?

Not just yet, his thoughts pointed out. Charles heard his own hysterical laugh. He wrapped his arms tighter around himself, drawing his knees as far up as he could. You're skin and bones, Angel had said – and he could feel how truly she had spoken.

"You won't be much of a fuck, will you? Can't move," he dragged in air, "can't bloody well breathe, and you're a walking talking skeleton. That idiot might as well jam his cock in a pile of – of coat hangers." His fingers dug into the sharp bones of his own elbows. "Wire coat hangers."

Charles supposed he was glad for the lack of oxygen: his thoughts could not focus long enough to present him with any image of – of the man doing – doing anything like … except then his mind did, and Charles had to bite his lip and ride out another wave of panic.

His teeth were clattering together. What, he thought, is there to fear? Death? Death by sex? Nonsense. It had been perfectly clear at their last meeting in the library that the man had come to realize his vested interest in keeping Charles alive. Then there's nothing to be afraid of … except. "Except," he mumbled to himself. "You could get – hurt."

It sounded so small in the chill emptiness of his room. A small word. But … but even someone gentle, who didn't know what he was doing in bed … or she, truly, because he had been with women perfectly capable of inflicting pain …

Even someone gentle could – could do damage. Serious damage. And somehow, Charles did not think 'gentle' within the realm of the possible in this situation, given the crazed want that had poured from the man in the library, and in the hallway – even outside this very room … that dark whirlpool of lust, frothing with rage and mine-mine-prey …

"I …" Tears had clogged his throat. "I don't – I don't want …"

And then it seemed he was crying.

It's all right, Charles told himself. It was all right to cry. He had nothing to be ashamed of. Except perhaps the waste of water. His tears were hot on his cheekbones, dripping down with soft plips onto the hood of his manteau. "Oh," and he covered his face with his hands. The wool scratched his skin. "Oh, god."

He didn't want pain. He didn't want more pain. All the memories cascaded through his mind, a scarlet wash trickling down watercolor paper. Backhand to the face; metal through his jaw and his
Charles squeezed his eyes shut; scrubbed at them with his gloved fingertips. He had to concentrate. Think of a strategy; of an approach. The man had hurt him when angry or afraid. So the trick would be to keep from provoking either his rage or his fear. But how best to do that? How best to –

And Charles tore his hands from his face and coughed out a bitter laugh. "To think of it," he dragged in a breath, coughed again, "To think of it in these terms. What can I change about my own behavior, to keep him from assaulting me? How shall I propitiate the monster? For fuck's sake," he spat, "that's sick. That's wrong. By god, he ought to be the one to change, or have no joy from me."

And he had to squeeze his eyes shut and huddle in on himself for a while. No joy. No joy no joy – it was almost Christmas, he knew. Joy any other year – family, community; he was hardly religious; it was cultural … But joy had not been part of his life for so long that even the word sounded bouncy and ridiculous on his own tongue. Joy joy joy –

"You're being ridiculous," he croaked. "You're getting hysterical. Calm the fuck down."

The tears were drying in tracks on his face. Already the air in his room had chilled their heat to an unpleasantly cool stickiness. He blinked back the ones waiting to fall, and forced his way past memories of pain … back to this room. To the night before the battle of Dallas began.

Charles sniffled. Held his coat and blankets closer. The man had knelt on the floor when Charles had ordered him off the bed. Had kept kneeling, staring, even when Charles had refused the ring and kicked at him. Had given Charles his word to protect the children. Had – had waited until Charles had initiated it, deepened it … but then had kissed him hungrily, desperately –

"Desperate for it," he said to the darkness. "Poor deprived soul."

If the man had a soul. Charles didn't think so.

And even though that memory edged fear and pain with a sensation of … of power … still, Charles felt as though he would be sick. It was his mind, he thought. Thrashing about like a rabbit in a snare. He took a shaky breath; exhaled. Tucked his face beneath the closed front of his coat, in order to breathe warmer air. Better.

He flashed back to choir at Oxford. To the midnight Christmas mass, when he was dragooned into singing it, and the moment when the first of them would tug a surplice over nose and mouth just to filter out the incense. And when the first caved, the rest would follow, snickering …

Charles slowed his breathing. Carefully, he sank into his mind, easing aside the veils where they had caught and tangled in tight knots of fear-panic-can't breathe – "Shhh," he told himself. "Calm down."

He blinked, parted the veils surrounding him. He was seated in the golden chair beneath the massive window. Light was flickering through the panes, strangely erratic, even though there was no trace left of ice or frost. He could see down the long room – the white light from the oculus making the sun shine in miniature on the floor, halfway to the distant wall. Balconies and arches, long tables and runner carpets … the hidden well of his power …

Where were his birds? Charles bit his lip and got up from the chair. The flickering light reflected crazily off his armor; bookshelves and tables alike shimmered, seeming oddly insubstantial … fragile. What …

"If I were my owl, for example … where would I be?"
An image: his owl, flying exhausted at high noon, white-hot summer sun beating down upon its fragile feathers. A hoot, panicked and helpless, as black shadows clawed through rips in the fabric of the sky and leaped at the bird, snapping with sharp teeth—

"Oh," he gasped. "Oh, come here – come back to me. Wherever you are –" Charles looked round, frantic, "I don't know what the subconscious would be, here …"

The well and the sea beneath it – that was a hiding place. And he knew the man had a deep-sunken castle dungeon. But in his own mind …

No matter. There was his owl, winging crazily up the long room. It flew to him and hit him straight in the armored breastplate, with a thunk.

"It's all right," Charles soothed. He held the bird close; he could feel it shuddering, even through the material of his armor. He let one gauntleted hand rest on its head, and its next hoot sounded less fearful. "I know you're frightened … but you don't have to be. Easy … Shhh …"

It made him feel somewhat better, he realized – distant, cold and immobile on his own bed. Comforting those who had comforted him, who had helped him …

"Raven?" And he was not surprised to see the black bird soaring to him, graceful and unafraid, threading its way through the beams of light that shone down through the reading room's windows.

It fluttered to his shoulder; dug in its claws to perch. "Well," Charles murmured to it. "Good to see that one of us is calm about the whole damn business."

Although … he bit his lip. The raven's eyes were glittering strangely. Perhaps the bird was not as calm as it looked.

"Jolly good show, then," he whispered, touching a finger to its black feathered ruff. The bird clacked its beak at him.

"Where are the others?" Charles stroked the feathers, looking through the room – he might have to walk, to search, to fly, perhaps … His own mind, and he was not sure of where, exactly, those birds could end up –

The raven croaked and Charles saw an image: his penguin, short and fat, immobile in the center of a sheet of ice – one that had broken off from the main and floated away through cold waters. And there ... Charles could see the dark shadow of a shark, circling …

His penguin's eyes were round. It looked terrified.

"Oh, come here," he gasped. "Do come. All of you, wherever you are." He took a few stumbling steps back to his golden chair; sank into it. His raven only barely adjusted its grip; his owl pressed closer. "All of you – fly to me. Or," he thought of his penguin, "waddle to me."

It took a few moments for the penguin to appear, tramping around the shimmering circle of light from the oculus as though such beauty were commonplace. And when it reached him, the bird pecked him in one shin.

"There you are; good …"

He let his penguin crowd close to his legs. The dove found its way to his other shoulder; sparrow and hummingbird flitted to the crook of his right arm. And the nightingale rested on the golden arm of the chair, silent for once.
Charles spared a brief thought for the diamond bird, now gone from him … but then he stifled the pang, and sent quiet and love to his entire aviary.

Then he thought, for a long moment. The crazed flickering of light had calmed, somewhat, into ordinary beams from the vast window behind them all.

"Well," Charles began. "It seems like only yesterday that we came up with this plan in the first place."

Silence from the birds. But at least, he thought, it was a calm silence. Not a frightened one; not anymore.

"Because we did give our word – and let it never be said that Charles Xavier goes back on his word." He gave a tight smile. "Not unless the rewards substantially outweigh the dishonor – ow."

His raven had pecked at his ear. Charles sighed. "Fine. We'll hold to our end of the bargain. But … may I ask you all something?"

The silence of the birds turned expectant.

"If things – if things get too … Well. I might come back here." He looked around the reading room's golden peace. "Just to be with you, you understand. Just so I don't have to see, or hear, or feel things I might not … want. So: will you be here for me?"

A rustle went up from all the feathers surrounding him. Charles heard soft cheeps – and the fwip of his penguin's flippers. Trying to be quiet.

"Thank you," he said, quietly.

It was warm in his reading room; so peaceful he did not want to leave. But – but reality, and that bargain, could only be avoided for so long. He was not sure how much time he had spent in his mind, but …

Charles frowned to himself. "How long can the blighter take to walk back, anyway?"

He tried calculating – blinked and stared to the side as the wood from several nearby bookshelves groaned. Marbles, or perhaps beads – from an abacus, maybe – rolled out from beneath one of the shelves. Even their patter on the floor sounded annoyed.

"Fine." Nettled, he looked at his armful of birds. "Do I have a volunteer?"

Before he had finished the words, it seemed, his raven sprang off his shoulder and shot through the window with a defiant cry.

"That's the spirit," Charles whispered. He rose, and carefully deposited owl, sparrow and hummingbird on the golden chair. "Stay here – stay warm." He watched the other birds hop down to the nest. If a brocade cushion could be said to be a nest. And even if his penguin needed him to lift it up to join the others. "Perhaps I'll be seeing you."

And before he could give in to his own sad wish … I don't want to leave… he made himself fly through the window, back to his cold bed.

Charles pulled the blankets closer to his body, dismayed. It was even colder, somehow – he saw every long plume of his breath. "Perhaps it's for the best. Break the mood," he muttered, and: "…
Well?"

He stretched out to find his raven. When he found it -- in no time at all, it seemed -- Charles looked through its eyes. It was clinging to a branch, flexing its claws through caked snow. It gave a low rattle in its throat, and Charles followed its glance to --

*Oh.* There was the man. He was only a shadow, long and lean in the starlight. Sitting on a tree stump, his right leg stretched out in front of him. He was gazing up at the sky.

"Hm. What's so intriguing, I wonder?" At Charles' request, the raven looked up at the stars, too.

Charles shrugged to himself, back in his room. Nothing much. The air was definitely clear, in the wilds of New York that was. It being the dead of winter, Orion was bright. He saw the red glint of Betelgeuse; Rigel's blue; the cold brilliance of the stars in the Hunter's belt and sword.

Instinct made him look for the moon. His raven fluffed its feathers, and Charles grimaced, remembering. He had first gone into the West Wing, into the library, to look for the moon. To calculate his latitude, to plan his escape ... That was how all this trouble had started.

"If only you'd have been a good boy," Charles whispered to himself, "and done what you were told. Then you wouldn't be in this -- situation. Would you?"

His raven croaked at him.

And Charles stiffened where he lay, as he saw the shadow that was the man turn where it sat. Turn, and -- was that the glint of eyes, fixed on where the raven would be? *Were it visible,* Charles thought, and, "You're invisible," he told the bird. "It's all right. He can't see you."

Be that as it may, the man had gathered his left leg closer to him. Then he shifted and stood. Charles saw a long stream of white breath, like a dragon hissing smoke. Was the man speaking? His raven couldn't hear. But then the other took one limping step in the bird's direction, and Charles fled.

"Go," he whispered. "Fly higher than he can see; but close enough to see him."

*No,* Charles corrected himself. Close enough to see Jean. For he had glimpsed the cocoon of white fur that the man still held -- but he wouldn't put it past the other to dump her in a snowbank and leave her there to freeze.

So Charles watched and waited, tense, as the man began limping back to the road. No -- to a path. He was moving quite slowly; carrying Jean, but burdened with something else as well. A bundle of something ... Charles could not see what. The raven hovered far above, watching; and Charles called up Ororo's map. The man was walking west, on *path through woods* -- and there he was, carefully picking his way across *stream*.

"Fall in," Charles muttered; then winced -- *Jean* -- and shifted where he lay. He did not mean to be vicious, not where she was concerned. It was just -- he shivered and rubbed his hands over his face. Even if he closed his eyes in reality, though, he could still see what Raven saw.

The man reached the top of a hill, and the raven caught sight of the manor at the same time the other did.

Charles prided himself on how he did not say anything. Even as he saw, distantly, how the man had to lean against a tree for a moment - before he exhaled in a cloud of white, tucked one of the furs closer around Jean, and started to make his way slowly down the hill.
The vast expanse of sky above the manor looked like a bowl turned upside down: one of indigo porcelain, studded with silver, opal, pearls. Charles didn't know. He did not know what to think. All he could think of was how the flares of his power, set at the manor's main entrance, went up in sparks of red fire as the man opened the front door.

Charles stared into the darkness of his room. It was far different to be tracking someone over miles, through the great outdoors, than it was to hear that same someone making his way up a flight of steps. A slow way, almost dragging…

The flares of his own power were going off irregularly, Charles realized, and: ha. That mean that the man’s limp was even more pronounced. This was good to know, he told himself. The army must have run out of Archangel's blood – or it had not taken, for whatever reason. A kick to the kneecap could incapacitate the other, if indeed that was where a grievous injury had been. That kick, or two good punches to the vastus medialis, or the time-honored knee to the groin… Charles had options. Options, he told himself, and a plan. Strategy. Perhaps –

– and he gritted his teeth to keep them from chattering as the familiar presence rounded the corner of the dormitory hall, and made its way to Jean's room. Charles heard a click of a lock and a creak from her door in its frame. His raven landed in his mind – “Good job,” he whispered, and: “That's enough for now” – and he focused tendrils of his power instead … subtle, you can't see me… on the feeling of the metal cloud, the silver steel blueprint rippling… As the man…

Charles shivered in his cold bed. "What's he doing?"

The shadow was crouched next to the hearth in Jean's room.

It took him a moment, and the faint smell of woodsmoke, to twig to it. And: "Not jealous," he told himself. "She's a child. She needs to stay warm – especially –" and really, the cold was making his teeth hurt, "especially on a night like this."

No, he wasn't jealous. Not at all. Instead, he was fighting for breath again – oh god oh god – as he sensed the other unfold to his feet, walk slowly to Jean's door…

Charles heard that door open and shut. Then – he bit down hard on his tongue – the shadow was standing outside, right outside, and he could just hear the faintest scrape and shuffle of boots –

"Oh god I can't stand it," he muttered to himself, and dove back into his mind.

The reading room was golden and warm, still; all his birds were piled onto the chair.

Except … instead of sleeping, they were staring up at him.

"What –" Charles gasped for breath. "What do I do?"

Silence.

Then his owl tipped its head to one side. It blinked its topaz eyes once, and tucked that same head beneath one light grey wing.

The other birds followed suit.

"Go to bloody sleep?" he yelped, but: "Oh. Pretend to be asleep? All right. I can pretend. I can – I can –"
And he was back in the freezing cold of his room. Freezing cold, except for the warmth radiating into his face, from where the man was standing right next to his bed – and Charles was at knee level, and from that distance he could –

_Ugh._

He could smell nothing but smoke, sour sweat, and – was that blood? Smoke and sweat and god knew what else. Well. If that last was or wasn't blood, it didn't change the fact that the entire effect was rank. Charles drew in a sleepy sigh, pretending, and that made it easier to switch to breathing through his mouth.

He heard the other shift where he stood.

It was difficult to keep his breathing even and his eyelashes still. Difficult, but not impossible. Not a flutter; not a peep. Charles' face was at the man's knee level, true enough, but why was the moron just standing there? Did he think that Charles was going to spring up and blow him without so much as an 'hello'?

But – Charles almost flicked his eyes open to peek. He caught himself, though. He could hear, from the whisper of fabric and scrape of shoes, that the man had turned away.

_His walking away_, his mind said, disbelieving. Walking away – Charles peeked after all – and stooping on the hearth. Bending one knee. There was a hiss, and the same cloud of white breath as had been visible outside. The smallest sound of cloth – a glove stripped off – and Charles saw the man touch one hand to the fire grate.

Then his skin prickled at the sound of a low growl.

And then Charles' mind went from disbelieving to outright giddy as the man abruptly rose, turned on one heel, and walked out of the room.

_What …_

The tiny flames of his power, watching over the hallway, flared and then died back down as the man limped past them and walked back down the stairs. Charles heard his own breath coming shallow and fast, as he sensed the other leaning against the front door, opening it and stepping back outside …

He sat up in bed.

"What the hell?"

He had expected the other to fall to immediately: to rip off blankets and clothes, then pin him down and ... Shuddering, Charles let his eyes skip from the cold dead hearth to the bare mantel to the open door –

He stared.

… the _open door._

Charles' pulse thundered in his ears.

He carefully slid his feet over the side of the bed and down. Something was making a clinking noise, somewhere, like water falling off icicles … But the door was open. His door hadn't been left open for weeks. _Months_. And here it was – and he could see the dark hallway outside …
It was only after he had thrown off the blankets and lunged that Charles remembered his chain.

Well. Only after he had lunged, and fallen to the floor with a smack.

"Ow – ow shite fuck –"

He had caught himself on the palms of his hands. But it had been a near miss – he could have broken his nose, he thought in a daze, staring at the hard surface inches from his face. Broken his teeth. "Although," and his voice was wavering, "what's one more broken tooth between friends?" A swallow. "Am I right?"

_We're not friends, Xavier_, the man had said, in a pleasant voice. And he had made Charles lick up a puddle of alcohol from the floor … Charles half sobbed, because _there was the open door, right in front of him_ – and he couldn't help it: he pushed himself to his hands and knees, braced, and then pulled and _yanked_ against the shackle, clenching his teeth against the pain – harder and harder –

He winced as he felt skin tearing. Could he – could he pull at the ring in the wall, instead? Scratch at the plaster, dig a hole into it and break free that way? He pulled again, feeling the shackle dig into the top of his foot – feeling something warm trickling down to his heel …

Charles watched his breath puff into the air. He could feel sweat beading on his forehead. And if ring or chain gave way – what then? Run into the cold woods without having eaten anything for the better part of a day? Run and hide in another part of the manor?

Run and hide anywhere, from this monster, with an iron shackle round his ankle?

He rested his forehead against the floor. "No," and his own voice was dull. He had known that it wasn't possible – part of him had. Not possible, not at this point.

And now the tears were welling again – _god damn it_. His palms were throbbing, his coat was caught awkwardly around him and he was on his hands and knees.

Charles' mind rested on that last. _Hands and knees_ – and that settled it. He was not going to let that bastard see him on his hands and knees. Like he was asking to be fucked –

"No," he sighed again, and wobbled to his feet. He took the two steps necessary back to his bed, wincing; then flopped back down on it.

Charles pulled the covers back up and drew his knees up to his chest. At least he was slightly warmer, now – although it wouldn't last, what with his forehead already turning chilly where it was damp. He could feel the blood trickling from the weal on his ankle. Perhaps it would scab up, and then the man wouldn't notice and mock him …

Perhaps the other would do what he wanted in the darkness, and leave, and Charles would not have to see him by the light of day.

But why had he left already?

"What the hell is he doing?" His own voice was a croak.

Charles considered, briefly, sending a bird. _Raven_, perhaps. Or his owl … Or even just reaching out with his own thoughts …

But he was so tired. Tired, and hurting, and he had had enough of frantically flying for one night, for one day. For a lifetime, really. "It's not that I don't appreciate it," he whispered to himself. _Raven,
"Raven … "I do. It's just – just … sleep. All right?"

He dragged one sleeve across his eyes. "Sleep."

And – surprisingly enough, very much so, given his adrenaline and fear, and the man's being surely just one short walk from returning … Charles slept after all.

He didn't know how long he had slept. Long enough to dream? Charles was not sure. But – but for a moment … even though he knew he must be waking … he felt strange. As though he were still asleep. Dreaming he was back in Oxford …

Thinking in clichés, his mind said coldly. But perhaps it was just because of how the air was … warmer. He heard the snap and pop of a fire. And there was a glow he could only just see through his closed eyelids …

Cautiously, Charles cracked open one eye. Then the other.

So. Not a dream then. There was indeed a fire, blazing away in his fireplace. Charles blinked at it.

Blinked, and shivered, because there he was. More a dark shadow than anything human … but a shadow resting on the hearth as any human might. His face was angled away from Charles, his head and left shoulder leaning against the wall. His left leg was folded up beneath his outstretched right.

Charles watched as the man reached out to grip his right knee tightly; digging in with one thumb. Then he took another piece of wood and laid it on the fire. None too carefully, which – Charles bit his lip, waiting for the burning structure to collapse in sparks.

It didn't. Perhaps due to luck.

Or perhaps due to the fact that the thick metal bands of the grate were sliding and coiling round each other where they glowed red hot. Holding the logs in place, balancing to make sure everything burned and nothing went to waste.

Charles couldn't help it. He shivered again.

And he must have inhaled more loudly than he had thought – because the man tilted its head and looked back over his right shoulder. Not a dream, no; but not a nightmare either. Which was a shame, since … if it had been a nightmare, Charles could have woken up from it by now.

"You're awake?"

That voice sounded like gravel.

Charles bit his lip. What to say? What to do? He did not know the answer to either.

So, feeling empty, he just nodded.

A smile – the flash of those white teeth. "Good."

Then the other turned away.

Good? Good? Charles' mind echoed, gibbering. Why? Good for what? He could just sit up and shrug – nice to see you too, let's get on with it, shall we? – and strip off his coat, see if he could make the other amnesiac from shock.
His coat … Charles shifted, staring at the man's back. His coat was approaching too hot, now, the quilted hood sliding off sweat on his temples, on the nape of his neck. He flexed his fingers in his gloves. The wool itched. Charles took in a careful breath –

And almost gagged. Instinct led his eyes to the corner of his room by the door – closed again, damn it – and made note of the leather jacket, neatly folded, lying next to a pile of wood. That would explain the stench, then. The man had shed a layer, and the result was vile. When was the last time he had taken a bath?

"Yet another reason not to look forward to this," he muttered to himself.

"Hm?" That voice was still gravelly – but damned if the other didn't almost sound … sleepy.

Charles held his coat tighter. He had gotten into the habit of musing aloud, but now he had an audience. He swallowed hard. A pungent audience; ugh, was he really going to have to –

"Take your clothes off."

Charles choked. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me."

"Oh I did – I just – I just didn't quite believe you. Are you joking? It takes a lot of nerve, coming into my room and ordering me to strip without so much as an 'hello.'"

The man shifted where he sat; turned to look at Charles. "Hello."

Charles said nothing.

The other raised an eyebrow. "Guten Abend?"

"Wanker," Charles muttered to himself, but replied: "And good evening to you." He might as well use positive reinforcement – really, it could be like training a dog. And now, the most positive of said reinforcements would be to take something off, he supposed.

The thought made his stomach lurch, as the man – smiled? Was Charles really going to have to do this? Deploy fucking Pavlov, for fuck's sake?

It appeared that he was, because the bastard had fixed his eyes on him. He had forgotten how green they were. Or perhaps it was just the firelight, gleaming gold on his skin, that made the color more intense a contrast. And if green and gold could be said to look expectant … well. The man did. Expectant; hungry –

Charles heaved an annoyed sigh and sat up. He stripped off his gloves, matter-of-fact, tossed them on the floor, and flipped back the hood of his coat. He had only made it through two buttons when it registered:

The man had stopped breathing.

Charles looked up warily. Those eyes were now fixed on his face … but the other's face looked like nothing more than a rigid mask. Or a mask that blinked – once, then twice – and those lips pressed into a white line.

Whatever went through that blinking idiot's head was not his problem, so Charles worked another button free – without breaking the stare. And, oddly, the man didn't follow the movements of his
hands. Instead, he just – kept – _staring_. Staring, his fingers gripping the metal ring on his left thumb.

"What?" Charles snapped finally.

"You …" A pause. Then, low: "You're … thinner."

Charles shrugged. "So are you."

For the man was. That golden skin looked stretched taut across cheekbones; his eyes glinted from hollows in his face. And his fingers looked bony, as he made an awkward motion with his hands – and how strange, to see him move awkwardly. It had been seven weeks, but Charles remembered that much.

The man had reached for something, and was working those fingers through the twine fastening the cloth wrapping – The round thing, Charles remembered. He watched; he had to admit, he was a little curious.

So when the cloth fell away to reveal a plump loaf of bread, Charles had to swallow a rush of saliva. _Don't look at it_ – don't look too eager, too pathetic, because he wouldn't put it past the man to toss the loaf on the fire as soon as he had seen that Charles wanted it.

The other rose – those lips pressed together again – and walked the few steps to the bed. Charles gritted his teeth, fought not to flinch away. This close, the rank smell was even stronger – but the man was holding out the bread – to him. "Here."

"What?" He kept his voice flat.

"_Here._" The man shoved the bread in the direction of his face. "I brought this for you."

_Don't look at it._ "I don't want any."

"Xavier," and that voice was nothing more than a growl. "Take it and eat it."

This close, Charles could see crust flaking. He could smell honey, and – were those currants? Or dried fruit, perhaps, and there were almonds too … For an instant, he felt faint – but luckily, then he saw the black grime caked beneath the man's knuckles. It made it easier to say: "No, thank you."

The growl sharpened into something savage. Charles winced, felt his back thump into the plaster of the wall behind him before he knew to stop himself.

Silence. Then Charles just heard the soft sound of the bread being torn. He felt the light weight of a piece landing by his knee. And the other limped away, found his leather jacket – took out a bottle – _oh hello what's that?_ – and sat back down by the fireplace. Charles might have described the ensuing silence as surly, were he not occupied with shredding the piece of bread between his fingers.

The man saw him stare, he was sure. Because he lifted the bottle in one hand and shook it, just slightly. Charles heard the slosh of its contents.

"_Stolichnaya_, with all thanks to _Sovetskij Soyuz._" A dark look. "Eat that bread and I'll give you some."

Charles would not thank whoever that was, even with such a gift. "So you think you can treat me like a dog, here?"

"I think a dog would have had the guts to chew its leg off by now." The man jerked his chin towards
the foot of the bed. "Professor."

Charles fought a stinging in his eyes. "What, this old thing?" He rotated his foot, heard the chain rattle. "I'm rather attached to it, by now. We've quite moved past the opposite situation."

"I don't – I don't understand you." Green eyes squeezed shut; the man pressed his free hand to his own right knee, gripped it tightly. "Xavier. Just eat."

And the ease with which he opened the bottle of vodka one-handed spoke of long experience.

Charles took a bite of bread – and took a deep breath so he wouldn't moan at the taste of honey and raisins, and – surely it had been made with eggs. That explained the golden color. He felt an almond crunch between his teeth; took another bite, another and another. Then – oh, it seemed the bread was gone. Huh. Charles focused on working a piece of dried fruit out from between two of his teeth. The shackle had felt strange too, when he had moved his foot … he carefully reached down, and felt –

His fingers stopped on the gauze wrapped around the chafe.

Charles yanked his hand away, as if the bandage burned. And he stared.

The man had flipped the bottlecap to the floor. He was rolling it with one finger, in the space between two flagstones. Brooding. For one brief moment, Charles was reminded of nothing more than a sullen student; then he shook off the bizarre thought, made his voice sickly-sweet. "All finished."

A grunt, and the man shuffled closer to the bed, not bothering to get up. He held out the bottle. Charles took it. Then waited.

The other was still fiddling with the bottle cap.

"Do I drink this straight off, then?"

The man looked up. "Hm?"

"Is the idea to get me so blindingly drunk that I don't notice when you get around to fucking me?"

Charles spoke in a tone of polite interest; he saw the other's jaw drop. "That's what will happen if I drink straight from the bottle, you understand. And I'm afraid I won't be a party to it."

A dazed look. Then that jaw shut with an audible click. The man leaned back, reached behind him for the rest of the bread; laid it on Charles' blanket, carefully. "Eat some more."

"It dried my mouth out, you blighter. There's a cup by the sink – go fetch if you're so set on seeing me fed and watered."

The man gave him a narrow-eyed look; Charles felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. Playing with fire, his mind whispered. Playing with fire …

He had done so before, taunting the other with T-shirt and sweater. Before having his tooth ripped out. The want had been thick as smog, then … Charles carefully checked the dampers on all of his power, his senses. He was not even going to think about gauging what the man was feeling. Or glimpsing whatever was going on in that sword-and-slaughter circus act that passed for his mind.

They were still staring at each other.

Then Charles saw the man give a faint quirk of a smile. He tipped his head to one side, reached into
a pocket, and pulled out random bits and pieces of metal. Screws, a bolt and two washers …

The man cupped his palms and tilted his head down.

And Charles almost forgot to breathe as he saw metal, shimmering, rise up from the man's hands and fold in on itself. Twisting and twining, one paper-thin leaf over the other, until what could have been a lotus flower made of steel resolved itself into a shining cup. Albeit a cup with no handles.

The man considered it for a moment.

Then he held out the cup, balancing it on the fingertips of his right hand.

Charles knew he was staring. He blinked, and carefully shut his mouth. Then he plucked the cup from the man's fingers, as though he saw miracles of metalworking every day. Not thinking of how he had felt just the smallest resistance when he pulled at the metal – as though he were opening a door to a long-forgotten room.

"You should have been a jeweler," Charles said, casually, before pouring himself a shot and knocking it back.

The man smiled thinly. "Perhaps in another life."

But Charles hardly heard. The alcohol had sizzled straight to his gut; he squeezed his eyes shut, blinked them back open and shivered. "Well. That's – strong."

"Mmm."

"I suppose the Russians brought it?"

The man quirked an eyebrow. "What did I just tell you?"

"Angel told me first. And she said they might bring it."

"Ah."

Charles took another sip before his skin prickled in warning. The man's eyes were hooded, glinting green … staring at him again. He bit the inside of his cheek. Anything, to get that stare to move away. Charles tipped some more vodka into the cup – held it out. "Here."

The man looked blank.

"Here." Charles tilted the cup back and forth – not enough to spill; that would be a shame. "We're being civilized. Remember? Now you get to drink some, too."

And to his credit, the other barely hesitated before plucking the metal from Charles' hand. He drank. Then gave the cup back.

With a shrug, Charles poured out some more. Tending bar. He could tend bar. He had never gotten the job himself, back at Oxford – the others, and their nattering on about his lack of self-control. Hmph. If they could see him now: the picture of self-control, passing a drink back and forth with the sword-wielding equivalent of an axe murderer. And not flinching. Well. Perhaps the man had an axe. He might ask, some day.

He drank, and passed the cup again. This time the man held onto it, then frowned. Angled it better in the firelight, and touched his finger to one side. Charles saw a bump in the metal smooth out.
"Show-off."

*Oh dear.* He hadn't intended his voice to sound that warm. Perhaps it had been the alcohol. Whatever the reason, the man looked back round at him, eyes wide, almost luminous.

But there was nothing luminous about the other's voice. It sounded like the gravel had been resurfaced with black tar. "Don't tell me you're drunk already."

"I'm not." Charles reached out for the cup, but the bastard was holding on to it. He clenched his fingers tighter, and pulled. The man did not yield; those eyes looked strangely lit – glittering – Charles tried digging his fingernails into the back of the other's hand –

He heard the other make a queer grunting sound – then there was a growl, and *oh shite*, touching him had been perhaps a bit of a mistake, because Charles' wrist was caught by one strong hand, and even though the man's other hand had yielded the cup, his own fingers were trembling, strangely, and the metal tipped, spilling, and he heard the clank as it dropped to the floor. And he was going to sigh at the waste of alcohol after all – he could feel the chill of the vodka on his fingers – except *fuck* the man had slanted one look at him, and had caught his elbow with the hand that had held the cup, and Charles couldn't move as the other started lapping at the puddle of vodka in his palm.

"God damn it," he hissed, and: "Stop that."

The man ignored him.

"Stop." Charles swatted at his head. The close-cropped hair felt clumped beneath his fingertips. "Oi – bad. Don't do that."

But the other growled, and that strong grip on Charles' wrist tightened, the hand at his elbow flexed, and before he knew it he had lurched forward, being pulled – and the man's breath was hot at the corner of his jaw.

Charles was not whimpering. *No*, because that would require breathing, and he must have been willfully ignoring the smell all this time, because there it was. Right there, practically unfolding into his nostrils. *Ugh.*

Perhaps it was because of how warm the other was. Even with the fire blazing away, and the chill of the room long gone, those strong fingers were hot where they curled around the bones of his wrist and elbow, and those lips were hot against the hollow of his cheekbone. And it seemed someone had set fire to the black tar in the other's voice – *tar was flammable, wasn't it?* – because he was nuzzling Charles' cheek, and whispering: "Can I – will you let me –"

And there was that tongue, daubing down the line of Charles' jaw, and what a pity another mutant had lent him a razor not three days ago, because otherwise the man might have been deterred – but the words were *wet* and hot when the whisper came again.

"… Can I?"

"May. I." Charles snapped.

A puff – confused? – against his jaw; Charles used the moment of distraction to yank his arm and hand away. The strange warm buzzing feeling had evaporated; he felt ill. "It's *may* I. And – and don't pretend to be asking me."

He drew in a ragged breath. "This is a transaction. A deal – nothing more. You made a promise; so did I. So I want to know if you kept your end of the bargain before I do anything. Before I –" he
choked; swallowed hard – "before I let you do anything."

The man was backlit by the fire. His features were shadowed … but Charles felt those eyes on him like weights. He shuddered. "Are they safe?"

The other nodded.

"Damn you." Charles crossed his arms over his chest. The fabric of his coat felt oppressive. "I'll believe it when I see it."

"Shall I fetch them for you? Bring them here?" The man eased forward from the shadows; his eyes gleamed. "You could ask after their health. It would be civilized. Hm?"

Charles hissed at him. "No. I'll find them myself. And while I'm doing that –" hurt him, his mind urged, hurt him – "you go wash. With soap."

The man blinked. "What?"

"Wash yourself, for the love of god."

"… Why?"

"Because," Charles said with mock patience. "You. Reek. When was the last time you even touched hot water?"

The man glowered at him. Then, defiantly, he snuffled at himself. "What's wrong with the way –"

"It's disgusting. I don't know if it's the smoke, or the rot or the blood or what, but I won't have it."

The man's glare had intensified. "I smell like myself, Xavier –"

"No," Charles interrupted, lip curling. "You smell like a battlefield."

"I …"

The rasp of that voice trailed away into nothing.

Charles, watching, felt an odd twinge of – something – as the other brought the back of one hand to his own nose. And sniffed.

Then the man shrugged, jaw set. "So what?"

Time to try another tack. Charles lowered his voice. "I'll show you, shall I? Come here."

The other stayed put, where he was kneeling. His eyes had gone wide.

"Come here …" He gave in to temptation, wove into his voice just the most delicate golden thread of obey me obey me do as I say –


Another pause. Then the man inched forward.

"Closer." Charles gave him a warm smile. "Come on."
Pavlov, he reminded himself, coldly. Classical conditioning. This thing can be taught.

And he kept the motion of his hand graceful – watch my wrist – see how beautiful? – as he reached out and slid a hand down into the man's turtleneck. He trailed his fingertips along muscle gone rigid, then fixed the other with a languid look.

"Do you feel that?"

The man's eyes were, impossibly, even wider. He swallowed – Charles felt the movement of his throat beneath his thumb.

"Do you feel how my hand catches? How your skin is … sticky?"

Because it was, Charles realized with distaste. He gave into impulse, bent his fingers and set his fingernails just slightly against the trapezius. And scratched – just a bit, but enough to make the man suck in a breath, which … well. There was no accounting for taste.

Matter-of-fact, he brought his hand back out. Noted the grime beneath all of his nails – and placed them right in front of the other's face.

"See that? That's been accumulating for weeks, hm?"

A long pause. Those pupils, Charles noted, distantly, were wide and black. Then the man nodded again.

He sighed to himself. Lesson plan, part two. Charles flicked open the rest of the buttons of his coat, and eased out of it. The relief from the heat was welcome. He avoided the man's eyes as he casually tossed the manteau in the direction of the wardrobe. Then he tugged his sweater down over his shoulder – easily enough, given the rent at its neck. I'll mend that with the sewing kit. Pulling down the T-shirt beneath it was more difficult – but finally he had his left shoulder bared, and he tipped his head at the man.

"Feel that."

The other was just – staring. He looked up into Charles' face.

"Go on." Charles gritted his teeth. "Feel. Right there, right where I felt you."

A hesitant movement. Then the click of the other's throat as he swallowed hard, and Charles felt rough calluses brush over his own skin. He bit down on the inside of his mouth; kept his eyes half-lidded. The man's touch was tentative. As though he were touching a pet – a cat, perhaps – and had never expected it to be soft.

"Feel how that's different?"

Another swallow. "I …"

And it was time to make the lesson – concrete. With one smooth motion, Charles grabbed the man by the back of his neck and pulled him close. Pressed his face right against the part of his collarbone that he could see, pale in the firelight, a sharp line disappearing beneath his blue sweater. "Smell how it's different?"

He could feel how the man was panting against his skin. "Go on," Charles said, making his voice throaty. Hopefully the other could feel the words vibrate. "Smell."
A deep breath, hot and damp against his neck, as the man did so. Charles could feel the blood thudding in his jugular. He was detached, though. He was in control. It helped that the man was nosing at his skin like a dog might – and that that same nose was, hilariously, cold at the tip. That had often been the case in Oxford, on winter nights. It was odd this time, given the amount of alcohol they had both consumed ... but so oddly ordinary –

Except then the man set those teeth against Charles' trapezius, gently – and – oh fuck me – bit down slowly and started tonguing at the flesh, fucking tasting him and that was why this was anything but ordinary. Because you're about to shag some hideously violent creature – with a fondness, Charles remembered, dizzy, for swords and strangulation, for his eyes and his blood – fuck –

"Oi! No biting -" And he shoved at the man's short-cropped hair. "Get off."

The other drew back instantly.

Charles heard his own breath, ragged in his chest. "Or –" because it was bloody likely that the bastard would want it, what with those frightful teeth – "you have to ask before you bite. Understand?"

Those eyes, staring at him, were glittering in the firelight. Watchful ... eager? Fuck if he knew, or cared, but he had to make the point absolutely clear. Charles licked his lips; a mistake, since that gaze locked on his mouth in an instant. Sod him. But - repetition. Comprehension. Small words, to start.

"You have to ask. Do you understand?"

The man nodded.

"Right." Charles tugged his sweater back up. "Good."

But he froze, as that voice rasped: "Can I bite you?"

Charles felt his jaw sag. "What – right now?"

The other nodded again, fervently.


And Charles felt a prickle of astonishment, despite everything, as the man obeyed without a word.

The astonishment sharpened into queasiness when he realized: the other was limping towards the bathroom, yes, but shucking off his clothing as he went. Was it too much to hope he would get stuck in his own turtleneck? Apparently so, because the door opened – metal handle that's right – and he made it past the doorframe without clocking his head.

"Oh god," Charles said, faintly. Because – did the man have so sense of privacy whatsoever? The door was open, and he was taking off all of his clothes – pausing to fold them – and even though it was dark, Charles saw traces of firelight gleam on the lines of that silhouette, and he jerked his eyes away and stared determinedly at the ceiling.

His mouth had gone dry.

"Right." He reached out blindly for the vodka. Felt for the metal cup, gave up, and took a drink straight from the bottle.
Charles heard a clank. "That's right," he said to the ceiling. "The pipes are still frozen. Ha." He took cold comfort in it – the man would have to wring out a freezing washcloth on himself once a minute for the next hour – but then yelped as sudden heat pulsed through the shackle on his ankle, through the bedframe.

The pipes. The metal pipes – the fucker was thawing them with his power. And apparently lacked the self-control to keep it localized. "You want to set my bed on fire?" he snapped in the direction of the bathroom. "Bloody well be careful, you idiot."

The strange heat in the metal close to him died away. And then Charles could only stare up at the ceiling, grinding his teeth, as he heard water start running.

He wished he could wash the grime from beneath his fingernails. He settled for splashing vodka over them, uncaring if he spilled. Charles scrubbed a bit. Then he set the bottle back down on the floor without looking. Brought his hands back to his chest – oh – a brush of his fingertips against the crust of – the rest of that bread – and Charles' stomach roared at him, and he was tearing off a piece and shoving it into his mouth before he could think twice. It was just as delicious as before. He ate another piece. More delicious – his eyes were stinging – because he was somehow even hungrier … and perhaps this would soak up the alcohol.

Before he knew it, the bread was gone. Charles hiccupped. Then reached for the bottle again, took another sip of vodka to clear his palate – just out of consideration –

"… Consideration?" His voice cracked. "For that thing? God damn it."

The sound of water had stopped. He didn't want to think about it. Instead, Charles ground the heels of his hands into his eyes and called up his raven.

"Fly," he gasped. "Find them –"

The raven was wild-eyed, calling out into the night. And flying so fast, that before Charles knew it he was at the stadium – all of its mutant minds burning like the fires set in the stands. His raven shot past Angel – Bobby John Sean – he had to search longer to find the others, but there was – "there you are – hello," he croaked, because it was Ororo… her mind burning with a pure white flame … Hank, drowsing, and Alex … Alex decidedly not drowsing, and Charles choked and sent his raven away. For you, he wanted to snarl. He heard Raven crying out. For you I'm doing this – giving himself to a hideous monster – and none of you knows, none of you will ever know, and that was the way he wanted it, yes, but at the same time it made him want to howl.

All of the minds like fires in the winter darkness … Raven arched away from them all and flew high into the stars. And if he could, Charles would keep flying forever. Forever, and away from what was waiting for him, because –

– because now things would change. As much as he told himself differently – as much as he let his Oxford self smile deprecatingly – it's just sex old boy, and stop bloody panicking, you're being a bore. There was something about what was waiting for him in his room – kneeling by his bed and watching him, he just knew it.

There was something about the man, about that obsession, that made Charles think: after this, things would change. But what could he have done differently? How could he have avoided it? Looking back, he could see obvious turning points, but other smaller events – some no more than choices that had seemed so insignificant at the time … How could he have known?
And now he was in a cave with a dragon – and those teeth and those eyes made him think that the monster saw him as a new and most wondrous treasure for its hoard: one to be kept secluded and secret; one to be gloatingly caressed; one to be tasted with a flick of a poisonous tongue …

One to be kept forever …

The winter sky was so dark. He could not see his raven. But – oh – Charles felt his energy flagging, and so he searched the stars. There. Flying through the constellations …

There was the Hunter, in the sky; there were the Bears and the Bull and the Seven Sisters. Charles saw starlight glint silver off his own armor, before he closed his eyes. Before he stretched out a hand.

"Come," he said. "I keep my word."

And his raven flew to him. Vanished into his mind –

Stay there, he told it. Sleep well. Tell them all to sleep, and … and not see.

And Charles exhaled slowly, and opened his eyes.

He sighed into the darkness of his room. It was very warm.

Even with the warmth, though, he felt the heat of the man's body – from where the other was kneeling at the side of the bed. So close… Resting his forearms on the blanket, holding his elbows in the palms of his hands.

Staring at Charles.

Charles stared back. The hideous monster …

Well. He blinked. Perhaps not that hideous.

The memories were there – seeing the man's bare chest before, when the other had sneered - your attention, Xavier, and: up here. Then they had kissed, yes, and the man had ripped out his filling. Huh. Bloody and tearful as they were … those memories felt strangely removed, now.

Perhaps because it was so easy to lie still, blinking almost drowsily, and look. At the lines of shoulder, muscle and bone, edged golden in the firelight. At the faint scars that he remembered – and at the tattoos. He could only just see the edge of one, on the man's left shoulder.

"What's that?" Charles propped himself up on one elbow, and watched his own hand move to touch the man there.

Green eyes shut, slowly; the line of jaw, already taut, clenched tighter. Then the man opened his eyes again and turned, just slightly, so Charles could see.

Charles lay back, looking.

It was a lion. Rather crudely done, but with a stark power to it. Surrounding it were lines of a foreign script – the whole thing in a block. He frowned. What was it? Not Cyrillic, no – though there were a few lines of that somewhere else on the man's torso, he remembered. Lower down than he could see, given the bed. Charles dragged his mind away from the whole concept of lower down and focused on the script.

Ah. Of course. Hebrew.
Charles made a note to ask about it. He moved his gaze from the tattoo – only to find the man staring at him in equal, if not more, fascination. All the while touching the ring on his left thumb.

"Did you find them?"

Charles shifted where he lay. Tucked a fold of blanket closer to his chin. "Mm-hm."

"And how did you find them?"

That voice was quiet. Charles shivered and made his own words curt. "With my mind. How else do you think -"

"No." A glint of teeth. "Did you find them in good health?"

Charles sighed. "Yes. They're fine." He curled his lip at the man, tiredly. "Well done."

Green eyes widened. Charles tensed as the other reached out -

Only to stop, mid-gesture.

"May I?"

"'May you' what?"

"Your hair." The man's eyes glowed: emeralds set in gold. "It's grown longer."

"Hair does tend to do that." Charles tipped his head to one side. "Go ahead."

Water had beaded on the man's forearms; drops of liquid gold in the firelight. He traced his fingers through a lock of hair that fell sweaty on Charles' brow.

His touch was very warm.

Charles closed his eyes; half-smiled despite himself. Despite everything. "You did that before."

"Hm?" The man's voice had gone to gravel again.

"That touch." All of his panic and fear had leached away, somehow. Perhaps his raven had taken them, flown them down to the depths of his own mind. "Don't you remember? You chased me from the library …"

"Ach so." A low whisper; it felt like sandpaper on his skin. "You left a blood trail."

Charles sighed. "Charming of you to remember that part of it, I'm sure."

The man said nothing. Merely tilted his head to one side, moved his hand down – Charles flinched slightly – but he was only brushing breadcrumbs off the pillow, keeping his movements slow and careful. Well. Brushing crumbs, but dabbing at one larger fragment and bringing it to his mouth. An eyebrow arched.

"You were hungry after all? For the rest of it?"

"I suppose so."

The smallest quirk of a smile – it made the scar stand out in white relief, between the man's mouth and nose. More of an absence of stubble, though, Charles thought. Just as it had been the night
before the battle …

"Good, wasn't it?" The man's voice was low, soothing. "They make it in your - Russia. Rossiyskaya Imperiya."

Charles swallowed. "Ah."

There was a long pause.

Then the man moved his hand again. Deliberately placed it at the blanket's edge. And looked at Charles.

Charles looked back, coldly. He was not going to … to offer, or anything. He had done that already. He'd be damned if he did it again.

Far better to wait for the look in the man's eyes to become somehow even more intense. To wait for him to pluck at the edge of the blanket and whisper: "May I?"

But even so …

Charles had to swallow hard and look away. He could feel his pulse thumping at his temples. Then he flicked his eyes back to the man – who, it seemed, hadn't even blinked. Who was just waiting, staring, before asking again: "… May I?"

He dredged the words out of his throat. "Don't pretend to be asking me. This is a deal – our transaction, nothing more."

"Yes, but –" and the man's whisper was almost inaudible, "but – may I?"

Charles stared up at the ceiling. Then he set his jaw. "Fine." He caught hold of the blankets. "You want to delude yourself? Be my guest."

He tugged the covers back and moved over. "Yes, you may."

Whether in Oxford or America that was; in academia or the EBS; with a friendly coworker or a crazed killing machine – some things, Charles noted, distantly, really never changed.

Namely: the jostling that had to happen when a bed was slightly too narrow for two people. Yes, he was starved to a shadow and the man almost so – and the other had the build of a greyhound, anyway. But the adjustments for space were trickier when one of the two was trembling like he was in a fever. Charles, needless to say, was not that one. He was absolutely in control. Perfectly so. He had managed with far less space before.

He slid until he felt his sweater brush plaster, then tugged enough blankets over to cover his back. It would not do to set a precedent of yielding too much. Especially bedclothes, most especially in winter. And that brought back a slew of Oxford memories. In bed at midwinter with a fire roaring away was well enough, but still: every adjustment would mean a nip of cold air on skin. And … skin … there were the recollections of when one was dry and the other damp from a bath; when one was warm and the other chilly … when one was mostly clothed, still, and the other was – oh god – the man was stark naked, wasn't he? How interesting, Charles' mind said to him, faintly; you've never seen him naked before. And he couldn't see him now, Charles sniped back; really, there was just warm darkness and the other was too close to see, edging closer and closer, and –

And then there was a hand brushing over Charles' shoulder, touching his sweater. Charles felt those
calluses snag on the soft knit.

"May I?"

Charles rolled his eyes. The constant queries would get very tedious, very quickly. So he exhaled long and throatily and reached out, twining his arms around the other's shoulders.

The man quivered under his touch, like a thoroughbred ready to race.

Charles spoke softly to him. "Right. A few rules. Are you listening?"

He listened – and only heard ragged breaths. Heard and felt them, warm on his face. So Charles sighed to himself and continued: "As far as 'may I' goes? Ask me once, at the beginning. And ask me – this is important. Pay attention."

Because the other's breathing had come completely undone; he sounded as though he were having some sort of attack. Charles placed a firm hand on the back of the man's neck; squeezed. "Are you listening?"

He felt a nod.

So Charles continued. "Ask me before you do things you've thought of that might – that might hurt. Always ask. 'May I bite you?' 'May I pull out another of those lovely teeth?' 'May I chain you up and strangle you again?' Et cetera. And – the most important part is … Listen to this. You need to understand this."

Charles tightened his grip on the man's nape. Shook slightly. "If I say 'no' – to anything – you stop. Understand?"

He waited.

Then he felt another nod, shaky.

"Say it," Charles snapped.

"Y-yes."

"'Yes' what?"

"Yes - I –" a gasp for air; the man sounded incoherent. But: "I understand," he said.

Charles sighed. "Fine."

There was a pause. He blinked, shifting where he lay. Odd. The bed had gone from middling-of-the-road warm – which had been nice enough, after the frigid chill of most of the day – anyway, it had gone from warm to hot as a god damned oven. The man put out heat like a bloody furnace. Except –

Charles exhaled: half laugh, half sigh. Some things never changed, anywhere in the world it seemed. Matter-of-fact, he placed his feet on the man's feet – they were cold, but at least the other didn't have a chain that clanked. Charles rolled his eyes; it was really too ridiculously Gothic, but –

His mind stopped in its tracks as he felt the man tug at the hem of his blue sweater.

"… May I?"

"Shite – did you understand a single thing I said?"
Irritably, Charles released the man's neck, batted away his hands and half sat up to strip off sweater and shirts. Then he tossed them towards the wardrobe and yanked the covers back up, shivering, because the body became accustomed to certain things quite quickly, it seemed – and exceptional heat seemed one such thing. "If you keep on with 'may I' this, and 'may I' that, we'll be here all night."

He felt the man's breath hitch.

Then … oh god, those eyes were staring at him. Charles felt the hairs on the back of his own neck stand on end.

And the other's voice was a rasp in the darkness.

"… All night."

And then Charles only had time to yelp once before the man grabbed him, and – "mmpf," he tried to say something, but the other had already crushed their mouths together, and then those arms locked around him like a vise, and he was being pushed back, pushed down – he gasped, and the man took the opportunity to shove his tongue into Charles' mouth and start the wettest, filthiest kiss he had in …

Charles moaned. Tried to remember –

But the catalogue had ground to a halt. His mind was … well. It was sitting there, eyes round, jaw slightly ajar. If a mind could have eyes. Or a jaw. He had both – his eyes were blue, the man seemed to like them – but no matter how blue, Charles had screwed them shut as soon as the man started sucking on his tongue, and nipping at it, sharp small bites. There was something Charles had told him, something important, but … but his jaw – oh – his jaw was starting to ache already, because the other had set his own mouth at an angle to get in even deeper, and really, that just wasn't on, because if things got dislocated this early, then where would they be?

Those teeth must have caught the inside of his lip, because suddenly Charles tasted blood.

And the taste brought a certain memory to the fore with a smack – blood, when the man had pulled out his filling … He winced, stiffened, started to struggle – but the man only tightened his grip. So it took a glancing touch of Charles' hands, pressed between their bodies, to the planes of the man's abdomen … he flattened his palms and dragged them up, and the man broke off the kiss to gasp -

Quick as a wink, Charles wrested a hand loose and slapped it over the other's mouth. "What did I tell you?"

He felt a growl, low and urgent, vibrating against his fingers. Charles ignored it, his heart hammering. His tongue felt oddly thick; it was difficult to speak. "I told you: ask before you bite."

The man hissed hot against his palm, and bit at one of his fingers.

"No," Charles snapped, and grabbed the back of the other's neck again, with his free hand. He tugged at the short hairs at the base of the skull. "You understand?"

Even going motionless, the other seemed to thrum with energy, like a live wire. Those eyes glittered, so close to Charles' own. Then that mouth moved again, this time lipping at the same finger. Tracing that tongue over it –

"Hnh." Charles swallowed. "That's better."
The man's lashes fluttered down – they looked dark and soft, from a mere hands-breadth away. He broke off licking and instead rubbed one side of his face against Charles' hand. *Like a cat,* Charles thought, absurdly. The stubble on the man's jaw and chin caught, scratching back and forth.

Then Charles felt something tug at the cuff of his sweatpants. He jerked away from the man. And stared. Both of the other's hands were still tight on his back, where they had grabbed. So what on earth was -

*Oh god.* It was a tendril that had somehow grown from his shackle, spiraling up and twining round fabric, pulling down.

"Stop what you're doing with that metal."

"Why?"

"Because I said so." Charles kept his voice firm, ignoring how his mind had gone off into hysteria. The things the other could do with metal ... He blinked at a sudden flash of inspiration. "And one final rule."

A growl, hot against his palm.

But Charles caressed the man's mouth and cheekbone, with one warm brush of hand and fingers. Kept his voice low, smoky. "No powers in bed."

A pause. "Why not?"

"Bad experiences on both sides, I'd say." Charles leaned in, brushed a kiss over the man's opposite cheekbone. The other's breath stuttered to a halt; he could feel it. And the scratch of the stubble against his lips. "We'll have to do things the old-fashioned way, hm?"

"Then ..." And the man's voice rasped against Charles' fingers. "Then - finish that." One strong hand moved unerringly down his back, rested on the waistband of his sweatpants. "Take them off for me."


Matter-of-fact, he took his right hand from the back of the man's neck, tugged the sweatpants and his briefs down as far as he could reach without - without moving his mouth any lower than the other's nipples, and - *oh, that's right ... He had liked that* - Had liked it before he ripped the filling out, of course, but as Charles wriggled out of the rest of his clothes, rolling his eyes while using his left foot to shove everything as far down the chain as it could go - *can't get it all off* - he thought to distract the man by licking a nipple and - *oh that did it* - the other gasped, and shoved his face into Charles' hand.

Right. He didn't want to think about how they were both naked, now, completely naked oh god, so Charles thought instead about how the other really was quite sensitive to touch. It would have been amusing, in any other situation - as it was, he supposed it was good to know. Charles started stroking with his fingers, up and down the man's side, then resting beneath his ribcage. Those ribs were prominent, he realized, frowning – and then grimaced to himself. Really? He, Charles, was still the thinner one. *The thinner winner,* he thought, snide; but focused on petting the man's skin – over his side and down his back.

The other made a strange drugged sound. Half a moan, half a sigh. Completely incoherent.

Charles darted a look back at that face. Those lips had fallen away from his own hand; he could see how they were slick with saliva, gleaming in the dim firelight. The man was breathing heavily
through his mouth – and only from a touch, Charles' mind whispered, avidly, and what would he do if …

"Let's find out," Charles murmured.

"Wha – oh," and the groan from the other sounded almost inhuman, as Charles pressed close and slid his free hand over the lines and planes of muscle and bone in that back, then down … until he was palming the warmth of that arse.

"Well well," he whispered into the man's ear. "Very nice. Has no one ever touched you here before?" He squeezed. "Like this? Hm?"

An incoherent mumble against his palm, where he had pressed his hand tight over the other's mouth again. Everything was hot and – and damp under the covers, and he felt his stomach clench, and the slow burn of – fine he would admit it – of lust licked up through his gut and curled its white-hot fingers through his own mind … made him get even harder and – huh – because it had been a while, but he hadn't remembered feeling like –

"How interesting," Charles flicked his tongue against the shell of that ear. He almost laughed at the man's choked whimper. "So what would you do if I …"

And he undulated closer, digging his fingers in and tugging, until he was rubbing his thigh up against what he had only just felt grinding against his hip when the man had first pounced on him …

Really, though, there were no euphemisms necessary. He was accustomed to this sort of thing. No, the Oxford Casanova would never shy away from saying that … truly? He was slowly dragging his thigh over one of the loveliest cocks that he had ever felt. Seen? No: felt. The two-month-old memory of the sight had started to fade; just as well, he thought, that he, Charles, had a refresher, close to hand –

_Mmm._ He slid exploring fingers over the sharp bone of one hip, and further over and ... around - and: _oh._ Charles sighed. All too familiar. It wasn't fair. He himself was hard, admittedly, but the other was ready to go off like a god damned shot, if the hot leaking into his cupped palm and the man's own garbled words buzzing against Charles' hand were anything by which to judge.

And it seemed that he didn't have to worry about being hurt, either, because the tosser wasn't going to last long enough to get that cock anywhere near his arse. _Oh well._ Charles pressed his lips together, thinking – as he started to stroke, as the man gasped and shoved his hips forward. Really: _oh, well?_ What was there to regret? If this eternal adolescent never did develop any ability to curb himself, then he, Charles, would be relatively pain-free for the rest of ...

How long was this – arrangement – going to last, anyway?

Charles had the question on the tip of his tongue. Then he looked back into the other's eyes … only to see that any hint of intelligence had evaporated in the heat of _lust-prey_-mine.

_Ask him later_, he decided. Charles took his hand away from the man's mouth and gripped the muscle of that right shoulder, tightly. Sped up his strokes, except – there was friction, and really, things weren't quite slick enough …

So he slid his left hand to the man's sternum and pushed. The skin there was stretched tight over bone – so _hot_ – and the other flopped back onto the mattress, staring up at Charles, sucking in breath –
"Stay still," Charles ordered, and straddled the man's knees. He tugged the blankets up over their shoulders, just so he could keep from letting cold air in. Then he looked the man deliberately in the eye, smiled what he knew was a feral smile, licked his own fingers and spat into his cupped palm. Just until he had enough.

"Hold on tight, if you need to."

Strong hands clawed at his waist as the man tried to sit up – god – and Charles felt his lips drawing back from his own teeth as he shoved the other flat on his back, and focused on jerking him off as quickly as he could.

The other's growls and snarls rapidly devolved into gasping gibberish. But then the man stared up into his eyes, flung one arm around Charles' neck and dragged him down into a kiss that was somehow both wet and red hot, and how was he even able to kiss back, as he was, ravenously, if his throat were this parched? Solution for next time, his brain offered: Suck him off again. That was delicious ...

"Ah," a moan into the other's mouth, and: next time, next time, to himself … But now - god, things were tumbling towards their conclusion like a freight train off a cliff, as the man threw back his head with one last rattling gasp – and Charles couldn't help himself; he licked up the long line of that throat as the other gave a wrenched groan … and came.

It took a while.

Damn it.

Charles sighed again. He had been pressed close to the man when he finished. This time he had hoped to avoid getting covered in come. No such luck, it would seem.

The other was still kissing him, making soft animal sounds in the back of his throat. He pulled Charles even closer, arms tightening, and Charles fought for breath.

"Um. We're going to – to end up stuck together." He coughed, cleared his throat. "If you do that."

Another incoherent mumble – and …

Mother fucker.

The bastard was falling asleep.

"Oi," Charles hissed. He gripped one of those muscled shoulders, only dimly saw his fingers dig into the lion tattoo. Shook. "You can't just leave me hanging like this –"

But there was only soft, warm breath – gentle against his own mouth – in reply.

With a curse, Charles wiggled as much as he could in the tight grasp of the man's arms, until he made it to the other's right side, still pressed close. It would not do to stay draped on top of him. Charles shifted, trying to make himself comfortable – failing. Even though there was skin warm beneath his lips – the other shoulder. He flicked his tongue over it. No tattoo there.

He glowered into the darkness. If he were any less self-controlled, he would have to start grinding his teeth … because this was the third time he hadn't come. Well. The second, since he did not really care to count the time with the tooth. But this time he was …

Charles exhaled against the man's neck. Son of a bitch. This time he was hard enough to hurt,
because it had been too god damned long.

He sighed again, into skin. Sniffed deliberately, to distract himself. That smell, now … that smell was. Hm. It was interesting. Everything was so warm that it made the scent more pronounced – soap, yes, Charles' own soap – thank god for that, his mind muttered … but there was something, even beneath the sweat and the come that Charles knew was going to reek by morning …

Beneath that, though, there was … he dragged in a breath. Exhaled. That musk, the pronounced scent he remembered, from when he had sucked the man off … He swallowed again against the saliva pooling in his mouth. Ran one exploring hand over the elegant lines of neck and collarbone, over the man's deltoid opposite, pectoral – he catalogued – biceps, curling fingers round to try and reach the triceps, and they all felt packed close and dense, even when relaxed …

Charles ran his fingers down the other's forearm – tracing another sort of map, really, when one thought about it. He breathed out a quiet laugh to himself. Not a map that he would color on paper and leave for a fellow student to find. Charles trailed his fingers over the bumps of ribs, back to the sternum, then down. He hadn't felt an abdomen like this in – well. Had he ever?

Yes, his mind pointed out. When you sucked him off. He had run his flat palms up and down the man's sides, like petting a cat … and he had felt the tight lines of these muscles then, too …

Charles considered. This was the third – no, second – time now, that the man had not lasted longer than five minutes. All things considered, it was somewhat pathetic. Or … Clumsy, perhaps. Not memorable. No, the man was not memorable in that sense, compared to almost all of Charles' previous lovers. But …

Pressed up against the man, Charles felt his own shallow sips of breath.

He supposed, if pressed to answer, if asked for the truth ... Perhaps to get out of the penalty in a drinking game, or something like that, he might admit to considering that – well. Compared to those previous, in Oxford or Cambridge, or at conferences in Brussels. And even with absolutely no staying power …

Charles was mature. He was experienced. He could admit it, and stay in complete control of himself. Fine.

It was possible that - the man had a … memorable. Memorable body.

Maybe.

But given enough time, back in Oxford, Charles was sure he could find someone similar. There had been considerable excitement about the Olympics being reinstated some summer in the near future, so when he returned he could find the fencers for the Kingdom of Britain and work his way through the team.

Charles breathed out another quiet laugh. Then he stiffened, as those arms tightened where they still held him. But the man didn't make a sound. Actually … Charles blinked, flattened his hand over the man's ribcage. He felt – and heard, now that he thought about it – a bit of a rumble to the other's breathing. Since it was too much to hope for the rattle of a collapsed lung, perhaps the sound would be better described as …

… as a purr.

Thank god the blighter didn't snore. Bad enough that he had fallen asleep –
Charles squirmed again. It wasn't fair, because his own cock – fine, he would admit it – ached, and he needed ... Gritting his teeth, he pressed as close as he could. Rested his forehead against the sharp line of jaw. The man seemed near unconscious; certainly in no position to do anything about … about ...

Without thinking about it – except: control, and you can stop any time you want – Charles started rocking against the muscle of that right leg. And it was all muscle, all hard as iron, so it was easy enough to find – resistance, friction, and Charles wanted to move faster, and did, and felt his breath speeding up. Keep it controlled. His mind was cool and collected. Get it over with quickly and at least you'll sleep well.

"God," he whispered under his breath, and thought to loosen his grip on the man's chest, where his fingers had tightened out of instinct. It wouldn't do to wake him.

And really, Charles thought, he should have known a jinx when he thought it.

Because the other's breathing hardly hitched before he inhaled, and those arms coiled tight, and with only one mumble, under his breath, the man tilted his body just so, angling so that – if Charles were to continue, which he wasn't, he would be grinding right against the other's cock.

Charles hissed as the man made one slithering, dragging counter-move, pressing closer. Then the man tongued down Charles' temple to his ear, kissed at it, and started – oh shite – It was too polite to call it a nip. The idiot was gnawing at his earlobe.

And then he took one arm away, moved a hand and grabbed at Charles' cock, and even though it was completely inexpert – and a killer grip, come to think of it – come I'm going to –

"Oh god," he mumbled, smashed flat against the man's sweat-slick skin. No, no, he was in control, he was –

And with a shudder, moaning, Charles choked at the rasp of calluses on his cock, and came straight into that hand. He felt the other's breath hitch again – surprise, perhaps, or – or just curiosity, because if one had never had another do that, the sensations could be new and interesting – the heat and slickness, and Charles could hardly remember what it had been like the first time, himself –

His thoughts ground to a halt. That mouth had left his ear, and –

And Charles stared.

Whatever his own first successful handjob had been like, he was certain that it had not involved licking the come out from between his own fingers.

There seemed to be quite a bit of it. Huh. Perhaps he hadn't been as dehydrated as he thought. No getting away from the image, though: the come had caught in sticky strands and the man was licking it up. Charles felt his jaw sag. Mother of god. The curling of that tongue, the low sounds of – enjoyment? Those jewel-green eyes, slitted almost shut, but glinting …

It was one of the filthiest things he had ever seen.

And that was impressive, because he had seen quite a bit. Somehow, impossibly, Charles felt his own cock twitch. Ngh -

Then the man grinned at him and Charles' stomach lurched. The other curled close, drawing that hand – at least it's somewhat clean now, joy – over Charles' back, then stroking warm and firm up
his arm to take tight hold of his shoulder.

When the man brushed his lips across his, Charles had no hesitation about deepening the kiss. None whatsoever. And if he had, they would not have been about the taste of his own come – it took more than that to disconcert him – but instead, perhaps ... about his slight discomposure. Uncertainty. What would the other do next? What if he –

Lean legs twined around Charles' own. Well. The man wasn't completely hard again, not yet; that was good, that meant that perhaps Charles could just go to sleep and nothing too painful would –

"May I bite you now?"

"What?"

"May I bite you?"

The whisper was a rasp in the dark, warm against his own mouth.

A pause. "Please?"

A … polite rasp.

_Oh god._ Charles started to shiver; the man tightened his arms. It was warm. Everything was warm from their bodies, and sticky, and – and perhaps if he let the other do this one thing, then he could get some rest. _This is insane. You're insane_, but: "If I let you, you have to let me go to sleep," Charles kept his voice firm. "I'm tired now."

A low rumble from the other's chest, and a hand stroking the back of Charles' neck. "I'm tired too."

"Fine, then." Charles kept his mind determinedly blank. "Only - not where anyone will see."

A pause. "On your shoulder?"

"Fine – I don't care, just –" Charles fought to breathe. "Just make it quick."

The man toyed with the strands of hair on his neck for one moment. Then he brushed his lips down Charles' cheek, down his throat and the line of trapezius, and found – found the deltoid instead. Set those teeth at an angle, and began biting down –

Charles shuddered.

"Shh …" The man drew back just slightly; kissed Charles there; then started again. Worked those god damned teeth into the muscle, worrying at it like a dog might a bone.

"That's –" It was difficult to speak; he couldn't catch his breath. "Um." _That's going to leave a mark_, his mind offered, helpfully, but surely that was what the other wanted, it would seem, because the bite had sharpened, and Charles winced. "All right."

The man started to growl.

Charles flinched. "All right. Enough." He brought a hand to the man's head; pushed. "That's enough."

The growl turned louder, and – Charles gasped at the sting of a sharp scratch down his own back –

"Stop."
And the man stopped. Stopped … biting – unclenched his teeth – but then slid his tongue over the same place, licked at it and … Charles felt woozy. The other sucked there, hard, with another growl. One that sounded … pleased.

"Well …" He felt like he would pass out. "Wasn't that lovely. Go to sleep."

And for the second – no, the third time that night. Or was it the fourth? Regardless, it was a pattern. And a good one, Charles supposed, for the man obeyed without a word.

A good pattern, Charles thought, as the other pressed close and tucked his face into the join of Charles' neck and shoulder. Right above where – fuck, that was going to bruise, surely …

But the pattern was – was fine. Pleasing. Charles' mind was not gibbering; he was just tired. The man would obey him, it would seem, as long as he was consistent. Conditioning, Charles thought, dazed, and: Pavlov. He could do this. He would be fine.

And he would sleep, eventually. Just like the man was sleeping right now, breathing warm and steadily against Charles' shoulder. Charles was tired, he was still a bit drunk – and that explained it all, really. He was worn out, and he had had an orgasm, and really, he was going to fall asleep any minute now.

It only … took somewhat longer than he thought it would.

But that was because the man's hair tickled the side of his face. And because his mind was telling him how all that come would itch in the morning. And because the other's grip was strong as ropes, even asleep, and Charles knew his own arms would eventually cramp.

And because … somehow, even with the fire still burning …

It seemed darker in his room than it had ever been, since his very first night imprisoned there.
Fire sparked at the edge of his mind, and Charles woke.

He kept his eyes shut. It was cozy in the sheets - almost hot. His blanket was lovely: warm and heavy, sheltering. And he must have been exhausted, since he had only just been awakened by -

Another warning flare went off.

By the stairs. Someone was walking up them. Walking quickly, although - another flare - he or she was burdened with something. But who -

“Angel,” Charles breathed, feeling his heart leap. She would have food, firewood - and she could tell him about the celebration, and what happened to the others.

Eagerly, he opened his eyes and pushed to move away -

- move away from -

Another pair of eyes blinked open - right in front of his own - and Charles yelped.

_Fucking hell._ His blanket was another person.

And not just any person. He had fallen asleep with the man on top of him; he was a hands-breadth away from the thing that had almost killed him; and _oh God_ they had both come last night, hadn’t they? He could feel the itch of dried semen all over his abdomen and thighs, and one whiff of the sheets confirmed it. One hell of a whiff; _shite._

Charles knew he was staring. He knew he had gone still, frozen in the manner of an animal trapped in a snare. He did not look away from those glittering eyes - _don’t look away don’t show weakness_ - and the spark of flare after warning flare in his mind was … distant. Like the memory of Roman candles.

Until the man flicked his eyes to the door. And narrowed them.

Charles heard the clack of boots.

How interesting. He could almost see the other’s hackles rise. The man’s lips drew back from those teeth. They gleamed in the morning light, and Charles’ instincts sent him past a shiver and straight to fear -

- only to switch to surprise, as the man quickly and quietly placed a hand over his mouth.

"Mmf -”

The hand tightened.

Charles glared up at the man, indignant. Tensed, got ready to struggle -

“Mr. Xavier?”

_Oh no …_

“Mr. Xavier?” A knock. “Are you up?”
By God, Charles thought, *if I’m not, I know who is.* He got ready to knee the sod -

Then there was a rattle. *Shite* - Charles tried to shove the hand away, to bite - he had to tell Angel not to come inside, not to unlock -

He heard a muffled, “What the hell?”

Charles blinked. The man looked down at him. His smirk made the cuts on the right side of his face twist and stretch; Charles hoped they bloody well hurt.

Another rattle, and a scrape. “Mr. Xavier?”

The hand at his mouth slid away - but the man laid one long finger on Charles’ lower lip. Tapped it gently.

Charles got the message. *Be discreet,* or, since ‘discreet’ probably had one syllable too many for the idiot: *be good.* Fine. Message received.

He cleared his throat. “... Angel?”

“Oh - sorry to wake you!”

Charles had indeed sounded groggy, he supposed. Although the rasp in his voice could have been from - not fear, he told himself. He wasn’t afraid. It was just … strange. To have a weight on his chest, warm and firm, and eyes wide and green, staring at him ...

“Um. Mr. Xavier?”

He licked his lips.

The man’s eyes flicked down to them.

“Yes?” Charles croaked.

Odd, how blue-green could spark. Like an ember might, in a fire. A jewel, Charles decided. If that color were a jewel, it would have to be jade, and reflecting flickers of light -

But then he could not see blue-green anymore - light or dark - as the man lunged forward and kissed him hard.

“Mmmfrghl -”

“What?”

The man jerked his mouth back. Charles felt hot breath on his own lips, ragged. Eager.

“Just -” he gulped. “Just stretching, Angel dear. How are you?”

“Fine, thanks.”

“Glad to hear it. Not hung over, are you?” he managed - except then the other mashed those thin lips against his again, and there was a hot, wet thrust of tongue. *Oh -*

“No that bad. But I’m having a hard time unlocking the door, Mr. Xavier - I don’t know why.”

*Oh …*
“Mr. Xavier?”

Their lips parted; Charles breathed in, out, shakily. “Sorry -” and he gritted his teeth. “Perhaps it’s the cold, Angel.”

A pause.

Charles glowered up into the man’s eyes. Placed his hands on those broad shoulders; pushed. The other … grinned, ducked his head down to Charles’ collarbone - nipped, and Charles bit back a surprised yelp.

“How would cold jam a lock?”

Shite. The bastard was still grinning against Charles’ throat; the curve of that mouth could be nothing but … “Not sure,” he managed, just before those lips moved up and over his chin and found his again, and then it was nothing but hot and wet and -

A pause. Then: “Are you all right, Mr. Xavier?”

The man took his mouth away from Charles’, just long enough for him to choke: “Perfectly fine.”

Except: not really. Not if he counted this creature trying to get at his tonsils twice now, before breakfast.

Make that three times. *Thrice*, his mind offered, and: *nice*.

But it wasn’t nice, and not just because they both tasted like they had been sleeping. Charles twisted in the man’s grip, fought to clear his mind. He was becoming aroused - easy enough, this early in the morning, and he hadn’t been this warm in so long … and knowing that the other was rocking his hips against the mattress in a telling way did not help - *shite*, he did not need this -

“You don’t sound fine.” Angel’s voice was dubious. “Do you have a sore throat?”

*I have a tongue jammed down my throat*, Charles thought, wildly, and: *I’d like to see you communicate any better in the same situation - oh …*

But he only said: “Mmf,” and shoved at the man’s shoulder until the other let him up for air.

Charles dragged in a breath. “Well, Angel dear -” he arched an eyebrow at the man’s narrowed eyes - “it does feel a bit sore. I’ll make myself some tea when I next go to the kitchen, shall I?”

“… All right.” Angel paused. “Do you need anything else?”

*I need a lasso and a leash, to keep this thing off me*, Charles thought. But he only looked the man squarely in the eye, and said: “Actually, I’d love to talk to you some more. Through the door …”

A pause. The man bared his teeth.

“… for a very long time,” Charles finished.

Another pause.

“All right,” Angel sounded puzzled. “What would you like to talk about?”

But Charles couldn’t answer.
“... Mr. Xavier?”

It took a sharp bite to the man’s tongue to get him to retreat.

“God -” Charles gasped, raking his fingers over the stubble of the other’s hair. Pressing those sharp cheekbones with his thumbs - anything to keep the inconsiderate sod from ravaging his mouth again -

“Um. You know what? Just ... I’ll come back in a bit.” Angel’s voice was anxious. “You sound sick. I brought you food -”

Charles felt the growl before he heard it.

“ - but I can go make you tea. And - and I brought you some firewood.” A pause. “Bobby and John got Sworn last night, so there’s a box here, with - with their things.”

"Did they leave any message?" He doubted it, given his knowledge of adolescent boys - pace Romeo - but perhaps Bobby -

His thoughts derailed when he felt warm slickness: an open-mouthed kiss, sliding over his throat. Charles shoved up against the man and almost lost Angel’s voice in the rustle of bedclothes.

"No, Mr. Xavier. I’m sorry. I brought your Quarter Gift, though.”

Angel sounded tearful. Charles bared his teeth up at the man and shoved harder. The other drew back, and the instant he did, Charles sat up and pitched his voice to carry.

“Thank you for everything - and don’t worry, Angel. I feel fine.”

“You weren’t too cold last night?”

A hand grazed his thigh; Charles slapped it.

“I was fine. Lots of clothes in the closet - I heaped them all up. Slept very well.” Lies, lies, except for the last - but it was still very warm. He blinked at the fire. The man must have gotten up to rebuild it before dawn, for embers were still glowing.

“And you brought me my Quarter Gift - thank you.” He made his voice bright. “Where on earth did you find a book of fairy tales this early?”

“It’s almost noon.”

Shite. “Well. I must have been warmer than I thought, to sleep this late. But where did you find the book? So help me ...”

Concentrating on the conversation was difficult, with one party on the other side of a door, and the man sneaking touches like an inquisitive cat. But Charles managed, sitting cross-legged and trying not to think of the dried come stretching on his thighs.

“So help me, Angel, if there’s been a bookshop within walking distance all this time, I shall weep.”

“Don’t you mean flying distance?” A bubble of laughter through the door. “And besides, Azazel took me to Albany this morning.”

Charles worked to place the name. “The teleporter? That was very kind of him.”
“Yeah. I … um.”

He put two and two together, murmured: “Oh dear,” under his breath - turned as he heard a rustle -

“Oh, for -” And Charles turned away again. Quickly.

“What?” Angel sounded curious.

“Nothing.” Charles’ heart was hammering. The man had leaned back against the frame at the foot of the bed. He was all pale planes and angles in the golden light. He looked like a sculpture.

Even when he was staring at Charles. And starting a leisurely wank.

It was distracting.

“Well,” he said, “Quarter Gift and the leavings of the Sworn. It’s my lucky day.”

A hand brushed between his shoulder blades. Charles shivered and moved away. But there was a growl, a shift of weight on the mattress … and the hand was back, fingertips digging -

“And maybe if we’re lucky, we’ll see you in Dallas, Mr. Xavier.”

Charles blinked. “‘We’?”

“I’m going with the others. We’re leaving in a bit - except Jean. She’s staying for a while longer. I think Lady Frost has meetings.”

It was difficult to concentrate. The words were important - they’re leaving again - his heart wrenched deep within him.

And his skin felt tight, too tight, and hot even in the morning air. There was a warm hand on his back, striped with callus. Only barely moving … caressing … Then there was breath gusting over the back of his neck.

And there was the rhythmic sound of the other beating one out.

God. Charles felt faint. He was locked in a room with someone rapidly shaping up to be a sex maniac. Rapidly … very rapidly, good lord -

“You’re going to hurt yourself,” he murmured over his shoulder.

And he didn’t have to worry about the man hearing, since he had edged closer. The line of that body was hot against Charles’, and the callused hand slid round under one of his arms and, strong and firm, came to rest on his sternum. Really, Charles would struggle, but it was easier to lean back and let his head rest on the warmth of man’s chest.

“So … Dallas, Mr. Xavier? Fingers crossed?”

“Yes.” Charles sighed. “We can only hope.”

A pause. “Did Lady Frost - talk to you? We all thought …”

The other was breathing harsh and hot; Charles felt his hair ruffling with it. With one smirk, he tipped his head and brushed his mouth on the man’s neck. Kept his voice low. “What shall I say?”

A confused grunt.
“Really,” Charles whispered. “If you can’t answer at a time like this, what will you do when I -”

But he broke off with a sharp gasp, as the hand grazing his chest moved lightning-quick and snapped round his throat.

“Tell her,” the man ground out in his ear.

Then he took several deep breaths. Spoke more quietly. “Tell her my lady wishes to - to speak to you about - Mexico.”

Charles blinked. Croaked: “Mexico?”

But the man had gone back to fisting his own cock, fast and relentless. Charles felt the commotion near his hip. He shivered. The hand on his throat … he would give anything to move it to his chest, to his back again -

“Angel,” he said, teeth clenched. “Lady Frost wishes to speak to me about Mexico.”

He paused. Then said: “It … sounds interesting.”

“Oh, good.” Angel’s voice was delighted, clear as a bell through the wood of the door. “And that means she’ll bring you to Dallas, too. I’m sure of it.”

“Right,” Charles managed.

“I’ll see you then, Mr. Xavier. And I’ll tell the techs before I leave. They’ll come and fix the door. And - I’ll make sure they hurry. I mean, do you need the bathroom or anyth-”

“No,” he choked out - “no, I’m fine.” Truly the last thing he wanted to think about - the bread must have soaked up the vodka, and he was more thirsty than anything else at that point … but thirst made him think of swallowing, which was difficult with the tight grip of fingers on his throat. Memory was thumping through his mind with his heartbeat - the man, this man, watching him with glittering eyes and choking him.

He heard only a laugh, and: “Adiós - safe travels!” from outside. Then boots making their way down the hall. Flares of his power, firing, as Angel jogged down the staircase - sparks at the edge of his vision …

It wasn’t from being choked, he told himself, frantic. It wasn’t. His vision was clear. But he couldn’t help it - he made the smallest sound of protest - a whimper, how pathetic -

The man let go. Oh thank God - but that thought was instantly gone in the face of oh holy shite, as the other pounced, throwing him flat on his back and diving for his mouth.

Charles cursed into the kiss, struggled. Their teeth clicked and their tongues caught; it was rough, and eager - at least, on the man’s part, since Charles knew that he could go without grinding into someone like a pestle on peppercorn - fuck, the other was hard as a rock, and gasping against his mouth, stiffening, those muscles knotting like ropes, and -

Charles broke the kiss. Rolled his eyes, gritted his teeth; waited for the blighter to finish.

When that body slumped heavily against his - then Charles made his move. He cupped one hand and cuffed the other over the ear, like he would a dog.

“Idiot.”
The bastard mumbled. And kissed his cheek.

“For the love of fuck, could you go without choking me, mauling me, or coming on me for five minutes altogether?” He pushed at the man, kneed and prodded. “Let me up.”

With another warm mumble, the man dragged his head back. Stared down at him - and grinned.

Charles stared back in dismay. There were far too many teeth there.

Especially when the grin widened. “Good morning.”

“It’ll be better,” Charles hissed, “when you let me up to go wash. I mean, really.” He swiped one hand through the come pooled on his stomach. Or what had been his stomach, four months previous. Charles flicked his fingers at the man’s face; come spattered. “Not civilized.”

A low laugh. “Even if we’re sharing a drink?” And the man ran his tongue over his own lower lip, catching a pale drop that had landed there.

“Bloody hell,” Charles said, faintly. He squeezed his eyes shut. “You’re insane. Now let me up.”

“Why?”

“Because.” He started to shiver. “I want to wash.”

The grin was audible in the other’s voice. “Ask me nicely.”

“Please,” and Charles opened his eyes wide. Stared desperately up at the man - saw the grin falter, saw him blink. “Please let me go wash.”

Another blink. Then the other tilted his head, just slightly. The shackle on his ankle quivered and fell open. Charles did not think twice. He gasped, pushed and shoved and stumbled from the bed - there was a clink and rattle of something glass, rolling on the floor. The vodka bottle - he had tipped it over, but: hell, he didn’t care about wasted alcohol, or about how ridiculous he looked as he scrambled for the bathroom, the muscles in his legs sending up stabbing cramps.

“God,” and his breath came in a half sob as he wrested the door shut behind him. It closed with a thump.

Charles stared at his hand, white-knuckled on the doorknob. There was no way of locking it. No way - and he stumbled for the bathtub and knelt. He plugged the drain, yanked at the faucets and started the water crashing against porcelain. Covering the sound of his ragged gasps.

He rapidly switched to breathing only through his mouth. Because it smelled in the bathroom, smelled like the man - he couldn’t get away from it. A quick glance confirmed that at least the sod hadn’t left a ring of dirt in the tub; still, he had been there, just last night …

Charles shoved the thoughts away and got to his feet. He turned.

And then he stared into the mirror.

Memory was playing odd tricks on him. Part of Charles expected to see subtly different contours in his face - more flesh, less strain. A face from long ago, staring back ... a streak of blood on its forehead ...

That had been him. A monster had chased him from the library, and had crept into his room. Had leaned over with a candle, to stare at him in the dark. Had touched him. And there had been red
blood on his white face; brown-black hair and blue eyes staring in the mirror the next morning.

And this was his face ... at noon, he supposed.

Charles reached out. Touched his reflection. He was still so pale - gaunt, white with ... with stress, he told himself fiercely. Not fear.

His mouth was very red. There was a darker red imprint on his lower lip - from teeth. His eyes, staring, were still blue. His hair was brown-black, much longer.

One stringy lock fell to his left shoulder, where there was -

Charles brushed his hair aside and looked at the bruise in the mirror. It was quite obviously from a bite, blue and purpling against his milk-pale skin. A red streak or two. The man must have drawn blood.

He squeeze his eyes shut. Opened them and stared again.

“I’m not afraid,” he hissed to his reflection. “I’m not. I’ll have that bastard begging like a dog before I’m through with him.”

He gave himself a sharp nod. “I can do it.” A deep breath. “I can do this. And - I won’t cry. He’ll never see me cry.”

Looking closer, he grimaced - because it was well and good to say so, but it seemed he had already let a tear fall that morning. It had traced down his cheek; he saw the trail near his mouth. Charles scrubbed at it. When had he -

And his stomach rebelled. Because it was come.

It must have gotten on his face at some point in the - proceedings, and - oh God it was all over his lower body, dried and itchy in some places, warm and dripping in others -

“No,” he mumbled, and walked backwards. Not looking in the mirror. Not thinking.

Not even two steps, and he bumped into the tub. Charles got in, shoved his head under the tap and let the warm cascade drown out all thought. And as soon as the gauze on his ankle was wet through, he tore the bandage off.

Twenty to one the blighter hadn’t cleaned the chafe properly, anyway.

He stayed in the water until it turned cold. Cold was easy to deal with. This situation, despite his resolve, was not.

Charles listened carefully. It was too much to hope that the other had left - he heard a clunk and scrape, and his heart sank. Somehow, apparently, he had hoped. His nostrils flared. The bastard’s smell was still strong, even after gallons of hot water turning into steam ... Charles turned, and swore to himself. That was why. In one corner: a shirt, a pair of trousers and socks - he was not going to think about the pants, except to hope they were tucked away somewhere. Gingerly, he took the neatly folded pile and walked to the door.

He pressed an ear against it. Listened.

He couldn’t place what the sounds were. And there was something there he could almost smell ... except that he could almost feel the stench from the clothes in his hands as well. Woven stiff through
the fabric. Charles gritted his teeth. The hot water had helped with the bite’s ache, and with the
tension in his shoulders. And soaping off all the come had raised his spirits from abysmal to merely
low. *Hurrah.*

“Oyez,” he called through the door, before he could change his mind. “You.”
Silence. And Charles did not even hear footsteps to warn him, before: “Yes?” came through the
door. Right at the level of his ear.
He did not flinch back; the other would have to try harder than that. “You left your clothes in here.”
A pause.

“Well?” Charles snapped. “Back away from the door; I’m putting them outside. And you - put them
on, please.”

Another pause. Then: “Why?”

It was refreshing, he thought, to hit one’s head against a door. Just once or twice. “It would be
civilized; it’s cold; it’s high noon and thus too late to walk around starkers; I asked you to. Pick one,
you -”

“... ‘You’ what?”

“*Wanker.*”

“You know, Xavier …” The voice was low. “You could call me by my name.”

Charles jerked back from the door.
He stared at the wood, his heart pounding in his chest. *No.* Just - a hundred times, *no.*

“Bugger off,” he snarled at the door. “I don’t want to know your name.”

Besides that … A chill ran down his spine. Something told him that he did know the name, already.
That all of the pieces were there, and all it would take was one lucid dream - analyzing, cataloguing -
to put it all together.
But: *no.* Knowing the other’s name, using it ... would make this real.

The silence stretched. It was different than the others. This one was a vivid shade of: *I’m going to
break down the door,* with a festive accent:* and tear you limb from limb.*

Perhaps the latter was just for old time’s sake.

Charles closed his eyes, checked all the locks on his power - all of his dampers, veils, everything. He
did not want to see shadows, taste rust, feel the bite of vicious metal on his mind … The bastard
could touch Charles' body all he wanted. Charles would keep his mind far away.

“Why not?”

“What do you care?” Charles sighed. “Bring me some clothes of my own.”

“I -”

“Now,” he snapped.
Quiet. Then footsteps - Charles listened carefully - the wardrobe door, and then a scrape at ear level again.

“Exchange of hostages.” He opened the bathroom door; shoved the man’s clothes out before he could lose his nerve. Shut everything tight again. “Now leave mine right there.”

“Xavier.” The voice was quiet. “Come out and get them yourself.”

Charles leaned his forehead against the door. “I told you to -”

“And I’m telling you to stop being such a coward.”

A ... coward?

Charles saw red. That bloody bastard -

“Also,” the other continued, his voice further away. “I’ve brought you coffee.”

Charles blinked.

… Coffee?

He stared at the door. Tried to smell. Now that the man’s clothes were gone - thank goodness - it was a little easier to try to … pick up the scent of …

Saliva flooded his mouth. He hadn’t had any for months, and he could smell it … Coffee.

“Professor,” that voice lilting. “I’m going to drink it all myself.”

“Wait,” he said. Opened the door, darted a hand out - grabbed his clothes and yanked them back into the bathroom. “Could you at least put on your trousers, please?”

“Done and done,” the man replied. He sounded amused.

It probably had been funny, Charles reflected as he scrambled into his clothes - pleased to see his favorite blue sweater. He had undoubtedly looked like a mouse, nipping in and out of the bathroom like that. But if that made the man a cat - well, then, the cat was quite securely belled, no matter what the fable said.

He gave his reflection one quick look, and combed his hair behind his ears with his fingers. Then he opened the door with a flick of his wrist. Strolled into the room. You don’t scare me, was in the forefront of his mind, and also: coffee coffee where is it -

The first thing he saw was a thermos on the mantel.

Following a close second was the sight of the man with his back to the fire. Standing there with trousers on but without a shirt; bending at the waist to wring out a cloth into a bucket.

Charles blinked. The other wet the cloth again, straightened, and scrubbed at his chest.

“That’s … that’s how you take a bath?”

The man flicked those green eyes to him. Gave him a casual once-over, assessing. The tattoo on his left shoulder flexed as he shrugged.

“At least I don’t take three-quarters of an hour.”
“At least - I don’t.” Charles bit down on his lower lip. Tried not to stare. “Use a bucket.”

“What's wrong with a bucket?”

No wonder he had smelled so horrible. “Where did you even get water? The kitchen?”

The man ran the cloth over his abdomen. “Melted some snow.”

Charles decided to stare after all. Then he looked. There was more firewood in one corner. There were traces of water on the floor, from the direction of the hallway. And the man’s feet were red.

He felt his jaw drop. “You went - outside? Naked?”

A shrug. “I took a blanket.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“You keep saying that.” The corners of that thin mouth quirked up. “Have a drink, why don’t you?”

The man raised one eyebrow, and - Charles took a step backward, as the metal thermos floated off the mantel and hovered in front of his nose.

He cautiously reached out, half expecting the man to yank it away. And laugh.

But that didn’t happen. And the metal was hot to the touch - he unscrewed the cap and smelled -

“Oh,” Charles groaned. “Oh, there is a God.”

“And on the eighth day,” the man said, “He created sugar.” He turned his head, tipped it back towards the mantel. The scabbed cuts on the right side of his face stretched.

Charles blinked at the packets there. “I don’t - take any? Usually.”

“Well, I do.” A stretch and a yawn. “Save me some.”

The cap doubled as a metal cup. Charles filled it. Tried not to think of anything except the smell, the heat and the taste …

He bit back a moan of pleasure, and drained the cup, burning his tongue. It was so delicious …

“Thank you,” he breathed.

The plash of water stopped. Instinct made Charles look to the right and down. The man was crouched over the bucket. Staring up at him, his expression unreadable. “You’re welcome.”

Charles poured another cup and sipped it, watching the other straighten and scrub above his waist again. The cloth moved round one bony hip, jutting up over the waist of the low hanging trousers. The lines of muscle in the man's abdomen, where Charles could see them, shifted in the dim morning light.

“Does it always - itch like this?”

Charles felt his lips twitch. “I’m afraid so.”

“Oh.” The hand with the cloth scrubbed harder. Charles saw the ring on the man's left thumb flash in the light. He let his eyes wander up. There were two other tattoos he had hardly noticed, in the dark. Some sort of script on the forearm - two delicate lines of it. Something else in the shadow of the inner forearm. And the real eye-catcher: the lion rearing back for a strike amidst the thick lines of text
flexing on the man's shoulder -

Before he could stop himself, Charles stepped forward. “That’s Hebrew, there. Isn’t it?”

A nod.

“What does it say?” He took another sip of coffee.

“I …”

The man was hesitating. Charles felt his curiosity spike.

“Come now, I’m sure it’s not a secret. Not if it’s there for all and sundry to see in the summer.”

“Not with tzniut.”

“With what?”

“Modesty laws.” A shrug. “In Eretz Galut.”

“Modesty laws; how quaint. And they obviously don’t apply now, not with -” Charles raised an eyebrow. “Your bucket.”

The man narrowed his eyes at him, wringing out the cloth again.

“The Land of Exile …” Charles swirled the coffee in the dented metal cup, thinking. “That’s where you got that tattoo, is it?”

A nod.

Which was bizarre, given what Charles remembered of the strictures in Leviticus. “And you don’t know what it says? It’s on your body,” he gave his voice a delicate edge of scorn, “and you can’t read it? How barbaric.”

“I can read it, Professor.” The cloth hit the bucket with a slap. “It’s just - some days I remember. Some days I don’t.”

“Crammed for the bar mitzvah, I suppose, and forgot it all the next day? My students did that regularly. Although: for exams. No religious purpose whatsoever.”

That didn’t lighten the mood, so Charles tried another tack. “Or … you’ve hit your head once too many times? Hm? What happened to your face, by the way?”

“Glass.”

Made sense, Charles decided. He gave the man an assessing look of his own. The water dripping from the cloth was obviously cloudy, now; he felt a slight twinge of distaste. Then the other walked to pick up another log to place on the fire - Charles saw the limp again, and gave in to curiosity.

“And what happened to your leg?”

A shrug. “Trap.”

“Really? When did that happen? I didn’t see anything in the Finder.”

The man shot him a quick look, oddly intent. “My lady had Jean with her, then. Not you.”
“When?”

“The last morning.”

When he had been locked in the sterile room in the Hive, Charles remembered sourly. Pounding on the door. “Ah.”

“If it’s any comfort,” the man said, “it was a complete surprise to everyone.”

Comfort? Where the hell did that wanker get off, thinking Charles was upset at the prospect of some surprise ambush in the past? But he kept his face neutral and waited, eyebrows raised.

“The defenders finally started - thinking creatively. Non-metal filler for their explosives. Glass.” The man touched the cuts on his face. “Wooden arrows; boiling oil. And on the last day - the very last damned day, there was a deadfall trap on my morning rounds. I didn’t even see it - I … I wasn’t thinking clearly.” A look, flicked at him from beneath lowered lashes. “I had overslept.”


“Mm. Three wooden logs, stacked. Crushed my kneecap,” the man tapped it, “and lower leg. The instant they tell me whose bright idea it was, I’ll find that person and **flay** him.” He bared his teeth. “Or her.”

Charming as ever. “And you weren’t given Archangel’s blood?”

“I was. Enough to get through the last battle, at least. But … for the past few years the breaks have been mending more slowly.” The man rolled his shoulders. “I don’t know why.”

Charles considered. “It’s possible that it’s just wear and tear on the body. How many times have you broken that leg?”

The man swished the cloth through the water. And thought.

As Charles waited for an answer, he could feel the skin on his forearms prickle.

Then the man squeezed water over the back of his neck. He let it drip down, and shook it out of his hair. “I’m not sure anymore.”

Silence stretched, punctuated only by the *plip* of water on the hearthstones. Charles did not know what to say. Except perhaps: liar, since it could not be true …

He stared at the thermos. There was a dent near its top. Charles shoved aside all thought, poured out the last cup of coffee and filched the sugar packets. “Then - how many of these do you want?”

“Two.”

Charles tipped the sugar in. Held out the cup to the man. “I’m afraid it’s gone cold.”

The other merely smiled at him, slowly. He dropped the cloth, took the cup, and drummed the fingers of his free hand on the metal. Charles blinked - the liquid sent up a puff of steam, and the man half grinned, half winced. And let the cup hover above his palm.

“Now that,” Charles said, “is clever. Another career possibility - you could run a tea shop. Keep a samovar in the corner.”

The other took a slurp of coffee; Charles winced. “Although not with those manners, surely.”
“Sehr interessant. You place great importance on civilization … on manners. Yet earlier, you felt free to mock those in Eretz Galut for their modesty laws. So tell me, Professor,” another loud sip, “do you only value those aspects of civilization that are fashionable, or those with which you happen to agree?”

Sunlight fell in a beam on the man’s face and glittered in his eyes. Charles saw the light turn the man’s stubble - no, beard - red-gold. As he stared, jaw slack.

“I’m sorry - did you just ask a philosophical question? I might be forced to concede you have a brain after all. Or is it the caffeine?”

“Perhaps it’s the company. And that’s not an answer to my question.”

“Civilization is civilization,” Charles snapped. “And our world is what it is, and I maintain that there are more important things to focus on in this nasty, brutish and short life, than whether or not one shows a bit of ankle.”

“Better to focus on something nasty, British and short, hm?” The man smirked, but then turned serious again. “They would say that their modesty is - part of a way of life.”

“Bully for them. And I mean ‘bully.’ It’s one thing to make individual choices as regards couture, bodily autonomy, whether or not to practice one’s - abilities. Et cetera. It’s quite another thing to legislate choices for other people.”

The man raised his eyebrows. “Like your queen did for you.”

“Yes, well,” Charles ground out, “she wasn’t exactly forthcoming with the terms.”

“Really?” Those eyes glinted green at him, over the cup’s rim.

“Yes, really.” He shivered. “Nobody in Oxford knows what the Chosen are chosen for. Nobody knows who the Takers are. And believe me -” he met the man’s eyes, and glared, “if they knew it was all kidnapping, imprisonment and torture wrapped up in some secret treaty … then -”

“Then … they’d form another committee, perhaps? To implement civilization,” the man murmured.

Charles clenched his jaw. The euphoria from the coffee had worn off. Even with the fire crackling less than a foot away, he felt cold.

But the other had called him a coward. And he wasn’t. So he raised his chin and bared his teeth. “Fuck. You.”

The man put the cup on the mantel. Stepped towards him - and every nerve in Charles’ body snapped to full alert - shite shite - because those eyes had fixed on his own.

… Then he moved his gaze from Charles’ eyes down - and down … and back up. And had his look turned … shy? What the fuck.

"I've - never," the man said, shifting from foot to foot.

... Had someone penetrate him? Small wonder, again, given Levitical law. Or did he mean - had he never had any sort of sex? His being shocked and elated by fellatio, Charles knew, but ....

He shook off his distraction. "Never what? Bloody hell, man, what do you call what we did last night?"
"I -" The man blushed, red as a beet. "I don't know. I've never -"

"Never taken the plunge? Or you just don't know how?" Charles sneered. "Do I have a fellow coward, or are you just that stupid?"

_Ah._ That did it. Back to normal. From shy to furious, in less than three seconds.

Charles took a step back, and another. Another - _fuck_, his back had hit the wall, and his pulse was crashing in his ears as the man prowled towards him like a tiger. Charles tried to dart to the right, back to the bathroom. A hand slapped the wall in front of his eyes. He tried the same in the opposite direction - the same reaction. Then he could only press against the plaster, wishing desperately for it to crack open behind him … as the man leaned forward.

Charles squeezed his eyes shut at the press of those lips on his mouth. He half expected the other to force his way in, as aggressive as he had already been that morning, and the night before.

Instead … there was the tiniest flick of tongue. Over his lower lip.

Charles focused on breathing. Slowly. Evenly. He was not going to react.

Even when the same thing happened again.

_Why was he_ - oh. Because Charles had done so. Twice. Once before - his mind stuttered - before the man had ripped out his filling. And once on the night before the Dallas campaign began. Each time, the man had been waiting. Unsure. Each time, Charles had - had invited him in …

Had taught him …

Time to remind the other who was the teacher. And who was the student.

Charles flexed his fingers. Then he snaked his hands up the man’s bare chest - a muffled _gasp_ - and slid his arms over those broad shoulders. He tipped his head to one side, opened his mouth - _just you watch … or feel, really_ - and unfurled his tongue in one seductive twist. Kept everything wet and hot as he started to suck at the man’s lower lip, traced his lower gumline -

The other groaned low in his throat. Moved his hands from the wall down to Charles’ waist, and -

- _oh - oh no._

Broad hands caught at his hips - thumbs traced the bony arch on each side. And then the man went and palmed his arse, with both hands. Palm ed, and gripped down hard - "_nnmf;_” Charles tried - to lift and spread, and make room for those narrow hips as the man leaned in and shoved up against him in one shudder -

_Fuck_, Charles thought, numb. He had only ever sucked that cock, and wrapped his hand round it … And felt it grind against his hip, for that matter - true enough - but this, _this_ …

The sod was going to have to be careful. _Careful._ How the _fuck_ was Charles going to teach him to be bloody careful? The only endowment Pavlov had to be careful of was that of the Institute of Experimental Medicine. And had that been anything to write home about? Well, it really depended on inflation but - probably not -

The man thrust against him. _God_ -

“All right.” Charles broke the kiss and drew his head back. He pursed his mouth to get rid of the
strands of saliva hanging. “That’s enough.”

“No,” the other growled. Another thrust. “It’s not.”

“It is for now.” He made his voice absolutely firm. “No arguments. When we do this we’ll do it in a bed, not up against a wall.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to break my head falling when your knee gives out, you moron.” Charles etched his tone with acid. “And … and because we need to go - slowly.”

The man’s breathing was labored. But he hadn’t moved. Charles felt his thoughts spinning out of control, frantic. The other couldn’t - mustn’t fuck him now - up against a wall with no lubricant whatsoever, oh shite - what could he say? What could he do, short of a full-scale telepathic attack, to dissuade the crazy sod -

His stomach growled. Loudly.

The man blinked. Looked down.

“Um,” Charles started. “Sorry?”

A look back at him. “Sorry for what?”

“Breaking the mood? I don’t know.” It was a lie; he wasn’t sorry at all. Charles felt a nervous laugh bubble in the back of his throat; he swallowed it and told the truth. “I’m just - hungry.”

A low growl; it vibrated into his chest where they were pressed close. Then Charles shivered. The other had buried the knife edge of that nose in his throat, nuzzling. He felt the hot, damp brush of a kiss.

“I’ll have to fatten you up,” the man whispered into his skin. Right before licking him.

“Oh, please.” Charles turned his head away. “Like you’re one to say anything of the sort.”

“Hm.” One tilt of that jaw, and a slow curl of those lips - and Charles’ thoughts sputtered to a halt. The man had tightened his grip, leaned back, and … and started walking, holding him plastered round his torso and hips ... walking across the room without so much as a break in his stride. Except the limp.

“And you mean what, exactly?”

“Ah,” Charles bit his lip, clung tighter. This was ridiculous. He hadn’t been carried since - since the summer of ‘65, and Geoffrey had been a rower twice as thick in the middle. He clenched his legs around the man’s waist - it felt as though he could bloody well snap him in half with one kick, muscles or no muscles. He cinched his arms tighter. “I meant - ah don’t drop me - I only meant that, well. You’re not exactly Rubenesque.”

“... What?”

“Ample.”

“Ah.”

The man had reached a corner of the room, back by the fire - but hadn't let him go. Instead, he slid
one hand down over the curve - well, not so much a curve anymore - of Charles’ arse, and gripped the back of one thigh. And squeezed. “You can let go now.”

Shakily, Charles did, as the man let him down. He crossed his arms over his chest; looked everywhere but at the other, still half-naked in front of him.

“Well.” His voice sounded brittle. “If you fatten me up too much, then you won’t be able to infantilize me in so gratifying a manner. Wouldn’t that be a shame?”

“You’re light, Xavier,” the man murmured. “And it suits a broken kneecap perfectly. Let me tell you now, though -” and he stepped closer, crowding Charles into a corner. “You fatten up, I regain my strength, and …” he flicked a green-eyed glance at him, “I’ll carry you wherever you want to go.”

*Home*, Charles thought.

Of course he said no such thing. Instead, he settled for a sardonic laugh. “And by ‘carry,’ you mean ‘fuck.’”

“That too.”

Charles waited for another cutting remark, or a leer. When the man stayed silent, he dared look at him directly. The other had opened a knapsack and was rummaging about in it.

“Here.” The voice was gruff. “This is mostly from Dallas headquarters.”

“Yours or theirs?”

“Theirs. Really,” and the man held up a plastic container. “Do you know what the fuck this is? I don’t know what the fuck this is.”

“Chocolate,” Charles said, faintly, gulping back a rush of saliva. He took refuge in semantics. "Pudding. Which is to say, the usage in America that was: custard pudding. Not the more general sense of the term, dessert -"

“Hnh.” The man flipped it back inside the bag. “Do you want it?”

Charles waited a full ten seconds. He counted them. “Certainly.”

“Then - here.” Two long strides, and the other had placed the knapsack on his bed.

Charles peeked. The bag was crammed full of food - non-perishables, mostly, and various things in plastic. Free West loot. He grimaced. "Did Angel bring anything? I thought she had said she had ... from last night, I mean."

The man's eyes had narrowed. "It went - bad." A sharp nod. "It would have made you sick."

Which was a heap of bollocks, because Charles could hear the thrum beneath the words. Even without telepathy. *Mine mine mine* - translation: *no one feeds you but me*. Charles sighed. *Welcome to the zoo.*

Hadn't Angel also - he peered round the man and blinked, glimpsing the boxes tucked in a corner; one new, one dirty and dented. "Oh - she brought those."

"Those boxes behind you - thank you for bringing them inside. Bobby and John were Sworn last
night; one box has their things, for me. And the other must be my Quarter Gift." He saw a lump of foil on top of it; perhaps meant to be a rosette. Angel. Charles smiled. He could use every part of these gifts - any scrap of cardboard from the previous Gift's boxes he had long since burned, so at least he would have those two, now.

The man paced over to the corner. Flipped back one cardboard flap of the dented box. A snort. "Such riches."

"Rag and bucket, remember? Give them to me, please."

"Hm." The man moved his left hand, slightly. Charles could only just glimpse it. What was he...

And Charles shivered as he saw the rosette crumple in on itself, stretching into a tendril, and then growing: uncurling filaments that wove together to become a flower on a stem.

"No powers," he whispered. "Stop that at once."

"You let me make a cup for us," the man said, quietly, glancing over his shoulder at him. "Just last night."

"... I was drunk."

"No," the man lilted. "No, Xavier. It was before you started drinking." The flower floated straight up into the man's hand as he turned; then it bloody well threaded his fingers, reformed on his fingertips. "What do you think of this?"

"I don't think -"

"You did not mind me warming coffee for myself. Why mind me making something ... rich? For you."

Charles stared at the petals and leaves glinting in the light, as the man held out his hand. Were they becoming - sharp? Fuck, fuck. He throttled his fear. He knew the zoo had a tiger in it; the prime attraction, stench and claws and all. "I said stop."

"Fine." With a flick, the foil went sailing across the room. It landed in the fireplace. Charles saw it start to curl up and blacken before the flames obscured it.

The man had turned away from him. "Frightened of a flower ..." Another quick movement, efficient, and both boxes joined the bag on the bed. "Who would have thought it?"

Charles' heart thumped. He would overlook the sneer; he had drunk his coffee and did not want any further conversation; he did not want to draw attention or think of what could happen if the other took it into his head to -

“Anything else?”

“I …” Charles turned where he stood. “Pardon?”

“Do you want,” the man pulled the turtleneck down over his head, “anything else? I’ll be gone for a while.” He ran one hand over his hair, then bent to tug on his shoes.

It seemed his thoughts were moving more slowly. The wanker was … leaving. Charles gulped in a breath; asked: “Where are you going?”

“Things to do.” The man tied his laces. “My lady is hosting some diplomats this evening. A feast.”
He made a face. “Too much talking.”

Too much talking - Charles fumed. He hadn’t spoken to anyone in weeks, except to take orders, except to children, except through doors, except telling this circus animal just how best to grab a cock. “You poor dear.”


“You’ll ask if you may bite me,” Charles corrected, coolly.

The man straightened. “May I?”

“No.”

A huff of laughter. Then the other stepped closer. “Then may I have another taste?” He pressed his lips together; when they parted again, Charles saw the shine of saliva. Christ.

"Just one?"

Charles backed away. Swallowed. “... No.”

The man tipped his head to one side, eyes gleaming. “Please? For a good-bye?”

“No.” Charles’ legs hit his mattress; he edged as far from the metal frame as possible. Placed himself halfway between head and foot. He heard a faint scraping noise - spared a glance down. He had bumped the vodka bottle; it was rolling back and forth. Pale green-blue glass, a different color than -

One last stare, green eyes slitted nearly shut - like a cat’s, Charles thought, skin crawling - and then a shrug.


“Why would I need you to do that?” he hissed. Relief had made him almost dizzy.

“Why indeed?” A slight smile.

And the man walked away. Flicked his fingers over the lock and opened the door, matter-of-fact. Charles watched him, eyes narrow. The blighter just wanted to slip into his good graces. Fetching him his own books? Honestly. One might expect the other to show more imagina -

One step forward, and the shackle on his ankle caught.

Charles yelped. Looked down, heart hammering. The chain had slithered up to him, secured him again, without his even noticing ...

… And it was shorter than it had been before.

Much shorter.

“Shite,” Charles breathed. He walked towards his bookshelf, got yanked to a halt not even halfway there - and - “oh, you fucker,” he wheeled on his free foot, “change it back.”
The man’s eyes glinted.

Furious, Charles grabbed the vodka bottle from his feet. Held it by its neck, made ready to throw.

“Change it back!”

“Mmm.” The man smiled at him again. “No.”

And he shut the door.

Charles heard the click of the bolt - but didn’t hear the lock rattle, over the sound of glass shattering.

It was at the lowest moments, Charles thought, that the smallest gifts could come as a pleasure. After indulging in blistering profanity for the better part of ten minutes, he stomped back to his bed and neated the blankets. Anything to cover up the scent, fading slightly but still there.

Opening the gifts took his mind off it, though. Charles decided to save the best for last. So, first, he upended the knapsack on his bed and made a careful inventory. He ate three containers of applesauce and two of chocolate pudding - and stared at the resulting pile of plastic wrap. He had hardly ever seen such before. Oxford used ceramics and metal for food, and here … well. There was his part of the Finder. And the IV packs of Archangel’s blood.

Charles amused himself by lobbing the plastic into the fire, one piece at a time. It was childlike, but … “If you can’t act like a child around Christmas, then when?”

Certainly not when you’re being fucked by a ravaging sex maniac, his mind observed; and Charles gritted his teeth, and directed his thoughts elsewhere. The plastic stank horribly as it burned.

Frowning, he rummaged beneath his bed for Ororo’s sticks of incense. Tossed one onto the fire.

Then it occurred to him to clean. He would not have two cardboard boxes again, anytime soon. Probably.

The box with the boys’ leavings in it he emptied. Then he placed the items from beneath the bed inside: Ororo’s incense and wooden combs; her book with the hidden maps; Logan’s bear grease; and different drawings that Jean had made while they were in the Hive and McCoy’s lab. Charles blew dust off the colorful scrawls, feeling a twinge of guilt. The drawings should be displayed. Hell, he thought, sourly - if he wanted, he could probably get the man to frame them.

He poked his head under the bed again, to search for anything else. There was the metal cup the man had made the night before. It had rolled away into the dust; Charles grimaced, and let it stay there.

Dust … dust and bits and pieces from Ororo’s makeup box. The metal box. He put that memory away quickly, and fumbled for the lipstick and eyeliner, concealer and nail polish. He had already squirreled away the items he could use in his first aid kit; these remaining, then, he would give to Jean.

He had given her the jacket from storage already, before the first day of the Dallas campaign. Light blue with puffy sleeves well-patched. Jean had loved it … and had given him such a hug, arms tight around his neck, that had led Charles to think she did not receive gifts often. Not since Ororo had gone, at least.

The cosmetics, then. Charles frowned, tried to remember Raven. His sister had been six when he had found her. He had played the icy older brother to her would-be suitors when … he closed his eyes, concentrating … starting when she was twelve. He smiled. Raven had brought home a boy for tea. Said boy had been petrified, his jug ears turning red as roses. Raven had skipped downstairs,
wearing a new dress, lipstick, blush and eyeshadow that had appeared from God only knew where. Her *amour* had stared, and had promptly spilled milk all over his crotch.

Charles had almost bitten through his tongue to keep from laughing. The boy had left, sodden and mortified, never to speak to Raven again without a blush of his own. And two days later Charles had asked his lover of the month to bring Raven some cosmetics and show her how to use them. Over another tea, the lover - *Viola*, it had been Viola - had insisted on painting Charles too. The portrait of a dour Oxford Master, hanging in the place of honor in the parlor, had surely never seen such hilarity.

Gathering up the cosmetics, Charles blinked.

“Huh.”

His voice sounded quiet, in his room. He realized: if he had been faced with the same situation, but with his abilities developed as they were now …

He would have flicked the incident out of the boy’s mind, to keep him from dwelling on a miserable memory. He would have worn kohl to teach, on a bet with Viola perhaps - and gathered her forfeit after successfully turning all attention away from him.

And he would have told Raven to practice changing her form, instead of inflicting an ill-fitting dress on herself. She could create clothes, he remembered. She could change her face to whatever she wanted, morph her body and her voice …

Such potential. But she had never practiced, except to hide.

Much like himself.

Charles dropped the cosmetics into a pillowcase, suddenly seething. The Takers, he thought, had a good deal to answer for. The EBS. Not Her Majesty, since she had undoubtedly been forced to the terms of whatever treaty she had signed - lest Lady Frost use her Prince to destroy Bath and Birmingham …

Charles shivered.

Had the man ever been to Britain? To the royal seat, in Coventry? … To Oxford?

“Surely not,” Charles mumbled to himself. Surely there would have been notice of the fact. And surely Frost kept the bastard on a tight leash. He would not have gone to the Kingdom of Britain without her. And if the leader of the EBS had paid Her Majesty a visit, then at least Charles could have confirmed the former’s mode of government for his lectures in political science.

The EBS … the Takers, *the Brotherhood*, he remembered, frowning. All of Oxford called it the Brotherhood. And Frost had sneered at the name, when he had first met her … so why had she not corrected the mistake in a public setting? Why, presumably, allow the Free West to dictate the discourse surrounding their conflict?

Why keep everything a secret?

Charles stared at his fingers, pale and thin, knotted in the pillowcase. Who knew? He sighed. Asking Frost was out of the question, of course; it had always been -

But then his skin prickled.
Perhaps he could ask the man.

Charles examined the thought from different angles. Then put it carefully away, to consider later.

He checked the slant of light on the floor - he had a few hours left, after all, until dark. On this Fourth Quarter. The darkest evening of the year …

Shaking his head, Charles looked at the boys’ possessions, spread on the blanket. Bobby and John, newly Sworn. And the material legacy of the newly Sworn was … sparse.

Charles picked through everything, carefully selecting the items he thought Jean would prefer. She would have no use for a razor and aftershave - he put them in the cardboard box with the rest. There were two beautiful scarves, that looked home knit, two intricately patterned pairs of gloves - and two pairs of socks.

He felt in the pillowcase - then frowned. Come to think of it, Jean was too young for cosmetics. He emptied them back into the box, then put the scarves and the gloves in the pillowcase for her. She would grow into them. The socks he kept for himself.

A ragged stuffed animal for Jean, along with a checkerboard and a deck of cards. And …

Charles felt his mouth twitch. A gumball machine, with a dozen candies left inside … and with - he checked - one penny in the hidden compartment. It must have been Bobby’s. John hadn’t known what a penny was.

And there was an old Zippo lighter. Charles flicked it open and shut. Smelled. The lighter fluid had long since disappeared, and the steel was light in his hand. He set it aside for himself - he could think of John, and his ability, even if he couldn’t use the lighter for anything.

“Don’t set the place on fire …”

No coffee, and no pornography, both of which he had half expected. It stood to reason. If one were off for a soldier, surely anything incriminating would have been burned - and they both seemed slightly young for the seamier literature. And John didn’t strike him as the type to ration his coffee. Oh well.

A box of candles - he took them - and - “Ah.” There was something lovely - a tiny lantern, with panels of red-orange glass. It had been dirtied with carbon leavings from smoke, but surely it could be cleaned. Charles peered inside. One could fit three candles in it - and he could have light by which to sew.

Thoughts of sewing took him to the last box, and eagerly, Charles opened his Quarter gift. A hefty bottle of Shiraz, with a corkscrew tied round the neck.. “Oh, Angel, bless you.” Even though wine was not nearly as efficient as harder liquor … still, it was seasonal. There was a sewing kit, homey in its round tapestry container. He flipped the lid open and shut - it was quite complete. Needles and thread; scissors and thimble; and a pincushion in the shape of a tomato.

Then Charles gazed at the book of fairy tales, for Jean. He opened it carefully. Breathed out in wonder.

It was perfect. A fine assortment of stories - Sleeping Beauty, he saw; Snow White, Cinderella, Rumpelstiltskin, Beauty and the Beast - the list went on and on. And the illustrations were exceptionally lush … reminiscent of Rackham, on separate gilded pages.

But for absolute quality control, really, he had to be responsible and read the book first.

So he did, after eating more applesauce and carefully wiping his hands. The taste of fruit, the beauty of the book; a warm fire and peace ...

He should have known it was too good to last.

The flares he had set out went up in warning not an hour later. *Really,* Charles thought, scrambling to hide the book in the pillowcase. The alerts were getting quite the workout. And this wasn’t the man - it was a group. He bit his lip, shoved the pillowcase in the empty cardboard box and slid both boxes between his bedframe and the wardrobe. Just in time, as the door opened -

- and Charles felt his jaw drop.

There were four soldiers in Free West uniforms. They held stun guns. And they all were staring at him with empty eyes.

“Um.” He stood, carefully. “Hello?”

One of them staggered over to him, boots crunching on the broken glass - turned his head first, then his eyes, to look at the chain. Produced a key and unlocked the shackle.

“Thank you?” Charles tried. “And - who the hell are you?”

Another soldier spoke. “With us …” A jerky twitch of the gun. “Now.”

Charles did not think to protest. He was too occupied with gazing, sickened, at the way the speaking soldier’s mouth moved independently of his face. At how all of them were - twitching.

And before he knew it, one had awkwardly fastened a blindfold round his eyes.

What next? Charles walked obediently, feeling the jab of a gun at his back. The others were marching in perfect time; it was eerie. Something was wrong with them - but he did not know if he dared use his power out to find out what. Their blank aspect, after all, reminded him of the mindwiped pilots, on the first day of the battle of Dallas.

It only seemed a minute before the blindfold was yanked off. Charles' mind had been buzzing, too anxious to keep careful track of the route, although it was obvious that the soldiers were taking him to the Hive - and to someplace he had already been. And sure enough, the room was familiar.

“Oh, hello,” Charles blinked at the doctor's assistant - he remembered him from the previous day. “What seems to be the tr -”

“Sit,” the boy snapped. He seemed really quite young, not out of college. If they had college in Albany - there was always the possibility of apprenticeship, Charles supposed. He sat. It was the same examination room as before - there was the MRI, occupying a wall -

“Sleeve up.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your sleeve.” The boy flicked an empty syringe. “Up.”

Charles frowned. “What is this about?”
“Forgot some tests yesterday, Mr. Xavier.” The voice was marginally more respectful, but -

Charles felt a prickle on his skin. But the boy wasn’t meeting his eyes. “Just give me some blood and piss in a cup, and we’ll be ready to go.”

Charles had obediently extended his arm, but blinked at the words. “A - urine sample? Why?”

The boy tied a quick tourniquet, swiped the crook of his elbow with rubbing alcohol.

“And why,” Charles asked, looking over his shoulder, “do you need an audience for a blood draw? Surely that’s some sort of ethical violation ...”

The soldiers were in the room. Staring blankly.

Charles yelped. The jab of the needle was not especially gentle. Red blood filled the container before it was tugged away. The boy left the syringe in and filled another vacuum-sealed vial. Then another. And another.

For a few long moments, Charles watched the rich spurt. He felt slightly dizzy. “What the hell is this for?”

But the boy merely tugged out the syringe - Charles winced - and shoved a bandage against his arm. Vials stacked in a holder - click click - and there was a broader container, held out to him. “Let’s go.”

“I’ll have you know I’m rather dehydrated -” he began, but flinched - fucking hell - as one of the soldiers pressed a stun gun to the boy's neck.

“Mr. Xavier.” The boy had gone white. “Could you give me the sample, please.”

“Of course,” Charles stammered. “Certainly.” He looked around - saw the door in the room’s corner. “Just - give me one moment.”

It did not take long. Nerves, Charles told himself, as he returned the container to the assistant and watched, uncomprehending, as all the samples were put into a box.

Then the experience became exponentially more surreal as a small boy, perhaps Jean’s age, trotted into the room.

Perhaps Jean’s age. It was difficult to tell … because he was blue. And he had a tail. And pointed ears, and: “What …” Charles breathed.

But the assistant gave the child the box, and said: “Dr. Vogelzang’s office, in Albany, please -”

- and the boy grinned, and disappeared with a crack and puff of dark vapor.

“What is going on?” Charles snapped, nerves fraying.

He did not receive an answer. Instead, the blank-faced Free West soldiers herded him out of the examination room, took him down a hallway, and - “No, no - not this again -” shut him in the white sterile sleeping room before he could regroup and try to wrest one of their guns away.

Perhaps it was the blood loss that made him dizzy. But even given the dizziness, he tried to ambush the soldier that brought him soup, and then the soldier that brought him four cans of fruit.

The latter was the one to use the stun gun.
“Mr. Xavier?”

Charles sat up, slowly, wincing. It had taken quite some time to recover from the gun’s jolt, but he was conscious again - at least enough to see someone he knew hovering over him.

“Oh - doctor. It's you.” He exhaled.

“You dropped this.” The doctor was holding a can out to him - mandarin oranges, he read. And he hadn’t dropped it. It had fallen, when he had punched the brainwashed soldier in the face.

Charles took the can, even as he said: “I don’t deserve it. After all, I forgot to take my iron supplement this morning.”

You're taking it tonight instead, his mind sniped, and Charles twitched. He put the can away in one pocket.

“That doesn’t matter just yet, young man. How do you feel? Any residual pain? The voltage on those abominable weapons is ridiculous.”

“I feel fine. Doctor -” He blinked at her, dully. “You’re here. All the way from Albany.”

“I returned with - with the results.” Her flyaway hair seemed wispy in the sterile room’s cold light.

“A charming little child took me here. Have you ever tried teleportation? It’s fascinating -”

“What - results?”

“Mr. Xavier,” she interrupted. Her eyebrows were pinched together. “I felt I needed to ask you something.”

“Only if I may ask what the bloody hell that little dog-and-pony show was for, earlier -”

“That’s it, exactly.” The doctor blinked at him. “Ten years, and I’ve never had this sort of request. Not that I’m complaining - it’s good for my assistants to use the machines, and a rush job is always good for practice under pressure … but.”

Charles felt like screaming. “‘But’ what?”

“But: tell me. Why would Ms. Frost order, to be completed before the day is out, a full VD panel for you?”

“... VD panel?”

“Venereal disease.”

And perhaps she mistook his silence for confusion, for she continued: “It's a combination of blood workup and urine analysis, and goodness knows it’s still relevant, what with the new syphilis strains floating about, but -”

Charles grabbed the front of her coat. Fleece, part of his brain noted, and still chilly. It had to be well below zero, outside.

“Help me,” he gasped. “You have to help me get out of here.”

“Mr. Xavier -” Her eyes were wide, staring. “What on earth -”
“God - she knows. She knows. I don’t know how she found out, but she’s going to -”

“Mr. Xavier, calm down.” Warm hands gripped his own, and squeezed. “Easy. Take a deep breath.”

But Charles couldn’t - he was feeling dizzy again as he staggered towards the door. “She found out. She knows what I - what I did -”

“And what did you do? My dear young man …. My name is Sarah Vogelzang, I’ve been practicing medicine for thirty years, and any secret you may have is safe with me.” The voice was calm, and the hands had moved to his shoulders. Pushed. “Head between your knees. Deep breath.”

Charles took a deep breath. Then, carefully, he stretched out a tendril of his power towards her mind. He expected a sharp curiosity, a scratching awareness of blackmail … or the greedy interest of a Free West agent …

Instead … he felt …

Kindness.

And - worry.

And her words echoed in her memory, with the sound of absolute truth.

She can help you.

“Oh, God,” he mumbled.

Hurry. Hurry.

Charles took in a ragged breath. “I made a deal.”

“What sort of deal?”

“I promised … if someone - helped my friends. Children, you know? If he protected them, at - at Dallas, I promised - I promised him -”

“The Battle of Dallas. Quite gruesome, from what I understand.” Vogelzang’s hands were steady on his shoulders. “Do I know this person?”

He choked on his own laugh. “Do you watch the news?”

A pause. “I don’t have a television, but … I read the weeklies.”

“Then you know him.”

A longer pause.

“Right. Now: nothing you say can surprise me, Mr. Xavier. I’ve treated people from all walks of life, and I’ve seen things you would not believe. You are,” she gave his shoulders a shake, “to be commended for protecting children. So many see fit not to do so, in this day and age. Now. What did you promise this individual?”

"You won't believe it. I hardly do. I mean, who would offer so much, just for ..."

"For what? Tell me."
Charles squeezed his eyes shut and spoke to the floor.

"For sex. I promised to sleep with him."

Silence.

Then: “I see.”

He focused on his own breathing. In, out. In, and out.

“Yesterday, Mr. Xavier, I diagnosed you with acute malnutrition, nervous exhaustion, and anemia.” Her voice was low and controlled. “And now … you’re telling me that you are being coerced into sexual relations?”

He couldn’t help it: he laughed. The sound was horrible. “That’s very clinical of you, doctor.”

“I’ll have you know that I am an excellent clinician. And excellent at breaking tragic news to people - for, Mr. Xavier? I’m sorry to tell you: that you have the worst case of chlamydia that I have ever seen in my life.”

Charles opened his eyes. Stared at the floor, and then straightened to stare at her. “... What?”

“The symptoms include,” and she raised her chin at him, looking - Charles wobbled on his feet - almost exactly like his penguin, down to the beady black eyes. “Penile discharge; a burning sensation when urinating; pain and swelling in the testicles. And in more advanced cases: conjunctivitis, fever and night sweats, erectile dysfunction - sound familiar?”

He felt concussed. “No.”

“Well, that is very strange, Mr. Xavier, because I have diagnosed you with advanced chlamydia, and I can only treat you with the most powerful antibiotics I have.” Her eyes burned into his. “In Albany. Come on.”

And she took Charles’ arm in a firm grip. “You’re coming with me.”

Charles allowed himself to be walked to the door. He felt faint. “... I am?”

“Yes. Now: which way to the exit?”

It wouldn’t work, Charles thought. There were too many guards. Too much security -

But the doctor swiped a badge into the lock … and the door of the sterile room hissed open.

His heart shot into his mouth. She could lie to people - and - and they knew her, here.

They’d believe her. He could escape.

“Right,” he gasped. “Long hallway, and then we have to turn left -” Even as they were walking, Charles half-stumbling in his speed, he reached deep into his mind and gasped again:

“All of you -”

And all of his birds flew to him, in a whirlwind of light.

His armor flashed in the beams from the reading room window. He had somehow drawn his sword - it burned with iridescent fire. “We can get out of here, but we have to hurry,” and Charles wheeled
on one foot to lead them - “come on!”

Back in the hallway, he felt as though he had woken from a three-day sleep. All his birds, flying round him - his power crackling - and there was a reverberation from the dark waters below. He could feel it, echoing through his mind - his full power straining at the locks, begging to be let out -

“Not just yet,” Charles said, distant.

“What?” Vogelzang panted.

“Sorry - here, turn in here.” They ducked into an empty room. “Wait just one moment.”

Charles closed his eyes to concentrate. Sent his hummingbird and sparrow flying ahead, set his owl to flying over the maps in his mind. Nightingale and dove on his shoulders, and penguin at his side, ready to run.

Above all, his raven. Spiraling up through the manor, letting a skein of his power unfold, tissue thin, and sensing:

- scores of people, and different languages being spoken as they walked up the front stairs of the manor - some mutants standing guard, burning bright - and soldiers screaming from beneath slabs of ice -

*Ice.* Frost. Charles broke into a sweat. The White Queen’s power was active and crackling through the manor - and she was the one controlling the Free West soldiers. Far fewer than at Dallas, admittedly, but this was so much closer.

And his own power … he checked. His heart shot into his throat. It did not fit into the billiard ball - *too much* -

Charles took a deep breath. Sent dove and nightingale and penguin back into his mind - not without a squawk of protest from the latter. He let the owl vanish, too. Surely Frost would not have noticed that small a flare of power. Surely she was occupied with other things.

There was ice crackling into a cube - a *diamond* - on the far end of the manor. East. Opposite them. They could make it.

“We have to hurry,” Charles whispered. “There’s a whole contingent of people at the front door - but we can find a window and get out that way, if need be.”

“Right,” Vogelzang said. “There’s an entrance to the outside near the storage space -”

His mind flashed to a room full of metal - *those swords* - and he choked.

“No - we don’t want to run into -” he fumbled for a good word, “security.”

She stepped out into the hallway. Charles followed.

“Then we’ll have to get out through the old coal cellar. Opposite storage,” she explained, “and connected to -”

“Shh!”

The sparrow had given a warning chirp. Tense, Charles focused ... And then felt the flicker of a mind. Schrödinger’s mutant, he remembered, but in miniature …
Then the small blue child rounded the corner, saw them. And waved.

“Problem solved,” Charles breathed.

“But - a child -”

“He would just be returning you to your office,” Charles said, and choked: “Please.”

One moment of hesitation, and then Vogelzang called out: “Hello there!”

The boy scampered up to them. “Lo!”

“Well, my dear, It looks as though my time here is up - may I ask,” she said, cheerfully, “if you would not mind taking me back to Albany?”

A stare, considering. The child was sucking on the tip - of his tail. Charles felt dizzy, staring.

“And you see, I have a patient here. He needs some medicine that I only have in my office.”

The boy’s forehead crinkled. His eyes, gleaming bright yellow beneath a fall of black hair, looked worried. “Two?”

“Yes, two. Is that all right?”

The child considered. Then brightened: “Papa!”

“Wait - no,” Charles gulped, “stop -”

But the boy had disappeared.

The two of them stared at each other from above the blue-black tangle of vapor.

“Why not, Mr. Xavier?”

“The fewer that know, the better,” Charles said, shivering, and: “I don’t know if another person would be as ... persuadable as a child.”

Although - if whoever the boy had gone to fetch was resistant, and held him back from his escape...

... Escape. This chance, this last chance. If people tried to stop him, then Charles would just burn their minds to cinders.

Another ripple of air - displacement - and if Charles’ mind weren’t screaming at him to run, he would have marveled at the sight. The mutant strolling up the hall towards him, holding the child’s hand, looked absolutely satanic - bright red skin, thick black hair and goatee, black suit with a red handkerchief peeping out of one pocket. And - the same tail as … the other had to be his son.

A smile bent the vicious scar bisecting a bright blue eye. “Dobryj vyechyer - a good evening to you both.”

“Hello,” Vogelzang said, brightly. Charles commended her nerve - but perhaps the two had already - “Doctor Vogelzang.” The mutant bent to kiss her hand. “You are as lovely as ever.”

“Oh, not this again.” She heaved a sigh. “Married.”

“And it breaks my heart!” The accent was Russian, Charles noted, and rather thick. “Every time we
meet, I hope that you have moved on.”

“Says the one who can’t stay in one place for an hour.” A smile. “And before you try, try again, I need to move on back to Albany - and to take this patient with me.”

“Ah.” The red mutant looked him dead in the eye.

Charles looked back - don’t flinch don’t give it away - and winced at the spark of recognition there.

“Bozhye moy - the White Knight!” The mutant’s own teeth were white - not as white as the man’s, Charles saw, but a jarring contrast with scarlet skin. “I saw you at Dallas! so many times, and at the Lady’s right hand -”

White Knight? He managed a weak nod.

“He’s rather ill,” the doctor put in, “and needs the strongest antibiotics I have.”

Charles did his best to look faint. It was not difficult.

“Bad timing - the feast will start in an hour.” He gave Charles an appraising look. “Can you now - how is it said - hang on? Have some food,” a grin, “we can have a drink, and talk Dallas.”

With an effort of will, Charles brought his hummingbird and sparrow, and his raven - Raven - to bear on the other’s mind. Ratcheted up his senses to detect suspicion; pulled in all the power from his flares in the dormitory, and deployed it as well …

The mutant suspected nothing.

Relief came in such a dizzying rush that he almost passed out after all. Escape. “I don’t - doctor?”

Vogelzang shook her head fiercely. “He’s horribly ill.”

“Da, he looks it -” the mutant put in -

“- and he needs to go to Albany now.”

“Certainly.” A red hand, extended to him … “Come. We shall go. Same office, doctor?”

“Yes.”

“Ah.” The mutant grinned over Charles’ shoulder. “Everything is well, Lady?”

Charles went still.

Beside him, Vogelzang gasped.

The White Queen’s voice was freezing cold.

“Not quite.”
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Thanks to 2 peeps for read-throughs of various length (heh) and advice! KayKay and etirabys! Thank you as well, etirabys, for this exchange:

"Every time you come early, I'm going to assume you have more in you and then start all over again."

"You're going to kill me."

:)

Thanks to kogitsunenoyosora and stayclassycait on tumblr, for help with Russian! NO THANKS to Babelfish.

And finally, thanks to Amanda for the line: "Sex has been used to bring powerful men to heel for centuries." I just changed the tense.

...

uh.

SPOILER, people - behold: teh sexx0rs! And also pretty clothes and food. :P

also: one final edit ...

I am really sorry if it came across as cheap, telling people that I'd be posting at a certain time & then doing so an hour later! To tell the truth: that's how long it took me to wrangle the gd formatting. /\ Hope this chapter makes up for any erstwhile pseudo-douche-baggery.

Please see the end for translation of Russian & German.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Watching what happened afterwards, Charles felt removed. As though he were observing something terrible, yes. But through a window.

The window was clear. Not frosted. Windows in Oxford had glittered with arcs and curlicues of ice on winter mornings, but this one … this one was completely clear. It ought to be, Charles thought, distant. All his veils were in place, and stronger than they had ever been.

But then again, Frost had not brought her full power to bear on him, surely. Not yet.

The adult teleporter - Azazel, that's the name - seemed greatly disconcerted, pale eyes darting between Frost and Charles. That mane of greasy black hair whipped round as he stared at the doctor, sagging against a wall. Then he turned back and started speaking urgently to Frost. Charles did not understand - ah. Because it was Russian. The child clung to his father, blue tail twisting in a figure eight round the taller mutant's ankles.
Frost lifted her chin. Spoke … very softly.

And Charles swayed on his feet at the cold he felt, rippling from her mind in precise, perfect circles.

He saw Azazel move to stand in front of his son, and incline his own head in a bow. One long strand of black hair fell out of its coif.

Then Charles had to focus on strengthening his shields.

Veil veil veil … all of them iridescent and tissue thin, but so many that they could become impenetrable. Like sparkly sheets, Jean had said in her mind, long ago - and had showed him an older, red-haired woman hanging laundry, her smile making round dark eyes crinkle at the corners. Had that been Jean's mother? Had she had a parent, like Azazel … but now gone? Charles felt his lips part. Blinking back awake to stare at the hallway, he was surprised that he did not see his breath. The cold in his mind, pronounced and ominous; the memory of Jean, warm …

But all his veils were holding.

"You alternate between surprisingly capable and incompetent, Xavier." Frost's voice sounded far away. Charles looked round the hallway, slowly. The teleporters had gone. A group of Free West soldiers had rounded the corner, leveling stun guns at him. They all looked as disoriented as those he had seen earlier.

Instinct made Charles turn to the side. Dr. Vogelzang was still there, slumped against one of the hallway’s metallic panels. She was deathly pale.

“Mr. Xavier …” she slurred. “He’s …”

“He's what?” Frost flicked through papers held in her hands. A soldier had taken Vogelzang’s briefcase, jerkily opened it and let all of its contents fall on the floor. Then he had shuffled through them to find a manila folder, and had handed it to Frost.

She bent her eyes on the doctor, coldly. "Tell me."

“… Sick.”

“Are you, Mr. Xavier?” The White Queen did not look at him, staring instead at Vogelzang. “Sick?”

The moment of truth.

Charles closed his eyes. “No.”

At that point, he could have done something. He could have broken the hidden seal, released all of his power, tried to stun or immobilize Frost and her minions … tried to escape.

All of his birds would have helped, Charles knew.

Instead, he called his raven back from its vantage point. Smaller than a billiard ball - you can’t see me. Charles sent his bird flying to Vogelzang. Right in front of the White Queen's eyes - but she can't see - she can't see -

The bird carried the one fiery pendant remaining to him. The one that Jean had given him in her mind - long ago, now.

Find the memory of our conversation, he sent along with the pendant, on a banner. Both of them small enough - Frost would not see. Touch this jewel to it. Speak a word of your choosing; put the
jewel around your neck. And the memory will be safe from Lady Frost. Hidden, until you speak the word again.

The raven let the pendant and banner fall into Vogelzang’s mind. Flew back to him - sparrow and hummingbird hiding behind it. *Hide*, he told them. *In my mind - go. Hide.*

There had only a small pulse of wonder and astonishment from the doctor, when the fiery pendant landed. But Charles did not have time to think about it.

Instead, he repeated to Frost:

“No. I’m not sick.”

“That’s exactly what young McCoy said,” she said coolly. “After looking at another copy of these results.” She paused. “We do have a fax machine, Xavier. In my office. Ways of communicating that aren’t medieval, unlike in your precious Oxford ... which does seem to be - on your mind. Hm.”

And Charles gasped as ice lanced into his veils. Cold was crystallizing around him; pain needling at the base of his skull - Frost’s power cradling his mind like icy fingers dipping up water - freezing it -

“Did you think yourself so very covert, just now?”

Charles swallowed hard. Took refuge in anger; ignored her power and her threats.“You gave McCoy the VD panel of a colleague? How am I supposed to look him in the eye?”

“Much as you normally do.” Frost smiled absent-mindedly, still gazing at the doctor. “When he returns from Dallas. I sent him there, after erasing this,” she flicked the topmost paper with one manicured nail, “from his memory.”

Charles stared.

Then Frost turned to stare back at him, the pale contour of her cheekbone and jaw immaculate. She had a necklace round her slender throat - clustered diamonds and loops of shining steel - and she was wearing a dress of white velvet. Charles blinked. He had never seen her in anything approaching a ballroom gown. Her hair was pinned up in a twist - emphasizing the elegant line of neck and collarbone, the ivory swell of cleavage …

She was beautiful. She was deadly. And she was still looking at him, eyes glittering.

For one vivid moment, Charles saw the diamond hawk mantling its wings. He slapped the image away and pushed more power into his veils. *Don't let it in,* his mind gasped; and he shuddered. *Could it find its way back in?* It was of his creation. *Could it?*

“I know the truth, Xavier. Now tell me: why would this doctor lie?”

He knew what Frost wanted to hear. He shaped the words - and it was not as difficult as he thought, to say them. It helped that they were true. Part of a larger picture … but true nonetheless.

“She lied because - I asked her to help me.”

“Exactly.”

He heard a moan. Turned slowly to look. Vogelzang was sliding to the ground, staring at nothing. All color had drained from her face, making her grey hair looked black.

Charles felt dread seize his gut. “Don’t hurt her.”
"And why not?"

"Because … because it wasn't her idea."

"And whose idea was it, Mr. Xavier?"

"Mine," he snapped, wheeling back and glaring. "It was my idea; it was my plan."

"… Plan."

Frost laughed. The sound clattered through the hallway; the soldiers swayed where they stood. Charles felt his face flush.

"Oh, my dear Mr. Xavier. This is what I meant, earlier. You are keeping me from your mind - well done, incidentally." He felt an icy touch slide over the veils; and then snag like cat claws on silk.

"But … you seem to think it tactical genius to cozen a faithful servant of mine into rebellion, to embark upon an escape in the dead of winter, and to believe that I would not find out about it all." She clicked her tongue against her teeth. "Very shortsighted of you."

_Oh fuck you_. "Shortsighted? Alas, my eyes are dimmed, but with _tears_, lady, for … I was so pleased you chose to speak to me, that it broke my heart to hear more of the same." Frost's eyes had narrowed; Charles didn't care. "You are competent, I am not; you are in charge, I am not; you have the power, I do not; _et cetera - ad nauseam_ - lather, rinse, repeat."

That last he had heard on a Free West film broadcast, once; a bizarre commercial, everyone had looked so healthy and wholesome -Charles shook free of his mind's gabbling, tipped his chin at her hair. "Very nice, by the way. Is there a salon nearby? For I know I'm looking a bit unkempt, and you haven't given me a Quarter Gift since my arrival here."

Silence stretched.

After a long moment, Charles flicked his eyes away from her. Swallowed. _That may have been a mistake, Professor_, his mind whispered, and: _too late now …_

But the White Queen was speaking, almost musing: "I gave you your chain and shackle, however belatedly. But I have not given you a Fourth Quarter Gift … true enough." An arched eyebrow. "And you would like one, Mr. Xavier? What shall I give you?"

Charles shivered. _What was she_ - but he kicked his thoughts away and snapped, before he could stop: "Don't hurt the doctor."

"Ah." Frost spared Vogelzang a glance. Tipped her head to one side, graceful. "You care so greatly for others, my dear boy. Consider it done."

_My dear boy - what the everliving fuck?_ His stomach churned.

"Dr. Vogelzang will return to Albany tonight; tomorrow, she shall resume her practice. I shall see the specifics of your interaction, of course -."

_No you won't_, he thought, savagely - but kept his face carefully blank.

"- but I'm sure I will find nothing surprising."

A pause.
Frost still had her head tipped to one side. Unexpectedly, she gave him a smile … that was almost - Charles' mind jerked to a stop, like a broken bicycle. Almost … sweet.

"I cannot tell you how pleased I am, now, Mr. Xavier. To know that you desire a Quarter Gift -"

"Really, the doctor's well-being is quite sufficient -"

"- and to know," Frost continued as though he had not interrupted, "that I have the power to bestow it upon you. Come along."

Charles felt the first stirrings of panic. He did not know what she was planning, but surely it was nothing he wanted. He darted a glance down the hallway.

"None of that." A gesture brought a half dozen Free West soldiers to close ranks around him. Charles felt the press of their guns and heard their synchronized breathing. "I shall escort you to your room, Mr. Xavier. And when we reach it, we shall have an hour to ourselves." She touched her hair. "No salon for me - I was disadvantaged growing up, you understand, so I practiced at home to perfect my skills. But I am happy to oblige you. And we shall have a lovely little chat."

Charles stood immobile.

"Move."

The soldiers began walking; he stumbled along with them. Oh god oh god - "Why -" he croaked - "I shall explain in your room."

"No - no, why the soldiers?"

"Oh, Mr. Xavier." Another kind smile, bestowed upon him as they turned the corner and he almost fell. "Practice."

\underline{Don't panic. Don't panic.} Charles focused on the echo of footsteps as he was escorted through the cold hallways. Frost had not blindfolded him. Perhaps she thought she could remove the memory of the route, easily enough … If she tried, Charles told himself with colder resolve: she would have another think coming.

When they reached the dormitory, he saw Frost raise an eyebrow. A few moments of utter silence passed, punctuated only by the soldiers breathing in time - and then another Free West uniform rounded the corner from the direction of the stairs. The soldier was twitching like a marionette and carrying an armful of white fur.

"Thank you," Frost said gently. She fastened the cloak at her neck, felt in one of its pockets - and smiled.

"After you, Mr. Xavier."

They had reached his door. One of the soldiers pushed it. Charles stepped in, automatically - - and stopped, staring. There were other soldiers inside. And - and - he bit down hard on his tongue. There were boxes there, being filled with his books. His bed had been stripped and his clothes were on the floor -

"What the hell is this?"
"Really, you need not speak so. Not when I am giving you such an abundance of gifts. For you see …" and Frost stepped gracefully to one side, to allow a soldier to bring a high-backed chair into the room, "I am in a generous mood tonight."

"… Generous?"

"Yes." She sat down, smoothing her dress. The chair had lovely upholstery and broad armrests. The collar of Frost's fur cloak brushed up against her jaw. Charles stared at the contrast - warmth and ice - "I know, Mr. Xavier, that I have not been … kind to you, recently. What you do not know is that it was necessary."

"You're joking -"

"Mm. You flouted my authority on the night before our great victory … and though there were few witnesses, words can spread quickly here. For the White Knight," and she gave the title a delicate brush of contempt, "to raise his hand against his Queen … well. You understand that I cannot have that. Thus your absence from the celebrations last night. If it's any comfort, the attendees were mostly unwashed or intoxicated. Or both."

"But," and Charles heard his voice crack, "there was food."

Frost's eyes were kind, in the dimming light. "Not for one who behaves as you did."

Food, his thoughts echoed, sluggishly, recoiling from the memory of how hungry he had been, just last night. But then he had eaten the bread that the man had -

Shite, the knapsack. Veil veil veil … The knapsack full of food - she would find it, she would find out -

But Charles did not see it on the floor. The clutter had rapidly cleared; soldiers were carrying boxes out the door mechanically. The knapsack had to have been packed away. So far so good -

His knees trembled and his mind felt like lead. He was still so weak … Nothing about this is good.

One soldier was building the fire into a blaze, another was carrying an armful of lacquered cases - well, three of them - into the room. Limp hands fumbled on silver latches. Frost sighed. "The largest one."

And then two of the blank-eyed men opened the largest and took out -

- Charles blinked.

Bedsheets.

Cotton, he observed, or linen. Colored in a vivid crimson.

He dragged his attention away from the men making his bed. Stared back at Frost. She was watching the soldiers, eyes languid. Then she inclined her head to him.

"I noticed those boxes," she gestured towards the wardrobe, "packed already. Had you been organizing, Mr. Xavier?" Frost smiled. "A squirrel in winter?"

Let her think him a squirrel, a rabbit, a god damned mouse, as long as she didn't look more closely. For he could see the drawstrings of the knapsack, peeking out from beneath the pillowcase containing Jean's gifts.
"Yes," he bit out.

"I see. Those are the most important to you, of your possessions?"

Charles closed his eyes. "… Yes."

"Then I see no reason you should not keep them." Frost smiled again. "Do move them out of the way, though, for the convenience of your servants."

"My … I don't have servants. That's ridiculous," he said, tiredly. He picked up the boxes - the odds and ends inside shifted and bumped - and shut them in the empty wardrobe. "If you want to play puppeteer with prisoners-of-war, feel free - but do please leave me out of it."

"They're servants. It suits them. They're fetching and cleaning -" she waved one hand through the air, "and even making your bed for you, my dear boy."

A pause. My dear boy, again, what the hell did she -

"Although you will be the one to lie in it. Ah," Frost snapped her fingers at one of the soldiers. "Tighter corners."

The burly man moved to obey. Charles felt his skin crawl. Having finished with the sheets, the soldiers returned to the largest case. And took out - oh … Charles stared. It was a beautiful coverlet of crushed red velvet, gleaming with what looked like silver damask threads.

He squeezed his eyes shut. Opened them. Something about the coverlet was familiar … but also … deeply unsettling. His belongings taken away, except for two boxes; his bed refurbished with the leavings of - of a sodding harem. And he refused to believe Frost had taken it upon herself to be a fairy godmother, to load him down with riches and plenty.

Charles decided to take the bull by the horns. "Why are you doing this?"

Frost smiled at him. "Doing what?"

"This …" He gestured at the soldiers by the bed. They had finished their work, and were staring into space - along with at least ten more, on the threshold and in the hallway.

"I told you. Practice."

"Not the prisoners. This - for the bed. I've been getting along quite well without velvet and silk, thank you."

"Hm. Sit down."

He looked from one end to the other of the room, stripped-down, cleaned and polished. "Um."

She smiled. "On the bed."

Charles sat. The fabric beneath him felt exceedingly strange; the velvet caught at the palms of his hands. So he threaded his fingers together in his lap instead. Focused on the tough material of his jeans.

Frost looked long at him, her beauty shining in the firelight. Like a pearl, Charles thought. Edged in rose and gold. And when she spoke, her voice was gentle.

"I wonder if you understand, Mr. Xavier … just how untrustworthy I find you."
Well - the pearl had teeth. He gritted his own. "I think I do."

"Well … I don't think you do. You sit there, the picture of frailty, and you expect me to believe that you are not plotting against me? Even now?"

Frailty? She was the one who had starved him. And plotting - Charles glared, divided between anger and disbelief. Not surprising, that the White Queen would suffer from paranoia, delusions of grandeur. All he was plotting was how to get bloody well home. "I'm not -"

"Be silent," Frost hissed.

Around him, the soldiers swayed like reeds in a high wind.

He would be silent, Charles thought, for their sake. Not because she told him to. Indeed, her voice was cascading on and on, like an malicious icewater brook, but he was so furious that he hardly heard what she said, until he caught:

"- that tooth of yours."

His mind lurched to a halt.

"… What?"

"Were you not listening to me?" She gave him a small, cold smile. "You may answer my questions."

"No - I -" he gulped. "I didn't catch that last. What was it? About a - tooth?"

Anger at Frost, fear for the doctor, the will to weave his veils - even the pain of the failed escape, still twisting through his mind … they were all there, but he had to ignore them. Had to focus on her words.

"Do you remember, Mr. Xavier? Almost three months ago, now, when I gave you a belated Third Quarter gift. Your gift of chain and shackle …"

Charles refused to look at said gift where it lay glinting in the corner. Likewise, he refused to nod or even blink.

"Do you remember why I gave it you?"

No. It was a small voice, to himself. Don't let it be … don't let her -

"You recall my prince, from the Finder. Yes?"

… Oh god.

"Of course you do. You must, for you yourself attempted to erase part of his short-term memory one night early in October. I reversed the erasure, because I would not have it so. But you must also understand, Mr. Xavier, that I was not concerned with what you had done - physically - to him." She curled her lip, just slightly. "He is a resilient creature. And of course, he is more than capable of returning injury. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth …"

"And, at that time, I was not concerned with what he chose to do to you afterwards. You had proved yourself deceptive and insolent, Mr. Xavier, and thus I chained you … for him to do with you as he would. I only told my son that you were to remain mentally functional." She lifted an eyebrow. "Due to your success with the Finder that morning."
"Success." Horror was clawing its way up from his stomach. "Later - without me … I helped you win in Dallas - without me you would have -"

"Without you," and Frost's voice was dangerous, "I would have accomplished the very same things. It would just have taken more time. I was the first to use the Finder, and with it I saved the city of Stalingrad during the second World War. Do not think to flatter yourself, Xavier."

His mind presented him with the images, from Wars and their Leaders. No picture of Frost there, no, but of Stalingrad … the vast scale of destruction …

She had not continued. Instead, she was watching him - looking for all the world like her statue in the man's mind. A perfectly beautiful face, but one made of stone.

"The next morning, you were alive and well, for whatever reason. So I left you both well enough alone. My prince is an adult, and perfectly capable of making his own choices." A pause. "Usually, however, when faced with particularly drastic choices, he comes to me to be advised.

"Even so you may picture my astonishment, Mr. Xavier, when … just this afternoon … he came to me with a strange request. One which had never been broached to me, before."

Charles could only listen, numb.

"He had washed." Frost pursed her lips. "That was curious in and of itself; usually he has to be told to do so. So when I inquired after his health - and after a bit of discussion - he revealed that he wanted …" she laughed lightly, a girl's laugh. "Can you imagine?

"He - wants - you."

She waited for Charles to say something. Then she continued:

"He wants you. Why? I do not know, and neither do I care … but I had to ensure that he was telling the truth. And when pressed, he did show me the memory of an extremely interesting interaction of yours. Involving that bed, a metal filling, and," she raised an eyebrow, "a good deal of blood."

Charles fought not to gag. He would not give her the satisfaction. The bitch. The bitch - and beneath that, he heard a howl of you bastard why did you tell her -

"So. He wants you as ... hm. It's impossible to say politely, really. So I shall not. But I shall say that - he has been so very useful to me that I see this as a fit reward. And you, Mr. Xavier …" Frost's voice descended into an icy whisper, "you have been such a thorn in my side that I see this as a fit punishment."

"Thorn?! I helped you win!"

"You defy me, Xavier," she hissed. "You flout my will whenever you can. And I have been striving for my victory far too long to brook any threat to my authority. That is why it gives me such pleasure to do what I am about to do to you. Or - arrange to have done to you. Behold, my Fourth Quarter gift to you …" She gestured with both hands. "The gift of my prince."

Charles half expected the man, so cued, to break down the door.

Instead, Frost half rose from her chair. Her eyes were blazing.

"And, through him, my dear Professor … the gift of finding out what it truly means to be powerless and abused."
Silence.

"Then, perhaps, you will think twice about defying me. Rebelling. Attempting to run away. Do I make myself clear?"

The soldiers in the room had, one and all, turned away or hidden their faces.

Charles felt faint. "Yes, my lady."

A vicious smile. "Good. Then -"

"Then don't do this -"

"My dear boy -"

"No, I mean," his voice cracked, "please don't do this -"

"Come, come," she said, gently. "I would not have my prince fight all these many days with no reward whatsoever. And since he seems to have taken a fancy to you ..."

"No." Charles whispered. To himself as well: the deal - their deal was bloody well called off if the bastard had introduced a third party to the terms. But Charles didn't know if -

He didn't know if she knew about the agreement. To protect the children …

But did that matter? To be given as a gift to someone - it was medieval, it was sick, and: *Happy Christmas!* Charles' mind shrilled, and he flashed to the image of a pig with an apple in its mouth. He wasn't as plump, of course; nor as pink, and oh god he was teetering on the edge of hysteria -

"Calm down, Mr. Xavier." Frost was watching him lazily. "There's nothing you can do. Except: do as I say, and I will tell him that you must be left alive after he's through with you."

He tried to reply. Couldn't.

"Now." She gestured at one of the soldiers, who brought her the second of the three lacquer cases. Medium-sized, Charles noted, but very thin, flat, with clasps more ornate than the case that held the sheets. The soldier held it out; Frost unlocked the clasps and traced her fingers over something.

Then she held it up.

It was - fabric. Spilling over her hands like dark blue ink. *Indigo*, Charles thought. Was it another sheet?

"Here is another gift for you, dear Professor. I received it only last night, from the Chinese delegation. These cases much earlier, from the Koreans, and the sheets from -" She smiled to herself. "From another life. But this I had intended to keep for Jean, in years to come. The *fenghuang*, you see …"

Frost held up the robe - for it was a robe, he saw - and curled her fingers round an embroidered bird. "But then it occurred to me that it might suit you just as well. And with rather less time to wait to wear it."

"Here."

Charles made no move to take it.
"Xavier." That same smile; cold. "You will take this robe. You will go into the bathroom and change out of your clothes. And you will return to me. No arguments."

"And if I don't?"

"If you don't … oh, dear. Your disadvantage, Professor, is that you care for certain people - and that their identities are hardly opaque to me. Divest yourself from these petty chains and you will find yourself infinitely more free. In the meantime, though, if you do not do exactly as I say, I will have Dr. Vogelzang shot."

He flinched. "But you said -"

"Ah, yes." Frost made a flicking gesture. "Her assistant, then. Quite ill-mannered, in any case, so it would not be such a -"

"Fine, fine." Charles got to his feet, grabbed the robe. "I'll do it. Just - just don't -"

But he could not speak anymore. Instead, he shut himself inside the bathroom.

It was easy to strip without thinking, in the dark. He had done so many times - October mornings, November nights. Charles folded his clothes automatically, shivering in the cold, and put everything in a corner. The same place that the man had put his own dirty clothes just the previous night -

Charles choked back a dry heave. There was very little in his stomach, luckily - just the packaged and canned goods he had had the chance to eat. And it was too dark to see himself in the mirror. He focused on his body with other senses instead. Hunger, yes, and thirst. A peculiar twisting to his stomach … nerves, perhaps. And that whole-body sensation of weakness, giddiness … He swayed -

"No. Come on." He unfolded the robe in the dark. "Get this over with."

Charles felt empty, only just aware of his fingers flicking from button to silk-wrapped button. He felt the piping on the cuffs, the embroidery crawling up the robe's front. The silk was surprisingly heavy. He supposed it must be worth … Charles shivered. He could not even hazard a guess. He had only ever seen a robe like this in a museum.

The dark blue of the robe would suit his eyes, he supposed. For one brief moment, he wished for a candle. Just so he could see …

Charles blinked hard. Smiled. It felt tight on his face. "Vanity, Professor Xavier." He fastened the button at the robe's collar.

Then he walked back out, as quietly as he could.

Frost turned to look at him. She smiled - almost … indulgently. Then her eyes moved down, and an eyebrow flicked up. "Shoes."

Grimacing, Charles slid out of his ragged trainers. He supposed the image had appeared rather foolish. He peeled off his socks as well, because it stood to reason that she would not want old cotton clashing with silk. But he hardly had the chance to roll them up before a soldier came up to him and -

"I might need those," he gritted out.

"No." Frost's smile did not change. "You won't be leaving this room for a while. At least, if I understand my prince correctly. Come, Mr. Xavier."
She gestured at the floor in front of her. "Kneel."

Charles took a deep breath. Kept himself removed. *Veil* … Perhaps the veil could work both ways, and if he poured all his strength into it …

He did.

Frost could not sense his emotions. And now, neither could he.

The floor was cold beneath his bare feet. He knelt, and arranged the robe so that the silk was not caught beneath his kneecaps and shins. *It would not do*, Charles thought, distant, *to spoil it.*

"Very good," Frost murmured. His veils were aware of every breath of thought, so he felt the ice crackle through the room. Thus it was not surprising to see the soldiers cluster together and then file out the door. The one at the end of the line, awkward and vacant-eyed, gave the White Queen the last and smallest of the three lacquer cases.

Charles felt soft fur brush the nape of his neck - only barely, given the fall of his hair. He did not allow his skin to prickle as he heard a rustle and *clink* - Frost taking something from the pocket of her cloak. Nor did he flinch as her cool fingers gathered up his hair, twining through the tangled strands.

She had a comb, it appeared. Because … and Charles exhaled, remembering. He had done the same for Raven, when she was young. Combing her hair, working carefully through snarls. Keeping the touch gentle. Making it all look …

He blinked, tiredly. Making it all look beautiful. He supposed.

But of course, he had never put perfume on his little sister.

The scent was getting stronger as Frost added more. He could almost see it … uncoiling from his hair, curling round his cheekbones, just barely touching his lips. If he opened his mouth, he might taste it.

Charles kept his voice quiet. "Is perfume really necessary?"

"Mmm." The comb's teeth were still gentle. Frost alternated strokes with flicks of the perfume on his hair; he felt small drops on his scalp. The scent was that of … roses. Subtle, though; not too heady. For which Charles supposed he was thankful.

"My own mother told me to brush my hair one hundred strokes, every evening." Frost's voice sounded dreamy. "I found that the time it took did not justify the results … but it can be a useful time. To think. And I think, Mr. Xavier, that another necessity here is: a haircut."

She held up a long lock, then combed it out from under. "Or at least a trim. You see, when one goes without cutting it for a few months, then the result - is split ends."

… How did one even reply?

Charles didn't know. So he said nothing.

If he thought about it completely dispassionately, though, he might say that it was relaxing. To have someone touch him so carefully. To feel the soft brush of a velvet dress on the nape of his neck; to sit in the warmth of the fire. To blink, sleepily; more and more … until he supposed he might be dozing. Which was all right.
His eyes had fallen shut completely, when he heard a faint tap on the door. Frost said something in Russian. Charles heard the door creak open … and felt a draft creep across his skin.

He could sense who it was with his power, he supposed. But … Charles sighed. Kept his eyes lightly shut. Of course he knew who it was. There was only one other person in this manor who would feel compelled to enter his room at this hour, on this day.

Well. Two other people. If Jean were afraid of the dark, or cold, he supposed, she would come to see him. Then again, had it been Jean, she would have hugged him immediately.

The man did not touch him. Instead, Charles felt the rustle in the air as the other stooped - carefully, given the leg injury - and settled on the hearth. That close, Charles could smell him. Not as he had the previous night; there was no overt stench. Just a scent that … he realized he knew.

Charles wasn't sure how to feel about that.

Frost said something else in Russian. This time, a low baritone replied. Same language. Charles sighed - he didn't understand. And unlike German, he lacked even a syntactical base on which to hazard a guess. He leaned, just slightly, as the comb worked at his scalp. Perhaps, Charles thought, the more he heard in Russian - and remembered - the more easily he could build a repertory of words, phrases, patterns for his catalogue to analyze. A project, perhaps. For the winter.

He noticed that, when he had tipped his head back onto Frost's knee … the man had stopped breathing.

Cool fingers touched his left temple. "To the right."

Charles obeyed, tilting. At the new angle he was conscious of both the hinge of his jaw and the pulse of his jugular. Before, knowing that the man's eyes would be locked on the vulnerable bend of flesh and bone, he would have been afraid. Now, though, he was so relaxed that he felt boneless.

The comb slid all the way down his hair on the left. He felt Frost pull the strands back, threading her fingers through them.

"I have one last gift for you, Mr. Xavier."

It was warm, he smelled roses, and he was tired. So Charles replied: "Mm."

He could almost hear Frost's smile. Then both comb and perfume vial were put down - he heard the faint clacks. Then he heard the click of hinges. The last lacquer case, his mind told him. Charles supposed he was mildly curious about what was in it. He heard a a faint rattle. It sounded as though Frost were tipping something into her hands.

He was also vaguely curious about why the man's scent had … changed. It was a very slight difference, but there. And Charles heard the quietest hiss of air through teeth. He wasn't quite sure what had the other's attention.

Charles also wasn't quite sure how to feel about the heavy necklace settling on his throat.

The stones in it were very cold, even with the fire - and he could feel that that the piece entire was rather more than five rows wide. Jewels of some sort, strung on wire and wrapping high around his neck in a priceless band. There was something important about this. Something he should remember.

He heard the snick of a metal clasp.
A pause.

Then: "Open your eyes," the White Queen whispered.

Charles' eyelids felt heavy. But he managed to open them.

Everything was clear, with the vivid quality of a painting. Outlined by firelight. Charles looked at the glowing fire grate, the yellow-orange light flickering on the plaster; sliding golden over the man's cheekbones and jaw. His hair looked very red. His eyes looked very green. And he sat an arm's length away from Charles - if it were a long arm. Long, and bony and …

Charles blinked. The other was wearing … white. A white linen shirt, almost blindingly clean, edged rose-orange-gold with the firelight. There was stitching at the neck and cuffs. Silver thread, in strange lines, curlicues. Quite like frost on a windowpane, if the window were white.

Well: white and grey. Grey trousers, which was good, because otherwise the ash on the hearth would dirty them. Except - the soldiers had polished the hearthstones. And the man's shoes were polished too. Charles stared at the firelight gleaming on black leather for a long moment, before giving in to his strange drowsiness and leaning back against the White Queen's knees again.

She was saying something. Her hands were curled around his shoulders. Charles listened.

"- have been moved to your library. I have made you a bed, my prince; and he will stay in it. For the return of his clothing, for his precious books; for food and drink; perhaps even for the chance to sleep … he will do anything you tell him to do." Frost must have bent down, for he felt her voice caress his ear. "Won't you, Mr. Xavier?"

His mind moved sluggishly. "… What?"

A delicate laugh. "I'll take that as a 'yes.'"

The man was … staring at him. Those green eyes had gone black; the pupils dilated. Frost was speaking in Russian now. Charles set his mind to remember the cadences, even if he did not understand the words. And in the meantime, he supposed he wanted to see what the man was seeing. He was curious.

So Charles called up his raven.

It took longer than usual to fly to him. Small, though, smaller than a billiard ball, she can't see you … It pressed into his neck, quivering. Its feathers felt cold.

"What is it?" he meant to say, in his mind. But it was too difficult. So he just sent the raven flying to the man, carefully - just to brush over his thoughts. To see what the other saw.

It was a lovely tableau, Charles reflected, distant. Raven saw how he, Charles, sat at Frost's feet: like a cat might, curled up and compact. Indigo silk pooled on the hearthstones, concealing everything but his slender white feet. His hair shone dark where it fell in a curtain over his shoulders. His eyes looked very blue, half-lidded; his mouth looked very red. And the firelight caught the embroidery on the robe, picking out glints of color all the more remarkable against the unrelenting white velvet of Frost's dress.

Then Charles, even twice removed - through the raven's eyes, watching through the man's eyes - felt confused. There was a strange light moving on the silk of the robe, moving with the rise and fall of his own breath. Not from the fire. This light was different: multicolored … like a prism.
Oh. The light had reflected off the wide band of diamonds tied round his throat. A king's ransom of jewels, all for him. The raven was immobile, staring; probably because the ornament shone so … And the man was staring - Charles looked slightly deeper into his mind.

The diamond glitter intensified; flashed. His raven saw it in the man's thoughts; not in the physical world - reflecting something familiar, something that glinted with sharp metal edges …

Charles flinched.

"- v Meksiku - oh dear." Cold fingers dug into his shoulders. "Now, Mr. Xavier … I'll have none of that."

But Charles was gasping for breath. It felt as though something had been dashed in his face; not cold water, no. Something hot, because the man's mind had been seething with that \textit{want}, but magnified out of all control -

He flung his hands to Frost's wrists, tried to pull her away -

"\textit{Dushi ego, Erik.}" 

But Charles did not hear, for the band around his throat rippled and pulled tight. His fingers flew to it, desperately; he clawed at the cold bite of diamonds and wire. \textit{No use}. He tried to speak, and couldn't; tried to breathe -

"\textit{Dostatochno. Polozhi ego na krovat'.}"

Strong arms were picking him up from where he had slumped forward, and then Charles was being laid on his bed. He hardly registered the slithering clank of the chain, the close of the shackle on his ankle - the softness of the velvet coverlet, or the hands smoothing over his hair and just barely framing his face. Callused, part of his mind told him, but he couldn't hear over the roar of \textit{thank god breathe just breathe} because the diamonds had loosened their hold.

And then the hands were gone.

More Russian. Frost was saying something. In a haze, Charles turned his head to look. The man was kneeling in front of her, silhouetted dark against the fire. She laid one hand on his brow. Then she smiled, caressed his hair … and gave him something.

Charles tried to catch a glimpse. The man had gone rigid, staring at it … a bottle? Small. Small, and glinting ruby-red in his hands.

"Oh god who cares -" he gasped, shuddering away from the sight of the two of them, panicking at the pain curled round his throat. "This again. Not this again. No, \textit{no} -"

And Charles was so occupied with trying to hook his fingers beneath the diamonds, hook and yank and break their hold, that he did not hear Frost leave.

Charles was focusing on his breathing, staring at firelight flickering on the ceiling and trying not to think, when the man loomed into view above him.

"Oh fuck, no," he rasped, and threw a punch.

The other caught it with no effort. Bastard. And stared down into his eyes.
"What," Charles took a deep breath, "are you looking at?"

The man smiled at him. Those green-blue eyes were shining. "… You."

Charles stared back. The ungodly fuckwit. Choke him again and then fucking smile? He made his voice as cold as he could. "Let go of my hand."

When the other did, Charles brought it down and massaged at his throat. "What the hell was that?"

A pause. "What do you -"

"No. You do not ask questions. You tell me. What was Frost doing here?"

"She - she gave you to me. I asked and she -"

Mother fucker. Charles sat up before he could second-guess; glared straight into the man's eyes. "Why the fuck did you ask her? Why did you tell her anything? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I …"

The blighter looked wide-eyed, confused. Baring his teeth, Charles pushed at that chest. He left red fingerprints on the white linen - good, he thought savagely; he wanted to ruin it, because his throat was god damned bleeding from where the diamonds had cut.

"I don't - Xavier … I cannot lie to my lady."

"Cannot or will not?"

But the other stared from where he had stumbled back to the hearth. Stared, and made no reply.

Charles drew in another deep breath. Exhaled. "How, exactly, did she find out? What did you tell her? Can you remember - do you understand? Or do I need to use smaller words?"

"I -" The man shook his head like a dog after a run in the rain. "She summoned me to - to escort MacMurphy. And they both saw. Saw that I was clean."

Charles felt caught, despite himself. "MacMurphy? He's still alive? What was he doing -"

But the other had kept talking. "My lady asked if I was ill. And I … I didn't know …"

"What to say," Charles finished, wearily. "So she took a look in your head, did she? I suppose she has a standing invitation to that castle of yours?"

A pause.

The diamonds on their wires … moved.

Only slightly, almost nothing - but Charles shoved himself over the bed until his back hit the wall. "Bloody hell, don't you dare. Do you understand?" His breath was high-pitched, ragged. "If you even think about choking me again, I'll -"

"You'll what, Xavier?"

The band tightened. The man watched with glittering eyes from where he crouched on the hearth.

"You'll run away again? Or … try to run away again? My lady told me just now, when you were
flopping on that bed like a fish. What you did. Trying to run away?” His voice had turned louder, thickening with rage. "You promised me. You said - anything I wanted, and I want - I want -" Greedy, Charles' mind offered. Selfish. Pig. But he couldn't say anything. His back was arching up from the wall. He couldn't speak, he couldn't breathe - but his mind flashed to a memory of combat training and he slapped his right hand against the plaster, hard. And again. Shite take a hint -

And the man did. The necklace - choker, how appropriate - loosened, and Charles could breathe again.

The other looked like nothing more than a shadow, hulking in front of the fire. "I want you, Xavier. I want your heart where I can feel it -" the diamonds undulated over his jugular, "and I want your blood where I can touch it."

Charles felt a drop of blood trickle down his neck from the ligature marks, as if on cue. But the monster didn't even stop talking to admire his handiwork. "You'd never be able to hide from me - you'd never be able to escape - so why even run in the first place?"

And all Charles could do was laugh.

"Why run?" He dragged a hand over his neck, blotting. It would be a shame for blood to stain the silk. "This is why. I don't even know how many times you've inflicted pain on me, you bastard - but do you think I want to be throttled? Have you forgotten so quickly what I told you? You ask before you do things to me. If you only listen to me when I'm screaming in pain, then I might as well run, hm? I'd scream if you caught me, I'm sure. But at least I'd be away from you. Not penned up like a rabbit in a hutch, waiting to be killed."

Silence.

Charles watched the shadow, narrowly.

"And I'd scream if I were out in the stables and you were fucking me there. That was what you said you wanted when you thought you had to kill me to have sex with me, remember? You said you would ask your precious lady; you said you would take your time torturing me to death. I told you: no, you adorable little psychopath - we can shag like we're in heat if you protect the children - and you don't even have to tell Frost -"

He was breathing heavily. "That was what I said. And you told her anyway."

"But -"

"You told her, and you hurt me again. So, you can see that I am having an entire cornucopia of second thoughts."

"An entire - what?"

"… Never mind."

Charles slumped back against the wall. It might have been amusing, were he not hyperaware of the dried blood on his neck and the scent of roses in his hair. And aware of - memory. The previous night - not even twenty-four hours ago, he realized - he had been having what amounted to an existential crisis on this very bed. Now things would change, he had thought, and had flagellated his own mind while staring at the stars in agony -

- what utter tripe.
Now, aside from being come on, twice, and being manhandled … and aside from Frost knowing … now? He ran a finger beneath the diamonds, searching for the clasp. Nothing had changed. Nothing: down to his own tendency to forget the obvious. There - something as simple as undoing a clasp, and he hadn't done it. It was the trauma, the stress, the tension crackling through the air that had made him forget. He brought both hands to the simple mechanism -

And the man growled. "Don't."

Something simple. Flinging his hands to his sides, Charles shut his eyes. The man had been motivated in the first place by a simple enough bargain: sex for the safety of the children, for Charles’ friends. Charles knew him to react to insults like a tiger and to caresses like a house cat. Fine. Then Charles would keep it simple for now. Simple would help the blighter actually understand that - that actions had consequences.

"If you don't want me to take off this bloody thing - and it is actually bloody, if you haven't noticed yet - then tell me: what did you tell Frost?"

"I could just melt the clasp, you know."

"I do know. And I could just do my best impression of a corpse all night."

Charles stared in frustration at the shadow in front of the fireplace - a shadow, he saw, but one clothed in a white shirt. It was surreal … but then again, it was not the most surreal thing that was going to feature in the next few hours. For example: his words. Charles opened his mouth; took the plunge.

"Which reminds me: how do you want this to proceed?"

There was no answer.

Maybe the blighter had not understood him. "Our … interactions." Charles raised an eyebrow. "If you will."

Still no answer.

The worst tutorials he had ever had the misfortune to witness had been like this. A patient teacher leaning across a table; a student glowering and silent. But Professor Xavier had only offered advice on how to improve the interactions; he had never been fumbling for what next to do, himself. And he would not start fumbling now.

"Think back," he murmured, "to the times that we have … been together. So far. I can think of three. There was last night; there was the last night in October; there was -"

"You forgot - three nights ago. Before the battle's end."

The man's voice had caught. Charles pursed his lips. He had forgotten nothing of the sort; what on earth was the blighter -

"I … slept well. There was a white bird." A pause; then the other continued, dogged. "I thought it was you. Wasn't it?"

Charles pitched his voice to cut. "It must have been your imagination. So. Last night, Halloween night, and - the night you ripped out my tooth."

"And - when I ... your eyes."

"Verbs are your friend. What about my eyes?"
"When you were slipping me a note." A low breath - had that been laughter? "I wanted your eyes … You were - on the library door -"

"Right," Charles spoke over him. The idiot was thinking of the times they'd touched, apparently. Not just sex. "All the incidents in the library that did not involve fellatio - let's lump those together, shall we? And besides, I'm not talking about -"

"The night you first came here."

Charles went still. "… What?"

"The night my lady brought you here. The first in September. You were asleep -"

"I was drugged."

The man had gone quiet again - but it had a different quality. Charles couldn't put a finger on it. He saw the other wrap long arms around bony knees and shins, hugging close. Was the idiot actually smiling? He looked like a child about to be told a story.

Really, this was intolerable.

"Tell me that you did not molest me in my sleep."

"I only … I saw you. Your eyes -"

"Fine. To clarify," Charles snapped, "I mean the times we have interacted sexually. All three of them."

The man shifted. "Four."

"Can't you count? What do you mean, four?"

"… When you were in my head."

And for one long moment, Charles could not speak at all.

Shame clutched his gut, twisting. It's in the past, he told himself, and: it was the influence of his thoughts. It hadn't been him, Charles. Not really. He had been under duress. He had been half-crazed with pain and fear - and in someone else's mind, and - "Stop," he hissed under his breath. It was in the past, it was over, and he'd never do it again.

"That?" He firmed his jaw. "I hardly remember it."

"Convenient," the man said. "I, on the other hand, remember everything. Everything you did - and everything you said. I remember it perfectly. You'd do well to consider that, Professor."

"Well, even if you do," Charles replied, pushing shame away, "you got your own back, didn't you? With my filling. We're even now."

The other was silent. Watchful, from his crouch on the hearth.

That knee must be giving him a good deal of discomfort - but who cared, really? "Now, one happy stroll down memory lane later, you still haven't answered my question. Which did you prefer: the night you pulled out my filling, or the night I sucked you off in the library?"

He heard the man's breath catch. Happy memories indeed. Charles controlled his own shivering with
an effort - really, though, he was cold, even with the robe. He shifted and turned. Could he wrap the velvet coverlet around himself? Perhaps. It was tucked in quite tightly, on the corners of the bed, but if he could at least warm up his -

"No."

Charles ground his teeth. "Beg pardon?"

"Leave the blanket alone." A pause. "I want to see you."

"You and the combined population of Oxford and Cambridge, yes, but I'm cold."

A grunt. Charles saw the man shift; stand up - he heard the pop of his knees - and the other took some chunks of wood from the pile in the corner, and laid them on the fire. Then he turned and leaned against the mantel. Stared.

Charles stared back. Ridiculous. He wasn't even naked. Deliberately, he flexed his toes, and then crossed one bare foot over the other. The chain clinked as it moved; and the man went absolutely still in a way that really, really did not bear thinking about. Charles dragged his mind back to the question, still unanswered … Easy enough for any civilized person, but it appeared a reply was not forthcoming. He hoped, rather desperately, that it was not because the blighter couldn't make up his mind. Best to continue the tutorial.

"Consider. I believe Lady Frost has the underlying principle of our first interaction more in mind: I do whatever you say or you'll hurt me. You demand various things from me in return for basic necessities. And you get to fuck me whenever and however you want, because my consent does not enter into consideration. What a charming prospect."

Silence. And the slightest movement of the man's head to one side - as if he were considering … oh god, was he actually considering it? Weighing the positives and bloody negatives of something so horrible; Charles shuddered and hurried on.

"Now, our second action was rather more to my - taste." No reaction to the innuendo; no surprise there. "And the underlying principle there is more civilized. We both want something, and we negotiate to get it. And, more importantly, you ask me whether you may do certain things to me. You ask me for permission. Just like I told you last night. Did you enjoy yourself last night? Hm?"

A long pause. Then a nod.

"Then … just think about it. Everything we could do together. Like I told you, that night in the library." Charles swallowed the saliva pooling in his mouth, and infused his voice with sex. Like cherry cordial, he thought: sticky syrup injected into chocolate. "I could show you so many things … I've told you so. But what you have to tell me," and there was the pill in the sweet, "what you told Frost."

"I …" The man sounded dazed. "She asked me - what I did with you. Before."

"And?"

"And I showed her the time - here. With the metal."

Charles felt a surge of nausea - she had seen it. The White Queen knew how he had wept and bled. And she had smiled, and dressed him up for more of the same; the absolute bitch. "What else?"

"Nothing."
And his instincts caught the word. "'Nothing'? You mean to say that all she knows is - is of my taking a trip through your head and your yanking a tooth out of mine … and that's all?"

"Yes."

Charles sucked in a breath. "She doesn't know about our - arrangement?"

"No. I -" And he saw the man shift from foot to foot. "My lady saw the one memory. And she was well content with it."

"I'll wager she was."

The venom was there, but the greater part of his mind was clicking over the realization, the possibilities. Frost didn't know about the deal. She didn't know that Charles and her precious prince had reached an accord; that Charles had licked Scotch off the floor and sucked the other's cock and tangled around him in bed and made him moan …

The White Queen had seen only what she wanted to see. Amused, presumably, she had refrained from investigating further. And that …

Charles stared into the fire. The leaping flames, red and orange, cast dark shadows.

That … had been foolish of her.

"Say something."

He flicked his eyes from the fire to the man. Raised an eyebrow. "What shall I say?"

"My lady - I," the voice was bewildered, almost pained. "Did I need to - tell her about what we -"

"No," Charles thought quickly. What tone to take? Stern, angry, kind, seductive … He settled on the last. "No, I rather think not. In fact, I think you should talk to me first in future, before you talk to her. About - us."

"Why?"

He curled his lips into a smile. "Because it no longer concerns only you. It's about the two of us … together."

"… Oh."

Charles smirked to himself. The man sounded dazed again. He could not see, but he would bet that that iron line of jaw had fallen slack.

"Together?"

Certainly slack. The other might even be drooling. Charles reached up, combed his fingers through his hair, languid. "Yes, together. Come here."

The man obeyed instantly, limping up to the side of the bed. So the leg had cramped. Charles filed the information away; looked up at him from where he sat. He knew that his eyes would glint blue under his eyelashes; that the line of his own throat would show very white - well. Where it wasn't streaked with blood. Bastard. But Charles shunted his anger to the side and smiled again, gently.

Green eyes shone down, luminous. Charles watched them travel over his face, down to the indigo folds at his neck and shoulders, back up to the choker. And darken.
Oh, he would have none of that.

"So. Frost said that I need ask you for food and water, for my clothes and books … for everything. Hm?"

The man's eyes were very dark. And hot. "You heard her."

"Well, for all I know she added: 'Belay that, old chap; give him the royal treatment' when she went into Russian. But …" and Charles sighed at the other's quirk of a smile. "But apparently she didn't. So. Consider yourself asked." He made a sardonic gesture, unfurling his right hand. "For food. I am rather hungry."

There was no answer. Just that smile, widening, moving the cuts on the right side of the man's face. The skin surrounding the scabs looked less inflamed than the previous day. Charles tightened his own lips. He could hold out hope for septicemia, he supposed.

In the meantime … that smile did not abate. Charles felt sweat prickle on his neck; he ignored it. And waited.

The man finally spoke. "What will you give me, then, for some food? Professor?"

"Why, the pleasure of my conversation, of course."

A low sound of contempt; Charles feigned an injured look. "I'll have you know that I am an excellent conversationalist. If walls could talk - but there is no 'if', because I can converse with bricks and rocks. And even with you."

The man fell silent.

"Unless, of course, you're in a rush to prove me wrong, and really - ah!"

The diamonds had given his throat a vicious squeeze. Charles gasped, scrabbling at his neck; the man leaned forward - and oh shite he had fallen back on the bed, and there were those broad hands, pressed against the velvet coverlet on either side of Charles' shoulders. The flare of relief he felt when the squeezing stopped was outweighed by the panic of having the other god damned growl into his face.

"A brick, a rock - I'm not stupid, Xavier -"

"Oh, I know that." He dragged in a breath. "Someone stupid would have no way of understanding what I say now -"

"And what is it," the man hissed, "that you say?"

Charles lifted his chin. "I say to you: that if you act like a killer, like a rapist, like an animal with no self-control whatsoever … I'm going to treat you like one."

He waited. The other was staring at him, eyes wide. Wide and - something flickered in their depths. A strange spark -

But whatever it was, it vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

"To treat … Really, Professor - you made a treaty with this mindless animal," lips curled back from white teeth, "didn't you? Whatever I wanted, you said. What's to prevent me from leaving you and finding your precious friends, and tearing them limb from li -"
The man stopped talking. Charles wished it was from an attack of conscience. For: staring down at another's fingers on a trouser placket - staring while those same fingers stroked and moved to take a handful of cock, even through fabric - that came a distant second to anything civilized. But at least it had shut him up.

"You're going to leave me?" he murmured. Rubbed his fingers down in a strong stroke. "Really? I'm hurt."

"You -" the man tried, voice thick, "what -"

Charles rested his hand over the hard heat. That prominent, already, and through trousers - good _lord_. But: "I am hurt," he said, pleasantly. "You hurt me. And if you do so again, I'll stop doing this -" he twisted his hand; the man gasped, "and do this instead."

And it was easy enough to rest his head, let his hand fall, and retreat into his mind.

The reading room was very cold. And somehow ... opaque. Charles saw his breath puff white in the air - and realized: his veils, drawn tight over the window, had been frozen. Or at least chilled to such an extent that they were heavy, immobile.

_Frost_. "It makes sense," he said to the room, darkly. "Can't attack the mind? Then work away at the shields; long enough and they'll defeat themselves … God." Charles shuddered, turning away. Paced to the immense golden chair and hung over it, resting his chin on his armored gauntlets and staring down at the pile of feathers on the cushion. Even his penguin was quiet. One would think that it would like the cold. But one would be wrong in this case, thanks to the White Queen. God, he hated her. _Hated_ the bitch, with every fiber of every page in every book of this reading room -

"My." Charles drew a calming breath as he gazed down at his raven. The bird had poked its head out of the huddle and was gazing up with intelligent eyes. "Such hyperbole, hm?"

The raven croaked at him.

"Well. Be careful," he told it, trying for another deep breath. It came easily. "Mind the books for me; stay warm. You could try beating your wings."

He did not know if it would work - he had to tell them something, though. So: "When I sleep tonight, I'll have a lovely dream, and time to spend with you." Charles gazed at the veils. "I'll fix this all then." _He would._

But in the meantime …

With a sigh, Charles brought himself back from his mind, to the room. Ironic, how the environment was reversed from the previous day. His mind felt cold and sluggish. In contrast, the room with the man in it … felt almost cozy now. The fire crackled high in its grate, the velvet wrapped round him was snug, and the callused hands pressed close to his cheekbones were warm -

Charles felt a gasp hot on his face, and then he winced at the scrape of that beard on his chin, at the frantic shove of a kiss against his mouth. Then the other mouth jerked away and he felt words:

"You, are you - _du_ -" Another gasp, and then a fierce: "Don't do that again -"

"Then you don't do that again. With this necklace." Charles tipped his jaw down. "No choking, _no_ hurting. You understand?"

"Yes - oh please -"
"Oi." Frowning, Charles pushed at the other, who was wrapped round him like a straitjacket. "Move back a little. I can't breathe."

"You were gone," the man said, almost ... frantic? Strange. "You were so still - I couldn't wake you -"

"Not even with a kiss, though I am the sleeping beauty. What a handy little trick." Sitting up, Charles smoothed the silk where it had crumpled under the other's weight. "Well. I'm still hungry."

"Ja," the reply, and those eyes glittered strangely, "was möchtest du - I," a dazed shake of the head, "I mean: what do you want to eat?"

He blinked. That had been quick. So, now that the lesson had been taught, perhaps it was time to replace discipline with judicious affection. His mind calculated. Not too much, not too quickly. Charles found the correct, warm tone of voice. And used it.

"Tell me. Before Frost spoke to both of us; before she summoned you here; before she even found out about our having met in this room previously ... Did you have something in mind, for how this evening would go?"

Eyes wide, the man nodded.

Charles rewarded him with a smile. "Did any part of it involve giving me food?"

"Yes - I," a hard swallow. Charles heard the click of it. "I have food - downstairs. I brought it from the feast." A pause. "It might be cold by now."

He made his words soft. "That doesn’t matter. It sounds lovely. Why don’t you bring it to me, then ... And we’ll speak some more."

And when the man shoved his lean body off the bed and staggered to the door, Charles could only stare after him. The door swung open; the darkness of the hallway was absolute. The other had not even taken a candle.

What ...

Charles held the velvet coverlet close. That had been - strange. But ... he focused on his breathing. On keeping it regular, calming. The man's actions rattled through his memory, just like the Russian words he had heard. Too much information; too much to catalogue. Charles resolved: he would remember, keep careful track - and he would analyze ... tomorrow. When he was not running the risk of a panic attack of his own. God, it was like being a lion tamer in the circus; except without the music and the crowd, the bright lights and good cheer ... Right. Rather nothing like a circus, actually. Perhaps he would just focus on not panicking.

Five minutes of deep, calming breaths later, he heard footsteps. Charles blinked. Two sets - one with a slight hitch, and the other ... quicker?

And then his jaw dropped as Jean ran into the room.

Mr. Xavier!!

"Oh, Jean!!" She had cannonballed into him; he let the velvet cover drop and gave her a desperate hug. "Oh - how are you? I've missed you -"
I've missed you too! And a kaleidoscope of images whirled through his mind: bright fires in the stadium, warm sun on an open field, Frost enthroned in diamonds on the clouds; smiling adults, laughing children, dancing and food and fireworks -

"Good lord." Charles felt dazed. "Slow down. Slow down, you're making me seasick."

Another image: himself, on an undersized boat with an oversized admiral's hat. Then he acquired an eyepatch and a crystal sword and - Charles felt his hackles go up - a taller companion pirate with a rakish, toothy grin -

Jean blinked up at him.

She must have sensed his mental cringe. "Never mind," he said. "It's fine. But when did you see a pirate, my dear?"

*In my book.* She sent him a picture of the library, and the man, holding the volume out to her -

- even as the same man limped into the room and closed the door.

Jean turned in his direction. She must have sent him something, for the other arched an eyebrow and replied: "*Nur ein bisschen.*"

And Jean gave her fern-curl of a smile and turned back to Charles. Her eyes landed on the diamond choker. And she tipped her head to one side.

*Shite* - the blood, she could see the blood. As quickly as he could, Charles dragged up power for a physical veil - *a real veil, in the real world* - He had to concentrate much harder to create it, but once wrapped round his neck, like a scarf, it was easier to maintain than the ones he had made for his whole body. He let the glitter of the diamonds shine through, still; all he hid was the blood.

And it seemed there was some sense of telepathic etiquette regarding these shields, because - even though he thought she might be able to break it, Jean looked away while he put the veil up. Then looked back, eyes serious. *Excuse me, Mr. Xavier.*

He waved his hand. "You're excused, dear. Now - what have you been doing recently? How are you?"

She answered the first question. *I got to see the feast.*

"Did you -" Charles started; then he gritted his teeth. And sent: *Did you?*

*I thought - when there are other people with us …* Her brow puckered. *Shouldn't you talk out loud?*

He made his voice as warm as he could. *Well, I thought that we could practice like this instead. It's been quite a while, you know, since I have had the chance.*

*But Lady Frost says she was practicing with you -*

Charles controlled the surge of rage with an effort; even so, Jean blinked. *It's more pleasant with you, child. So. He raised an eyebrow. How did you enjoy the feast? Did you see -* and he sent a picture of MacMurphy.

*Mr. Xavier … Can you talk out loud instead, please?* Jean sent a picture of the man. *He'll feel sad if we leave him out.*

… Sad?
And that burst of anger broke the wall; he took a deep breath -

Jean whimpered.

A small sound - but audible. For, near the hearth, where he was setting out ceramic and metal containers, the man's head came up with a snap. And those eyes pinned him.

A pause.

"Really, Xavier." The voice was cold; the look in the green eyes was even colder. "For all that you place such importance on children's safety, you seem somewhat careless to me."

Charles gulped. "Sorry," he told Jean; his voice shook.

That's all right, she returned. I'm fine.

But: "Maidele - komm hierher," the man said. He held up a bowl.

And Jean scrambled off the bed and made a beeline for the hearth, sending Charles the picture of tables laden with dishes, framed with the word in steam: Hungry.

"Well." Charles swallowed hard. "Bon appetit."

"Das bedeutet: guten Appetit. Also, möchtest du Ente oder Gemüse?"

And the one-sided conversation continued. Charles narrowed his eyes. Even though he understood - the general gist was easy enough - Charles did not have the facility that the other had, or the crisp intonation. And he definitely did not like Jean standing easily there, within breaking distance, choking distance. Even if she seemed happy enough. Even if she …

Charles bit his lip. Jean had carried a dish over to the bed. The porcelain bowl was brimming with vegetables and meat, in some sort of sauce, over rice. She held it out to him, along with a pair of chopsticks. His stomach sent up a desperate gurgle.

Jean beamed. This is for you.

"Thank you." He took the bowl and chopsticks; his hands were not trembling.

It was difficult to wait until Jean clambered back up beside him, holding what looked like a dumpling wrapped in a napkin. But she did, and Charles started to eat. In another life, he might have told her to be careful of getting grease on the luxurious bedclothes. But in this life, he was far too occupied with trying to keep from a moan at the taste of - oh god it was duck. Rich and juicy, and he could hardly hold the pieces with the chopsticks. It didn't help that he was unfamiliar with them - but Charles supposed he was a quick study.

Chewing, he thought to dart a glance up and over to the hearth. The man was watching him, eyes half-lidded.

Charles swallowed. "Are you -" and licked his lips. "Are you going to eat something?"

A grunt. "Why not?" and a look at Jean, "Warum nicht?"

"You speak German to her? Why?"

A shrug. The man was flicking vegetables into a dish; he wielded the chopsticks as easily as breathing. "The more languages heard when one is young -" he raised an eyebrow, "the greater the
"Your lady." Charles grimaced. "She speaks Russian to her, I suppose."

"Yes." That voice was low and calm. "Russian for work -"

"German for reading?"

The man stared into the bowl. "German for children."

Which made no sense, but the other had fallen to, and Charles was annoyed to see that facility with languages and chopsticks was accompanied by perfectly serviceable table manners. Who would have thought?

But he tried not to think. Far better to concentrate on the food.

There was silence, punctuated by the clink and scrape of utensils. Charles ate everything he had been given, making only token protest when Jean brought the bowl back to the man to be refilled. One corner of that thin mouth quirked up - the scar moved - as the man snagged a piece of duck with his chopsticks and held it out for her to eat.

"Where did you learn to use chopsticks?"

"Manchuria."

Charles had to admit he was curious - but since no further information seemed forthcoming, he focused on his food.

A few moments later, he only just picked up the image of water from a faucet, framed with thirsty, when there was a thunk from his wardrobe. Charles turned his head so quickly that he felt a vertebra pop. He heard a clinking noise - and then the metal cup from the previous night floated across the room and to the bathroom. There was the squeak of a tap, water running and stopping, and the filled cup moving through the air to Jean. Surreal.

Jean giggled. The man arched an eyebrow as she plucked the cup from midair. She took a drink; offered the water to Charles.

"No, thank you," he said, and snapped at the other: "Really, you might ask before rummaging around in my things."

He realized his mistake as soon as he saw the man's shoulders straighten, and those eyes spark. Charles gave the metal cup a jaundiced look. Far better to give it back, he supposed. But for now - it was useful, so he would use it. Just not to fill with -

"Then you're not thirsty at all?"

"Not for water, no." Charles sighed. "There's a bottle of Shiraz in the same box, if I could just take two oh-so-trustworthy steps to fetch it." He rattled the chain and sneered -

Only to stop, staring, as the shackle parted. Had he -

Except: the man had gone tense, staring as well.

Is that better, Mr. Xavier?

Charles gulped. "Yes," he murmured. "Yes, Jean; quite. Thank you." And before the other could
trap him again, he slid off the bed and padded to the wardrobe. "I actually have a gift for you, dear. Fourth Quarter, you know."

She shoved the last of the dumpling in her mouth and began to chew frantically; despite himself, Charles smiled. "It will keep. Don't choke."

And he moved quickly to shift both boxes. The one with his own possessions - all that's left, his mind whispered, and Charles shut down that line of thought, moving the box to its original place between the metal headboard and the wardrobe. And the other, empty except for the pillowcase, he decided to place on the velvet. Then he stood still, not wanting to go back onto the bed. It would be accepting what Frost had decreed for him - putting the apple in his own god damned mouth -

"Here," he said, voice hoarse, with a gesture at the box. "Inside. Take a look."

Eyes wide, Jean made her way to the box, and peeked. Then, with a bounce, she took out the pillowcase and scrambled to go sit on the hearth.

Charles bit his lip. She wanted to … share, perhaps. He sighed: admirable, but really, that just meant he had to sit on the bed and try not to think about what would happen when the glee of gifts was over and Jean was gone; try not to think about sex with every single brush of the velvet coverlet on his fingers -

Unless ...

Before he could change his mind, Charles walked across the room and looked at the high-backed chair. Frost's.

Instinct made him turn to look down over his shoulder - to see the man, staring up from his own place on the hearthstones. Charles tried to read his expression; couldn't. With one pass over the other's mind he could; but, tiredly, Charles realized that he didn't really want to know. So he merely smoothed out the silk of the robe and his own expression. And sat.

The chair didn't belong to Frost anymore. He was laying claim to it. So there.

Can I, Mr. Xavier? from Jean, clanging like a fire engine. Please please please?

Whether Christmas or Fourth Quarter or Chanukah - Charles felt a smile curl the corners of his own mouth - children were the same, it seemed. "Go ahead."

"Das bedeutet -" the man began, but Jean was too busy rummaging through the pillowcase, her mind a fiery pinwheel of excitement.

"Somehow, I doubt she's thinking about German vocabulary at present," Charles murmured, looking at the other and raising one eyebrow.

The only reply was a flat glare. Except: then the glare turned into a glint, and those thin lips quirked up -

Oh shite, and Charles flicked his eyes away, feeling his stomach lurch. What the hell had that been? Whatever it had been, he wouldn't have it. He would focus on Jean instead.

He saw Ororo's makeup, Bobby's gumball machine - "Oh, I forgot, Jean. Most everything there is from the others - Bobby and John were Sworn, you know."

I know, I saw. Another beam up at him; then the box of playing cards accidentally fell open and Jean
scrambled to pick them all up.

"So … the only thing in there from me," Charles swallowed, "is the book."

Jean paused at his tone. Then she got up, quickly. Trotted over to the bed, retrieved the empty box, and promptly put all of her gifts inside. All except …

Charles waited, biting his lower lip, as she looked inside the pillowcase. He watched her take the book out. Her hands seemed very small on its broad cover. She touched it, hesitant, and then opened it carefully.

Charles heard her draw in a breath of wonder.

He would not remember all the presents he had given Raven, over the years. Once the Bank of Britain had been reestablished, renamed, he had gone through the legal motions to retrieve his inheritance. It had no longer been a fortune, what with reconstruction taxes levied by the government, damn their greedy eyes … but he had set enough aside to be sure of giving his sister the best gifts each year. Compared to that …

One book did not seem like much.

Except then Jean looked up at him. Charles saw her grey eyes shine. And he saw her mouth the words: Thank you.

"Why, Jean -" he steadied his voice with an effort. "You're quite welcome."

She held his gaze for another minute, then turned back to the book. Reached out -

The man made a low tsch, between his teeth. She looked at him; he looked back, seriously. "Erst mußt du deine Hände waschen."

Charles blinked as Jean jumped to her feet and scurried to the bathroom. Could she reach? But then Charles heard water running, and remembered. Telekinesis. Very determinedly, he stared into the fire. Did not meet the man's eyes.

Jean came back, and picked up the book. She walked up to Charles' chair. Will you read to me?

"Of course," he said. Shifted to make room. "If you can stand my bony knees. Here."

It was like having a little sister again, he reflected, as Jean turned the heavy cream-colored pages from her seat in his lap. Charles scanned the table of contents. "Choices, choices. You pick."

Jean nodded, and thought. Then she pointed to Sleeping Beauty.

And Charles felt a shiver creep down the back of his neck, as she looked at the man and tilted her head.

The other spoke softly. "Das ist Dornröschen."

Briar Rose, Charles' mind translated, and: No. Stop. He moved all of his attention to the book. Focused on the texture of the paper, the slide of pages as Jean turned them. On the ornate colored plates, the illuminated capitals, and the sound of his own voice.

But try as he might, one prickle on the back of his neck was hyperaware of the man picking up the dishes and rinsing them in the bathroom sink. Moving quietly to lay more logs on the fire; to put clean ceramic ware, metal containers and chopsticks back in the canvas bag in which he had carried
them. And then - really, was he compulsive? One would expect him to relish squalor, given his issues with personal hygiene - but he was carrying the pile of Charles' clothes out from the bathroom, and placing them in the box outside the wardrobe.

Charles heard the can of mandarin oranges fall out with a clatter, followed by a soft curse. Odd. The man hadn't caught it with his ability - but really? He, Charles, couldn't care less.

The room was soon neat as a pin again. A few more quiet steps - Charles heard running water, and then the man placed the metal cup on one of the chair's flat armrests.

Then all that remained was for the man to fold up his lean form, sink back down to the hearth, and listen along with Jean. So, clamping down hard on his own nerves, Charles took the fairy-tale lovers to perfect felicity as quickly as he could.

"... And they lived happily ever after. The End."

Thank you. Jean snuggled close. Then she yawned.

Charles' stomach lurched. He had forgotten: the faster the story ended, the sooner Jean went to bed, and -

"Möchtest du schlafen, maidele?"

Jean nodded, scrubbing the back of one hand across her eyes.

"Really," Charles said, quickly. "I would very much enjoy reading another one to you, Jean."

He could pull a Scheherazade, he thought, desperately. One story after another, as long as the other didn't -

"She looks a little tired to me, Xavier."

"Jean?" Charles bent his head to meet her eyes. "Are you tired?"

A nod.

"Oh, but - there are so many more in here," and his voice had cracked, he knew it, and he made a grab for the pages, to flip to the table of contents.

Mr. Xavier, and her eyes were grave, your hands are dirty from dinner.

He swallowed. "I'm sorry."

That's O.K. It's just that I wash my hands before I touch the pretty books, is all.

"And that's very good of you, Jean."

You're pretty too, Mr. Xavier. Can you show me how you made your hair so shiny?

He gritted his teeth. Said nothing. Jean had only just begun to look slightly anxious when Charles regained his self-control, and forced a smile down at her. "One hundred strokes a night - brushing hair, I mean."

Really?

He felt a laugh catch in his throat; swallowed bitterness. "No, dear. I'm afraid I'm not quite sure
"Come on. Take your book." Jean did; Charles glanced at the box of her other presents, and then gave the man an impassive stare. "I'll put her to bed."

He busied himself with standing, hoisting Jean to put her feet on the floor - she did with a drowsy mumble - and picking up her box. Tucking it under one arm. His throat was parched, but he refused to look at the glass of water.

There was only silence.

"Really," he exhaled. "You can trust me to - to walk across the hallway and put her to bed. Can't you?"

The other treated him to just as impassive a stare in return. Then one corner of that mouth curled up into a smile. "Only if you hurry back."

Charles did not grace that with a reply. Instead, he ushered Jean out of his room and across the hallway to hers.

He expected - well, he hadn't really thought of what to expect. Cold, perhaps; frigid darkness. Like his own room had been, before the man had built a fire for him. But … Jean's room was warm enough, with flames crackling away in the fireplace and three blankets on the bed.

Charles was not jealous, he told himself. Not at all. Merely - he sighed. Merely tired. Sick and tired of the whole rigamarole that had begun with them treating him like a student, and ended with them making him envy a six-year-old, for god's sake -

_Mr. Xavier?_ Jean's thoughts were anxious, through her sleepiness. _Are you O.K.?_

"Fine." He smiled down at her. "Go brush your teeth."

And he watched the fire as Jean did so. As she placed the book on her tiny bedside table, as she pushed blankets back and cuddled up in them, holding - he grimaced - Frost's gift of white furs close. But, Charles was satisfied to see, she held the bear closer.

"I don't know whether that bear belonged to Bobby or John," he said, "but I will tell them both 'thank you' for you, when next I see them. Shall I?"

_I can tell them 'thank you.' I'll see them tomorrow._

Charles swallowed. "Will you?"

_Yes. Lady Frost is going to Dallas. Then she's going to Mexico City, but I get to stay in Dallas with Hank and Logan._

But Charles hardly heard.

The fire was blurring in his sight, into a rose-gold smear. "Ah."

For a long moment, Jean was quiet. Then - he felt the faintest brush of her thoughts. The small animal that he remembered as edging out from inside the conch shell … The shell, Charles realized, that he had not seen in months. That was a good thing, he supposed.
But … Jean had sent an image.

It was himself, Charles realized. His dark hair and indigo robe blending into room's shadows. Diamonds glittering at his throat, even through the veil; his pale, gaunt features blank as he stared at the fire.

Except … there was a glittering on his cheekbones, too. And that glitter coalesced - threaded silver to frame the image with: Mr. Xavier …

... Why are you so sad?

Damn. Charles made the veils surrounding his mind flutter; Jean's touch slid away. He swiped one of his sleeves across his face and turned to give her a bright smile.

"I miss them, dear. So: tell them I miss them, won't you? Ororo, Bobby and John, Sean … Hank, Angel and Alex, and Logan; everybody." He made his voice light, waggled his eyebrows comically as he tucked the blankets under Jean's chin. "What a long list."

I'll tell them. Jean's eyes shone beneath her drooping eyelids. I'm sure they miss you too.

"I'm sure." He straightened. "Sleep well, hm? Happy Fourth Quart - oh really. Happy … Solstice, Winter's Eve, Yule, Christmas. Whichever." He swallowed against the ache in his throat. "And a very happy New Year, too."

Happy ...

She was falling asleep.

Charles stood there, quietly. Then he bit his lip, and reached out a careful hand. He tucked a lock of Jean's red hair behind her ear. And sent a tendril of thought, the most gentle suggestion.

Sleep well. Sleep deeply. And sleep until tomorrow morning, hm? Whatever you may hear, in your sleep ... is a dream.

Starting, Charles told himself, with the soft sound of the door as he closed it. He did so. Dropped the veil, sent that power back into his mind. Except for enough to waft Jean one final thought, as he leaned his forehead against the wood.

Tomorrow is a journey.

Seven is a journey, Raven had told him. And were his sister here, he would say to her what he sent to Jean:

Be safe. I love you. Be safe.

Charles made no fuss about walking back into his room, no grand entrance. It was his space after all - not Frost's, not the man's. No matter how much the one might gloat and the other might -

Might stare, god damn it. He could feel those eyes boring into his back as he closed the door; as he sighed and strode over to his bed. He reached in the box remaining to him, rummaged through his belongings until he found the bottle of wine.

And kicked, sharply, to get the touch of cold iron away from his ankle. "Don't."

A low growl. "Why not?"
"Because I showed I can be trusted without it. I put Jean to bed and returned in all due time," he paced back to the chair in front of the hearth, turned on one heel and stared down at the man, "and now, I just want to sit and not be chained."

Charles set the bottle of wine on the floor next to the chair. Then he picked up the metal cup on the armrest, drained the water in one gulp - his throat was dry, after all - and sat down, flipping the silken sleeves out of the way. "Besides. That thing bloody well chafes, and that chafe? Hurts."

“If you stopped yanking at it, it wouldn’t hurt as much.”

“If it weren’t on my ankle, I wouldn’t yank it.”

“If you hadn’t taken your trip through my head, it wouldn’t be on your ankle -“

“And if you hadn’t tried to kill me, I wouldn’t have taken that - trip.”

A pause.

Then the man growled: “Well, you shouldn’t have been in the West Wing.”

Charles met his eyes fearlessly. “Well, you should learn to control your temper. Oh, and - just maybe? Not kill people.”

Another growl. But the other had looked away, turned to the fire instead. And … Charles glanced to one side of the chair. There, in the shadows, the chain lay curled up. Like a metal viper, waiting to strike …

He dismissed the image and picked up the wine. Opened the bottle smoothly enough, given how out of practice he was with a corkscrew. A metal corkscrew, he noted, and gave the back of the man's head a poisonous look. The blighter could have offered to do it for him. Not that Charles would accept it, but it was the principle of the thing.

Pouring out a generous amount, he sighed. Stared at how the wine cast purple-red glints onto the bright metal. The cup was more polished on the inside; he didn't know how the other had managed it.

Charles swirled the alcohol and stared at the man, who was gazing into the fire in turn. The light reflected in his eyes, just like it would in those of a cat. In fact, he seemed more feline than anything at the moment - the lines of back and shoulders relaxed beneath the white shirt, grey-clad legs tucked beneath himself, head tipped just slightly to one side.

Then he turned, looked back at Charles - those eyes glowed green and the illusion was complete. Charles tightened his grip on the cup; sent mental thanks to Angel again. If he was going to get through this, he would need every single drop of that alcohol. A pity he had knocked over the vodka that morning. Or maybe not: even with enough food to take away his hunger, he wasn't quite sure if it would have cut the impact of harder liquor -

Food. He blinked at the man, remembering. The blighter had actually brought him - food - oh shite. He had missed the chance for positive reinforcement.

"'Never too late, I suppose," he muttered, and: "Here." He held out the cup. "You have some first."

"… Why?"

"Because," and Charles tried a tight smile, "you brought me a feast. And I didn't say 'thank you.' So:
thank you," he gestured with the cup, "and: have some."

A dubious glance into the brimming cup as the man plucked it from his fingers. "How much is 'some'?"

Charles shrugged. "However much you like. I am all prepared," he tapped the bottle with one finger, "for a good deal of holiday cheer."

"Mm."

The silence was nowhere near comfortable; Charles' nerves were strung too tight. Blood had dried in streaks on his throat - he could feel his skin catch on the diamonds. Still … as he took the cup back after the man's careful sip, and slowly drained it … he felt somewhat more centered. And if it took alcohol to achieve that? Such was the way of one Charles Xavier, Oxford Casanova.

"Long may he reign," he muttered to himself.

"What?"

"Nothing." He raised his voice for the man's benefit. "Just thinking."

And he stared at the other … just thinking. Watching the man turn back to the fire and relax again. The tutorial had been mildly successful so far, he supposed. The other had stopped choking him; had brought him food, fetched water, had even tidied. All he needed was the sex, Charles thought, cynically - and he'd have the perfect spouse. *Spouse.* He was not so traditionally minded that he automatically thought 'wife' - certainly not. The Party of Purity was strong in Oxford, and rather worse in Coventry… but really, Charles had always thought that if they were so keen on traditionalism, they'd do better to move to the Free West. They were on Stryker's sodding bankroll already anyway.

He brought his mind back to the issue at hand. *Sex.* Charles poured himself more wine and drank, staring at the man. It had not been precisely terrible, so far; the incident with the tooth excepted. The other was just naturally aggressive, rather to an extreme. But when manipulated by his own adolescent desires, and when coaxed and soothed - hell, outright controlled - through touch … well. He could be calmed, somewhat.

So … Charles would have to touch. Fair enough. He took another drink. It was not that tedious a chore, touching.

Not as tedious as having that bloody chain round his ankle had been, these many months. Smiling, Charles flexed his ankle. Then felt the smile vanish as the scab cracked. *Oh, right -* just last night he had yanked at it, trying desperately to get to the door … The man had put a bandage on it; an excellent idea. He set the cup down and got up -

The man twisted round where he sat, smoothly. Like a cat. Charles' skin prickled even as he made his voice soothing, "Stay - just stay. I'm only getting my first aid kit. You look comfortable," he smiled, "so don't get up."

He fetched the kit, and snatched up Logan's container of bear grease from the cardboard box as well. But when he returned to his chair the other was still twisted in place, the better to watch him. "Really." He sat and flipped the case open, took out the gauze. "If you stay like that, your back will cramp."

No reply.
Who cared? Charles opened the container. He scooped up sufficient grease and stretched to put it on his ankle - damn - changed his mind and hoisted his right leg up. It was easier to get at the wound with his ankle propped on the opposite knee, even if that did mean he was flashing a bit of leg …

Instinct made him pause, and listen. Then Charles rolled his eyes. Of course the blighter had stopped breathing, and - Charles checked - of course he was staring - Charles checked there, too. At his sodding shin, for god's sake. It looked like a bloody stick. What was so attractive about that?

"Really, this isn't a Victorian novel," he drawled, smearing the grease on the chafe. "Are you so overcome by a bit of ankle, that you have to gawk like that?"

The man did not reply. Instead … Charles clenched his teeth. He was not going to shiver, he was not. Even when the other flicked those green eyes to his face, then back down … and -

Charles felt his mouth go completely dry. The sod had not gotten up; no. But he looked just as comfortable prowling on hands and knees as he had looked sitting still and attentive - and he had reached Charles' leg, and had brushed the side of his face over one calf before Charles could flinch away.

That beard scratched.

"Hnh," Charles dragged his eyes away; started wrapping the chafe in gauze. The grease made his fingers slip. It was not because his hands were trembling. He tied a tight knot. Thought. Then reached down, flicked one button open and slid his hand into the robe, and moved beneath his upturned right leg, to the right of his left leg, and - ha - placed his fingers on the side of the man's face. And pushed.

"Move away a little, please."

The man obeyed, staring. Actually, he looked quite poleaxed - which Charles supposed made sense. He smirked, drawing his hand back and rebuttoning the robe. It wasn't every day that someone sprouted fingers from the calf. One point to him. But … and Charles slid his right leg back down, feeling the whispering slide of silk. But. What to do now?

It seemed the other had considered the same. His voice was a scrape: "May I?"

Charles raised an eyebrow; reached for the cup and took a slow sip of wine. "'May you' what?"

"May I be - closer?"

A hand grazed his shin, through the silk. Then the man leaned forward again, and pressed his face back into Charles' calf - again - through the god damned silk. Shite. Charles loosened his death grip on the cup, took a deep breath.

"Of course you may." He covered his mouth with the back of his free hand, tried to make his yawn as unobtrusive as possible. It was not completely a lie - the wine was making him sleepy. But Charles smiled to himself at the flash in the other's eyes, as those callused hands came up and settled on his own knobby knees - as the man pushed gently, just so, and shouldered his way in between Charles' legs -

- oh.

Charles felt his eyebrows climb up. He couldn't be thinking - the crazy sod couldn't be thinking of …

"I want to do what you did." That gaze was bright, fixed on his face. Then the man looked down -
Charles looked, too; he wasn't tenting the robe or anything, thank god - but the other's breath was warm through the fabric as he drew closer. "With my mouth. I want to do that. May I?"

"Oh …"

It was odd. The words, the look … all had set off a warm twist in his gut, and Charles acted like he were back in Oxford with a lover before he was able to stop himself.

"Oh, my dear." He saw his free hand reach out, stroke over the roughness of the man's hair. Saw the other's eyes go half-lidded; felt the sharp angles of cheekbone press into his palm as the man leaned into it. The scabs felt hot against Charles' skin. "… Really … you've never done that before. Have you?"

A warm breath against his hand. "No. But I want to."

Charles tried to concentrate; the lipping at his fingers was making it difficult. A problem: he didn't want the other to be traumatized. He stroked that hair again, meditatively. "Hmm …"

"Please? May I?" It was too low-pitched to be a whine, but the tone was - oh god, was this really happening? Charles double-checked the level of wine in the cup; leaned over to look at the bottle. He wasn't drunk. So it really was. Happening.

… If he wanted it to happen.

Charles felt the slow surge of heat tingle in his fingers and toes. He might have been breathing faster, because he supposed he did. Want it.

"Well, then." He gave the cup to the man. "Put this on the floor, would you?"

The other did. Not with his power, Charles saw. And those bony hands were trembling.

"I have to know …" Charles rolled his shoulders and shifted where he sat, making himself comfortable. He touched his other hand to the man's head too; ghosted his palm over the short hair. "Can you do as I tell you? Just for advice." He smiled. "You understand."

The man nodded. His eyes were wide.

Distantly curious, Charles slid fingers down to the other's throat, and pressed to check - oh. The man's heart was hammering away. And Charles could feel each breath rattle in the trachea under his fingertips.

"All right." He laid both hands on the man's shoulders. Squeezed. "Buttons first."

The other leaped to it - Charles gave him a light tap on one deltoid. "Slowly. I don't want anything torn."

So the man went slowly.

Charles focused on his own breathing. In, out. In, and out - even if he only had to crane his neck slightly, to see the other's head bent as he started with the buttons nearest the hem. And went up. Slowly. The man pressed closer in between his legs; Charles felt them fall apart just a bit further, felt the brush of linen against his thighs, and -

He touched the man's shoulder. "Shirt off, please."

The other drew back with what sounded like another whine - no, a moan. And practically tore his
own shirt off. Charles watched the linen land on the floor - _hope it's still clean, it'd be a shame to_ - oh, and the slide of warm skin against his own was really so much better …

So much better than the open air of the room. Charles hissed. Although it stood to reason: even though the fire had heated everything, of course the air would be chilly on his cock. The man had managed to unbutton everything up to his sternum, and was staring. Charles couldn't help it; he smiled to himself. Usually the dumbstruck expression appeared on his partners' faces only after he had finished doing whatever - or whoever - begged to be done.

On second thought … His smile faded, just a bit. That look was more - curious. And it stood to reason, Charles supposed, and he wasn't comparing or jealous; no, he was not.

Besides, it was only because the man was taller.

A tilt of the other's head to one side. Charles saw the jewel hanging down on the man's chest glint - but his attention was taken away from it, as the other reached out - then stopped and drew back gracefully, like a cat from a puddle. Looked up at Charles. "May I?"

"Go ahead …" Charles knew his voice was languid; he didn't care. "Treat yourself."

And then there was only hot breath on his cock - _oh_ - and the other had taken the words to heart, because he was -

Licking.

Lapping, really. Like a deer with salt.

"Oh, that's -" _Wonderful_, Charles' mind supplied, and: "… good," he managed. He was in control. He swallowed against the dryness in his throat. "Very good."

He spared the man another glance; and when his eyes met green ones, the blighter drew his tongue back and grinned.

_Oh dear_. There were far too many teeth in that smile, and Charles felt a _frisson_ of unease. What would happen if -

- but then the other latched onto his cock greedily and Charles had to groan. "That's it." He savored it for a moment; then blinked. "Wait - here." Stopped the man with a gentle touch to his forehead. "Use your hand; just - make a circle, like so," he curled his free hand around his shaft, drew back so that the other could copy the motion, "and make the grip tight - _ah_, not that tight - all right, good. Like that. And then, you see," he slid his fingers over those stark cheekbones, over the planes and angles of the other's face, "it makes it easier to suck it."

Charles let the words settle in the silence of the room. He liked the way they had sounded. "Because," he whispered, "that's what I want you to do. Go on."

Charles bent his fingers into the man's scalp, and scratched. "Suck my cock."

And - _god_ - the man grinned at him again, teeth gleaming, before he dove for Charles again and clamped his lips around - "_Fuck_," and Charles did his best not to thrust up into the wet heat of that mouth. "Mother of god -" Except the other was Jewish, so that perhaps was not the best phrase. Charles set part of his mind scrambling for a good one - he happened to be distracted, somewhat. His thoughts were starting to shiver apart, overheated, so he was extremely proud of the fact that he eventually gasped: "Lord god of hosts."
He felt a growl, and oh, the vibration was bloody amazing around his cock. But Charles screwed his eyes shut, trying for self-control; he was in control, in control, and he wouldn’t ask the blighter to repeat anything, ever, because that would indicate he - Charles - wanted something - from the other - god, it was getting harder and harder to concentrate. Harder. Ha. Charles slitted his eyes back open, looked down; the man's features were contorted, and really, it would serve him right if Charles just slapped both hands on the back of his skull and fucked his face. Wouldn't it?

How fortunate that he was more civilized than that.

So civilized that he wasn't even moving. Charles just sat in place - well, sprawled in place - and watched, fascinated. The other was going about it as if he were starved for cock. It was sloppy and inexpert - and more than once Charles felt him gag as he tried to get the head past the back of his throat …

Well. Practice made perfect. There was potential in that hot lash of tongue, in that hungry slide of lips; hm, perhaps if he - but - oh no -

"Fuck!" Charles yelped, and shoved the man away.

The other lay sprawled on the hearth, arms akimbo. He stared up at Charles; then winced. "I … forgot."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph -" and who cared about canon or creed? "Forgot what?"

The man's lips were very - pink, Charles saw, stupefied. Pink and swollen, as he said: "May I bite you?"

"No, you absolute idiot - you do not bite someone's cock! Ever!"

"You ... don't?"

"Absolutely not - and you want to know why? Because it hurts like hell." It hadn't, really; it had just been more of a surprise to feel a god damned nip like that. Charles flung the robe closed, and shoved himself back to sit upright. It was the principle of the thing. He had bloody well been sliding down the upholstery, like molasses, and then the sod had bitten him. "Didn't that ever occur to you?"

"… No."

Of course not. Moron. Catching his breath, he looked up to snarl at the other again - but paused.

The man had turned crimson to his ears. He wouldn't meet Charles' eyes.

Charles blinked.

Every single instinct in him flared. The other was - what?

Angry? Embarrassed? Ashamed? Whatever it was, it was there for Charles to use. Just the tiniest bit of human kindness and he could have the bastard eating out of his hand.

Use it.

Charles heaved a sigh. "Well." He reached for the wine and the cup, poured some out. "Come here."

The man stared at the hearth. Dispassionately, Charles noted the firelight glinting off the crystal hanging on his chest, shining off the metal ring on his thumb.
"Come here," he repeated. "I'm not angry; I'm not hurt. Really, I'm just -" and despite his instincts telling him: no no... the tiniest crack split his self-control, and he gulped back a snicker. "I was just surprised. That's all."

He let his head fall to the back of the chair; gave the man a lazy smile. "But we all get carried away, once in a while. Don't we? Was that it? What was it - were you just curious? I know you're circumcised, but the ritual requires more of a ceremonial apparatus than we have here, hm?" Another laugh, bottled up. "What was it? Why nibble on someone's cock?"

"You taste good," the man mumbled to the hearthstones.

"Ah, well. I'm flattered. Just - bite me someplace different next time." Charles paused, softened his voice. "You were doing very well, truly. Now: come have a drink."

The other shuffled closer, face still flushed. Charles held out the cup. "Take a sip."

"Why?"

"Well, you might want to clear the taste out of your mouth."

"I like it," the other growled, but obeyed.

"That's right," Charles said, softly. "You licked my come off all of your fingers just last night - didn't you?"

A look from beneath dark eyelashes; Charles felt his stomach lurch. "Fine. Then - you can have all of the come you want next time. All right?"

The man put the cup back on the floor and went for Charles' thighs again; one movement of the knee, though, and he stopped in mid-grab. "'Next time', I said," Charles said. "Not just now."

The other looked crushed. "But I -"

"- want to know what to do," he said, "and who better to show you? Go on." Charles tipped his head to the left, directing. "Bed."

A moment in which the man just gaped at him; his woebegone expression being swept away by a wave of dazed lust - and then he got to his feet.

"Right. Pick up your shirt and fold it."

Familiar territory, Charles thought, as he watched the muscles flex in that back ... as the man bent to obey him. This, at least, the other knew how to do. Obey him, bite back curses and moans as Charles wrecked him ... Yes. They could have quite the routine down by the time the sod had to ship out wherever Frost ordered. If Charles wanted.

He bit back a smile. The man was standing in front of him, holding out the folded shirt like an offering.

"Give that here."

Charles decided to smile sweetly after all - the man's eyes glowed - as he flicked the shirt out of those big hands and laid it beneath the chair. But then a glint caught his eye as he straightened in his seat.

Frost. He narrowed his eyes at the jewel on the man's chest. "Next: your lady's token?"
"Yes?"

"Comes off too."

A pause: "I …"

"No arguments. And besides," Charles thought back, then continued: "I didn't see it last night. Where did you put it?"

"In my coat pocket."

"Well, you have a trouser pocket tonight; put her there."

Something strange coiled into his stomach and settled there as the man obeyed. Light glinted off the crystal facets - but then only off warm skin and tattoos as the jewel disappeared into cloth.

"Good. Now sit down."

Charles retrieved the cup from the floor - or started to, when he had to snort. The idiot had gone for the floor himself.

"Sit down on the bed."

The other obeyed him without a sound. Sat, placed a hand on each knee ... and stared.

Charles sipped at the wine. He was definitely feeling its effects; a pleasant buzz in his mind and a warmth in the pit of his stomach that had nothing to do with lust. No: the lust had moved out to new territory; Lebensraum ...

Oh, what the fuck. Now was not the bloody time to think about the Second World War - where the hell had that even come from? Frost and Stalingrad? Eretz Galut, perhaps - from association with the tattoo on the man's shoulder. Charles looked at the lion, more familiar now - at the skin made golden by the firelight. And he swirled the wine in the cup.

He hadn't gotten off yet … so: why not?

He took another sip of wine. Aspirated, swallowed - smiled. "May I ask you something?"

The man's eyes were wide. "Yes."

"Would you … ah." Charles trailed off. "Well. You probably wouldn't want to do this … but if I asked you to …"

"Ask me."

"I'm not sure -"

"Ask me. I want it."

He was probably still talking about Charles' cock; certainly he was staring where the robe covered it. Poor dear; so confused. Charles ran the cup's rim over his lower lip, gave the man a sly smile. "Could you please take off the rest of your clothes for me? I'd like to see what I'm getting."

"You …" The man focused on him. It took a moment. "You want to - see?"

"Yes, please."
"Even though you saw me this morning?"

"Well, that was only a bit - before I hid in the bathroom. Remember?" Charles sighed. "Besides, it was cold."

The ensuing silence spoke volumes.

"You don't know what happens in the cold? Really?"

"I know ... with snow, you forget -"

"With cold," Charles interrupted, "things get smaller. So. Go on." He relaxed where he sat. "I want to see. But -" he held up a finger, "you don't need to stand. I won't have you straining that leg."

It was fascinating, watching the man obediently strip. Not a single motion was wasted, as he slid the polished leather shoes off his feet and set them at the foot of the bed. Socks and belt followed. He had no false modesty or shrinking shyness; he merely peeled off the grey trousers and folded them, and did the same with his briefs. And Charles' eyes dragged down the long line of back as the other leaned forward to place the clothing by the shoes - and damn, there was no more wine in his cup. His mouth had gone dry again. Mostly because the man had leaned back, and -

"Lie down."

The other blinked at him.

"You can - turn to look at me, if you'd like. But …" and Charles licked his lower lip. "Lie down."

Yes, his mouth was definitely dry. Parched, really.

"Well, well." Charles got to his feet, smoothed the silk down his front. He was relieved to find that the bite hadn't damaged anything; only … set him back, briefly. But with this sight, he could make up for lost time. He padded over to the bed, gazed into the man's eyes, and then let his own wander leisurely over that body.

"It's a pity," he mused, after a long moment of quiet, "that this holiday is not a celebration of springtime."

"You want me to bring you flowers?" the man growled.

"Oh no," Charles said. "But I do want to dance around the maypole a little." He grinned his most lascivious grin, went to one knee by the side of the bed, and leaned forward to dip his tongue into the man's navel. "How lovely you are."

"I -" and the other was edging towards incoherence already; excellent. "I - don't -"

"Think you're lovely? But you are." Charles kissed up his abdomen, dragged the flat of his tongue up the sternum, over collarbones - and then kissed the man's pulse. "Rather deadly, certainly. But a well-balanced sword can be beautiful."

The other said nothing.

Charles leaned back to look into his eyes. They were wide; fixed on him and glowing. The man's lips were parted.

He flicked his glance away and continued. "Well-balanced; that's the key. You have a nasty temper and a belief that pain is your bosom friend - but really, you've been doing quite well with asking
permission and not hurting me … except. This."

Charles laid a hand on the diamond choker. "Please take this off."

Silence.

He slid his eyes back to the other; the dazed look had been replaced by a sharp one. *Damn.* "Please," he began again, "take it off."

"It is my lady's gift to you, Xavier -"

"Not precisely. You, apparently," he shoved at the tattooed shoulder, "are your lady's gift to me. The rest is just accessories. Gravy. But you are the important thing."

"… I am?"

"If I'm her gift to you, then you're her gift to me," Charles explained. "It's logical. Now, given that nobody ever asked whether I wanted Father Christmas to stuff a metal-melter of a telekinetic sod in my stocking … well. I think it would be polite if you took this off. Or," and he touched the clasp; *huh*, the man hadn't yet fused it. "Or let me take it off."

He stared into the man's eyes. "… Please."

The moment stretched.

And then Charles felt his skin prickle, as the diamonds around his neck slid and slipped down his chest into his hands, with a rustling sound. A priceless rustling sound, he knew - but he was too busy taking breaths as deep as he could possibly make them.

Another pause, and: "Thank you," Charles whispered.

Time for reinforcement.

He leaned up, found the man's mouth and gave him a kiss. He let the quick gasp in response serve as an opening; he nudged his tongue between the other's lips and started a nice snog - all the while thinking, desperately, where he could put the god damned diamonds so that he wouldn't have to worry about being strangled with them again.

The man murmured against him, slung one wiry arm around his neck to draw him close. The chain was in the corner. There were metal knick-knacks in his box of gifts; there were metal containers in the canvas bag with dinner … hell, there were metal faucets in the bathroom. If it was death Charles was worrying about, the man had a hundred different ways to kill him ready to hand.

So Charles let the necklace drop to the floor, and shoved it beneath the bed. And focused on the kiss.

It was slow and sensual, wet and hot as Charles let his tongue tease and slide. He could kiss like this all evening - could probably keep the man enthralled in such kisses for days. But: *positive reinforcement,* Charles' mind whispered, and he had promised to show him, after all …

He broke the kiss; then placed his fingers at the man's mouth when the other craned his head to follow Charles' retreat. "Ah. No."

"Why not?"

"Because …" and Charles bent to kiss the man's chest, and his navel, "I did say I would show you. And besides - this will take the edge off. For later."
"What happens late - oh -"

The rough voice had cracked into a groan as Charles skipped any preliminaries and sucked the man's cock deep into his mouth. He thought it better to do so, really, than to second-guess himself by staring at it any longer. Because it was warm enough in the room now, so that neither of them was chilled, even on top of the bedclothes. There were no trousers or blankets to obscure sight. And so it was enough to swallow around the hot, heavy weight on his tongue and the back of his throat, and enough to bring his own left hand up and slick it with the spit he sent running down.

The man wouldn't really notice if he was drooling, after all; and Charles couldn't care less. One couldn't have any sort of sex without the body coming in to muck things up - the key, then, was to find the perfect fit, sit back and enjoy, and use the mind only to come up with an exit strategy - Charles blinked, and drew his mouth away with a slurp. "What is it? Are you cold?"

The man was shivering.

"Hm. Let me build the fire a little," and Charles got up to do so, even as the other gasped a protest. He put two more logs on it, then considered, and added another - and carefully moved the wine bottle out of the way, lest someone trip over it in the night. He shut up the first aid kit and laid it on the chair, along with Logan's container of bear grease. Then, taking a deep breath, and staring at nothing in particular - the fire grate, the upholstery - Charles flicked his hands over buttons that remained shut and let the robe slide off. He carefully draped it over the chair. It would not do to have the silk sullied, after all.

Naked, he almost immediately felt goosebumps ripple down his back. And it wasn't even that cold …

Instinct made Charles look back over his shoulder.

The man had raised himself on one elbow, the muscles in arm and chest and flank knotted. His mouth had dropped open and his eyes were wide and staring. Charles raised an eyebrow in reply; then turned slowly on one heel.

And the man looked almost - confused? Thunderstruck, perhaps - with gibberish undoubtedly rattling through his head. Charles looked down at himself. Really, he was far too thin; the jut of his hipbones was pronounced, and his ribcage looked as though it might separate from his body. He shrugged and strolled back to the bed.

"Take a closer look," he suggested. Then - and why not, really? - he laced his fingers through one of the man's hands, tugged it from where it lay slack on the bed, and brought it back to his own cock. "And think about what I'd like you to do to me when I've finished showing you - showing -" Charles trailed off. "Um."

For the other had yanked his hand away, gasping, and turned to one side. Squeezed his eyes shut - and - and it sounded as though he were in pain, as he whimpered and -

*God.* He suppose it was a compliment, but really … this was starting to get excessive.

"Do you know how to get come out of velvet?" Charles sighed. "I know I don't."

He waited a moment, and then tugged the coverlet away, moving the man's weight off it little by little. That body felt limp enough to be boneless. Charles then carefully draped the velvet over the bedframe to ... dry. In places. He supposed.
Then he turned back to the man. "Hello?" he asked. Then he tapped one muscled shoulder. "Are you alive?"

He heard only a mumble in reply; looking closer, he saw how the man's ears had turned crimson. Again.

"Don't worry. It's perfectly understandable, if you haven't had the opportunity to see many people naked in a sexual context. Or … ah." He smiled. "Perhaps it's some heretofore undiscovered mutation of mine. I'm like the Medusa, only with sex. One glance? And you come."

The man had turned back towards him. "I'm sorry - I didn't … I couldn't …"

"It's quite all right, really, and I - wait." Charles blinked. "Wait. Did you just say you were sorry?"

A nod.

"I didn't know you knew the word. Well," and Charles pushed off from where he was leaning on the bed. "I believe that deserves a reward in and of itself."

He walked back to the chair; gave the container of grease a long look. Logan would never forgive him for using it to … but then again, Charles would never tell him. So. It would be slick, having spent time enough on the hearth. And it would be this, or Ororo's moisturizer, or good old-fashioned saliva. Easy choice.

Charles gripped the container tightly, walked back to the bed, and straddled the man in a move as casual as he could make it.

"Are you awake?"

The man bared his teeth up at him. Charles raised his eyebrows in reply. Not only awake, but recovered, it would seem - for the other growled and clenched his abdomen to sit up. Except - then he blinked heavily, eyes almost crossing. Ah. That tendency to fall asleep; perhaps he was not so recovered after all. Charles shoved him, hard, with a hand to the chest. Hypothesis confirmed: the other flopped back onto the bed.

"God, you look drunk," and Charles took the lid off the carved container, "but you need to pay attention. Because what I'm about to show you is important."

Charles rocked back, slightly; there was no way the blighter could be - all right, there was some improbable way he could be getting hard again, already, but it would certainly take at least five minutes to get back in fighting trim. He hoped. Because he definitely needed some time …

"What is it?" The man reached out, curious as a cat. A sleepy cat.

"Bear grease." Charles offered it. "Feel it."

The man did, then sniffed his fingers and blinked.

"This goes both ways, you know." Charles ground his hips, experimenting; the other hissed and let his hand fall to the bed. "I'm not going to be the only one here ending up smelling like *Ursa americana*. Also," and he moved his hips again, "I'm telling you right now. Every time you come early, I'm going to assume you have more in you and then start all over again."

"You're going to kill me."
"Nonsense," Charles said briskly. "If I wanted to kill you, I would have shagged you to death in the library, instead of letting you strangle me."

"Letting -" the man ground out. Charles flinched at the tone, and looked - and immediately regretted it. The daze had gone in a flash. The man's eyes were glittering, his teeth hideously bared, and oh god he was about to fuck a dragon, or a lion or some monster out of myth - and Charles had to shove his forehead against the man's shoulder and try not to scream.

A feather-light touch brushed his hair. "What is it?"

He shuddered. "Let's not talk about strangling."

A pause. "All right."

"No," and with a deep breath, he pushed off the trapezius and made his voice casual again. He was in control. He was in charge. "Let's talk about fingering instead. Have you ever heard of it?"

"My lady - in Russia, she played the piano."

Charles' mind had started gabbling nonsense to drown out the words, as soon as "my lady" had passed the other's lips - because … Frost and fingering just - he never wanted the two associated; never ever. But …

"Well. There is indeed that definition of fingering, for those who play musical instruments. I'm talking about a different sort."

Slowly, Charles lifted himself from where he straddled the man. Reached down, and glided exploring fingers over the other's cock - now half hard again, dear lord, and taking interest in the proceedings. He slid back just slightly, to make sure they had enough room. "This. This here. Feel with me."

The man obeyed him. It was strange, to have their fingers entwining there, but judging by the other's hard swallow and the strong teeth digging into that thin lower lip - to say nothing of the twitch of Charles' own cock - strange was not necessarily unpleasant.

Before he could lose his nerve, Charles swiped up a hefty dollop of grease with his index finger. Reached down again, dragged his finger over the man's, and hitched his upper body forward, bracing himself with his free arm. "Now - feel here."

And he moved the man's hand back.

Well technically, Charles' mind point out, he was moving the man's hand forward, and his own had to move back around his hip because it would be difficult to get there with his own cock in the way, straddling someone like this - and the Oxford Casanova was not a shrinking violet, and what he really needed to communicate to himself was that he was guiding the man's fingers between the cheeks of his arse … and just leaving them there, brushing the hole. There.

Now, he just needed not to hyperventilate.

Easy enough; Charles found his self-control again and drawled: "Feel."

There was no motion whatsoever. He frowned, dragged his gaze away from where it had focused on the bedstead, and to the man's face.

The sod was looking absolutely flummoxed.
Charles sighed. "Feel. Right there. Press in a bit." And he did so, with his own greased finger. "Like that."

"... Like this?" the voice rasped, and Charles bit his lower lip at the careful touch alongside his own fingertip.

"Exactly. Now then," and he rocked back just slightly; felt the man shiver beneath him. "Please tell me that you are aware of the logistical issue at hand. So to speak."

_I think I've put my finger on it_- his mind supplied the admittedly trite witticism for the other … but said other just stared at him, pale.

"Does that mean: 'yes'?"

A long pause. Then a nod.

"Fine. Then this is what needs to happen. Penetrator, or the soon-to-be-penetrated - or both - makes or make use of a generous amount of whatever lubrication is available, slicks up the soon-to, you know which I mean - and then utter depravity ensues. 'Depravity,' that is - " and Charles raised an eyebrow, "if I am to believe Free West propaganda."

"Free West propa - wait." A line had appeared between the man's own eyebrows. "This is what they mean, when they - when they say: degenerate acts?"

"Lord, you're an absolute innocent." Charles smiled. "A bloodthirsty babe in the woods. There's a whole spectrum to it but - traditionally? Yes. This is rather the jewel in the degenerate crown."

"Oh." The man fell quiet, staring at nothing. But then he looked up at Charles again. And grinned - like a god damned shark. Charles gulped despite himself.

_You're in control_, he thought, shivering. Covered it up with bravado. "Come on, then. Strike a crushing blow against reactionary tyranny. Finger me."

The press of the other's finger was more directed, this time. Charles focused on the lion tattoo, since it was right in front of his eyes. Murmured encouragement - and, after a few long moments: "You need to go deeper. And move it around."

"I -"

The man was being far too cautious. Charles was getting impatient. "Like this," and he pressed in himself, sliding well down. It was a bit of a stretch to get past the man's finger there, but everything was slick. "It's important to use enough lubrication, and to go slowly. Otherwise things might tear, and I really don't think they'd be too pleased to hand out Archangel's blood for peritonitis."

"For what?"

"Inflammation of the peritoneum from rupture. It can kill you, you know."

The man's hand went absolutely still.

"None of that." Charles leaned in, slid a kiss over his mouth. "I know what I'm doing. Now: put your finger in deeper, and move it."

"But …"

He sighed, hot, against the man's lips. "Like this. Feel what I'm doing, and do it too."
Charles closed his eyes and focused on the slow, twisting press of his own finger. Once, twice - the blighter was in the way, otherwise he'd have a better angle - three times, and - Charles squeezed his eyes more tightly shut. The sensation was uncanny: to have another fingering him, too, and to feel the rough bumps of knuckle against the smooth skin of phalanges, all of it hot and slick and close.

He leaned his face closer to the man's, then moved to press into his neck. The other was sweating; he could smell it - Charles flicked his tongue - and taste it. And his breath was speeding up. No: their breath was speeding up.

"Add another one," he mumbled. And: "Wait -" as the man moved to obey. "Grease it first." Charles took his free hand and battied at the bedclothes - there was the container; he shoved it at the other. "Do it."

He only just had time to feel dissatisfied as man pulled his hand away, before it was back, and two - oh yes, that was lovely. "Move them in the same way. Follow my lead."

Ballroom dance, his mind giggled, and Charles shut the thoughts down. The crook and twist, the stretch - and even the burn was good. It had been too long. How long had it been? He wasn't sure. But he was sure this would be sufficient - with just enough grease applied, no matter how ... large ... the other was. Charles had done this countless times, and he knew exactly how to relax, when to squeeze and push and when to relent, how to keep from hurting. And there was no way the blighter could last for longer than two minutes.

Charles pushed off where he had braced himself - the man gasped as he rocked back onto their fingers - but stayed kneeling there and touched the man's cock. Just enough to confirm that: yes, things were ready to move. So to speak. "Put another in," he said. "Just one."

The other took the two out instead - Charles drew in breath to remonstrate, but: oh. He was only fumbling for the container. Then Charles heard some sounds that were almost ... wet. He swallowed hard. A fine backdrop, those sounds, to his own breath. He wasn't panting; he wasn't a bloody dog. Just - almost breathless. Somehow.

He did not stop to think about what animal the other sounded like. What did it matter, now? Charles slid his fingers out quickly - and there was the man's hand, fingers almost too slippery, and trembling.

"Go on," Charles muttered.

The man pressed in. Not too fast, which deserved a reward, Charles thought, distant. He squeezed at the strong hand just once, and then got a last swipe of grease to smear on his palm. To slick up the man's cock.

As soon as he wrapped his palm round it, though, the other gasped again. Kneeling - god, his thighs were sending up a terrible ache - Charles held onto a bony shoulder with his free hand while gripping that cock tightly at the base, keeping his own eyes shut. "So help me, if you come now I really shall kill you."

A hiss: "Verdammt - stop that."

"That is the only thing that's keeping you from coming, you wanker."

A low growl, and the fingers in him twisted and slid up further, exploring, pressed forward and rubbed and -

"Ohfuck," Charles gasped. "There. That there, do that again."
Hot breath gusted over his brow. "This?"

Charles kept his eyes tightly shut. There was the motion again, and: *holy god*, at least there was nothing wrong with the sod's short-term memory, because that was it, exactly -

"God, *god*, all right. Fuck me. Go on."

"What -"

"This." He squeezed the man's cock. "*In* me, put it in me. I want you." He slid his hand away, left a trail of grease up the man's torso and neck as he searched for his jaw with blind fingers; found it. Then Charles placed his other hand there. Kissed at the corner of that mouth, felt hot panting against his own lips. He kissed him again. "I want you."

"Oh," a mumble, and the other sounded almost - wrecked, already. "How …"

"Just …" he bit his lower lip. "Slowly. All right?" And Charles canted his body up. "Take your fingers out, and -" he reached back down again, feeling that hand palm his arse, fingers slick and quivering - he grabbed at the man's cock, "- let me -"

It was strange, he thought distantly, lowering himself ... that the man was completely silent. The room was silent, except for the hiss of Charles' breathing, and the sounds of the flames crackling in the fireplace. Except then the sound of Charles' groan, because it hurt - a good hurt, it was *good* but it had been too long. Since - and his mind presented him with an image: a man behind a bar in Coventry, when he had attended the celebrations for the first fifteen years of Her Majesty's reign - *god*, he hadn't even known that man's name, and had let him fuck him into the wall - had he been drunk? maybe he had, but it had been in May -

"May," he croaked, and: "*ah,*" because it did not so much hurt anymore as stretch, so wide - it hadn't been this way in May, "May -"

There was a quiver in the muscles beneath his hand; a flex of jaw. Then whipcord arms flinging themselves round his back, and - "*mmph -*" he was pressed close against all that sweat-slick skin, and he could hardly breathe.

But: "Yes," the other choked out, "*yes yes please -*"

Groggily, Charles searched back through what he had said. Moan, and gasp and the month of May - *may* -

His breath caught.

The fucker thought that he, Charles Xavier, was asking permission.

"*God damn you,*" he hissed, and opened his eyes. The tattoo was right in front of his nose; he saw the blue-black lines of the lion's mane. Panting, Charles hit his head against the man's shoulder. "*Damn you,*" and he forced his body down, then back up. Down, then back up. The man was gasping, almost wheezing for breath - and then, *god*, he was kissing at the bruise on Charles' own shoulder. With those arms locked so tight round him Charles could hardly twist to move, could hardly breathe - could not escape. "*Bastard,*" he panted, and *bit*; the man shuddered, head kicking back -

This couldn't last long. It *couldn't*. Every single time Charles had gotten his hand or mouth on the man - or he had gotten his hands on Charles - things had finished in less than five minutes. So it couldn't be long. Please let it not be long. He tasted sweat, he *smelled* sweat - and smelled come from
earlier and the smoke of the fire; and three months ago or so this man had been the one to try to kill him, and not quite four months ago he had seen Charles taken away from everything he knew, drugged and dreaming no doubt, but not of the nightmare to come. And everything he knew had contracted to the size of this prison cell of a room, with the fire in it flickering on limbs slippery with sweat - knots of muscle, angles of bone, the light and dark of two men twisted together on a bed.

"Let me," the man gasped, hands plucking at his back, "Charles, I have to -"

"No -" And Charles reared up and punched him as hard as he could.

His arms felt like rubber, he felt the hot throb where the man's cock was thrust deep in his arse - and he was shaking with the instinctive movements the other was making, rocking up, shallow …. And they were too close. Far too close for him to put real strength behind it, let alone aim. As it was, he got the man square on one cheekbone: watched his head snap to one side before the other snarled and yanked him close - closer than before and tighter - But Charles wasn't afraid.

"You don't - call me that, you bastard -" he clawed into the man's shoulders and shook him. "Don't -"

Teeth flashed white as the man glared into Charles' eyes, his own hot and glittering. "Xavier," he spat between gasps, "Professor. Let me come - let me -"

"Do it, then." Charles let his body sag; he felt his breath catch as he turned his face into the man's neck. "Damn you." His voice cracked, but he would not break. Not here, not now. "Do it."

And the man wrenched him closer still - buried his own face in Charles' hair - and groaned something incoherent, too loud to be a mumble and too slurred to be intelligible. Those hands gripped Charles' shoulders from behind, pulling him down, down …

Charles was quite sure they would leave bruises.

He felt every shudder beneath him, every jab of sharp hipbones with each erratic thrust; and then the sudden easier slide of the man's cock - such a slick slide out and then back in even as Charles felt a grunt - surprised - puff hot on his scalp.

He stayed still, waiting for his breath to slow.

It was difficult. All of him felt drenched with sweat - he could smell its stink. Charles bit down on the inside of his mouth, hard, as he turned his face away. As he fought not to start shivering.

He flinched at the wandering brush of a hand over his cock.

"You didn't …" the man was slurring. "You - you need to -"

"No," Charles said, calmly. Professor voice. "No, that's quite all right." He stared determinedly at the fire grate. "Go to sleep."

"But …"

The same hand, trembling, pawed at his shoulder.

"Stop it." Charles felt empty. Even with - he winced at the thought. "Go to sleep."

As if he wanted to, anymore. As if he wanted to come. No … Charles drew in a deep breath and let it out. He felt as though he had been pummeled with a cricket bat. At least so far the ache was rather
more in his quads than his arse; small blessings. And he wanted to sleep as well. But he'd be damned if he dropped off before the man did.

Another touch of the hand to his face.

"Stop." Charles pushed him away. "Leave well enough alone. Go the fuck to sleep."

"I don't want to sleep -"

"How old are you? Really," he sighed, tugging against the grip on his chin, "Seven? Six? I've known six-year-olds who don't behave as poorly as -"

" - without you," the man finished.

Charles closed his eyes.

His skin prickled as he felt a puff of warmth on the side of his face. Pressing his lips together, he yielded to the light pressure of that hand; turned his head.

For a long moment, he felt only the same breath. And then a careful kiss, of all things - there and then gone from his mouth, like a kiss a ghost might give.

Charles opened his eyes to look.

The man looked just the same as he always had, beneath him. The lines of bone and muscle, the tattoo and golden skin, the green eyes beneath eyelids falling shut, the lips parted to show a hint of teeth. Nothing had changed - if one didn't count short-cropped hair having turned darker, damp with sweat.

There he was, the same creature.

And no wonder, Charles thought. This had just been sex. It would take more to change someone than one round of fucking; much more than something as stupid as a kiss on the lips. Charles closed his eyes wearily. It had been what it had been … and here he was, still. No escape. Just sex with a monster, in his own prison, pain or death lurking round every corner.

He wiped his forehead with the back of one hand. He would have to start planning -

The man's palms brushed his cheekbones, reaching, and slid over his brow, smoothing out sweat. "Sleep?"

"You go ahead."

"No," and the voice was insistent, if groggy. "Sleep with me."

Charles sighed and flicked his eyes open, in time to watch the ripple of muscles in the man's abdomen as he eased back onto the bed, lying down. Strong hands tugged at Charles' shoulders, and then - oh - Charles was draped on top of him, and the pressure off his thighs felt marvelous.

"Will you sleep with me?"

"Yes," Charles lied. "Yes, of course."

And he observed the other's dozing smile, and watched the man's breathing even out into slumber.

It was only when he knew that slumber was deep that Charles braced himself, pushed against the
mattress and angled so that the slide of that cock out of his body was as painless as possible. And really - it was more of an ache. Not pain. Charles knew that it would take much more to hurt him. And the man had been crestfallen when denied another chance at sucking him off, because of that nip. It would be easy enough to keep him from inflicting pain sexually ... Charles hoped.

The sounds of the fire were still very loud in the silence. This time there was an undertone: the man's breathing. Charles thanked whichever deity responsible once again: the blighter did not snore. The near-silence, the warmth, the residual ache in his own body ... it gave him space to think. He raked his fingers through his own hair - his hands were not shaking, Charles told himself. Not at all. And now he had space to think, and to plan.

So. That had been all. And really, Charles thought, it hadn't been so terrible. Nothing truly painful; nothing unforgivable. And now ... he touched his neck, bare; glanced down at his ankle, also bare. Now, it appeared he had been given a gift or two of his own.

A gift …

Charles stared down at the sleeping man. *Sleeping Beauty* … well. The contours of that face and body were too spare to be conventionally beautiful. *Dornröschen* … Briar Rose. Hardly. Charles had been the one smelling like a rose - though that was long worn away by sweat.

… But the man had a castle, surrounded by thorns. In his mind.

And if Frost had given him such a gift, surely she would not object if Charles ... unwrapped it.

Charles lay down on his side. And grimaced, as the other turned in his sleep to face him.

So, Charles was looking at the man as he tried to fall asleep. It was odd. He had never seen him this boneless, this relaxed. Except perhaps in the library, falling asleep on *top* of him, after Charles had plundered his mind ... with a wince, Charles shoved that memory away.

He looked closer. The scabbed cuts on the right side of the man's face had cracked and bled in a few spots. But ... lines etched in his brow had smoothed out; the tension in shoulder and flank had gone. Charles reached out and touched a fingertip to the scar above the man's lip, below his nose. That mouth twitched in the direction of the touch. Like a smile. And sex - he grimaced again - sex, brought to the man by one Charles Xavier, had done it all.

... That was an interesting observation. Charles considered it.

He thought for a long while.

It was growing cooler in the room. Absent-mindedly, he got up and built the fire. Walked slowly to the bathroom to brush his teeth, and gave himself a quick scrub with a washcloth. He retrieved the man's white shirt from the floor and placed it on the pile of his other clothes. Then Charles limped back to bed, tugged the crimson sheets out from beneath the man's dead weight - and lay down next to him before pulling the bedclothes up around them both.

And thought.

Sex had done it … Charles was a historian, and he knew: sex had been used to bring powerful men to heel for centuries. He had had glimmerings of that idea already. Break him down, build him up. Make the other do what he, Charles, wanted him to do. Change him. Civilize him.

But with such a one, brought to heel …
Charles inched closer. And prodded the muscle of the man's right shoulder with one finger.

The other woke with only a blink - shadowed lids, then glittering eyes.

"I'm cold," Charles whispered.

The man blinked again. And then, without hesitation, he reached out and tugged Charles into his arms. Holding him close, checking to see that the bedclothes were wrapped tight around him, and falling asleep again. Almost in an instant.

Charles was very warm then. He blinked at the man's mouth, felt the warm breath from where his own hair brushed right up against the other's nose. Then he eased himself up on the pillows - only enough to make eye contact, should the other wake.

And Charles touched the man's hair. Stroked it, gently.


Finally, he sighed. "And sleep."

Easy to say, less easy to obey. The man had, it seemed; but Charles stayed awake for a long while, even in the warmth and light fading to dark. Thinking, and then thinking of nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Frost to Erik

" - to Mexico -"

"Choke him, Erik."

"Enough. Put him on the bed."

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Erik to Jean

"Only a little."

"'Maidele'- come here." (n.b. 'maidele' is Yiddish, and I find sounds really stodgy if one translates it as "maiden" or "maid." Perhaps the same concept as translating "chica" or "petit chou." (... although the latter is just hilarious. :P ))

"That means: 'good appetite.' Now, would you like duck or vegetables?"

"Why not?" (... :P I know, duh - but just to be consistent.)

"That means -"

"First, you must go wash your hands."

"That's 'Briar Rose."
"Do you want to sleep, maidele?"

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Please let me know if I missed something, and/or if anything needs fixing. :)

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and one final credit: to etirabys for the "let 'em finger Charles together" idea. Oh, bb.
To you, I give All teh Win. :D
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to etirabys, for her "I.I." ("Italicization Intervention") ... :)

Please see the end of this chapter for links to fanart and fanmixes!

Finally, the quotation/translation from the Baghavad Gita I obtained at this blog.

Thanks! and sorry for the longer wait this time - I hope you enjoy.

ETA, 9/3/16 (... gahh!): thank you, May Zimin for the catch: the Baghavad Gita tattoo should of course be in Sanskrit, not Hindi.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Oh ... ow, shite ...”

A twisting cramp woke him up well before sunrise.

Charles hunched his shoulders and pressed both hands flat against his stomach. Even though he was warm, almost hot, the pain made him focus on his body and forget - forget that he had - that there was someone else -

At least, until another hand slid over both of his own.

“What's wrong?”

Charles took in a deep breath; exhaled. It was ridiculous, really, that the slightest comforting touch should make his eyes sting. All the more so since he was less than a hands-breadth from the man, and he could feel the other's words, even in a voice like gravel, puff warm and damp against his mouth.

"Xavier." A breath, and then, even closer: "What's wrong?"

“Cramp,” Charles gritted. “I think it’s because of the meat.”

"Ah."

The hand massaged down from the hollow beneath his ribcage, and then started stroking his abdomen firmly. "I should have known."

“I should have as well. Although -" and he had to breathe out a sigh. “Even had I known, I still would have eaten it.”

"Well.” If the man had been anyone else, that sound would have been a laugh. "You're not the only one."

"Really?"

"Mm."
"Even if you knew it would disagree with you?"

"Mm-hm."

"Why? If you knew it'd make you worse?"

The man hummed warm against his neck. "Meat is meat." He kept massaging, strong and sure.

That had made little to no sense. Charles stared into the darkness. The slow movements of that hand were - helping. Did he really need to admit it? Did he? The other wasn't demanding conversation, or sex, or anything of that sort … Content, apparently, to -

To touch him.

*Give in*, the drowsy thought came to the fore. *It's warm, it's quiet. Just forget about …*

"Mmph." Despite himself, Charles pressed his face into the crook of the man's neck, at the join of shoulder and throat. "That feels good."

"Does it?" That voice was rough and low; given the hour, it wasn't a surprise. Still … the man kept rubbing. But then he stroked his free hand over Charles' hair, pressed a kiss after it and Charles tensed. *Couldn't forget after all, and: damn.*

"I don't want to have sex." He swallowed hard, all too conscious of the tang of the man's skin under his own lips. "Not right now."

And Charles squeezed his eyes shut, bracing himself for the snarls, the demands, the greedy bite of those fingers digging into his flesh -

"Mm."

The massage had not stopped.

Charles cautiously cracked one eye back open.

The man kissed his hair again. "'S all right." He still sounded groggy - maybe that was it; maybe he was just so tired that he couldn't -

- except Charles felt the man's cock, hard, dig into his own thigh. He shivered; the other huffed out a breath and eased back. "… Sorry."

Charles gritted his teeth. 'Sorry' deserved positive reinforcement, it truly did … except the cramp in his gut was back with a vengeance. "Ah -.*

With the salt taste of sweat under his lips, and the rise and fall of the other's naked chest against his, it was small wonder that he could feel the words vibrating: "You're hurt?"

"Not really," Charles sighed. "This will pass, soon enough." Literally, when he thought about it; but he determinedly steered away from the mechanics of his body. "Listen." He aimed his next sigh at the man's jugular; felt the resulting shiver. *Ha.* "You don't need to apologize - for this."

He nudged one quadricep against the man's cock. Smirked to himself - even in the dark, even if he felt ill - as he felt the other growl, softly. He moved his thigh, gently. "It's natural," Charles breathed.

A long pause.
Then … a whisper in reply. "Is it?"

"Yes."

"Or is it you?"

Charles grimaced. Thankfully, the other couldn't see him in the dark of the hour before dawn. "Beg pardon?"

"You." Almost inaudible.

Charles waited, the hair on the back of his neck prickling.

He did not have to wait long.

"You … Du. Even if it's dark, even if I'm blind. You're beautiful - you're everything, you're -"

One rustle of bedsheets and a warm hand moving down from his hair to his shoulder …

And the man caught at his lips, kissing him, and turned so Charles found himself sprawled over the long limbs and taut muscles of that body. There was the flick of tongue against his lips; without a second thought, he opened his mouth and felt the thrust of that same tongue, hot and wet. He couldn't keep from breathing in, shuddering, and sliding his hands up to frame the man's face. He supposed he could have kept from catching that tongue and sucking on it - but … really, Charles thought, tiredly amused. _I'm not made of stone._

He sighed into the man's mouth. Ran his fingers over the angles of jaw and cheekbone and up to uncoil over the stubble of hair. Charles stroked there, then scratched, just a touch … and smiled to himself as the other made a choked noise in the back of his throat.

So sensitive. It was rather unique in his experience. Except, he thought dreamily, for that one blonde in Brussels. Louise, her name had been - and had she been a nun until the year previous? Surely so, because nothing else could have explained the way she had gasped as Charles had kissed her. She had felt like a particularly adorable pillow … wonderful … whereas the man felt like the Apollo Belvedere recumbent beneath him.

Still … There were positives to that as well; especially when some statue of a Greek god made flesh was moaning into Charles' mouth, as though on his last breath -

Charles slipped his mouth away. "Easy …"

For a long moment, he only heard - and felt - the other's breaths wafting warm on his face; but then, "Please," the man husked up at him, "please …"

"'Please,' what?" Charles let his fingers play over the man's temple. He felt the turn in that direction, felt cheekbone and nose brush over his hand and then lips land in the middle of his palm.

"Please," and the man kissed his hand. "Again?"

It was quite warm in the bed, really. Charles sighed to himself, leaning closer. The warmth could explain his better humor. "Since you ask so nicely."

He moved the man's mouth back to his own with gentle pressure from his hand. "Here." And Charles kissed him. Shallow this time, teasing; then using an indolent ripple of his body to make the other strain for more at the hips rather than the neck -
But he had to stop. "Ow - fuck."

"Did I -"

"No," Charles groaned. "It's not you, it's me." An ominous gurgle came from his stomach; he flicked his fingers against the man's scalp. "Literally. Did you hear that?"

"Felt that."

"Mm. And if I recall correctly, it's going to get worse before it gets better."

A pause.

Then: "Well -"

- and the man had eased him aside, the better to sit up. Charles blinked in surprise, staring at the outline of that body in the dim light left from the coals of the fire. It was even more surprising when the other turned to look at him. Or, at least, must have turned to look, because Charles could hardly see him in the dark. But he could feel the assessing stare.

Hands reached out to tuck the bedsheets under Charles' shoulders. "Well. We can’t have that, can we?"

"I’m afraid it’s nothing either of us can help. Nature will take its course -"

"Ginger." The man’s jaw cracked as he yawned.

"Ginger? … What about it?"

"You chop up ginger, put it in water - blyad, it’s cold -"

It was colder in the bed, too, after the man left it. Disconcerted, Charles hugged the sheet close and listened to the quiet sounds - footsteps crossing the floor, a rustle of fabric punctuated by another yawn, and a log landing in the fireplace with a thump and a shower of sparks. "Scheiße."

"Yes, you’ll want to use tinder there -"

"I'm so glad you're here to tell me these things, Professor."

Charles rolled on his side, sheets wrapped tight as a chrysalis, and squinted into the dark. Tried to connect a motion with the strange scraping sound he heard - and felt his eyebrows jump, despite himself, as the man breathed into the fireplace and flames leaped up round wood shavings. Shavings - how … Except then Charles saw the glint of a razor edge, on the metal strip the man was holding. A twist of the fingers and the strip slithered into a bracelet. He felt his skin crawl.

But kept his voice casual. "I don’t recall you bringing that in last night."

"Pocket."

"Just as long as you don’t melt or morph anything of mine. Ever."

More of the kindling caught; the flames made the man’s teeth shine white as he turned his head to grin at Charles. "I won’t."

"Promise?"
“Well,” and the other uncoiled to his feet. He had put on the grey trousers, thank god, but he wore no shirt. The lion tattoo rippled in the firelight. “I’ll ask before I do. I can promise you that.”

Which was more, really, than what had gone into repurposing his filling, Charles supposed. God only knew what the bastard had done with his watch. And with that on his mind, he did not blame himself for merely grunting in reply when the man said something about ginger and the delegation from Zhōngguó-

"Wait.” Charles’ mind caught up. “A delegation?"

There was no answer. Just a flurry of sparks from the fire.

"Just how many does it take to represent an ally? Or was there a hundred times more food at this feast than there’s been here for the last few months?"

“About twenty diplomats,” with another yawn. “And they made some food on site here. Even Zelya can’t teleport ten courses at once.”

“… Ten courses?”

“Thinking with your stomach.” The man sounded amused. “Spatzi …” A hand ghosted over his forehead; Charles controlled his flinch of surprise with an effort. “Ah, Spatz … wie wunderschön. Were it not for you, I would have had to talk to every last one of them. So.” The words were warm on his skin. “Ginger. And soup, perhaps? That would sit better than meat.”

“Not in the middle of the bloody night it wouldn’t.”

“Soup for later, then.” A kiss to his brow, and then the voice even softer, drawing back. "Hm?

Charles bit down on the inside of his cheek, making no answer. Nor did he look up. He could sense, though, the other looking down at him - gaze not heavy, precisely; not assessing or sharp.

Warm, rather.

And the warmth lingered. At least, until Charles heard the sounds of the bag with its cutlery being picked up, the creak of the door opening and the click as it closed.

For a long moment, he remained still, staring into the darkness.

Spatzi. "Little sparrow," if Charles remembered correctly. Ridiculous and inappropriate, to address him as a doting mother might her child. But Charles supposed it was right there with the man carrying him around the room just the day previous. He scrubbed at his face with the heel of one hand; tabled the matter for later. And tried not to think.

Thoughts would intrude, though. Thoughts, and sensations: awareness battering against self-control like waves against a sea wall. Charles clenched his teeth together to stop the chatter that threatened to start. He did not hurt, precisely - but … there was no getting away from it. He ached - and he knew absolutely why, he remembered why. A fine thing, to roll over on top of the man and kiss him teasingly, when the joke was on Charles. On him, sending up a throb in his shoulders, neck, quadriceps; and in him, because of - to say nothing of -

No. He would indeed say nothing of it. No need to think about anything liquid, certainly. Except perhaps the promise of ginger tea.

Charles rolled his shoulders and massaged at the ache in the left. Bruises were enough to think about;
"Bloodthirsty sod," Charles muttered. He grimaced at the damp spot on the mattress, gathered his cocoon of sheets closer and wobbled to his feet. And his legs were not watery because of how thoroughly he had been shagged; no. Besides, he had been right. The man had not lasted five minutes. Even if that cock had been -

"Ow."

Charles thought twice about bending to put more logs on the fire. He shuffled closer to the flames instead, and stared into them, frowning to himself. He had forgotten all of the recommendations for recovery from malnutrition; namely, liquids - juices and broths and soups - leading into meals of fruit and the most innocuous of boiled vegetables. Certainly not bread and meat on the first and second go, respectively; and of the latter, absolutely nothing as rich as duck.

He swallowed against the churn and cramp of his gut. Bloody hell, that was a thought. The man wouldn't insist on fucking him when Charles was … ill - would he?

"Shite," he muttered. *So to speak,* his mind added; Charles rolled his eyes. He walked over to the wardrobe and yanked it open; retrieved his jeans from the box and slipped into them. He gave the room a once-over, saw the corked bottle of wine and placed it in the wardrobe for safekeeping. Then he grabbed the can of mandarin oranges. Best start getting things in better order sooner rather than later, lest Christmas turn out to be a literal rather than just figurative cesspit.

It was a sign of how groggy he still was that he tried to pry the can open with his fingers for a full thirty seconds. Then Charles stared at it mulishly for thirty seconds more. He would have to ask the man to open it; he would have to wait. *Damn.* But …

"Hm." Charles drummed his fingers on the can. "The door closed, but I didn't hear the sound of any lock. Which means," he took two steps and tried the doorknob, "it's unlocked," - it was - "and therefore the cat is out there, waiting. Waiting to see if this little mouse will stick his head outside his house. Clever," Charles breathed through clenched teeth, tightening his grip, *"clever cat."*

He could have confirmed the man's presence with a tendril of thought. Instead, matter-of-fact, Charles opened the door, took a careful step outside, and made a great show of peering to the right. Nothing except the darkness of the hallway.

He turned on his heel to look to the left, and *ha* - made no sound. Neither yelp nor squeak at the sight of those eyes glinting green in the dark, not even a foot away.

Six inches, Charles supposed. If one were being generous. But he wasn't generous; rather, he was proud. He had been right - and he hadn't screamed, hadn't gasped, hadn't even flinched.

Instead, he raised one eyebrow. "You said you would get tea."

"And you," the man whispered, "said you could be trusted. It seems you cannot."

Charles shrugged. "Can."

"Really."

"Yes." He held up the oranges. "Can. Open it, please."

A blink. "What -"
Charles heaved a sigh, "I had intended this for dessert last night, and I forgot. Will you open it for me? Please?"

The man seemed quite confused. That did not keep him from taking the can, running a fingertip around the top and nudging out an aluminum circle. Then he looked down at the fruit. Looked at Charles.

With a smirk, Charles plucked the can back and sucked out some of the juice with a loud slurp. "Delicious." He fished out an orange slice, chewed, licked his thumb. Said, low and sweeter than the syrup: "Thank you."

Silence.

"When someone says 'thank you,' you say 'you're welcome' -"

"I know," the man rasped.

Charles sucked another finger with a flourish. One could not miss the way those green eyes were fixed on his mouth - and he heard the rustle, felt the warmth spike as the man drew closer … and closer … until Charles' back bumped into the stones of the wall. Just as well he hadn't fallen through the doorway, he thought; but then the other was brushing his mouth over Charles' jaw, over his lips and licking at the sweetness there. Tiny licks. Like a cat - but, Charles thought muzzily, rather less scratchy. Good cat. The slow press of that hot line of body, combined with strong fingers edging through the sheets to stroke at the skin of his waist, made Charles' eyelids almost fall shut. He felt like purring. Except he wasn't the cat; the other was the cat. Clever cat, to pick up on that erogenous zone so quickly -

- but, Charles decided, perhaps a judicious retreat was in order. At least before they started rutting like animals in the hallway.

He drew his head back, relishing the sound of protest the other made. Not relishing the resultant grab at him - but Charles took a tighter hold on the can with one hand, and gave the man a light admonitory slap with the other. "No."

A growl, and those heated eyes narrowed.

"No," Charles repeated, but the effect was lost somewhat when he yawned. "Look, I'm falling asleep on my feet out here. The grease is in there," he tipped his head towards the door, "and besides, I'm cold."

"In."

And he looked down, indignant, as a hand shoved him in the chest. But too quickly he had to watch his step and look behind him, as he was manhandled into the room, and - blimey - pushed back down onto the bed. Rolling his eyes, Charles made a great show of setting the can down on the floor and dabbing at the juice that had dripped onto his fingers.

Then Charles looked up at the man again. Those eyes were fixed on him, and … he shivered as that lean face twisted from watchfulness into desire, hot and intent. The flash of strong teeth did not help, as the man whispered,

"Stay."

"I beg your pardon?"
"Stay there."

Charles tugged the sheets tighter. "It's too bloody cold in here."

The man backed up, and - *shite*, he was hardly looking away as he reached behind him, picked up more wood, and leaned to put it on the fire. It should have been amusing to see more sparks billow into the room, to watch the other swat at them on his trouser legs without breaking the stare …

It was not amusing, though. Not with the expression in those eyes.

Charles swallowed hard and looked away first. "I don't suppose you could bring a blanket back with you?"

He heard the pad of bare feet on the floor. Then - "Oof," Charles swatted at the velvet bed cover that the man had draped over his shoulders. "Not this one; I don't want this one." He knew he sounded petulant; he didn't care. "It reeks of ejaculate."

The man hummed, bent and pressed his face into the bite mark on his shoulder before Charles could move away. The goosebumps rippling down his arms were from the chill, since he had pushed the cover off. Not from the way the other was nuzzling him, god damned *smelling* him. But: of course. He smelled like come, too, and the blighter fucking *liked* it.

"Stop that," Charles gritted out between his teeth. He shoved the man in the chest. "Get away."

"Then stay put. I'm locking the door from now on." That grin reappeared as the other backed towards the door. "Don't even set a foot out of that bed, Xavier."

A pause. It was still dark, even though the light from the fire made things easier to see. Things like the glow in those eyes … Charles bit down hard on his own tongue, but refused to look away. Cowering and cringing was for others; not for him. Even when the man's grin widened into something truly animal.

"I'll be back soon."

"Take your *time*, you god damned oversexed -"

The thump of the door closing cut him off mid rant. Charles stared at the door, fuming, until he heard the crunch of metal - locking, or twisting, or melting or - something.

Sod caution, sod reserve. Charles sent out a wisp of thought, following. In any other world, he would have been amused at the speed with which the other was moving; in this one, he stared at the fire, seething, for a long moment - before getting up and stalking to the bathroom to wash as best he could in the unrelentingly cold water. Just out of spite.

The gesture would have been more effective had the man actually done what he said he would do. Charles had washed his entire body twice with soap, wishing fiercely for a block of pumice. Then he had dragged the cover into the bathroom and scrubbed at the stain on it. He knew he would ruin the velvet; he did not care in the least. Soon enough, though, he had hung the cover to dry on the bedrail, built the fire, and paced round his room what felt like several dozen times. Charles told himself that it was to work out the aches in this back and legs - but he knew it was nerves. And that was all right, since even the most levelheaded person would be nervy after two months of suspense had finally been resolved.

He had abruptly sat down on the chair. Had things truly been - resolved, though? Was one round of
sex enough to defuse what had been building between the two of them, for all of this time?

Charles thought he knew the answer. He wasn't sure he liked said answer. So he decided not to think about it.

Instead he huddled deeper into the chair, holding the sheets tight. He had placed the indigo robe on a hook in the wardrobe: out of sight, out of mind. He had put on the rest of his clothes again, and only winced once at the sight of the unraveling sweater neck. That tear could be fixed with the sewing kit. Shifting, Charles stretched his feet to the fire and flexed his toes - the only part of him that wasn't … aware of itself. Not hurting, not even aching that badly - just aware.

He had a body that had woken up, it would seem. And now it clamored for warmth - he hitched the chair closer to the fire - and food. Even if part of it was still rebelling against the previous night. Against the dinner, Charles thought fiercely, of the previous night. If anything … horribly … his body seemed quite content with other aspects of - of what had happened. He cracked his ankles, not considering the thrum in his muscles, nor the sensory memories that made his skin prickle and his heart speed up, greedily, wafting to the fore of his mind images, textures, tastes -

"All right," he muttered. "Enough."

Just to drive the point home, he caught at the empty can of mandarin oranges with one toe. He had finished it before sitting down; had licked up the rest of the juice. And now he tossed it onto the fire and let the acrid smell of the scorching label clear his mind.

It was getting lighter in the room. Just slightly - the vague grey of dawn. Charles calculated, feeling drowsy. It might be seven o'clock, or half past. Certainly the second day after the solstice would be one of the shortest in the year, so it could not be terribly early.

He could send his raven out flying, just to see what had become of the man. Perhaps he had fallen down the stairs in a fit of distraction or walked into a wooden door and knocked himself out. He had certainly seemed giddy enough with desire to do any number of foolish things.

After due consideration, he shrugged. Raven could rest - and the others, too. And he could be satisfied with staring at the flames, languidly, feeling his eyelids droop. Although 'satisfied' was not correct. He felt … not content, precisely. His gut was still sending up regular cramps. But he felt relaxed.

It had been like this, sometimes, after certain Oxford missions. After the first to London, for example, he had been drowsing on a hospital chair outside Raven's room. His new sister's room - at that moment, his mind could only just touch on the thought before shying away from it. But Geoffrey had clapped him on the shoulder, thinking he was still shivering from the charnel pits that they had found.

*You've seen the worst,* Geoffrey had said, bluff and sure. *Nothing can surprise you now. Soon, young one, you will become like unto the greatest of these.* His smile had been broad. The maths tutor had been missing two incisives - leftovers from gang warfare - but it had not made the grin any less warm. *Yours truly.*

Charles tucked his feet beneath him, and rested his head on the armrest. *You?* he had said. *Nothing can surprise you? Truly?* Then he had made Geoffrey laugh by eeling up from his chair and tugging him down by a trailing end of bandage from his arm, for a quick kiss.

So. Perhaps nothing could surprise him, Charles, now. The man knocking down the door and bodily wrestling him back into bed would not surprise him; additional eager sexual demands would not surprise him …
And even something quieter - the blackened can crumpling into a ball of aluminum, slowly brightening, and then coiling in between the arms of the fire grate like a silver snake - was not enough to surprise him. Charles merely sighed to himself and waited.

The door opened.

"Still not wise enough to obey, I see."

"It was too cold over there," Charles spoke into his nest of sheets. Then he yawned. "And it smelled."

"And charring a can makes such an improvement?"

The man stalked into his peripheral vision. In the dim morning light and with the fire burning merrily, Charles could see every lean line of his chest and arms as he reached out to call the metal to his hand. It obeyed readily enough, twining round the bracelet already there. Silver on silver - brighter than the metal of the ring on his thumb - and still rippling.

"That must be second nature by now," Charles said, thoughtfully.

The man had crouched to build up the fire; as he turned and raised his eyebrows, Charles told himself that it was permissible to appreciate the long line of back, the graceful flex and twist of muscle. "What must?"

"Collecting metal." He nodded towards the bracelet. "It makes sense. You never know when you might need it."

A pause. Then the man turned completely, kneeling with his back to the fire. He looked up at Charles.

The cuts on the right side of his face were well on their way to healing; the skin around the scabs no longer looked inflamed. But now there was a bruise on the man's left cheekbone. Charles frowned - and then winced to himself as he remembered. Last night. He had punched the man in the face -

But the wanker had deserved it. Where did he get off, saying Charles' name like that? He got off shoved straight up your arse, his mind pointed out. Charles batted the memories away.

The other had read his first name - in a file, surely. The dossier on him. Probably. But that did not mean he could use it; thus the well-deserved mark on the face, almost visibly darkening.

The overall expression, though, was anything but dark. Quite the opposite. Charles carefully controlled his own urge to smile. The man's gaze up at him? Could, charitably, be described as … besotted.

"How do you feel?"

"All right, I suppose." Charles propped up his chin on one hand. "Still rather queasy."

It was as though the other had been waiting for a cue. He grinned, widely, and made a grab for the same canvas bag that he had brought with him the night previous. The metal thermos was the first thing he took from it. "Here." He gave it to Charles. "Try some."

Charles unscrewed the thermos top and took a cautious sniff. The spicy scent made him blink.

"It's ginger. Try some."
It was not that great a concession, Charles thought, to take a sip. And besides, the drink smelled positively festive. And tomorrow would be Christmas Eve, so - his stomach lurched, and he swallowed the spicy mouthful of tea before his throat could close.

Quite the time for festivity, really. It was the steam from the drink, making his eyes sting. That was all.

Charles took another swig. It was quite good. Another, longer one - and he yelped as some of the tea splashed hot on his neck.

The man snorted. From another, it would have been a laugh. "Use the cup, Xavier. Be civilized."

"As though you were one to talk." Charles poured out tea into the cup. He closed his eyes, the better to enjoy the scent without distraction.

"Hm." He could hear the other's grin. "Yes. That's the joke, isn't it?"

"A joke." Yes - the tea was quite good, if somewhat bitter. It sent warmth curling through his stomach. "I confess that I did not think you capable of them."

"Surprise."

Charles rolled his shoulders; stretched. "I'm not surprised." There had been the surprisingly witty remark about the sugar yesterday, after all. "Just thinking out loud."

There was the slightest touch to one of his feet through the thin cotton. Charles opened his eyes with a start, turning to stare.

The other had … leaned his head against Charles' foot. And was looking up at him, eyes half-lidded. *What would he do if …* Experimenting, Charles flexed his toes, trailed them over the man's bruised cheekbone.

Admittedly, the touch was through the cloth of the sheet. But the other smiled slowly, and turned to …. *Fucking hell.*

The terror of the Free West was pressing a kiss into the arch of his foot. And the image made Charles' libido stand up and start salivating.

If by 'libido,' he meant 'cock.' Quickly, Charles drew back and shifted the sheets around - thank god he had actually put on his jeans, because it would not do to give the man any further information on how to please him. Bad enough that he was a prisoner and walled up in a cell to have, presumably, an obscene amount of sex in the near future. There was no need to demonstrate any sodding enjoyment of the same. He hadn't gotten off the previous night, after all - things had gone by too quickly and been too - too *new.* Familiarity need not change that.

Except the man was stretching to get at his foot again, and Charles snorted. "Enough."

At any other time it would have been hilarious. The terror of the Free West? Was now giving him the pleading look of a spaniel denied a treat.

"Really," Charles began, "I can think of far better places for you to put your mouth -"

And *shite* - he could have bitten off his own tongue for saying it. He had just bloody well thought *not* to give the other any ideas. And now? Now all Charles could do was pour more tea and stave off
the man's pawing through the bedclothes by holding out the dented thermos cup to him. "Right here. On the rim, here - take a drink. We're being civilized."

*On the rim?* his mind chimed in, gleefully - and he could only watch in alarm as the man took the cup and tossed the tea onto the blazing fire without even missing a beat. It sent up a billow of steam.

"Let's be - civilized," Charles tried, faintly.

"Civilized?" came the reply - through all those teeth, grinning at him. "*Fuck* civilized, Professor. I want your cock."

He could feel his goosebumps sprout goosebumps as his mouth went dry. And the images that that simple phrase conjured … But he was stronger than they. He had control. "No." Charles swallowed, fixed the man with a calm and collected look. "I don't think so."

"I do." And then there were strong hands tugging at the bedsheets - landing on the button and zip of his jeans, and really, that was quite enough.

"I don't care what you think." He kept his voice firm. "I said 'no.'"

A low hiss. "Why?"

"Several reasons." Charles straightened where he sat, uncoiling his legs from beneath him and pushing the man away. "First, there's no way you're getting those teeth near my bits again any time soon. Second, I'm not in the mood. And most importantly, if I do ever let you suck me off, I'll need a book to while away the time whilst you - try -"

He trailed off. Possibly because the man was looking murderous. Which, Charles reminded himself, was not just an adjective where the other was concerned.

"Do stop glowering." He stood, wrapping the sheets close again. *Damn.* His legs had wobbled again, just slightly - but he saw the man blink. And had it a sound, the other's hackles rising would have been quite loud indeed.

"You're hurt -"

"Certainly not. I'm just … The tea was quite lovely." Suddenly, Charles felt dizzy. He walked to the bed and sat. "Perhaps it will take complete effect in a few moments. In the meantime," and he tried a smile, "I hope you understand that I - I don't quite feel like exerting myself."

The man was silent for a moment. When he spoke again his voice was rough. "I was sick like that, once. In Manchuria. And the tea was helpful. Not a cure-all, though."

"You were sick? With what?"

A shrug. "Radiation poisoning."

"And you - recovered from it?"

Another shrug. The man uncoiled to his feet from the hearth. "I had help."

"Besides the tea."

"Yes, Xavier." There was a clink and scrape from the canvas bag; despite himself, Charles craned his neck to look. The man caught him at it and gave him a sly smile over his shoulder. "Besides the tea."
"Dare I ask what sort of help?" Charles couldn't keep his mind from clicking away, analyzing. "In my experience, vomiting from radiation poisoning is rather the beginning of the end than just an inconvenience - at least, in the field. Or do they have hospitals in Manchuria?"

The friendly look chilled. Much more normal, yes, but Charles held the sheets tighter all the same.

"Of course they have hospitals there."

The man had taken two larger metal containers out of the bag. Then he caught up a spoon and a bowl in his free hand - hands, rather, because of course the containers were levitating. Charles shook his head - the sight would take some getting used to, surely - but then he dismissed it and focused on the snide tone of,

"Just how uncivilized do you consider the world outside of Britain, Professor? I would have thought you'd have read a book or two on China Before."

"I have." Charles tipped up his chin. His skin prickled as he tracked the man. He watched the play of lean muscle in the morning light as the other loped over to the bed, set containers and utensils down, and returned to the corner by the door, to retrieve - Charles blinked. Blankets.

Well. That was unexpected.

"You have?"

The man's arms were full of folded wool; the weave caught the sunlight filtering through the arrow windows. Charles dragged his attention away from the light licking golden over the lines of shoulder and forearm. The other had asked a question. About - books -

"Yes. Several. I only assumed," and Charles bit his lip, let the man unwind the sheets from around him and shake them out, "I only assumed that - I'm more familiar with neighboring provinces. And countries. And: Seoul was gone; Tokyo. Beijing was one of the first to be bombed by, by MacMurphy. Even before that, though - I assumed that Shenyang would have been bombed too. Or did you go to Vladivostok?"

There was that smile again. Gentler this time, almost. Except the man and 'gentle' could not coexist. The other had quickly remade the bed, and Charles found himself - in it. Under the sheets. It was quite a different feeling than sitting on the mattress, even if he did have clothes on.

"Full marks for geography, Xavier -"

"I'm thrilled you approve."

" - and to answer your question: no. Harbin was just north enough to avoid the fallout from Korea, with the winds blowing east. We all made it to a clinic - Harbin had a university too, then, and rather more equipment and medicine than one might expect."

"But I thought Harbin was -"

"In the second wave."

The man had unfolded the blankets and was draping them around Charles. Charles watched those hands tuck heavy cloth into the corners at the bed's foot; waited until the other turned to pick up a last blanket before edging down into the warmth. "The second wave. MacMurphy's China campaign. Correct?"
"A one-sided campaign if ever there was one such." A last blanket, and then the man casually sat at the foot of the bed; drew up his long legs and folded them over each other, gracefully. "And with the wind, Beijing fallout finished what remained of Manchuria - but you understand, that was a month after Ch'ongch'on, and we were long since gone."

"Who is - 'we'? And gone where?"

"Long story." The man had retrieved a bowl, and was watching one metal container, his head tipped to one side. The gesture was explained when the lid flipped itself onto the topmost blanket and steam billowed out.

"Winter is a time for stories - what with the cold and all." Charles watched the soup pour itself into the bowl - he caught the sweet scent of … was it carrots? And his stomach, upset as it was, rumbled slightly. "Winter … a month after World War Three began - that's almost nineteen years ago today."

"Mm." The man touched the bowl, testing, and then held it out to Charles with the spoon. "Eat this."

"If I do, will you tell me what happened after Harbin?"

A wide-eyed look, mocking. "You've read your histories."

"Well," and Charles took the bowl. "It's rare to have an insider perspective. If indeed you were more than a foot soldier at that time."

"My diversionary tactics versus your reverse psychology. How amusing. But - let us have an exchange instead, Professor. I will tell you what happened after Harbin - if you tell me why it would be so very tiring to lie back and have me suck your cock."

Unfortunately, Charles had just taken a generous gulp of soup - so his splutter and coughing fit got broth all over the topmost blanket. And he heard the blighter laugh.

Angrily, he swiped at the soup dripping from his face. "I don't understand you. Last night you could hardly string two syllables together, and this morning you're conversant in techniques of psychological warfare. Reverse psychology, indeed. One might suspect you of trying to play a mind game on me. Or do you alternate between Neanderthal and civilized human being on a regular basis?"

"Ah, Xavier. My apologies for startling you. And I will answer a question for no recompense, and say: first, last night I was … distracted." Those teeth glinted in a smile; Charles looked away.

"Secondly: afterwards, I slept very well indeed. You?"

Charles waited him out a moment. A reply seemed to be expected. So he kept his voice cold. "Well enough."

"Good. And third, then: walking outside helps, in the morning. And a good sleep helps, and fresh air too. Things are …"

Something in the man's tone caught Charles' attention.

He looked at the man out of the corner of his eye. The other's expression was … not confused. Distant, rather. Considering.

"Things are - more clear," he concluded, finally, "in the morning."
Then the man shook his head once - and there was the inner dog again, content to let complex thoughts evaporate. A quirk of a smile at Charles. "So. There it is."

"There it is," Charles agreed, dismissing the topic. "Why did you have to go outside?"

"Ah." The smile widened. "That's another question. And I answered one already. It's your turn."

Hunching his shoulders, Charles made a show of slurping the soup. It was delicious: sweet, with a pronounced taste of carrots, and chunks of a white vegetable Charles could not immediately identify. "I don't want to talk about fellatio at this hour. Ask me something else."

"I don't want to ask anything else. Not right now."

"Fine. Then - I'll give you some soup, shall I?" Charles held out the bowl. "And you answer my question."

The other raised an eyebrow, looking down into the near-empty bowl. Then he looked back up at Charles.

Slowly.

Charles' mouth went dry.

"I'm not hungry for soup," the man whispered.

*Of course not.* Charles dropped the spoon into the bowl with a clatter. "Why am I not surprised? And I hardly need ask what you're hungry for in truth, do I?"

"I think you -"

"That was a rhetorical question," Charles sighed. "Fine, then. Come here and kiss me, and then give me more soup and answer my question. In that order."

He was in control. And he was not afraid. So it was easy enough to watch the man prowl forward on hands and knees, and lean in close to Charles' mouth.

But then he went still.

Those blue-green eyes were so near that Charles could see individual flecks of color in them - of cerulean, of jade, azure or even some grey - silver - who cared? Charles pushed his lips out in an exaggerated pucker and raised his eyebrows. *Go ahead, wanker.*

A hot puff of breath as the other smiled. "Good morning."

Charles rolled his eyes; then yelped as the man made a mock snap at his lips with those teeth. "Oi! No biting!"

"They were just begging for it, Xavier," in a drawl, and then the smile widened in a flash before the man slid his mouth over Charles'. Tipped his head to one side - *oh dear* - and flicked at Charles' lips with his tongue. Charles refused to let him in, and it only took a minute of slick prying before the other gave up and sat back with a frown.

"Don't look at me like that," Charles said, quietly. He drew the sleeve of his sweater across his mouth. "If I don't want you in me, I don't want you in me. And I don't - right now."

"Why not?"
Despite himself, Charles laughed under his breath. "I have bits and pieces of carrot stuck in my teeth." He held out the bowl. "May I have some more, please? And what happened after Harbin?"

"Yes," the man said, pouring, "and no. For that, I'll answer why I had to go outside, and no more."

"Fine. Why?"

"The delegates from Zhōngguó needed help."

Charles spooned up more soup and set his mind to work. "Help - with what? Transport? I thought you had teleporters for that."

"Azazel has taken my lady to Dallas. Jean too."

A quicksilver tendril of thought to Jean's room confirmed it - empty. Charles only had enough time for one hard swallow - gone away - before the man continued. "The embassy is in Albany, and they needed to return. They have several cars and a truck - I helped clear the snow from the road."

"More snow? Good lord." The conversation was pointless, but hopefully it would stave off the idiot's pawing for a while. "I had wondered - it was even colder this morning, but the one doesn't necessarily follow the other."

"High pressure system's come in. There won't be another storm for a while."

"No: it will just be cold enough to freeze over Hell; once, twice, thrice." Charles eyed the man's feet. "Tell me you at least wore shoes this time."

A nod.

"And a coat."

"Yes -"

"And … hm. If you had a shirt you somehow misplaced it. So. Did you wear a shirt?"

The man looked to one side. Then back at Charles. "… Maybe?"

"Really, you're of no use to me if you give yourself pneumonia."

"'Use'?" A grin. "How am I of 'use' to you now, Professor?"

"Fetching things," Charles replied, languidly. He drained the soup bowl. "Speaking of which: might I have some more tea? I want to rinse out my mouth."

"Why?" The question did not keep the man from wafting the thermos to the bathroom sink, pouring water into it, directing it back to the bed and gesturing so that the metal heated through in a flash.

"Because you're also useful for relieving certain urges that seem to have reared their primitive heads recently." Charles took a mouthful of too-hot tea, but did not flinch, swishing it instead. He swallowed, and leaned over to place the thermos on the floor. "And I respect you enough not to inflict bits and pieces of carrot upon you."

He stared into those green eyes. Then raised his chin. "Come here."

Blinking, the man obeyed. Charles placed bowl and spoon to one side and, in one smooth motion, framed the other's face in his hands. The man's eyes had gone wide in a split second. He sucked in a
breath as soon as Charles kissed him.

And then he groaned like he was the one who was ill, as Charles licked into his mouth and dipped his tongue behind front teeth. "Shh," Charles murmured, drawing back just slightly. "Calm down. This is just a taste - and without carrots, hm?"

He kissed the man more deeply before any reply could be made.

A serious snog: bony fingers reaching out to curl into his hair, then moving down to the blue sweater, flexing strong, caressing. Charles kept his own hands firmly on the other's cheekbones and temples. It was warm, it was wet and twisting and sinuous … and the blood was thumping in his ears when an insistent tug at the sweater gave him the excuse to pull back.

"Don't tear that."

"I won't," the other panted. "Please - let me?" Those fingers slipped under the knit, caught at his waist.

"Not right now." Charles drew back, smiling. Control. He was in control. "I merely thought that since I asked a few additional questions … I should settle the account."

"Ask some more."

"Really, I -"

"Please. Do you want more soup? I have more soup -"

"No, that's all right." He moved the bowl and spoon to the floor, next to the thermos, and nodded at the metal soup container still on the bed. The man stared at him, eyes wild, before grabbing at the metal to put it on the floor as well -

It dropped with a clank.

"Well. This isn't the first time that's happened." Charles mused. He felt a smirk twist his lips. "Just now, and the can of oranges last night … and the cup you made for me. A few occurrences, at least. Is your fine control really so precarious? I had thought more of you."

The man had ducked his head; the tips of his ears were crimson. He mumbled something.

"Pardon? I didn't quite catch."

"You distract me," the man hissed. He looked back up and glared. "Du."

Charles knew himself to be anything but a saint. So he did not fight the near-vicious satisfaction that welled up in him at the man's words, like beads of blood from a cut.

He masked it well, though, with a murmured: "Terribly sorry."

There was no answer. Only a glower.

Charles tried again. "Why did they come here, anyway? From Zhōngguó?"

"To celebrate."

"To celebrate - well. I do hope that they had a passable time. Victory is victory, but as we mentioned," he shook his head, "the bombing of Beijing … nineteen years ago, sometime this week.
I find it hard to believe that they could bow to Frost at the stadium with MacMurphy sitting right -"

And the realization hit him like a slap.

For a long moment, Charles could not breathe. He could only stare directly into the other's eyes, staring at their gleam, feeling like nothing more than a mouse facing down a viper.

"You gave them MacMurphy." His voice sounded thin and strained, in his own ears. "Didn't you?"

There was no reply. Instead, the man tipped his head to one side. Kept staring.

"Oh god, you did. You did, didn't you? Tell me the truth."

A slow smile. "Maybe?"

"God." However much the tea and soup had calmed his stomach, his lower gut twisted in protest as Charles kicked back the bedclothes and stood. "How could I have ..."

"How could you have' what?"

He stared into the fire. How indeed? How could Charles have … let the man fuck him, invited him into bed, knelt before him and kissed him and caressed him, even made this bargain in the first place? A bargain with a monster, for there were no illusions about it. MacMurphy had given the orders to have China's nascent power destroyed through nuclear bombs; the people of Zhōngguó, digging their way out of post-nuclear wreckage even twenty years later, would exact a terrible revenge from him. And the man had made it happen.

But he, Charles, had known that the bastard was a murderer to begin with. Did this make much of a difference? Charles swallowed his nausea; shivered.

"Put another log on the fire, flee to the bathroom, or come back to bed, Xavier."

Don't let him see you're afraid. "And what," Charles retorted, wresting a log from the pile in the corner, "if I do both first and second?"

The reply was low, mocking. "Then I have these warm blankets all to myself, and I fall asleep knowing you to be a coward."

Deep breath, in and out … Charles turned on one foot and kept his voice calm.

"I am not a coward."

"No?" The man bared his teeth in a grin. "Prove it."

Charles leaned back against the mantel. "How?" It was not falling into a trap, he reasoned, if one were fully aware of engaging in such an obvious give-and-take. Rather like watching a chess match but not actually playing it.

Because: "Take your clothes off," the man said - and really, that demand following such a blatant look of lust was the definition of predictable. Rolling his eyes, Charles stripped neatly and left everything draped over the chair. He walked back to the bed, matter-of-fact, and put his hands on his hips.

"There. Not a coward."

The man was staring with a look of indecent curiosity. Well, it was completely light in the room by
now. And he knew everything - or, at least, everything important - was relatively impressive. Even if he looked emaciated.

"Now you."

The man blinked up at him. "What?"

"Turnabout is fair play. Take off your trousers."

The other was just beginning to comply, with fumbling fingers … when Charles saw an eyebrow go up. And: "No -" the man started.

"And now who's a coward?"

"We'll see." A grin that was all teeth. "You take them off for me. Now."

Charles refused to break eye contact as he sat down by the man's side, biting back the groan from the immediate twinge in his quadriceps. Those eyes gleamed at him. He sneered back. "What do you say?"

Teeth flashed. "Please."

"Fine." It was simple enough to make quick work of belt and buttons. No zip - the cut of the trousers was an older style. And no briefs - predictable once more. Charles did not permit himself to feel aroused in the least as he hooked his fingers into the trouser waist and pulled the fabric down. "Ease up a bit?"

The man obeyed, breathing more heavily. Charles could see the rise and fall of that chest in front of his nose as he tugged the trousers down.

"You had better handle the rest," he murmured, and trailed his fingers up over the man's flanks, abdomen - avoiding exactly what the sod wanted. A quick glance confirmed it. And had the admittedly impressive sight of that cock rapidly hardening not been enough for Charles, the speed with which the other kicked off the trousers and the hot glitter of his eyes would have been further proof.

Charles did not hide his yawn. "Well. I'm not a coward, and you're not a shrinking violet. Now what?"

No answer.

He felt so tired, suddenly. So … why not use it?

Charles yawned again. "What do you want?"

"I - want you -" the man rasped.

"Yes, that's mildly apparent. But - how do you want me? Because I," and he rolled his shoulders, "am feeling rather ill, and quite sleepy. So … what I propose is: I shall lie down here," and Charles dramatically flopped back onto the bed, and chose to turn over onto his stomach, "and you shall do all the work."

Charles had always thought that different silences had different qualities. Much like fine wines.

This silence was that of shock, yes - but also the dazed quality particular to a unique and beautiful human specimen. Yesterday's virgin faced with … and Charles shifted his thighs, slowly ... a full,
delectable spread. So to speak.

But the fresh memories were not far away, and they in turn reminded him: "Although, before you start that work ..." and Charles wriggled to one side, on his stomach, and fumbled beneath the bed. There was the grease; it had fallen to the floor the previous night. "Do show some loving care towards your dance partner. Hm?"

"I don’t … dance?"

"Figure of speech," Charles sighed, holding the container in one hand and flailing with it behind his back. "Just take it, use it, and fuck me already, will you?"

Silence again, heavy and hot. And then there was the warm line of a body easing over him - skin only just brushing skin in places that flared into fire - and breath between his shoulder blades.

"Say that again, Xavier."

"Fuck me; god." He rolled his eyes and rocked backwards, grinding his arse against the man - and, ha, his words had already had quite the effect. “It’ll take my mind off things.”

“I…”

“Perfectly straightforward.” Even so, Charles had to work a bit to keep his voice sounding bored. “Just like you did earlier: only this time, I’m facing away from you. Clear?”

Charles had not been aroused before; too focused on his own winning their little back-and-forth. Now his body was just starting to stir, to take an interest in things besides the ache in his gut. The man was still hesitating, though: breathing onto Charles’ neck in short, damp gasps; trembling where Charles touched him. For he had moved his own fingers, flexing, to curl round the other’s cock and squeeze the slightest bit …

He tightened his grip and felt the man’s body almost … almost ripple, in a full-out shudder. Very nice, Charles thought, but drawled: “I’m going to have a nasty bout of indigestion in less than two hours.” He yawned again. “So … do get on with it now, if you want it in the next day or two. Come on. Grease up.”

A curse puffed hot into his back, and then Charles heard unmistakable sounds. Slick and fast - "Don't hurt yourself," he tried, but broke off - for the man had growled against his neck, braced himself with one hand and moved the other greasy one down, and Charles shivered at the slow slide of one slick finger into his hole.

"Well. That's kind of you. Things should be fine from last night, still … but it can't hurt."

Except that three fingers shoved in all at once could hurt, and did. Damn. "Wait - let me just …" Charles spread his legs wider, reached down to grab one of his knees, pulled it up just slightly. Up and to the side, and he hadn’t done this in a while, truly, because the grate and pop from his right hip was a sound better suited to a sixty-year-old.

"Are you all right?" The man was panting, his voice cracked.

"Fine." Charles shoved back against him, relishing the incoherent sound that was the only reply. "Go ahead; fuck me."

The fingers slipped out - Charles pressed his lips together - and that same hand gripped what little flesh remained to grab and spread him further. The man was whispering something … in German?
Who knew. All Charles knew is that the fine specimen of sod was jabbing at him again with that frankly ridiculous cock - there was a joke that could be made, surely; Charles would think of it soon - pushing in just slightly, but there, and Charles bit down hard on his own tongue. Another push with no give whatsoever. Charles tried to relax. He knew how, after all, but this was - he winced as the man tried again - perhaps this was going to be a problem. Perhaps there hadn't been enough lubrication left over after all; perhaps he should have ordered two rounds of grease on that cock - oh -

"Xavier?"

Fingers trailed over his shoulder. Charles could feel them slip. It had to be some grease left over, then ... how charming.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

That voice was like sandpaper, rasping on his neck.

"I might ask you the same thing. Have you forgotten how this works?"

"No," the man growled, "but - it's hard."

"Indeed it is." Charles tried a roll of his hips; the other hissed, and - bloody hell his breath was hot.

"I mean - it's not like last night."

"Mm. The angle's different, yes. The principle is the same. Keep going."

He had asked for it. The next shove, though, got what had to be the head wedged in tighter and he couldn't keep his shoulders from drawing up to his ears.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Charles replied. It was difficult to swallow; he managed it. "Keep going."

"I …"

What on earth was the problem now? How much of a challenge was it, really, to fuck someone? Would he have to hold the moron's hand through every single position in the Kama Sutra?

But: "... May I?" The man was whispering the words in his ear, a hot rough tumble of " - may I may I please -"

"Oh." Charles finally understood. "Right."

He slid his hand from where he was still resting it lightly against the man’s thigh. Slid it back, and around, and then he coiled his fingers into the tight muscle of that arse and scratched. Felt the other hiss, and turned his head round to whisper against those lips: "Move."

The man choked. "What -"

"You heard me," Charles murmured. "I’m the one that’s feeling ill. I have a stomach ache. And you are going to do all the work; go on, move it." He loosened his fingers; slapped where they had been clenched. "Fuck me."

"You -" All those muscles tightened. Charles felt dizzy. The stretch at his hole was an abominable tease; he tried rocking back again and yelped as the man nipped at his shoulder. Where he had bitten yesterday - or was it the day before yesterday, now? And: you have to ask, Charles thought; tried to
put the words together, but that cock was rather distracting, and he wanted the other to fall to and just
fuck him already - too long and the man might get a cramp of his own.

But let's remember, children - the sudden image of himself in full tweed, pointing at a diagram - the
penis is not a muscle. Vasodilation leads to the corpora cavernosa and the corpus spongiosum
becoming engorged with blood, followed by -

The sod was biting again. The coil and flex of all those muscles against his own skin felt delicious,
pressed as close as they were, but those teeth were intent on the bruise, and it hurt. Charles drew
breath to tell him off, but then the other rocked against him, just slightly - enough to hint at just how
hard he could get slammed into the bed - god, yes -

“Right - fuck me through the mattress, go on.” Charles rolled his hips once more. “While we’re
young.”

The man jerked back, growling; then moved quick as a cat to shove at his shoulders, pressing his
chest into the bed and leaving more room lower down. Must have been instinct, Charles thought,
even though he felt his own instinctive clench around - nothing. Damn it. He had tried to squirm
away from the hands running down his back in a hot, calloused slither and scrape - and the head had
popped out. But the other was still shifting from knee to knee - setting up a good angle - eventual
angle, since both hands were on Charles’ hips now, taking such tight hold that he could have sworn
he heard bones creak. He gulped as the man tugged him into position; face-down arse-up, but he
didn’t care, because he was in control and he had had other undignified things happen to him in the
course of a sex life well spent - even though the idiot then had to make another grab for flesh, his
favorite thing, and flex the fingers of one strong hand - more bruises, damn it. Charles hissed. That
sodding thumb had to be leaving a dent of its own -

Then his heart shot into his mouth as the other hand darted forward, snapped round his own left wrist
and pinned it to the mattress.

Well. Pinned it to the sheet. Which set off pale skin quite dramatically, being crimson. And there was
the man’s skin, darkened by the sun, white only where the fierce grip had bleached his knuckles.

Charles shivered despite the heat pressed against him. He saw the ring on the man’s left thumb
gleam. Still have that old thing, chap?, except he couldn’t really say anything - his heart was
pounding and there was that cock again, all right, jolly good, if the sod would just get a god damned
move on because Charles didn’t want to wait anymore -

“Move,” Charles groaned, because his tongue felt strangely large and leaden in his fuzzed mouth;
everything was hot and close and sweaty, even above the bedclothes, as the man somehow tightened
the grip on his arse and pushed, and there it was, he was sliding in, and: “ohfuck,” Charles gasped.
“Like that -”

A low growl. And another push.

“Ngh.” The blanket felt cool where his forehead had caught on it. His skin was sticky and damp. Oh,
the hand left his arse and migrated to his hair, stroking through the sweaty tangle, petting, which was
not what Charles wanted. “No. What you did before. Do it again.”

The man growled again, grabbed him again and -

“Oh my god,” and Charles couldn’t help the moan, really. Shove and thrust and then he had felt the
third all the way up his spine; how had the stupid little - not that little, his mind gibbered - how had
the overgrown moron found the right bloody angle on the third bloody try? Luck, it had to have been
luck, and: lucky me lucky me, his thoughts sang in chorus, and: “Again. Just like that …”

“You liked that?”

“What does it sound like? Yes. This is called ‘communication.’ This is called ‘positive reinforcement.’ Now: do it again.”

“… Again?”

“Yes - for god’s sake,” he made his voice cut like a whip, “how are you having trouble understanding me? Do. It. Again.”

A shove of those hips, and Charles groaned - god that was good …

Another long pause. He felt sweat trickling down his temples. What was the other waiting for - oh. Right.

“I told you to move.”

“I - but …”

Charles felt divided between a growl of his own and an hysterical snicker. He settled on a long-suffering: “What is it?”

“It’s -” The man sounded almost incoherent. Which wasn’t really a change. “It’s so - you’re -”

A shuddering sigh, the slightest retreat and then a hard, smoother press forward ... Had Charles been any less experienced and confident, his eyes would have rolled up into the back of his head. As it was, he waited until they focused again, and murmured,

“... I’m what? Tell me,” and he lolled his head round on one shoulder. “Tell me.”

“I can’t - you’re so tight,” the man gasped.

Charles kept his smirk to himself.

“Mm.” He let the purr last, as turned his head back to the mattess and rolled his hips, grinding back up against that lean body. “Flattery will get you everywhere, sweet.”

A pause.

Then: “What did you just call me?”

Charles thought. Then he blinked. Whoops. But he decided to brazen it out: “Sweet. Süß, if you prefer.”

“Süß ...” the man whispered.

And Charles felt the pent-up energy in that body intensify, like a steel coil corkscrewing, ready to snap. Like the metal cloud, he remembered: and thank god he had dampened all of his telepathic power, because otherwise his mind would have been ravaged long ago. But the other was still whispering:

“Xavier … I remember you from the first day of the battle. You. I felt you, through the Finder. I saw you. And then there was bird - flying.”
The tension was building, building .... The hand on his arse slithered down his back and twisted into his hair. And tugged, just a bit - you need to ask first, he was going to say, but his mouth had gone dry.

“Really?” Charles replied. Tried to sound neutral.

Or as neutral as he could sound when he ached from being stretched so wide, when he was teetering on the edge of .... It was not panic. No. He was just suddenly aware of the fact that …. Charles knew it, he could sense it even without his powers, his birds, his mind …

The other was so close to letting go of even the miniscule amount of control he possessed. So close to fucking him senseless.

Charles felt the hand on his wrist tighten. Left hand on left wrist, sinister enough, and the weaker could be left broken with that amount of force - Christ. He winced, and squeezed his eyes shut, waiting ...

But nothing happened ... except another whisper.

“I saw you. And I know you saw me. What I don’t know is how many I killed that day, Xavier.” A small movement of those hips; Charles swallowed, feeling the hand in his hair tighten too. “I rather lost count.”

A pause. “And you call me … sweet?”

"Why not? We've established that I'm not a coward, so I'll call you what I like."

As long as he didn't call it too loudly, because: god. It had only taken half a dozen thrusts - only half of those at the best angle, admittedly, and only one, alas, sliding over the right spot in just the right way … but still: he already felt boneless. Out of practice, Charles decided, and: time to get back in control. He stretched as languidly as he could with the other’s weight on him, reached back with his free hand, and felt for the spikes of the man’s hair. Then Charles caressed down the back of his skull, his neck. “Could you please keep fucking me?”

The man found Charles’ exploring hand, nipped at his fingers. “Mm,” breathy, and then - oh thank god - he started to move, setting up a slow rhythm, bless his precocious little cotton socks -

Not so li - but Charles reached gently to shut off the catalogue, the inner voice … Focused, instead, on the pushes - in slightly, then in further each time - and then each gritty slide almost out, the ache just on the right side of outright pain. “Like that,” he whispered, “just like that. Keep it slow. That’s good. Isn’t it?”

“What,” the other ground out, breath rattling in his chest. Charles could feel the muscles in the neck beneath his fingers strung tight and quivering, even as the pace picked up just slightly -

“Slow … ‘s good -” Charles tried, but then gave up. Communication later, perhaps. Charles took his hand away, reached out for the pillow. Drew it close, nuzzled his face into it. Perhaps it was time to start a conversation with said pillow. Nice pillow; pretty pillow. Very soft. It could see the hand leave his hair and plant itself next to his face, bracing against the mattress as the man started to thrust faster. And then the hand had to give way to a forearm, and that made the angle something special, that did. Mmm ... Pillow knew how lovely this was - it could feel the rhythm, too, pushing Charles down into the bed, making things creak - thank god he was the only one left in the dormitory, because the noise was -

The man paused, dragging in deep breaths. Charles felt him shiver, and snapped his attention back to
what was - oh shite not already. “No, don’t come yet, for the love of all that’s holy -”

“What?”

Charles reached out, grabbed the forearm that lay tense against on the mattress. “Don’t come yet.”

“How - how can -”

“It’s easy enough.” Lovely rhythm, lovely stretch and now it was back to the blackboard, damn it. But - this, and then they could resume, and - oh, the idiot. “Focus on other sensations. Think of something - something quelling. Anything,” and Charles smirked, “besides my delectable arse.”

“Fuck you.”

“Exactly,” and he made his voice sweet. Encouraging. Ha. “I used multiplication tables, when I was younger. I’ve since moved on to cubic roots.”

“I -”

“Hm?”

“I don’t know - cubic -”

“Oh, bless.” Charles slid his right hand, curled it round a biceps. The man still had his left wrist caught tight; the grip was quivering now. He was pressed close, yes … and still so deep … god … but taking most of his weight on one arm. Charles blinked. Quite a feat of balance, and he didn’t recall telling him to do anything that considerate, but … where were they? Cubic roots. “Very few know them. So,” and he caressed sweat-slick skin with his palm. “What do you know?”

A moan.

“Hm. Try the periodic table. Recite it.”

“Iron,” the man gasped, “cobalt, nickel, chromium’s different; lithium, oxygen, sodium, magnesium, aluminum -”

“Hydrogen, helium? Aren’t you forgetting a few?” And moving, he noticed, from the ferromagnetic elements to the paramagnetic ones - what on earth?

“I don’t …” The other’s breathing was labored. “I can’t -”

“Shh - focus.” It seemed a deep breath was necessary for himself, too. “Clear your mind.”

"My mind ... I ..."

The grip on his wrist loosened and another arm came down, and oh, Charles was framed by heat and scent as the man shifted his weight to both forearms and exhaled long and hard against his nape. He flexed his left hand, surreptitiously. Well and good, no injury. Nothing too terrible, even with the heave of that chest just brushing his back now. He knew the man was not especially hirsute, which fortunately was more to his own taste … but Charles could feel sweat dripping down onto him. He supposed it might have been disgusting … but - oh god - something about the scent - the man’s forearms to each side of his head and hot breath on his hair - and Charles was sweating too. He could feel it pooling in the small of his back.

Though any thoughts of the small of his back rapidly turned to thoughts directed further down, where - he groaned into the pillow, despite himself, because although the other’s breath was slowing,
that cock was still so god damned hard and pressed so deep -

“Nngh.” *Very articulate*, a small part of his mind supplied - but most of it was occupied in cataloguing: well, there was the scratch of hair, Charles could actually feel it press against his arse - fuck fuck -

“Fucking hell ….” The words caught in his throat. It was too hot. Or - too humid, with the sweat. Something was making his thoughts liquefy. *No, Focus*. He had just been focused - his mind had been clear enough to see the periodic table entire. This was ridiculous. He had done this so many times that it shouldn’t feel - he shouldn’t be - “Shite,” he whispered. *Stay in control*. He raised his voice. “Move again. Go on.”

“You want -” The voice rasped against the damp skin of his back.

“Yes.” Then he gritted his teeth; focused. *Keep control*. “Everything clear up there? In your mind?”

“Clear …” The man brushed his mouth over the bite mark. Licked at it. “… *du … du bist -*”

“Ich bin, *du bist, er sie es ist*, yes; now will you fuck me already - ah -” Charles grabbed, pure instinct, at the man’s forearms. That thrust, a sharp snap of those hips, had made his teeth rattle. "*Careful.*"

"Why -"

"That hurt."

And he felt the breath sucked in against his shoulder. "It - did?"

"Yes, and I'd really prefer it not." Charles shivered. "Please."

"Then," a rasp, and, "then - what do you -"

"Slow." He turned his face back into the pillow. "Like you were before. Slowly; as - as -*deep* his mind whispered, "as far as you want, in, but - slowly."

"Like this?"

And Charles squeezed his eyes shut, panting, because *god* it was good. A careful slide up into him - everything slick enough for it now, thank god - and *cramming* him full of cock; it was fantastic - "Yes. Again."

Fantastic times two, three, four, he thought muzzily, because the man had obeyed. And he was pressing deep, again and again, in a slow, relentless rhythm that made Charles' toes curl.

And that went on for a while.

A short while. Except, long rather than short - short in terms of time. Long in - in terms of -

*Oh …*

The Oxford Casanova was hardly ever reduced to mumbles or to drooling. It seemed the man was a quick study. Charles spat out his mouthful of pillowcase. He looked down at the bottom edge of the pillow, lashes catching on the cotton already sticking to his face, and watched the line move back and forth - and speeding up, which meant that the other really couldn't control himself anymore. Pity, that. But the thrusts didn't hurt, even as deep - *god*, deep as the man was reaching. Well. Maybe a hurt, but - not a bad hurt - it was just … an ache, or a stretch or - full, he was just full - Charles felt
hyperaware of the scratch of beard on his skin, of breath slithering hot over the damp on his back, and - fuck he felt the other lapping up the sweat beading on his shoulder blades. And the bone-deep relentless fuck didn't stop - didn't - except -

Charles groaned into the pillow, feeling his own breath curl round his face. It was strange to sense vibrations from front and back. Those on his own lips and those from the low growl on the nape of his neck - drawn-out, bestial - and Charles winced at the sharper snap of those hips, four times, five, and more - but that cock didn't really hurt at all, only because - ah. There it was - a bit of come to ease the way ... and a bit more. And - god - more. Nothing to worry about, even if things had started to sound ... not strange, but wet ... obscene ...

What was strange, though, was the surge of bile rippling up his own throat. He choked down the nausea and braced his forearms against the mattress, rocked back hard into the man's shove. The other gasped and crowded forward as close as he could, pinning Charles with the weight of all those knotted muscles and sharp bones.

And then there was nothing but the rasp of their combined breathing.

Charles gave it a minute; two. Then he shifted beneath the man's dead weight. He tried squirming, a push with his shoulder, and finally a jab of his elbow. No response.

"For fuck's sake," he mumbled into the pillow, and: "Wachet auf."

"Hnh?"

"Wake up."

"You mean wach auf?"

Charles narrowed his eyes. "Whichever."

He only remembered the phrase from the hymn - which, though liturgically appropriate for the day, was perhaps not the most ecumenical choice. Or appropriate, for that matter, since there was no part of it that conveyed, "Please get your cock out of my arse."

A grunt against his back. And Charles had to grit his teeth against the dragging slide of that cock, slick with grease and come but still palpable. But: "There," he muttered. "Thank you."

The man had slumped flat onto the bed, pressed close to Charles' side. And he took that single piece of polite nothing as a cue to sit up, bend over and mash his face into Charles' skin, rasping that beard between his shoulder blades and pressing a sloppy kiss to the single most prominent vertebra. "You're welcome."

What utter bollocks. Now was not the best moment, though, for a temper tantrum. Instead, Charles rolled over as gingerly as he could. He winced at the rough texture of the blankets - but at least the sod hadn't gnawed bruises onto him this time. He gave his cock a jaundiced look. It had recovered from being pressed down into the bed, but it still seemed rather undecided about whether or not to -

He could not flinch back in time to avoid the hand closing around said cock like a trap. "Oh, you fuckwit, leave me bloody well alone -"

But the man had shoved his left arm beneath Charles' shoulders, and was holding him in place with a strong hand to the chest. And the right hand - was starting to jerk him off. Damn it - he didn't want to
do this, to give the other the satisfaction, the power -

"You didn't come last night," the man explained, voice hoarse in Charles' ear. "You think I forgot, but I didn't."

"I'm so proud of you," Charles gritted out between clenched teeth. Why hadn't the moron just fallen asleep? He pushed against the restraining hand, aimed a kick at a bony shin. Pity the bad knee was on the far side. He tried to struggle in earnest; the man growled and bit his ear - only the slightest close of teeth on flesh, but enough to make Charles freeze.

So for a long moment, he could only feel the flurry and scrape on his cock - and too much of the latter, shite -

"Grease up your hand, for the love of fuck. Or at least spit in it. Your calluses are -"

An exuberantly obscene noise, right in his god damn ear. The man had obeyed him again. Joy. It was difficult, though, so difficult to focus on his anger and fatigue and disgust, rather than on the quickening motions of the other's hand.

And … really, Charles thought to himself. Why not? If he was going to be - stuck here for however long and obliged to let the man fuck him every which way … why not take something from it for himself?

Besides, he felt sick. And the fuck had been a good distraction - but if he had this, maybe he could end up going to sleep and postpone setting up camp in the bathroom by an hour or two.

So Charles slapped his fingers round the man's forearm, clenched and scratched with his nails while arching up into the tight grip on his cock. He refused to say anything; just hissed and grunted as he thrust, and if he sounded like an animal - well. He was in good company; namely, the good company panting into his ear. No words - just rattling breaths, hoarse and charged with lust.

And the advantage of behaving like an animal was that he didn't have to say anything after he came. Charles just avoided looking at the other's eyes, and tried to ignore the sound and sensation of a hot tongue licking up all the come on his own abdomen. "You said I could have it," the man had growled - and just because Charles could remember saying it the previous night did not mean that he had to pay any attention at all.

His knuckles, whitened where they gripped the topmost blanket, were truly more interesting anyway.

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After, Charles had stayed on top of the bedclothes, staring at the angle of light changing on the ceiling, until he had started to shiver. Then he made no resistance as the man had bundled them both beneath the sheets, and blankets … and it had been so warm that he had fallen into a doze, despite himself, while being held in the other's arms.

A surge of nausea and a particularly nasty cramp woke him soon enough, though, and Charles slipped out of the man's grasp and started for the bathroom, weaving unsteadily on his feet.

He had just downed his second cup of water and was staring at his own pale face in the mirror when the bloody door opened. It was when the fucker put his head in that Charles lost his temper. In a restrained way, of course.

"What do you think you're doing?"

A low growl. "I might ask the same."
"I'm wondering why you didn't bloody well knock before coming in. And - as I told you - I'm feeling sick. Indigestion." Charles grimaced into the mirror. "It will pass, but it will be unpleasant in its course, so please. Leave me alone."

The man ignored him and - Charles gritted his teeth - paced into the bathroom. At least he was wearing his trousers, although the belt was unbuckled. Charles darted a glance at the other's image in the mirror, blinking. Scabbed cuts on the left; cheekbone bruise on the right. And Charles was so used to seeing the scar on the right and the lion tattoo on the left that to see them reversed … was extremely strange. The man scrubbed at his hair; showed teeth in a yawn.

Then Charles' stomach lurched. For the other had peered into the mirror, eyebrows slowly ascending, and touched his fingertips to the bruise on his cheekbone.

He said nothing. But he met Charles' eyes, in the glass … and those teeth looked just as animal, smiling, in reflection as in reality.

Charles shivered and looked away. "Do you mind?"

"Mind what?"

"Since you are not picking up on normal human etiquette, let me be frank. I am five minutes away from unleashing digestive Armageddon on an unsuspecting plumbing system, and I do not care to have an audience for it. Will you please leave?"

"That's 'frank'?" The grin in the mirror widened. "Why, Professor. If you need to take a shit, just say so."

"My god, you really are an animal." Yanking at the tangles in his own hair, Charles tried to focus on anything but the desperation in his own eyes. "Fine. Our honeymoon is over; the bloom is officially off the rose. I'm going to be ill and I would appreciate your leaving now." He turned to look the man in the face. "Please."

"Animal?" The voice was doing nothing to disprove the notion; it was a purr, as the man ran the long, slender fingers of one hand through Charles' hair. "An animal wouldn't leave."

"You haven't yet."

"That's because," and the man turned and perched on the edge of the bathtub, "I know what you like."

One tip of the head and Charles saw the faucets twist. And saw steam billowing up from the cascading water.

"Oh." He felt caught wrong-footed, staring. "The water … It was - cold this morning."

"Mm. Pipes are freezing, on and off. Comes with the season. So," the man drawled, "do you prefer this hot, Xavier, or boiling hot?"

"As close to boiling as possible."

"Like a lobster." A smile. "This is the second bath for you today. Do you really need it?"

"Surely you're not that medieval. I smell like come, and so do you. Or did you not notice?"

The man looked genuinely confused. "What's wrong with -"
"It's just a civilized standard." and Charles squeezed his eyes shut against the cramps in his gut and the ache in quads and arse as he bent to retrieve his last bar of soap from beneath the sink. "I wonder at you. There are stages of development, you know, focusing on these functions; there are the establishments of certain taboos … It's an entire sub-field, in psychology. I wonder very much what Herr Doktor Freud would think of you."

Steam was still wafting round the man. It should have made him flush, but … Charles looked in the mirror, and raised an eyebrow. The reflection of the man showed his eyes as dark smudges and the bruise as a purple smear. He had gone quite pale.

"Herr Doktor." The man shrugged abruptly and stood. He plucked the soap from Charles' hand and placed it on one flat corner of the tub. "Psychology; tsch. Let me be frank with you, Xavier. You have some reservations about bodily functions? I do not. Far too many years 'in the field,' as you say. The battlefield. And -" a mocking twist of the mouth - "uncivilized places. A waste of time, fretting about who smells like what. No … it takes a good deal more than shit, or piss, or come, to disgust me."

Charles felt like mock-applauding the speech; then realized that he had no energy for it. Instead, he shrugged over his shoulder at the man. "Just as long as you remember their different contexts. Please."

Because it was bad enough that the blighter enjoyed licking him - what if he were to - Charles winced at the thought of - no, no he was not going to think about it -

And besides, the other snorted a laugh. "Of course."

"Of course," Charles echoed, relieved. He gave his hair one final despairing look; caught the look of amusement given him by green eyes, and curled his upper lip at the mirror. The man had taken a step to stand next to him, shoulder to shoulder. That body heat was ridiculous in the bathroom's chill. But soon, Charles decided, he would be warm enough in a bath.

He considered their reflection one last time. Then he gave in to his curiosity. "So: what does disgust you?"

The fact that the man took so long to answer was disconcerting in the extreme.

But finally he smiled a broad and sunny smile into the mirror. "Cannibalism."

Charles stared.

The man turned to look at him, still smiling. "So."

And he leaned in close to Charles. Dropped a kiss on his nose. "What shall I bring you to eat?"

Charles had given him a rambling list. Fruit figured highly, he thought; but he hardly remembered - because his mind had been circling around 'cannibalism.' Cannibalism. He had seen the remnants in certain missions, yes, but had always thanked whatever powers existed that he had never witnessed the practice. That he had had Oxford's hastily constructed walls to live behind in the first years of chaos, after the bombs had fallen. And that the friendly rivalry with Cambridge engineers had resulted in those walls being reinforced to last - and to last forever - by 1955.

Having taken care of the business of indigestion, and presently soaking in the hot bath, Charles stared at the faucets above his feet. 1955. On a projection cloud above the Battle of Dallas Frost had told him: the EBS had arrived in what had been America, and settled in New York State that was, in
1955. We were invited to this land, she had said. And then she had gone on about Stryker's nuclear weapons - and the bloody CIA, for that matter - being destroyed by First Quarter of 1956.

Nobody knew any of the particulars of the EBS-Free West war, of course. Charles ducked his head under water again and reached for the soap. That was the reason he had asked for books. And then received the sodding children's book that had started him down the doomed midnight path to the library. Had he known that one time breaking curfew would have ended up with him in a monster's clutches - literal clutches, he thought, staring broodingly at the fingerprints just beginning to bruise on his chest …

"Well," Charles muttered. "No sense in crying over spilt milk."

He wasn't crying, of course. And - Charles firmed his resolve once more - he would not. Not about this, a bargain he had created for himself.

He washed his hair with the soap, wishing halfheartedly - and not the first time - for something to take care of the tangles before the last resort of subduing them with a comb. Although … Charles brightened, thinking about it. He had scissors in the sewing kit. He could cut the whole mess off as a Christmas present to himself.

A better present than a children's book riddled with propaganda, that was certain. So. In 1955, the EBS had set up shop on this side of the Atlantic. Perhaps even here, in this manor. Charles ducked to rinse out his hair. To him, it was the years before that were even more intriguing - especially now that he had the faintest glimmerings of a timeline. The man and others with him had been treated for radiation poisoning in Harbin, far in the north of China Before, prior to that same city being rendered uninhabitable by fallout from the bombing of Beijing. That last had occurred around Christmas in 1950 - and by then, the man had said, he and his fellows had been gone - to places unknown. Well. Unknown to Charles, as of this moment.

Different pieces, each more tantalizing than the last. The fact that they had had radiation poisoning in the first place, and so close to the beginning of the Third World War … The bombing on the banks of the Ch'ongch'on, 25 November 1950 … far in the north of Korea Before. A short journey from Shenyang, Vladivostok. And Harbin.

And the man had mentioned Ch'ongch'on. Charles hadn't been the one to reference it …

Charles dropped the soap, and fumbled to retrieve it, heart pounding. Foot soldier, he had taunted the other - but with such an ability, there was no way the man would have been a pawn on any chessboard. Even at a young age. Charles cast his mind back, remembering - Frost had said … the White Queen had said …

My prince was brought to me in 1945. One war ended, and I taught him to speak again. Cold peace reigned, and I taught him to read. I watched over him as he grew, and as he was prepared for his destiny.

And he watched with me, as another war began.

Charles had watched Dallas with Frost. Had the man - had Frost -

"Mother of god," Charles breathed. Had they been there? Watching Ch'ongch'on?

Did the man know anything about how the nuclear war had begun?

For a long moment, Charles stared at the rust-stained porcelain by the spout. Then, despite himself, he laughed. "Easy. Down, Professor; control yourself."
Nothing surpassed the giddiness of a historian confronted with a pristine primary source, and an eyewitness to a mystery, to boot. *The Eagle of the Ninth? Why, I stuck that out in the barn for safekeeping, old chap - follow me!* Charles turned the faucets, adjusted the temperature to lukewarm and dunked his head beneath the tumble of water. "Calm down."

But if he could return to Oxford - with the knowledge of ... god, he could write such a book -

"For pity's sake," he grumbled at the soap. Delusions of grandeur. Charles opened the drain, cranked the hot faucet again, and started replenishing the water. It would be far better to focus on something different. Save the ferreting out of information, the wild hypotheses, until he actually had the man gasping and pleading beneath his hands. Because Charles knew he could wring anything from the blighter. Given enough time.

He had done so with others, after all. Geoffrey had been furious when Charles had wheedled out of him Cambridge's short list for their physics hire. For while their administration had been deadlocked over whether or not to wait for the Free West candidate - something about the poor man's visa - Charles had reported back to Oxford and *they* had snapped up the Belgian. The ensuing dramatics had been spectacular.

*And you would think that I'd have learned my lesson*, Geoffrey had said, staring down at him. Charles had merely smiled, beguiling, and drawn him back to bed.

Geoffrey Hill, the Cambridge maths tutor. A fellow missioner - one who prided himself on his dry wit, and who tended to trace his proofs over bare skin in bed. A different type of playful, really, than the sort he, Charles, had been privy to for the last thirty-six hours. Geoffrey at least had been civilized.

Charles thought back, strangely wistful. *Geoffrey.* Dark hair and eyes, hands square and strong, a ready smile ... quite handsome indeed, even though the man had better teeth. Geoffrey had similar arms and shoulders, though no tattoos - he had talked endlessly about his rowing. But the rest of his build had been softer, more luxuriant. And he had almost always smelled of tea and linen.

Charles idly ran through other comparisons. St. George Richardson, the curate at Christ Church. He was much of a height, but adorable rather than animal: clumsy, with spatulate fingers. Anna Weiss from Philosophy had a similar ... *hm* ... clarity? Of bone structure? Clarity, purity - awkward ways to describe the elegant lines of cheekbone and brow. And of course there had been the spoken German in common. True, Weiss had firmly resisted all attempts to entice her into bed - but that had been her loss.

Robin the message runner - and it was only Robin, given that he was a war orphan - was perhaps the most similar physically, overall. Lean and fleet, if somewhat vain about it - but not much of a cock, really, not like -

And Charles put paid to that train of thought instantly.

Just in time, too. He heard movement from his room, and then a tap on the bathroom door.

"Can I come in?"

"It's 'may I'." Charles replied. "And yes."

Good manners should be rewarded, after all - and the more so when the good-mannered one came bearing gifts. Charles tried to keep his eyes from the thermos, but it was difficult. Fortunately, he did not have to avoid it for long.
"Here." The metal was pressed into his hands. It was cold. "Drink that."

"What is it?" he began, unscrewing the top - but did not even have to wait for the answer before his mouth flooded at the sharp scent. Oh god it was orange juice. Charles took an eager drink and almost whimpered. It had been so long ... "God," he sighed, "that's better than sex."

"No, it's not."

"Oh, sorry," and Charles poured some juice into the cup and held it out. "Here's for you."

"No." The man pushed Charles' hand back. "I got plenty of it in Dallas."

"How can you not like orange juice?" He drained the cup and tried to keep from chugging the rest in one go.

A shrug. "Bad memories."

Trauma involving orange juice - really. "I'm ... sorry?"

The man saw his puzzled look, and gave a slight smile. "Nothing so terrible. It's just - Zelya mixes it with vodka, you know? And I'm usually the one to clean him up."

"Oh dear. And ... Zelya?"

"Azazel." The other had placed his forearms on the tub's rim; he rested his chin on them. "The teleporter. Have you met him?"

In the hallway, with his blue-skinned son - and then with Frost ... Charles pushed the memory away. "Yes. He's Russian?"

"Da."

"You met him ... where?"

"At Dvorets Shuvalovyk."

Charles blinked. "In English, please?"

"It was," the man drummed his fingers on the porcelain, "a manor. The Shuvalov estate. Similar to this one, a bit smaller. I lived there for about four years, I think."

"You ... think?"

"Mm."

Charles' mind raced. This was what he had wanted; early history ... but it was hilariously surreal, to be considering ways to extract information when the other was covertly peering into the bathwater. Sighing despite himself, Charles reached out to touch the man's cheek. Just resting his fingertips on the stubble made the other turn in the direction of the caress, quick as a flash, and smile. And kiss his palm.

He kept his voice low. "Thank you for the orange juice."

The smile was still besotted. Lovely. "You're welcome. And you - oh." The man's eyebrows rose. "You finished it already?"
It would appear he had, and without knowing it. Charles flushed. "I'm dehydrated."

"Less so now, I hope."

"Indeed. Well," and Charles dipped down one last time to rinse his hair, holding the thermos above the water, "I'm clean. So could you please bring me a blanket? I've long since turned my towel threadbare."

That was a lie; he had long since given it to Jean. And since she was gone now, there was no getting it back.

The man padded away, then back, and held out a blanket as though it were the most royal of robes. Charles stood and let himself be wrapped in it without a fuss, only pausing to fill the thermos with water before letting the man start to walk him back to bed.

"Wait a moment." Charles went to the wardrobe, and dug his comb out of the box with his few remaining possessions. "There."

And he tried to think of it as something normal. A domestic couple - one working snarls out of his hair, and the other piling fruit onto a plate - together in their bedroom. Completely innocuous. Even if the taller of the two was alternating stoking the fire with… with taking off his trousers again, god, and easing the plate of fruit onto the bed, before climbing up after it and drawing the blankets close. And then running one finger along the edge of a metal shard taken off his wrist band, and slicing up the fruit. Quite civilized. Surreal, but civilized.

He finished slicing before Charles finished combing - and the other watched him, and then smiled. "Here. Let me."

Charles thought of protesting, but then sighed and switched comb for plate.

"Eat all of that, Xavier, and I'll finish with you here." A hand took firm hold of a lock of his hair, and the man started working at a particularly nasty snarl. "You really had no idea how to do this, Spatz."

Spatz again - Charles rolled his eyes and focused on the taste of fruit instead, speaking around a mouthful of pear. "How do you know?"

The man dangled the comb in front of his eyes. "See all that hair? You've been yanking too much."

"And you know how to deal with this - because?"

A quiet laugh. "Because I had long hair, once."

"When was that?"

"When I lived in Eretz Galut, it grew out. It helped that men do not cut their beards there -"

"Long hair and a beard. You must have looked like a yeti."

"A what?"

"A type of bear."

The man hummed and kept combing. And he really did have an oddly capable touch.

Charles blinked down at the plate of fruit. "Do you want any of this?"
"Well. Perhaps - just the orange one, there. *Acht Uhr.*"

"What?"

"Eight o'clock. On the plate."

Charles picked up that slice. Its texture was … strange. "What is it?"

"Mango."

"Oh."

A pause; the man did not stop combing. Except then he murmured, "Are you going to give it to me, Xavier? Or are you going to stare at it?"

"I've - never had mango before."

"*Ach so.* Then you eat it."

Charles blinked out of his daze and flushed, despite himself. "I didn't mean to - that is, if you want it I don't need -"

"Professor," a low drawl - and the hand in his hair tightened. "Eat it."

"Fine," Charles snapped, and shoved the mango slice into his mouth.

"You like it?"

It was a challenge, to convey enough enthusiasm for the exotic taste with his mouth full, but Charles nodded vigorously anyway. He could hear the smile in the other's voice. "Good. Then finish it."

And it was not so difficult to do just that. Charles stared down at the empty plate moments later. The man had laid the comb down on the bed, and was now just smoothing Charles' hair with his hands. It was warm, he was relaxed enough to feel boneless, and his stomach found nothing to protest in the fruit.

*Give it time,* his mind sighed, and Charles sighed as well. Leaned back. *Oh,* that was lovely - the hot press of muscle supporting him and the wiry arm looping round his waist to hold him steady. And that voice, quiet. "Feeling better?"

"Yes."

"Good. Here - lie down."

Charles winced. "I don't want to have sex -"

A soft *tsch.* "Who said anything about having sex? Lie down." The man pressed on his shoulders. "You could try to have a nap."

"Only halfway through the morning? Really?"

"Really." And the other lay down, himself; stretched, and yawned - *like a cat* - Charles' mind whispered. And smiled up at him. "I don't know about you, but I feel as though the past seven weeks have all caught up at once."

It was not a weakness, surely, to admit that he felt the same.
Carefully, Charles lay down at the man's side. He made no protest as the other, still smiling, tugged at the blankets and carefully tucked them in around Charles' shoulders. Everything grew warmer so quickly that Charles felt his eyelids droop. But he could not fall asleep, because he had had - hints. Bits of information. He blinked at the sudden image of Raven, chin in her hands, mournfully considering the mess of a jigsaw puzzle on the parlor table.

"You like mango, but not orange. Connected with vodka … well. Were you Azazel's barkeep?" Charles kept his voice casual. "At this manor?"

A snort. "There was no time for that there."

The man had taken the bait without even knowing it. Charles concealed his smile. "And where was it? This - Shuvalov estate."

"South of Kiev." A yawn. "And he had a palace in Leningrad. Though he used Peterburg and to hell with anyone who told him differently."

"Who did?"

The man frowned up at the ceiling. "Shuvalov. I lived with him."

"Oh. I assumed it was an historical name, for the manor … and I thought you - lived with Frost. Before."

The other rolled on his side, the better to face Charles. "Who told you that?"

Charles could have kicked himself. Blindsided by an amateur; fool's mate. "I suppose I assumed it, since you came to this country together."

"And who told you that?"

"Frost did," Charles snapped. "Her Ladyship herself."

"Hm. Just as long as you are not," and a finger landed on his face, "being nosy."

"I'm not nosy. I'm just curious."

"Why?"

Charles gave an exasperated sigh. "The human condition? Not having anyone to talk to except for children, these many months? And besides - what with this," he touched the lion tattoo, "and the others - I supposed you had interesting stories to tell."

"The others?"

"I did notice, you know. There's Cyrillic on your lower back - your left, my right. And there are these." Charles touched the two lines of script on the man's left forearm, dusted by red-gold hair. Then he ran his finger down the tattoo that had been obscured before, in the shadows cast by bright morning light. It was a small, neat line of numbers on the inner forearm. Faded slightly, even against the pale skin. "So. I'm curious."

"Hm."

Charles waited. Then, nettled: "That's it? 'Hm'?"

"Not at all, Xavier." A lazy smile. "It only occurs to me … that those are many questions."
"… Yes?"

Charles waited some more. Then he twigged to it. Rolled his eyes, leaned forward, and dropped a quick kiss on the man's mouth.

"Three tattoos, and that's good for one drop of ink." The smile had widened, those teeth gleamed. "Try again."

"Really, must I?" Charles tried a smile instead. At the man's eyes narrowing, he pressed on. "It's not that I don't like it - I do."

"… You do?"

The voice sounded - oh for the love of fuck, the blighter sounded shy.

"Yes," Charles soothed. "You've made me come … twice now, you know. You're one of the most unique men I've ever met."

"Unique?"

"Yes. I've never shagged a war leader with supernatural powers." Nor had he ever shagged someone who had broken his bones, kissed his blood and licked up his come. Well, licked up to the same extent. But Charles only concluded with: "That makes you unique."

The sod fucking preened under the warm gaze, so Charles widened his smile and batted his eyelashes. Take the bait, you wanker.

"Well," and the man twisted to look down his back; then leaned in towards Charles and kissed his brow. "That Russian - that's a proverb. The lion you know about. And this," he pointed to the script on his left forearm, "is Sanskrit."

"And those numbers?"

The man was silent.

Charles waited, and then shrugged. "All right. You can tell me about the others, if you don't care to mention that one." Anyway, Charles could have sworn he had seen such a tattoo before. Something in a history book; something connected to the Second World War … He would remember, given enough time.

"So. What's the Sanskrit?"

"I can't really read it -"

"Much like the Hebrew."

"No," the man corrected, firmly. "That I can read. It's just - difficult upside down, for one thing. Even in the morning." He glanced at his left shoulder. "If I saw the text in a book, I could read it."

Charles made a mental note to find a copy of the Hebrew scriptures in the library. Well … he made an addendum. First: persuade the man to let him in the library. It would not be so difficult. "Fine; you can read Hebrew, occasionally, but never Sanskrit?"

"No."

"Then why did you have it done?"
"Shuvalov arranged it for all of us. Himself, my lady, me." The man frowned. "Not Azazel, though."

Charles stared down at the two spiderweb-thin lines of script. "What does it say?"

"It's a quotation. From - one of their books of scripture? I think it was called The Song of God."

"Ah. The Baghavad Gita."

"Yes. That was it."

Charles waited.

The man's eyes had gone distant. And then his voice was quiet, saying,

"'If the radiance of a thousand suns were to suddenly burst forth in the sky, that would be like the light of the exalted one'."

He paused, looking at the second line.

"This one is from later on in the same book, I think. 'Now I am become Death, destroyer of worlds. Even without you, every warrior in the enemy camp will cease to be.'"

Silence.

Charles felt his skin crawl.

The man quirked an eyebrow at him. "What?"

"Another man quoted that."

"Really? Who?"

"Um." Charles cast his mind back to the Oxford meeting of scientists and mathematicians, his fellow professors crowding round a vidscreen - falling silent at the broadcast. "His name was Oppenheimer."

"Was?"

"He was imprisoned on charges of high treason in 1956; executed ten years later - you don't know of him?"

The man shook his head. "Why would I?"

"Well …" Charles bit his lip. Tried to smile. "You see how it feels? Now I have the story to tell."

A broad smile in reply. "So - tell."

"I don't know how he came to be charged with treason. Knowing Stryker's administration."

A hiss. "Stryker?"

"Yes, obviously. It was the Free West that executed him - that's why I thought you'd know."

The man made no reply. But his expression had gone from sleepy to focused in mere seconds.

"Anyway. Stryker's administration has always had factions in it. It was assumed that someone wanted him gone, and thus that Oppenheimer was blamed for a security breach or an assassination
threat. He was such a highly respected figure that it was assumed he would just be kept under house arrest. But then he gave an interview in 1965; it was smuggled out and broadcast across United Europe. And in it … Oppenheimer made some choice remarks about Stryker, and in what could not have been a coincidence, he was executed the next year."

"How do you know this?"

Charles shrugged. "I tutored a student in the history of science - and the development of the fission bomb forms a good chunk of this century's narrative. At least so far."

"And this Oppenheimer was -"

"A key figure in it; yes. All work for the government - that of the United States, back then, of course. It was Before. That text … he quoted it, in the same interview, as having been his reaction to seeing the first test of an atomic bomb. In 1945."

"But the interview was in 1965?"

"Yes."

The man furrowed his brow. "Shuvalov … We all had the tattoo done in 1950."

"1950 -"

Charles controlled his shiver; he did not control his goosebumps. Luckily, the man noticed neither.

"Was that before the war?"

A blink. "Before the battle. At Ch'ongch'on."

"You're saying this - this Shuvalov person was connected to Ch'ongch'on in some way?"

"Ja. We watched, we three. He had come from the talks in Moscow - he brought the bomb with him - and he arranged it so … I don't know. I don't think he knew it was going to be a war, but then again," a shrug, "I knew none of his plans."

Charles felt lightheaded. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"You're joking. Tell me you're joking."

"What?"

"You are saying that this - Shuvalov - started the third World War at Ch'ongch'on, and you saw it and did nothing to stop it?!"

The man was silent.

Charles listened to the sound of his own breathing, high-pitched and rattling. Then he opened his eyes again. Glanced at the other -

- and felt a hideous wave of fear, at the cold look in those eyes.

"Are you …" Charles gulped. "I'm sorry. Forget I said anything."

A longer pause. Then the man flexed his jaw and turned onto his back. "I don't want to talk about Shaw anymore."
"… Who?" Charles asked, meekly.

The other growled. "Shuvalov - Shaw. Same person. Bastard."

"Well obviously, if he started the -"

But there was a thwack, and Charles flinched. The man had thrown out a hand and tensed his fingers - and something had flown from the pocket of his trousers on the floor, straight into his palm. It was a bottle. Small and ruby red, with a metal stopper.

"Here." The man dropped the bottle onto the pillow, in front of Charles' face.

"Um." Tentatively, Charles touched a finger to the glass. "What's this?"

"It's perfume," and the man's voice was heavy with rage. Charles did not need to use his power to sense its sickening thrum. "Cologne. Or something. You can put it in your hair, if you want. If you like it."

"I don't know if I like it -"

"Then open it. Smell."

Charles obeyed. He had the dizzying sense of being on some sort of tightrope, but he wasn't sure … He took a cautious sniff. Ugh.

The man saw his face twist, and … Charles exhaled, shakily. The dark look of rage had softened, somewhat. Into - one of inquiry. Angry inquiry, but still better than before. "You don't like it?"

All of his instincts told him the correct reply. And told him to keep it casual. "No," Charles said, and slid the stopper back in, matter-of-fact. "I can't say I do. Some men like to smell like a muskrat, but I'm not one of them."

"You're not?"


A snort. "I have no idea. I just - don't like that." The man nodded at the bottle.

"You'll have to find out what you like, someday."

Silence stretched. Then the man took the cologne from him, and - Charles went tense - nuzzled closer. Smelled the soap in his hair. "I like this."

"Soap?"

"Mm."

"Well. I'm glad to hear it."

"And I liked what you smelled like last night. When my lady was brushing your hair."

His stomach clenched. "Roses? That wasn't my perfume; Frost put it on me."

"It wasn't hers, I know. She doesn't ever smell like flowers."
Then I shall lay claim to the scent of rosewater. A little British blossom," Charles gave a sarcastic smile, "yours for the plucking."

"How many times can one flower be plucked?"

"You'd be surprised."

A grin. The last traces of anger were gone; Charles breathed out, relieved. And watched the man relax into the pillow beside him, gazing at the dark red glass of the bottle.

"I don't know why …"

Charles held his tongue, waited out the silence.

The man sighed. "I don't know why my lady would give me this. When she knows I hate it."

Tread carefully. "Well … What did she say, giving it to you?"

"That I should put it on you, when the rose smell wore off."

Charles swallowed bile. "How considerate of her."

"No ... that's the thing. This was his. Schmidt, Shuvalov, Shaw - he wore this every day, from the first day I can remember him. But she told me it would be good, to use it. Why would she -"

"Never mind her. Just don't tell her that you got rid of it," Charles shrugged, "and throw it in the fire."

"That'll make the whole room smell like him."

"Then flush it down the loo."

And Charles heard ... He blinked. That had almost been a laugh. How unexpected.

It turned into a smile, curling the corners of that thin mouth. "Professor," the man drawled. "That's actually a good idea."

"Of course it is. That is why I am a Doctor of Philosophy. Herr Doktor Professor Xavier, with all the good ideas."

"Herr Doktor Schmidt, Monsieur Shuvalov, Sebastian Shaw," and the man gave the bottle a vicious smile, "smelled like this until the day he died -"

"Yes, you've said so -"

"The day I killed him."

"Oh."

Charles stared at the man. He knew his mouth was open; he did not really care. "You killed him? The man who started World War Three?" If, his mind added, if the narrative was to be believed - and Charles would have to double-check and correlate facts - but if it were true, and the man had killed him …

Charles knew he should be judicious. Restrained.
The other was watching him warily. Then he nodded.

*Sod restraint.* Charles gave him his broadest smile. "Well done, you."

"So …" the man pursed his lips, "it's all right to kill someone if he or she -"

"Do shut up," and Charles plucked the bottle from the man's hands, and set it down on the floor. "I'll give you my lecture on the ethics of capital punishment later."

"A lecture?" the other began - but broke off with a pleased growl as Charles leaned in to kiss him.

"I'm an academic." And Charles kissed him again. "It's what we do."

It turned out that Charles was able to nap for hours. It was so very warm, after all, and … and it seemed the man was right. All of the strain, all of the tension and fatigue from the past months made him realize … that now that he had the opportunity, all he wanted to do was doze - sleep and not dream, warm and full of food.

For the judiciously homicidal idiot kept on bringing things to eat back to the room. It was almost funny. Charles would close his eyes and fall asleep pillowed on the other's sternum - and would wake up just as warm but cocooned in blankets instead. Would stir, blink, and look down at steam wafting up from the thermos. Or at more fruit on the plate. Or at another bowl of soup. And there the other would be, sitting cross-legged on the floor and watching him hungrily.

The fifth time this happened it was shading towards twilight. And Charles saw the man wince as he stood up.

"Does your leg still hurt?"

"It's fine."

"'Fine' and 'healed completely' are two very different things. Now this," and Charles tipped his head down towards the plate that he had just rubbed clean with a finger, "has been lovely, but there's no need for you to keep running around getting me food."

The man leaned against the mantel. "Once more."

"Really, I -"

"Just once." The look was warm … possessive. "It's almost time for dinner, after all."

Who was he to argue? "All right," Charles said, "but that's all."

"I'll go, then. What would you like?"

Charles drew a blank; shrugged. "Why don't you fetch something you would like, this time."

A broad smile. "I'll be back soon. Don't go anywhere."

"Really, where would I -"

And the door closed, softly. Charles listened - and sighed. There was the sound of the lock and bolt. He got out of bed to clean, putting scraps in the fire and rinsing dishes in the bathroom sink. Although every muscle in his body made itself felt, courtesy of the shag he had had that morning, his
stomach felt better. Still, though, there was the odd lurch of queasiness that made him rather dread trying to tell the blighter that ... certain parts were off-limits. Arse, his mind snapped, disgruntled. *Are you really going to let that man out-frank you, the Oxford Casanova?*

So. No penetration. Then again …

Charles toyed with the small bottle of cologne before placing it on the mantel. He did not flinch at touching the memento of the one who might have started World War Three. Schmidt, Shuvalov, Shaw ... names to go on, to unravel the mystery. Charles was not daunted by that prospect. So why should he cringe at the idea of talking limits on sex with his current bed warmer? The man had gone wide-eyed and worshipful every time Charles had given him permission to do anything. He could try any number of additional sex acts; he could insist that they spoon the night away. Hell, he could probably just pet the man's hair for an hour straight and call it an evening well spent.

Perhaps that last would be best. For he felt tired again.

Charles put another log on the fire and ambled back to the bed, carrying water in the thermos. He took a good drink before flopping back down and pulling the blankets tight around himself. Another nap would not go amiss.

As he stared at the leaping flames, his mind circled back to the one thought he had been avoiding the entire day.

*Make a wish.* He had wanted more information about Ch'ongch'on. *Had they been there? Watching Ch'ongch'on? Did the man know anything about how the nuclear war had begun?* And he had received his information, his answers.

It was only the fact that they were unconfirmed, and thus suspect, that kept Charles from breaking into a cold sweat. It was one thing to make a bargain with a monster and a murderer. It was, perhaps, quite another to bed down with one who handed off MacMurphy as a gift to Zhōngguó, with the one who had stood and watched the bomb go off at Ch'ongch'on ... and who had killed the one who had given the order … Charles shivered. Had the man really done that? How could he, Charles, ever be sure?

It was odd, to feel as though he were in a history book. But the books always left out the shagging. Charles sighed into the pillow. He had what could be answers, then, to questions that might have best remained unasked.

And now ... how was he supposed to sleep?

Very well, apparently. It would seem that murders and mysteries, historical enigmas long unsolved, did not affect his sleep in the least. When Charles blinked awake again he felt almost unbelievably well-rested. The fire had burned down to white ashes. And - he blinked - weak, watery light was filtering through the arrow windows.

"Bloody hell," he said. His voice was loud in the room. "It's tomorrow morning already?"

A grunt from behind him. The man lifted up his head, eyes fogged with sleep and squinting. "Wha'?"

"It's morning!"

The other's face screwed up in a grimace. "No."

"Did I fail to mention that when I feel hale and hearty, I am most definitely a morning person?"
"Ungh," the man mumbled, and buried his face in the pillow.

"Morning, morning," Charles said - well, half-sang. Almost all in jest. Almost all, because he could not quite resist one last - "Morning?" - and a jab to the man's right shoulder with an index finger.

A hideous snarl. "Shuttup."

"You can't be hungover. Unless …" Charles narrowed his eyes and slipped out of bed. Shite. It was freezing cold. He took wincing steps to the fireplace - first things first - and, with considerable luck, ingenuity, and lungs like a bellows, he managed to coax a small fire out of the few remaining coals. Charles set up some logs, ready to catch in turn, and made his way to the wardrobe as quickly as he could.

Excellent. His bottle of wine was still there, securely corked. It might have gone off already - but who cared? It was alcoholic, and that was the important thing. And there … Charles retrieved his sewing kit, threw a glance back at his sweater still draped on the armchair. He could mend that today - Christmas Eve day. As a present to himself.

He turned back to the bed. The man had craned his head to watch him, eyes heavy-lidded. Charles hadn't heard him come to the room; hadn't felt him come to bed. And he supposed positive reinforcement was in order for such consideration. Even if the other hadn't woken him to eat dinner.

"Did you eat?" Charles asked.

The man groggily shook his head. "'s borscht," he mumbled. Pointed to a container placed at the corner of the hearth. "Right there."

"You waited to eat with me? Oh," Charles smiled, broadly, "how polite. How civilized. So," and he fumbled at the knapsack, "are you hungry now?"

A grunt. "No." And the man flopped back down on the pillow, wrapping the blankets closer.

"Ah ah …" Charles shook his head. "Wrong answer."

It was almost - oh, fuck it. It was hilarious in truth, the way that head back came up above the pillow, back into view, like a stubbly gingery sunrise. And then those eyes followed. "… What?"

"Are you," and he held up a container of chocolate pudding, "hungry?"

"… Yes?"

"Correct." Charles padded back to the bed. "Move over."

The man obeyed with alacrity, eyes wide. Charles tore off the container's seal and scooped up some of the pudding before he could think better of the idea. Then he sucked every sweet, viscous drop off his fingers. And made a show with his tongue. "Good morning again."

No answer.

Which Charles considered quite understandable - as he thoughtfully made himself more comfortable, thoughtfully arranged his legs, and thoughtfully touched his thigh to the man's cock. If that last had only just approached its present state, he was surprised that the man had enough brain function left to breathe, let alone talk.

He swiped his fingers through the pudding again; held them to the man's lips. "Try some."
Male or female, Oxford native or Ithaca transplant, jaded or virgin - all would react in the same way to chocolate being smeared across the mouth in the early morning hours. And this one? No different.

Perhaps slightly more enthusiastic than the norm, admittedly.

For: less than a minute later, Charles was smugly licking the rest of chocolate from the container as the man ground down on his hip, rutting against him and gasping into his throat, kissing wherever he could. But when the other made a grab for his arse, Charles interrupted.

"Ah - still feeling a bit ill, actually, so …"

"So?" the man growled.

"So we're going to try something new." Charles smirked up at him. "Where's the grease?"

For a beat, all the other did was stare. Then there was only a wild scramble of movement - the man was looking, searching, and there it was, beneath the bed. He reached it, though. And shoved the container at Charles, breathing heavily.

Who knew? Perhaps the grease had settled in next to the diamond choker. Flatmates, and one of them he never needed to touch again. *Ha.* Charles felt smug. Well on his way to recovery, having a fine morning - his stomach was settling; his aviary was resting, surely; and the man was hanging over him, waiting on his every move, practically cross-eyed with lust.

Wrapped round his little finger.

"Now," he began, opening the container. A third of it gone; *shite,* they'd have to ration soon. "That memory with my filling -" distant now, he could control his reaction - "that one, I don't care for. But until you actually started doing terrible things to me, you had a good idea of what was pleasant, sexually."

A palmful of grease slicked between his thighs did wonders. Charles smirked up at the man; raised his eyebrows. "So. Remember what we did then? With the grinding? If you're going to flail at me with your cock, go right here," he took the man's hand, brought it to where he was clenching his legs together, "and go a little crazy, won't you. They call it - Oxford style."

Quite appropriate, seeing as he himself would be the centerpiece of the next five minutes. And he was nothing if not loyal to his university. Charles Xavier, for her Majesty and Britain, and for Oxford. He grinned again and rolled his hips.

The man had been staring during all of Charles' woolgathering. He only reacted to the hip movement with a twitch. He looked dazed - dazed, and on the brink of passing out.

Charles frowned. "Are you dehydrated?"

"Nuh - no." A slow blink. "Don' think so."

"Good. I know I've been taking the lion's share of the potables."

"Of - what?"

"Oh, you are no good like this; go on, fuck me. Go on. Go - "

*Ah,* Charles' mind offered, dreamily. It was lovely indeed, as the man fell on him with a gasp and starting rutting at him like an animal. Gathered him up with all that strength, arms hot and sinewy and
demanding, and all Charles had to do was make the occasional pleased sound and jerk himself off as the other thrust between his legs. Thrust, and shoved his face against Charles' neck - he could feel the scrape of that hair. The other pressed sloppy kisses into his pulse, mumbled incomprehensible things - gasped again, and slowed, moaned and tongued at him - and then fell back to thrusting rapidly, panting.

Charles kept track of the minutes and seconds. Even though the man was going at it hard and fast, he lasted longer than he had any other time so far. Well done - and he himself took it as an endorsement of his pedagogy. Of course, Charles waited until the other had come to come himself - the time-honored twist of his hand, the particular rhythm that the Oxford Casanova kept secret … But in the end it was done, and he felt rather deliciously relaxed. Even if the other had fallen on him with a groan, heavy as a pile of bricks.

"Good morning, indeed," Charles murmured into the man's ear.

A low, wet-sounding growl. "G'night."

"Dear, dear. Have you reacquired vocabulary yet? Syntax? Or shall I just ease you off," Charles did, "put you to the side," he did - even though the man fumbled and grabbed at him like a concussed wrestler, "and let you sleep?"

A mumble was the only reply. Charles grinned to himself, victorious - until the other blinked awake as he was edging out of the blankets.

"Wait -"

Charles grimaced. "Wait for what?"

A pause. Those eyes almost crossed again as the man reached beneath the covers, frowned, moved some more, and -

There were fingers held to his own lips, dripping with ...

God. It wasn't chocolate pudding, that was for sure. Or vanilla.

"Try some," the man rasped.

Charles swallowed hard. Best to do it, get it over with, continue this little *quid pro quo* business. So he looked the man directly in the eye, licked his own lips, and took the fingers in his mouth. Laved them, sucked the come clean off, and lapped at the fingertips when he was finished.

"There," he sighed. "Sweet dreams."

And the man gave him one incomparably broad and toothy grin, and fell back on the pillow to sleep.

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Charles, on the other hand, felt wide awake for the first time in days. He poured some borscht into the empty thermos, poured some wine into the metal cup the man had fashioned for him not two days ago, and had a picnic in the chair. It was bitterly cold. He built the fire as high as he could, making a careful note of how many logs were left. He did not chance washing, lest the water had reverted to its normal chill - because …

… And it was odd, really. Charles raised an eyebrow at himself and worked the needle through another torn stitch. Odd, that he should not want to wake the man, when he was sure he wouldn't mind. Wouldn't mind being asked to fetch and carry, to run outside through the snow and get more
firewood.

But he hadn't woken Charles for sex the night previous. And now it was Christmas Eve day, and Charles would in turn be generous. Even if the man would probably growl at the thought of celebrating it.

He had found the tapestry needle in his sewing kit and made a thread triple-thick. It was a challenge to mend some parts of his sweater - where the yarn had wormed its way back into the knit, for example, rather than remaining obligingly obvious. Still, it was nothing a little ingenuity wouldn't fix. And Charles had ingenuity in spades.

He allowed his fingers to go on autopilot, sensing the scrape of yarn, the tighter pull of thread and the tink of needle hitting thimble. Sewing and mending was hardly a gendered activity in Oxford; far from it. Everyone had to know how to fix a hem or seam; nobody would be thought effeminate for sitting in a window seat with needle and thread. And if he was joining the generations of workers - mostly women, but who cared? - who had daydreamed at their work … well, he had Dornräschentucked into bed right across from him. He could afford some indulgence.

At least, until the man woke up.

It was a strange sight. His face went from relaxed and calm to frowning in a split second - then he shook his head, once, twice - and sat up with open eyes and a quick gasp.

Charles blinked at him. "Bad dreams?"

Those eyes were wide, staring. "Stein."

"I … beg your pardon?"

And then the other blinked back at him. "What?"

"You said something." Charles slid the needle, still threaded, into the pincushion for safekeeping.

"Just now. Something about a stein? Really: beer, at this hour?"

A grimace. "My head -"

"Ah." And Charles went to the bathroom to fetch some water. "You're dehydrated, I think; it makes sense, given the low humidity and the amount of sex we've been having. Here." He handed the man the ceramic mug, and sat on the bed. "Drink that."

The man did, frowning slightly. The more shallow of the cuts on his face had healed, it seemed; the bruise on his cheekbone had darkened further but had stopped spreading. Charles shoved aside any sympathy; took refuge in etiquette.

"What do you say?"

The other handed the cup back with a sigh. "Thank you."

"No problem. It's a pleasure," and Charles gripped one bony knee through the blankets, "to wait on you a bit. Since you've been catering to my every whim for the past day or so."

A shrug. Those shoulders, Charles saw, were just as bony as the knees. There was more wiry muscle there, though, to create the illusion of bulk. In fact … Charles let his eyes wander. He felt justified, since he was just as naked. In the morning light the man looked thin enough to disappear if he turned sideways. With a sigh, Charles looked down at himself. Just as thin, if not more so - although …
He blinked. Poked at the distended curve of his stomach. For once, it seemed he had had enough to eat; it was only a pity that bloat should accompany it. At least he did not ache too badly from the sex - thank god the other had gone slowly, as requested -

"Something wrong?"

"No, not really." Charles drummed his fingers on his own abdomen. "See here, though? I've been eating well, I think."

"Good."

"Do you want some more water?"

"Not right now."

"Borscht?"

"Nyet."

"It's quite good when it's cold," Charles coaxed. And that flash of teeth was sardonic. "Xavier. Believe me, I know that it's good when it's cold."

"Well then," and he brushed one hand over the man's hair. "What would you like?"

"You, naked in bed."

"It seems you have that."

"You're on the bed, not in it."

"I'm warm enough. In all seriousness, though: what may I fetch for you?"

"Your mending, Xavier."

"Hm?"

"Whatever you're doing with the needle and thimble," the man gestured, "over there - please bring it here? And sit by me?"

"Really, I'll need more light." It was darker in the room; a storm was probably gathering outside. But the man looked especially wistful with his hair tufted. Charles considered, and then stood up. "I thought I had candles somewhere; a lantern -"

"You're lovely, Spatz -"

"Ah - that is one thing." Charles tossed the sweater and his sewing kit onto the bed. "Please do find another endearment. Spatz, or Spatzi - 'little sparrow' - is generally something parents say to their children."

"How do you know that?"

"I knew a fellow professor - a German expatriate," Weiss, he remembered with a wry twist of the mouth, "who got married and pregnant within a year. And then before you knew it, there were twins, and only the diminutive separated them. It was Spatz this and Spatzi that - Spatz likes Goethe, we're taking Spatzi to Walküre, et cetera."
That last might have been exaggerated, but he thought best not to correct himself. Especially when the man growled: "Walküre?"

"Oh, I never said I liked it. Far too lengthy; far too self-important."

A grunt. "Good."

"So you -" Charles opened the wardrobe, "think of another word. And I'll find a candle."

It was easy - he knew he had remembered correctly. There were the candles, and there was the lantern that had belonged to one of the boys. Wrought iron framing red-orange glass. Charles wedged three candles into it and lit them with a spill from the fire. Then he carefully hooked it onto the upper left bedpost, clambered over the man and nestled himself beneath the blankets. Sitting upright, though, so he could rest his back against the wall.

Then he picked up where he had left off mending, and tried to relax beneath the weight of the other's gaze.

It was strangely peaceful. The fire gave off sparks, the logs he had set now busily burning. Their snap and pop was the only sound in the room besides the man's breathing. Charles gave brief thought to the weather. Clouds were one sign. And if the silence were that of an impending storm, they would have to lay in more firewood before it hit.

He tied off the thread to the shoulder seam; he had reinforced one of the mends by weaving through the ribbing at the sweater's collar. Then Charles considered the longer tear, running down the sweater's front. That one would be trickier.

He prepared another length of thread, moistening it and doubling it, trebling it. Then he held the needle to the candlelight and squinted.

"Here."

The man's voice was rough. "Let me."

Wordlessly, Charles held out the needle. The man smiled up at him, drowsily. And Charles felt the slightest tug, then a more intense one - and the metal slipped from his grasp. Slipped and arced through the air; neatly positioned itself over the thread. And dropped - with a twist -

A laugh escaped him as he picked up needle and thread - all ready to use. "That's amazing."

"Fine control," the man said, pleased.

Charles reached out and caressed his hair, absent-mindedly. The rumble from the other's chest was almost a purr. Indeed - it could be a domestic scene. Man, sewing, with his cat.

Looking towards the fire, Charles could almost picture it. Raven would have had a cat on her lap - one of her strays. She would be watching him mend with a smile. Perhaps it would have been one of his winter coats, draped across his knees. They would be discussing the round of Christmas parties to attend that night; his mulled wine would have been wafting its spicy scent from the kitchen …

He exhaled, sharply.

Pressed close to his crossed legs, the man stirred. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Charles said. He shook his head to clear it; held up his thumb with a grimace. "Forgot to
put on the thimble, and I just pricked my finger."

"No, you didn't."

"Really -"

"I can feel metal, Xavier. I can feel blood on metal, and I'm telling you that you didn't - prick - your finger."

"Fine." Charles tipped up his chin. "It's Christmas Eve day, and right now I would be talking with -" he caught himself, swallowed Raven's name with cough, "with a friend or two from my university. Trying to guess who gave which gift -"

"Gifts?"

"Fellow teachers, occasionally. One runs the risk of an unequal exchange - I once gave a bottle of Tokay and received in return an evangelical tract."

Charles looked down at the man's snort.

"Christmas. Important for all the goyim, yes?"

"Well, yes. In terms of giving gifts. And really," Charles sniffed, "I would have wished you a happy Chanukah, but you were gone."

The man tipped his head to one side. "You know when Chanukah was?"

"I … may have guessed - that it was earlier? This year?"

"Sehr gut." Another smile, almost shy again. "Very few know that it's based on the lunar calendar."

"Well," and Charles bowed his head. "I am one of the few."

"And it was earlier, this year." The man made himself more comfortable, turning onto his right side to face Charles more fully. "I was in Dallas."

"And I hardly suppose the Free West sponsors any peaceful, ecumenical celebrations?"

No reply. But then, the attempt at wit had not been that funny, really.

"Did you ever celebrate it?"

"No."

Charles blinked. "Not even in Eretz Galut?"

"Not that I can remember. I am sure they do celebrate it, there. When my lady and I left to travel in 1954, we were invited back for all the holy days. Chanukah was in the letter, I remember."

"I see."

A pause. Charles focused on his mending, and willed the man to change the subject.

No such luck. "Christmas, then, you celebrate."

"It's cultural." He held up the sweater to the light. "I was usually too hung over to attend church on Christmas Day - my choir friends and I would start drinking after the midnight mass, and stop when
we fell over."

A low laugh. "You should drink with Zelya, sometime."

"Ha. Give me a gauntlet and I'll challenge him."

"But you - miss it. Today."

"Miss what - drinking?"

"No." The man refused to be diverted. "Your Christmas."

"I miss the gift giving. Did you see how Jean liked her present?"

"Yes. It was quite kind of you."

"'Kind,' nothing - it was entirely selfish. I read the book before I gave it to her," Charles grinned, "and I have it all -" he tapped his temple - "up here."

Where he lay curled on his side, the man looked oddly vulnerable. "I don't think you're selfish."

"Well, I'm better than you, I suppose."

A blink. "What?"

"I gave Jean a present this year. You - did not." Charles tsked. "And she seems to think the world of you, too."

The man bristled. "I have given her gifts before, Xavier."

"Like what?"

"She told me you saw - the metal box?" The man's hands made a rectangle. "With wires? I made that for her."

"Ah." And Charles' mind shoved an image from his memory to the fore; he inhaled. "And ... that candle holder - you made that too?"

"Yes."

He smiled down at the other. "But that still doesn't change the fact that you gave her nothing this year."

The man looked up at him through half-lidded eyes. "Fine. Do you have any spare metal lying about?"

Charles turned the sweater inside-out, to start reinforcing the mend. "You might check the cardboard box in the wardrobe."

"Mm."

Charles waited. He heard a faint clink, a rustle. He darted a glance down at the man, who merely stretched and tugged the pillow closer to his shoulder.

"Are you planning to use the lighter?"

The stitches were steady; Charles was not impressed in the least. "No."
"Then may I have it?"

"Help yourself."

A longer pause. More clinks. Charles would not give in to curiosity; he would not ask. Nor would he look at all surprised -

- when metal filaments twisted into a sphere came rolling out of the wardrobe.

The sphere rolled up onto the bed, and settled near Charles' knee.

"Oh …"

He carefully placed the needle into the pincushion; took off the thimble. Touched the intricate mesh. There was plenty of space to see through - the wires looped round and round in their perfect circles - and … Charles picked it up. The entire sphere was light. Easy to handle.

"What's it for?"

The man sat up. "Move over?"

Charles moved. The other shifted, leaned against the wall on Charles' left. He was thin enough not to be bumping into the bedframe, but Charles moved further away anyway.

A gesture, and the sphere wafted into the man's cupped hands.

"Jean is a telekinetic as well as a telepath. My lady works on the one - and I try to show her the tricks of the other." One long, slender finger traced the curve of the sphere; in its path, the wires sprouted tendrils that twisted together. Like threads, Charles thought, mesmerized. Or vines. Perhaps there would even be a flower.

"So, I shall give her this. You set it moving, and see if you can change its direction."

"Really, that seems easy enough -"

"Ah." The man smiled at him. "Then there's this."

Another gesture - and Charles bit his lip as a small chunk of iron drifted over to the bed from the fire grate. The man let it hover above the palm of his outstretched hand. Then …

Charles felt his eyes go wide, as the metal shifted, stretched …

... and ended up as a bird in flight.

"With this inside," and the man slipped the bird between two wires easily enough, lengthwise, "the challenge …" he snapped his fingers - the sphere floated in midair; another snap, and the bird floated within it. " - will be to keep the one moving and the other flying. Steel and iron," he explained. "Different weights; different air resistance."

"May I see?"

The man's voice was low. "Help yourself."

It was ingenious, Charles thought, swallowing hard. He balanced the child's toy on one palm. Even without telekinesis, he could feel what the man had said: the steel was light, almost pliable, and the iron was a heavy little lump. He poked a finger in to touch the darker metal, and smiled despite
himself when the bird leapt into the air in response. "Thank you for that."

"Will she like it, you think?"

"A pretty little bird in a cage." Charles felt his smile turn bitter. "How could she not like it?"

There was a long pause.

Beside him, he could almost hear the wheels turning in the other's head.

Then, quietly: "I didn't mean it that way, Xavier."

Charles sighed. "I'm sure you didn't. And all the better, for -" he looked the man dead in the eye. "What would you do if that pretty little bird - disappeared?"

And he did not give himself time to second-guess, to doubt, to wonder if his power lying dormant for two days running, now, would have affected his own abilities. Instead, Charles called up a veil - a real veil, in the real world - and wrapped it round the metal bird, quick as a wink.

He heard a gasp from his left. Ha. The man was not the only one who could show off.

"But - I can still feel it," and the voice was wondering. A laugh of disbelief. "I can't see a thing, but I know it's there. But if I didn't have my ability, Professor - du -"

A hand landed on his left shoulder; Charles flinched in surprise. "Rabe - du geschickter Rabe - that's wonderful. And you've done it before - the time by the library door, and the time by the bonfire."

Strong fingers squeezed. "Does my lady know of this gift?"

Every single alarm went off at once in Charles' mind.

"Oh," he said, thinking desperately, "no. Not at all - for you see," and he faked a grimace, "I can't hold it for very long." He dropped the veil; the iron bird reappeared. Then he put a hand to his forehead, theatrically. "Ow."

"Consider telling her," the man urged. "She could help you improve it."

Like fuck she could. "I suppose she helps you?"

"Yes. Very much so."

It seemed the alarm bells had brought family and friends to Christmas Eve dinner - the clangor of his instincts had doubled.

"Frost ... helps you with your power?"

"She came to the Shuvalov estate as my tutor. We have worked together ever since. Twenty-four, maybe twenty-five years. I'd have to double-check the dates."

Dear god. "Well," Charles said carefully, cupping both his hands round the sphere, "I wish you would not tell her about my little veil."

"Why not?"

"Because ..." It was the hardest thing in the world to fake a rueful smile. "I'm afraid I was just showing off."
Charles turned to face the man. And at the soft look in the other's eyes, the fake became slightly easier. And it was easiest of all to lean into the caress of a callused hand, sliding up over Charles' left cheekbone, twining long fingers into his hair.

"Then it will be for us two. Hm?"

"Yes. Lovely," Charles breathed. His mind, cold and calculating, sent his gaze sweeping down to the man's mouth and trailing back up. A quick study indeed; the sod already knew the signals, it would seem. The corners of that mouth turned up in a smile - this close, Charles saw the scar move - and bent forward to kiss him. Yes. Yes. Distract him, distract him -

What were the odds, really, that the same thing would happen twice in a mere forty-eight hours? The odds, Charles decided, were favorable. For the whole question of distraction was resolved by his stomach’s fierce growl - and thus, he reassured himself, they wouldn't need to worry about falling to the bed and crushing Jean's gift.

The man broke the kiss, looking amused. "Hungry again?"

"It would appear so. You?"

"Mm. There's borscht," the man nodded in its direction. "I'll go get you some."

"No, I will get us some. I've eaten more food in the past two days than in the past two weeks before that - and you brought it all. So now it's my turn." He brought the container over. "Where's your thermos? I'll drink from it, and you can partake from this."

"Rabe," the man murmured. "Schöner Rabe. You don't think that's - uncivilized? Without a bowl?"

"Nonsense. Borscht for breakfast - off the beaten track enough to render the form of its consumption moot."

"… What?"

Charles continued, blithe. "And I like 'Rabe.' 'Raven,' isn't it? Much more dignified than 'sparrow'."

"Xavier -"

"And I'll have all day to get used to it, before I make you shout it when you come - wait. What is it?"

The man cleared his throat. "It's - not for breakfast."

"Well, I know you brought it last night, but -"

"Nein - no," a frustrated gesture. "What I mean is: it's getting on towards night."

"What?" Charles stared. "You mean - right now?"

"Yes."

He darted a glance at the window. The light was still weak - but he had assumed it was cloudy …

"You can't be serious."

"I am. It's evening."

"How long did I sleep?"
"Maybe … twenty-four hours? I'm not sure."

"You didn't keep track? Don't you have a watch?"

His own words sounded very loud in the room. And memory hit him like a punch. Of course the man had a watch - he had Charles' own watch; he had taken it. And - fuck, Charles felt his throat closing up.

He set the metal container of soup aside, awkwardly, and stood. Paced over to the chair; dumped his mending and sewing kit into it. Twenty-four hours. Christmas Eve day, gone; and now it was Christmas Eve - Christmas Eve was almost over and he hadn't even known -

It wasn't important, he told himself. It was cultural. There was a knot in his throat, though, growing larger and more painful by the second. And when he thought of his friends in Oxford - of Raven and her first Christmas alone …

The flames were blurring again. Just like they had the previous night in Jean's room. Jean in Dallas; all the children, all of his EBS friends gone away … Charles heard a choked-off sound escape him, and he wrapped his arms round himself -

And shivered as another pair of arms wrapped round, too. But at least the man was warm. And they were both stark naked - shite - but at least the other wasn't getting hard at the sight of Charles shaken and miserable. If indeed he had cottoned on to it.

"Shh," breathed warm in his ear.

It appeared he had. But Charles took no satisfaction in it. He just felt dull.

"Schöner Rabe. What's wrong?"

"Nothing of importance."

"What is it?" A hand caressed his hair.

Charles hunched his shoulders and said the first thing to come into his head. Anything to make the sod back off.

"I - don't like it. Time; time passing this way. When I'm drugged, or knocked out -" he shot the man a look, "in the infirmary or in the Finder - when I lose time, I feel as though I'm lost."

The man looked solemn. "I understand -"

"No, I don't think you do," Charles bit out, looking away.

"Xavier …" Pressure at his chin made him look back.

Those green eyes were intent. "I know what it is, to lose time."

"Well, besides that," Charles gulped, "it's Christmas Eve," he dragged in a breath, "and it is - or was - important to me, to my friends - and - and I don't even know what - what time it is. Wie viel Uhr ist es," he choked.

"Ich weiß nicht."

"So, you see -"
"I do know - here." The man held him at arm's length, brow furrowed. "Stay here. I'll bring you a gift."

"But I don't want -"

"Your watch," the man interrupted. "I'll give you your watch - for Christmas."

Charles felt his jaw drop. "… You will?"

"Yes." The bony fingers of one hand twisted the thumb ring on the other. "I have your token. I don't need your watch, too. Although - it was very useful."

Charles wiped his eyes on his forearm. "Was it?"

"I timed White and Blue group's run with it; and MacMurphy's capture. All the hands are well crafted - and someone repaired it once, you know. There's a cog that's different from the others -"

"You can tell me all about it," Charles' voice cracked, "when you - if you …"

He fought for control. "Will you really give it back to me?"

Ridiculous, to be reduced to this. A wreck of a person, standing there naked and shivering; Oxford Casanova and Professor stripped away with his clothes. Whimpering after a watch -

But it had been his father's. And it was Christmas Eve. And … Charles sighed. And he was only human.

"Yes," the man breathed. "Mein schönster Rabe. Stay here - stay," he waved his hand at Charles, backing up, "and I'll go get it right now."

Charles snuffled. "Right now?"

"Yes."

"Then - could you put on your trousers, please?"

"For you?" The man grinned at him. "Yes."

And he did, quickly, and sidled to the door - "Stay" - and then he was gone.

Charles exhaled raggedly. The sound of metal writhing between lock and bolt was louder than usual; perhaps the man hadn't concentrated sufficiently. God only knew what the door looked like from the outside. He took one step back - two - and sat down in the chair with a thump. Ridiculous, to be so overwrought … but he had lost a day, and it was Christmas Eve … and the unrelenting attention of the other had left him …

Charles looked down at his body. Not as sore and aching, anymore - but … bruised. Scratched. Covered in come, periodically. But … his mind, his mind -

"Am I going mad?" he whispered to the fire. "Am I? Raven?"

She couldn't hear him, of course.

No, Charles thought - but his own raven could. He had told his aviary to sleep, the night of the solstice. It had been twenty-four - no - forty-eight hours. Maybe that was it. Maybe he felt as frayed as his sweater because he had not seen them in so long.
Shivering, he closed his eyes and called up his raven.

It shot out of his mind -

- with a scream.

"Oh god," Charles leaped from the chair, gasping. "What is it? What is it?"

The raven was flying circles round his thoughts, croaking and beating its wings frantically.

"What?! Tell me!!"

And the raven shot up - through the ceiling, through another floor of the manor - and unfurled the same net he had used to find Sean in Syracuse - the same net, but much thicker, because it only stretched the length of two hallways -

- enough to sense the man, that iron whirling cloud intent and searching in the library, burning with a strange iridescent glow underneath the twining patterns of the blueprint, all of it ablaze -

- and enough to sense Logan -

Logan?

- walking up the stairs from the kitchen.

"Oh, no," Charles breathed.

"No," He stared at his door. "No, no, no -"

"X man - Merry Christmas!"

The voice rebounded down the hallway, along with the loud tramp of booted feet.

"On the first day of Christmas, an X man gave to me / one-of-your birds in whatever kind of tree is-your-favorite-kind-of-tree. Shit, I don't know. X?" A booming knock on his door. "You there? I know you're there - damn, I can smell you're there. What you been doin' on your vacation, X man? Smells like a party."

"Logan," he croaked.

"Hey -" That bluff voice trailed off. "X? It's me. And -" something sloshed. "I brought some booze. Special delivery from Dallas, and Marie says hello. Merry Christmas?"

Charles flattened his hands against the door. Squeezed his eyes shut.

He sensed his raven, flying above. And - there was the man, leaving the library, oh god leaving the library -

"He can't find out you're here," he gasped. "Logan - get out of here."

"The hell? I did not bribe Azazel to lug my sorry ass back here just so I could leave without giving you a present. Shit. Xavier - what's up?"

"Get out!" Charles' voice cracked. "Leave - leave - he's coming, he'll find you -"

"Who's coming?" A sniff. Then a more pronounced one, lower. At - keyhole level. "Who's come,
you mean; damn. Just -" a scraping noise - "let me get you out of here and I'll make you a sandwich and you can tell me all about it." A pause. "The fuck is wrong with this lock?"

Silence - except for the sound of his own breath, ragged and desperate.

"Hey, man." Logan's voice was ... oh god, he sounded worried. "X man. We're friends, yeah? Cause, friend to friend? You don't sound so good, Xavier. You get bronchitis this time of year? Sean does, believe it or not."

Charles tried to speak; couldn't -

But Logan breezed on. "So come on down to the kitchen with me, and I'll tell you about Angel dumping Azazel's ass -"

"Logan -"

" - from 10,000 feet, and when he was drunk, so that makes it even better -"

"Logan," and it was almost impossible to get the words past the terror squeezing his throat, "you have to leave - please ... please ..."

But silence had fallen outside his door.

Nerves strung screamingly tight, Charles squeezed his eyes shut. Called his raven back to him; hide, he told it - go back and hide -

The raven croaked at him. And stayed on his shoulder.

"... because I might need help? Fine." Charles felt his teeth chatter. "But - don't make me see it, don't make me hear -"

But he couldn't help hearing Logan's snarl. "What the hell are you doing here?"

There was no answer. Only silence.

Silence, and the shink of - of Logan's claws sliding out from between his knuckles. "I asked you a question. Sir."

And then ... the faint sound of bare feet. Moving slowly. Like a cat.

And the low voice, purring at the door.

"Professor Xavier ..."

A pause.

"Why don't you tell him?"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all you readers and reviewers! You really help me keep going!

And thanks SO MUCH as well to all of the talented people who are hitting the ping
pong ball o’ Fan Creativity back and forth across the 9 11 10 table with me. Squee! Thank you for fanart and for fanmixes. I gloat over each one; much like Smaug.

Mai Master List - I Showz U It ... divided into sections for your convenience.

NB: Because of REASONS (having to do w/ AO3’s character limit) I am saving the Charles/Erik stuff and the playlists for the next chapter’s endnote!

CHAPTER ART / COVERS / BLING

Nan (in what might be a series? FINGERS CROSSED ZOMG!) - Prologue

" - Chapter Seven

" - Chapter 9

Disproven - book cover

Fassbender-McAvoyobsessed - cover

artmasks - 9 11 10 watch case / pendant!

ERIK

Loobeeinthesky - Erik the Red

Just Follow Snails - Erik the Red - Free West propaganda

CHARLES

Hellomynamesandiam - Charles the White Knight

datglasses - Charles and Jean

GeorginoschkaVincen - Cardboard Box

" - He is on his way ...

Katburning - Charles at the sink

" - he's coming ... / Charles crying

Kogitsunenoyosora - Charles looking in the mirror

" - Charles and his birds

etirabys - Charles & his birds

Honey Pancake - Charles and his raven

and last but definitely not least ... PAPER ART!!

Paperflower - 9 11 10
Chapter Notes

Please note the rape/non-con tag. If you wish to read more about the rationale behind it, please click through to the end notes. (NB: said rationale includes spoilers.)

Thanks to Kay, etirabys and Azryal for their feedback and encouragement. Thanks to tumblr folk for suggestions regarding Russian. And special thanks to resurrecttheliving, also of tumblr, for the name of Ir Tzedek, "City of Righteousness," the capitol of Eretz Galut.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For a long moment, all Charles could hear was his own breathing.

Then Logan spoke.

“Tell me what, X man?”

He sounded …

… Charles did not know how he sounded.

He focused on his own breathing instead. On the grain of the door’s wood, darkened by his shadow.

“Xavier?” Logan’s voice cracked. “You there?”

There was shuffling in the hall; scraping. Charles could hear it. He kept his raven close to his side, not wanting to see, not wanting to know –

“You are one crazy motherfucker, you know that?” Logan had obviously turned; his words stabbed sharp in the opposite direction. “What the hell is going on? Why aren’t you with the scouts?”

There was a thump, and Charles jerked away from the door. Logan had obviously been backed into it.

“California’s fucking gorgeous this time of year, sir – why the fuck aren’t you there?”

Silence stretched.

“… James …”

The whisper made the hairs on the nape of Charles’ neck stand on end.

“James … I don’t have orders. You do.”

There was a hard thud – Charles took a step back, carefully, heart pounding. What –

He stared at the door. The wood creaked.

He heard a groan of pain, cut off – as though Logan had bitten down on his own lip – and the low
voice again:

“What are those orders? Tell me.”

“You bastard,” it was spat out, each word an effort, “you sadistic piece of – ah fuck! Son of a –”

Charles backed away even further – as three metal claws inched through the wood, slowly … one agonized fraction at a time, and then they quivered and spread like the spines of a lady's fan. And there was a hissed: "God -"

“Tell me.”

“Hold Fort Worth and pick off the stragglers and watch out for the – fucking hell –”

“Then why are you here, James?”

“Fuck off,” Logan gasped, “stop –”

“Can’t take a little pain? You’ve gotten soft.”

“Fuck you –” a scuffling sound – and astonishingly, the claws withdrew, slowly, sliding through the wood with a noise like nails on a chalkboard. “Ha – not so easy when she’s not here to charge you up, is it – sir -”

A snarl was the only reply, and something punched the door again – two somethings – and then all of Logan’s claws smashed through the wood and there was a cut off scream.

“Care to repeat that?”

The metal twisted with a screech, and a particular volley of noise from near the floor had to mean that Logan was kicking at a flagstone. But it was the vicious sound of that voice that jolted Charles out of his stupor. He knew that tone – the one that preceded broken bones and blood –

So he walked straight up to the door, stepped in between the two sets of claws, and put all of his courage into his voice.

“Stop.”

Then Charles squeezed his eyes shut. Waited.

His raven, upright and strong, beat its wings once. No, he told it, I don’t want to see –

For he only needed to hear: Logan’s ragged breathing, the rough metallic sounds of those claws being withdrawn, and then shuffling steps. But then Logan spoke, right in Charles’ ear. From the other side of the door.

“Listen, X,” tight and taut with pain, “whatever you’re doing, you don’t have to do it. Let me just –”

“I chose to do it, Logan.”

Charles knew his own voice sounded cold. But if Logan was going to shame him for –

“Xavier,” Logan breathed, “I don’t care who you fuck, man or woman or both at once or neither – You just –”

A thud. The man must have somehow hit Logan's head against the door. Not broken any teeth,
though, for Charles could hear the gasped: “God damn it all, you’re my friend. If you’re being hurt, I swear to God I’ll –”

“You’ll what?” Charles’ eyes flew open; he could hardly speak past the tightness in his throat. “What the hell can you do, Logan?”

“Listen. Charles. You don’t have to –”

But whatever Logan was going to say was cut off in a strangled gasp. Charles stumbled back from the doorway again, flinching. His raven fluttered to the mantel. But he didn’t need any of his power, to sense the pain on the other side …

He heard something rustle. Looked down, wildly.

The door’s metal handle was melting.

“Stop –” His voice cracked; he didn’t care.

And he heard the hissed reply almost as a physical jolt.

“You’re not going to tell him. Are you, Professor?”

“Tell me – what –” a gurgle, and then Logan cried out in pain.

Charles slammed both of his hands against the door. “Stop it!”

“Tell him,” the man snarled. “Tell him you want me. Tell him you did this because you want me.”

He could only stare at the splintered wood, aghast.

“Tell him, Xavier –”

“No,” he choked.

“ ‘No’? Of course, ‘no’.” The man’s voice slithered through the cracks forming in the door. “I knew you wouldn’t; I knew it. And now I have to deal with him, before I deal with you.”

Charles heard something snap-crunch. It wasn’t wood, and it wasn’t metal. And Logan had not made a sound, but there was a high-pitched, tinny whine coming from the hallway, and he could smell –

Something tickled his toes.

Charles looked down.

There was blood seeping under the door.

When his eyes focused again, he was standing in front of the fire, shaking from head to foot. The shadows in the corners of the room were thickening, bleeding into the air just as – under the door …

It was unreal. One moment the only question was whether the other would really bring back his watch; and the next moment – this –


The man growled. “Speak up.”
“– to let this happen – no,” he dragged in a deep breath and clenched his hands into fists …

… before finally letting go.

“No!!”

“… What?”

“You heard me, you fucker – stop! Stop hurting people, stop fucking hurting my friends, you unholy inhuman bastard!”

“I –”

“Stop. Right. Now! How many times? How many fucking times do I have to say it? How many god damned languages do I need in order to make it clear? Logan is my friend, and he came to say hello and so you get to fucking kill him?! God, you’re a savage, you’re an animal and you don’t listen –”

He broke off in a fit of coughing; his throat felt scraped raw.

The sound punctuated the utter silence from the hallway.

Except then Charles heard something heavy moving, and a groan.

“… Xavier?”

“God, Logan –” Charles rushed back to the door.

“You been taking tips from,” another ragged breath, “Sean, eh?”

“Are you all right?!”

“Awful damn loud, Xavier. Bringing down the house.”

“I’m –” he had to cough again, and gulped. “I’m sorry if I –”

“No, X, don’t you apologize.” A thud – one of Logan’s heavy hands must have hit the door. “Don’t care what you do; don’t care who you fuck. You just … god damn it.” He sounded drunk. “Christ on a crutch, kid. Be careful.”

“I’m not a kid.”

“Fuck, X man.” A dragging gasp. “I know.”

Logan sounded …

Charles’ skin prickled. Logan sounded – close to crying.

But that was ridiculous. Logan couldn’t cry. If anything, he could take all the pain in the world and kick it off a cliff into the sea. Like football, Charles thought, blinking. Except that image didn’t make much sense, so perhaps he was going into shock. He pawed at his throat until he found his own jugular – he had to maneuver round a love bite – ah, there. Yes. His pulse was strangely thready. Erratic.

He looked down. The blood was cooling on the flagstones. If Logan had lost that much …

“You practically bled out. How are you even talking right now?” Charles asked, vaguely curious.
“That's my mojo. Remember when you shot me in the head? Good times, man.”

“Oh.” A slow blink. “That’s right.”

“Xavier. Charles,” Logan’s voice was urgent. “Talk to me.”

“I don’t – feel well,” he replied. His pulse was thundering in his ears; the blood was shimmering in the firelight. “I think I have to sit down.”

“Well, I’m not leaving you, even though – oh, X man, somebody’s not happy about that. Nope. I am getting a great big ‘no’ from a certain somebody out here, and it’s the piissiest ‘no’ since Frost sent Stryker’s VP packing this morning. News flash, sir,” and Charles could almost hear Logan’s madcap grin, “I’m not leaving. Not unless you drag me out of here by my –”

Silence.

Then a strange, grunting sound – and the crash of a body hitting the floor. A dead weight.

Dead …

Charles knew he would have to sit down in a moment. A pity – he had felt so strong, screaming all of his anger … That had changed. But what remained the same was that he didn’t need his raven, or any other power, to sense the black rage clotting on the other side of the door.

“Is he dead?”

A pause.

Then, a low hiss: “No.”

“Good.”

Charles blinked; swayed on his feet. Then he looked behind him. He took two steps to the chair and made an effort to drag it to the doorway. He propped its high back firmly against the wood. He took his sewing from it, set kit and sweater carefully on the bed. And Charles staggered back to the chair, and sat.

He tucked his feet beneath himself, to avoid any blood. There did not seem to be more, though. But – and he looked – his soles were red-black, and filthy – and he had felt the blood, slick beneath them, just a moment ago. He had not wanted to think about it.

“… Professor.”

The man’s voice was like ice.

Charles swallowed. “Yes?”

“Do you want him to stay alive?”

God damn you for a bastard, but: “Yes,” he said, keeping his tone even. “Of course I do. He’s my friend.”

“Because: If you want your friend to stay alive, his visit is now over.”

“Because,” Charles mocked, ”we were having such a lovely chat – fine.” He gulped. He would not let that bastard see him cry, and surely Logan would be all right – too valuable to be killed, too tough
to die – “Take him and leave. Get away from me.”

“I’ll return soon –”

“No.”

Charles made the word adamant, and pitched it to punch through the door.

And for a long moment, there was silence.

Then:

“… What did you just say?”

“I said ‘no.’ ”

A pause.

“So that must mean … you don’t want your watch after all?”

“A paltry two-bit piece of scrap.” Charles hugged his knees close; squeezed his eyes shut. “My useless father gave it to me one lovely night, but not before he was drunk.” A lie, of course – and it hurt to say it, but, “Keep it and welcome. It brought me no luck; here’s hoping the same for you.”

“But –”

The man’s voice had fucking cracked.

“Fuck you,” Charles hissed under his breath, almost into his kneecaps, “– bastard – you bastard. You can’t make me think,” and his throat was tight, “you can’t make me feel –” sorry for you, his mind finished.

Because all the poor little dear wanted was to make him, Charles, happy – wasn’t that true?

He opened his eyes. The blood shone black on the floor in the firelight. Charles laughed to himself, gasping. I’m going mad. My god, I swear I’m as cracked as that watch face the instant he slams it into the wall –

But there no sound of glass breaking. Only quiet.

When the man spoke again, his voice was gruff. “Then I’ll keep it.”

Charles kept his own distant. “You do that.”

“And your friend … is going back to Dallas, with Azazel.”

“My friend with your friend. How lovely.” Charles stared into the fire. “I hope yours knows about your taste in torture, or he’s in for a bit of a shock –”

“And you, Professor …” The man continued as though Charles had not spoken.

And something about his voice …

Charles felt his mouth go dry with fear.

A disbelieving sputter escaped him before he could choke it back. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“No.” That voice was strangely calm.

“No … Mein Geliebter – mein Schatz. Beautiful … I’m not joking.”

“Well, if you think –”

“I think, Xavier, that you think it well and good to stand there and shriek at me as though – I were – your – dog.” Each word was crystal clear; the man had taken a step closer, the better to make his low tones heard. Charles felt own fingers curl into the armrests of the chair, nails scratching the fabric.

“And I am saying: that it would be well and better for you to go back to bed.”

No reply was possible.

“Far better. Du …” The man’s voice was thick. “Far better to go back to bed, to think of ways to please me … to make yourself ready for me …”

“Ready – are you –” Charles was shivering; he couldn’t seem to stop. “And is the fact that I am by no means willing any part of this sick little picture of yours?”

And he could have sworn that the man’s laugh had scraped up all the blood on the floor and smeared it on his words:

“Professor: Ready or not, willing or not … When I return, I’m going to fuck you until you forget the names of all your precious friends.”

A pause. Then, solicitous: “Is that quite clear? In your mind?”

“It’s clear, and: no.” Shaking, Charles rose to his feet; turned to face the door, the bulk of the chair in front of him. His raven squawked, flapping its wings. “Don’t you remember what I told you? If at any point I say ‘no,’ you stop. And you said –”

“I said I understood, Xavier.”

Silence.

And then, almost gently:

“I never said I agreed.”

Charles could have sworn that his vision had gone grey at the edges. For: it seemed a long moment had passed before he blinked hard to come back to himself. There had been a dragging sound in the hallway, but now there was silence.

He licked his lips. Whispered, “Go,” to his raven – and it flew out the door and up, to see –

– there was the man. By the kitchen, with Logan. Logan, who was still unconscious. And the man was doing something with the metal of the kitchen door – restraining him? Chaining him, too? God, Logan –

“He won’t kill him. He won’t do this. He won’t, he can’t,” Charles mumbled to himself. Stepping around the chair, he tried the door’s handle, feeling dizzy. “Oh god, oh my god …”
Nothing budged. He slapped his hands against the door and shoved. Nothing. So Charles pushed the chair to one side. He set his teeth, braced himself, and rammed one shoulder against the largest of the cracks –

Nothing, except a bright flare of pain, and a new throb setting in by the bite mark –

“Oh god, that,” Charles backed away, wildly. That bite. The man would bite him again, whether he said yes or no or stop – “Raven, Raven come back –”

It flew back to him in an instant, circled round his mind with a screech and swoop of black wings. Not in panic, though. In fear, perhaps – but anger too, and that anger made Charles straighten his shoulders. That bastard thought he would gasp and faint and - and lie there and take– it. It? Rape, his mind said, icily, call it what it is.

The Oxford Casanova was no prude – but the one time he had seen it, in the Rose in Bloom … A weedy student had staggered against the dirty bar not two minutes after downing a beer, and someone else - someone bulkier - had come to help – and the way his fingers had grasped, greedily … Charles had seen it, and he had intervened.

Nobody else had cared, but he had intervened. He had seen grit at the bottom of the glass, and he had intervened. He had not had nearly the same power, then, but he had still intervened. Raven, and he reached out and his power brushed the bird’s feathers – Raven had been an egg, if anything …

“An egg,” he mumbled, “that’s what you – oh –”

The raven had pecked him hard on his skull. It was still angry, and he was only dazed with fear. Angry. “Don’t just stand there; don’t just wait,” Charles said, with a half-sob. “Do something.”

There was nobody here for him. Logan was being god damned welded to the oven or something equally hideous, and nobody would intervene. But if the man thought he, Charles, would let himself be raped …

Well.

He would have another think coming. And a fight on his hands.

Without considering, not pausing for a second, Charles shoved the chair to take up as much of the doorway as possible. He pulled his empty bookshelf from the far corner, wedged the wood in front of the chair. The bloody door opened into the hallway, yes, but the furniture would at least slow the bastard down.

He set a thought fire burning at the head of the stairs and tiny flickers lining the hall on the way back to his room. Fire. Charles stared at the flames flickering orange light on the hearthstones. He darted to the bathroom and took the ceramic mug; then scooped up some of the red-hot coals, hissing at the burn on his fingers. Ceramic, not metal – metal, oh god –

Charles looked around the room, wildly. The chain curled in the corner. The metal cup by the hearth; the thermos. Jean’s toy, the soup container – both on the bed – the god damned bed frame was metal, and the hinges and handles of all the doors, “Shite,” he mumbled, “what can I – what –”

What’s the point? and he started to laugh, despite himself. Now he knew he was mad – he’d have to be, to stand there and laugh, even though his raven was fluttering over to the bedframe and perching on one post, croaking –
Pecking at the lantern.

Charles fell silent, realizing – yes.

He blew out the candles in a rush and pulled them out, heedless of the hot wax. Threw them in the fire, and then raised the lantern above his head and brought it down on the hearthstones. He only just remembered to close his eyes before the glass shattered.

And there, in the smashed remains, were three pieces – long and jagged – that could fit in his hand.

He grabbed his sweater from the bed, and shoved the smaller shards and splinters around the chair. That would slow the man down further.

“Glass,” Charles muttered, “any more glass?”

His mind was distant, cataloguing, even as he felt his heart hammering. Two of the large pieces he hid in a tear in the mattress. To imitate Logan’s claws would be all well and good, but Charles knew his own limitations with an edge weapon. So it was only the third that he clenched in his hand. But the more glass he found, the more he could smash and leave as a barrier at the door. The raven was looking – he was looking –

The only other glass was that of the ruby-red bottle of cologne. On the mantel, Charles remembered. He darted to pick it up; swore again under his breath Useless. Far too small – he let it fall to the hearthstones – small and durable, for it didn’t break. “God damn –”

But the sensation of his thought-fire flaring, warning him, stopped Charles mid-curse.

Raven fluttered from its perch on the bedpost. Flew to his shoulder, mantling its wings.

Unfortunate, that fear should taste metallic on his tongue. But it did.

“Here’s the plan,” Charles whispered. “He tries to come into this room. When he’s getting past the impediments, you fly at him,” he stroked the raven’s ruff with trembling fingers, “attack him. I’ll distract him at the same time with the coals from the fire. He’ll be – shocked, or he’ll slow down, or –”

Charles bit back a sob. It sounded ridiculous; it would never work – and would he run outside god damned naked? There was the one pair of sweatpants remaining to him, in the wardrobe; he put them on. He put his sweater back on, too – all without letting go of the one last shard of glass. The biggest one.

“He’ll slow down enough, and I’ll cut him and – and run.”

Right across the jugular. Charles made a practice swipe. He could do it. He had only ever once done so, true, and that had been with a broken bottle, but he could, he knew he could –

The smaller alarms were flaring. One at a time, at a steady pace. Sending him flashes of the shadow slowly pacing up the stairs – and of the roiling cloud of the man’s thoughts – sharp and bloodstained, all light gone from them.

Charles kept a tight hold on the shard. Bent and scooped up the ceramic mug with his left hand. It was hot to the touch.

He bit his lip. Then switched weapon hands. With any luck the man wouldn’t remember he was ambidextrous, and the glass would be a surprise. He tucked it into his left palm as best he could. And
waited.

The waiting, then, was the worst part.

He couldn’t hear anything. It was dark, except for the flickering firelight. Charles dragged in a deep breath – smoke from the fire, of course, and the scent of Logan’s blood. Probably dry by now. Certainly dry on his feet.

He looked down.

Oh. That was right. Frost had taken away his shoes.

“Shoes or not – I’ll still run. Come on, come on you bastard –”

The door creaked.

“… Professor?”

Charles took another deep breath. Angled his body, ready to throw the coals.

“Xavier. Answer me.”

No, he thought, fiercely.

The bedframe twitched, just slightly, its posts scraping across the stones. Charles almost jumped out of his skin.

A tsch. “You’re not in bed.”

“Stay away,” Charles rasped.

“Ah. There you are.”

“Did you hear? I don’t like repeating myself.”

“Neither do I: so I will not ask you to go back to bed. I will say, instead,” and the voice was calm, “that I’m going to break the door down now, Charles. Since you did not do as I told you.”

The fuck - what did that door do to you? Just bloody well open it, you blighter, except: of course. The man wanted to frighten him.

“I could be wrong, but that might not be the best way to win my affections,” Charles spat. “And you don’t get to use my proper name, you bastard.”

There was no reply. Instead –

Charles bit down hard on the inside of his mouth to keep from screaming at the sight of the metal handle starting to bubble and writhe. Tendrils worked their way into the cracks in the wood, and shot out spikes –

And the man ripped the door off its hinges as casually as he had opened the aluminum can.

Only this time, of course, he was covered in blood.

Which was a melodramatic way of putting it, Charles’ mind observed, detached. Not covered,
precisely. It had only soaked his hands, and smeared up his forearms. There was drying patch where a gout had splashed his chest.

None on his face. Unlike the other times Charles had seen blood on him. It had made his eyes look very green. No. None on his face now.

It took him a moment to realize what that meant. And when he did, he was surprised his voice stayed steady. Not loud. But not shaking either.

“You watched,” Charles said.

The man had flung the door into the opposite wall; Charles hadn’t flinched at the crash. Now, though, the sight of those hands, lying on the high back of the chair in the middle of the empty doorframe …

The other’s eyes were fixed on him. Glittering.

“Watched what?”

“Logan – bleeding. You made him bleed, you made him scream, and the entire time you stayed far enough away to watch it all as it happened.”

Bloody fingers flexed. “He didn’t scream. He never screams.”

Charles kept his mind removed. Distant. His raven was helping – talons digging into his shoulder, waiting to attack. “You’ve done it to him before.”

“I helped train him when he first arrived here.” The man’s voice was low. “He ran five times.”

“And you do that. To people who run.”

“Come, now, why the concern?” A raised eyebrow. “He was not a child.”

“You savage,” Charles spat. “He’s my friend –”

“And there you are, Professor …” Teeth glinted. “In all your righteous indignation. James doesn’t scream, but I know you do.”

Charles’ gut twisted.

But it was the sight of the other leaning forward over the chair’s back, languid, that made sickness rise in a rush. Relaxed, yet completely focused on him.

And Charles realized: chair, shelf, fire … the man would not be distracted. Not by anything – except, perhaps, by Charles himself. Change the plan, he thought, desperate. Let the man think he was winning, lure him close enough, get him off his guard – and then cut his throat.

He watched the other tilt his head from side to side. A small roll of the shoulders. Those arms stretching in front, hands joined and turned out. And then those long fingers resting on the chair’s fabric – red, interlaced – Raven's hair in a plait –

"I've made you scream before, Xavier." The voice was even quieter. "I'm going to make you scream again."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Charles hissed.
"Mm. Because," and the glint of teeth was more pronounced as the man looked at the mug, "you plan to be civilized? Water me well, sway me to your will? It won't work. Not this time."

"No," Charles agreed, and threw the coals at him.

The blighter dodged. Bloody well ducked behind the chair’s back, his arms whipping out of sight, and why the hell hadn’t he thought of that? God damn it, desperate, and Charles was ready to follow up with the mug, then caught himself – gripped it hard –

A laugh scratched over his ears. “You honestly thought that would … ah, Professor.” The man unfolded from behind the chair, still grinning – those teeth –

“I had wondered what you would try. Very clever. And now look at you …” a tip of the head towards the mug, “ready to try again. But you have no more coals. What a shame.”

*Keep him focused on the right hand.* “Don’t touch me –” Charles gasped.

Another tsch. “You’ve set the chair on fire.” The man moved it carefully into the hallway, and tipped it on its side. Coals on the cushion fell off, sparking on the flagstones. Then, easing back, the man considered the bookshelf still in his way.

“Fire and wood. How original.”

“It worked at Dallas, didn’t it?”

“Perhaps. But too late to be of any use for them.”

The man hooked the fingers of one hand into the shelf and dragged it into the hallway. The scrape of wood on stone was very loud.

*Get ready,* to his raven, and Charles brandished the mug at the man again. “You come near me and I swear I’ll –”

“You’ll what? Spit at me, scratch me … bite me?” The man leaned against the doorjamb. “Anything but your mind, Xavier, I’m quite eager to experience.”

“My mind? I should have turned your brain to pulp days ago. But there wouldn’t be much difference,” he spat, “would there?”

The curl of a smile, cold, and the chain rattled in the corner. Charles bit down hard on a yelp.

“You use your power, Xavier, and I use mine.”

Silence.

The man stayed on the threshold for a long moment. Then, still smiling, he stepped into the room. Slowly and carefully, sweeping aside the splinters of glass with the sides of his bare feet.

Charles took a step back. “Don’t.”

“You’ve put clothes on again. Schatz,” low and honeyed, “why would you do such a thing?”

Another step; on his own in turn, Charles faked a stumble. Made his voice ragged. “Please don’t – don’t do this –”

“Do what?”
Charles felt his back hit the wall. He looked down and to the side – caught his own breath, half gasp, half sob. The type of noise someone would make if they had just registered their own death grip on a useless little mug. *Take the bait.*

And the man did.

“There, now … what’s that?” The voice, still low, was now almost playful. “What will you do with that, Geliebter? Hit me in the head?”

Charles brought his left hand to the mug as well, brushing his fingers against it. He kept his eyes turned down. Faked a shiver. “It’s mine.”

The man was so close that Charles could feel the heat of his body and his breath. Could smell the drying blood. Could almost *taste* the soft purr. “Of course it’s yours. Just give it to me and I’ll put it back, right where it belongs. Here –”

The man hooked two fingers of his left hand into the handle of the mug. “Let me have it.”

A quick glance up confirmed: pupils dilated. Charles tugged back; those nostrils flared. The man pulled – higher, up higher, until the mug was at the level of Charles’ eyes. Then closer to him … until Charles’ hands were almost resting on one bony shoulder. The man’s skin felt warm against his knuckles.

Those lips quirked in a smile. “Let me have it, Charles.”

“All right.”

Charles made his right hand tremble on the mug as he let it go.

But there was no tremble in his left hand when he flicked out the glass and went for the bastard’s throat.

It was only luck, he realized, that had the man bringing up his right hand to take the cup from the fingers of his left. Luck, chance …

It did not bear thinking about if – like the nightmare monster lurking in the woods – the other was truly that god damned fast.

Still. The monster had blood as red as any human’s. Red and hot, and spurting from the base of his neck as he roared in pain.

Drops of it spattered Charles’ face as the man struck back – instinct, perhaps. Charles’ left arm had rebounded off the man’s right, so he punched at the lean abdomen with the glass – *gut the bastard* – getting in another hit before a hand grabbed his shoulder and wrenched him around and threw him down at the floor. Charles turned the fall into a tumble, let the momentum carry him until he hit the wardrobe. He had only just scrambled to his feet, ears ringing, when a fist whipped towards his face – he ducked and the punch missed. He landed a punch of his own on the fucker’s ribs, then nipped beneath a swing for his head and ran for the hall –

But something hit the back of his head, hard, and Charles stumbled with the force of the blow. He landed face first against the wall, only dimly registering the shatter of the mug on the floor, ceramic splinters biting the back of his legs. His ears were ringing as he turned – turned to see the other dripping with fresh blood and stalking towards him like a lion.
Charles tried to push himself off the wall. The pain in his head spiked, and the man’s face shimmered in and out of focus – but he focused enough to will the dizziness away. Focused just in time to register the lean twist and blur of a moving arm – to see the punch that landed hard enough to break his teeth.

And that sent him to the floor without a saving tumble - though really, there was no room to do so, in the corner by the door.

But he would not cry. He had sworn it to himself, after all – in the mirror, days before … Charles blinked, woozily. If he wasn’t crying, what were the warm drops trickling down his face?

The man leaned down from where he stood tall, penning Charles in the corner. He swatted at the glass. Charles’ grip on the shard had loosened, so much that he could only watch the other’s hand connect and then listen for faint sound of glass falling on stone. His head hurt. And what was on his face?

Charles swiped at one cheekbone. His fingertips came away crimson.

Oh. The man was bleeding on him.

Charles tilted his head up to look. Blood was dripping from the man’s throat and abdomen. The smile on that face was more of a baring of teeth – and Charles had to turn his own face away.

“Rabe …”

The whisper snagged on Charles’ ears.

“Clever, clever … Du geschickter Rabe …”

He could feel a light touch on his hair. Fingers, Charles realized – those long fingers, stained with blood, stroking through tangles. Petting him.

The man’s breathing had picked up speed. Charles blinked; tried to focus again. There was a hand on his head. The heel of the other hand was pressed against the man’s trouser placket. Then pressed more forcefully, and then the man shifted from foot to foot. Even with his dizziness, Charles could see …

Fingers flexed in his hair. He swallowed back nausea and put out a hand to shove the other away. The man was hard, visibly straining against his trousers, and his breath was a rasp. Hell. It wouldn’t be the first time the fucker had gotten aroused by pain and blood, but Charles would be damned if he would –

“Well, Professor? Let’s have you lick my cock.”

Charles shook his head.

“Why not?”

“How,” he dragged in a breath, “can you even ask me that? Why would I do something for you, when you don’t have my consent to do anything to me?”

“Because,” the man said, caressing his hair, “I’m going to fuck you now, Professor, and I thought you might prefer it wet.”

Charles bit back a cry as the hand twisted in his hair and yanked. The man tossed him towards the
middle of the room, casually – *like a cat*, the thought flickered through his mind – *playing with a mouse*. Charles focused on the stones of the floor beneath his nose. He was not a god damned mouse, and he’d *kill* the fucker before he let him – let him –

He felt a kiss pressed into the nape of his neck. Fingers of one hand combing through his hair, of the other stroking his flank and then catching the waist of the sweatpants –

Charles gasped and started to struggle. The hand resting light on his head moved to his neck and clamped round it like a vise. Elbowing, Charles tried for the cut on the man’s abdomen, for the bruise where he had landed the punch to the ribs. But then the other leaned forward with a hiss, pressed with all his weight – moved back and then pushed forward and down against his arse, one slow roll of the hips. He was hard as a rock.

“*No,*” Charles groaned. “*Don’t. Please* don’t –”

“*Shh.*” The man’s breath felt hot, even through Charles’ sweater. There was pressure – a hard thrust that he could feel through both their trousers and the softer nuzzling of the other’s face into the sweater between his shoulder blades. “*Mein Rabe.* Beautiful, you’re so … It doesn’t have to hurt – it doesn’t –”

“Of course it doesn’t have to, but,” he couldn’t seem to breathe, “but – without anything, it will. You’ll put me in the god damned infirmary if you don’t use any lubricant, you crazy sod –”

“Is that a *yes*’?”

For one appalled moment, Charles could hardly breathe.

“No. *No* – it’s not. You absolute *bastard.*”

There was a long pause. And then he felt something. And felt something in him turn cold, removed, when he realized: it was laughter.

It was odd, to have something so small as a trigger. The faint vibration of laughter that he felt in his back – nothing more – to push him over the edge. Like screaming, earlier, he thought. The same feeling of … letting go.

Perhaps, Charles thought, having elbowed the man hard in the stomach, bucked him off and turned to claw at his eyes … Perhaps the analysis of feelings could wait for later. He felt distant enough as it was. As though his raven, perched on the mantel, was watching him draw blood with his scratches. Raven watched the man swath Charles’ fingers away, and grab him with greedy hands – then rear back at another blow, growling, and cuff him on the side of the head. *Like a cat.* Very feline, for the man to glance towards the fire and drag Charles closer to it, straddling him and keeping his head close to the coals scattered on the hearth, threatening to burn him if he kept struggling.

And as soon as he had Charles in that place, he grinned. Bent to brush a kiss across his cheek, and shoved his hips down, grinding –

His raven was walking up and down the mantel, Charles knew. Looking at … something shiny? *Typical* – but … what was it? *The bottle of cologne,* his mind supplied. Stuck at an angle between two stones. Stuck. Sticking out. At an angle.

So when someone kicked it – he wasn’t sure who, since all four feet were bare … it broke. The odor was just as unpleasant as he remembered.

Not as unpleasant, though, as having his blue sweater ripped in two. Right down the front.
I just mended that, Charles thought, and his raven screeched from the mantel. *Just mended,* and then—“*Stop*—” he kicked out again, but his voice was almost gone, and the man was scratching stripes into his flanks, biting his shoulder. *No. Stop.*

And to his raven: *do it.*

The bird flew to obey. Charles hardly registered its feathers fluttering. Most of him was too involved in thrashing, tearing at the man’s skin as best he could with blunt fingernails, gasping and trying to shove him, to knee and punch, kick and claw his way free.

Distracting him, really. So that the bird could spread its wings wide, float off the mantel, and plunge into the man’s mind like a knife.

One made from obsidian, perhaps. Something with a razor edge. Sharp enough to cut through the maelstrom of metal ringing the man’s mind – to cut through and fly over the river – the leaden river, clogged with corpses, reeking of rotten flesh. But: *no,* that was the cologne – Shaw’s cologne – Shaw, Schmidt, Shuvalov – and the raven was dizzy, fluttering and falling …

“No,” Charles’ voice wrenched, broken. “Not there—”

He felt fingers gripping his jaw, and he wrested his sight back to the physical world – this is a real thing – in the real world. A real thing: the man looming over him, grip unforgiving as iron. So close, crusted in dried blood, eyes glowing in the firelight.

“Using your power?” A hiss, hot over his face. “Very well. *Professor.*”

And the man slapped the hearth and Charles felt the bite of metal at his wrists. He heard a slithering clink – “*god*—” lightning-quick, the shackle whipped round his ankle. “*No*—” and he struggled against the bonds, but he couldn’t breathe. Not even when something sharp sliced through his sweater sleeves and trouser legs and yanked everything away.

He was naked, Charles realized. And Raven was drifting on an eddy, down the river. “Come back,” he croaked, and gathered strength for another attempt –

But then the man reached out. Placed one bloody palm to the side of Charles’ face.

“*Schatz.*” Teeth flashed – Charles saw, dim through his dizziness, the other lick over his lower lip, slowly. And then lean forward to kiss him.

The raven wafted out of the man’s mind with the kiss. Slowly, pitch black in the dim grey, like a feather falling. It landed by Charles on the hearth, exhausted.

*I'm sorry,* Charles tried to say to it, but he couldn’t move his mouth. There was a tongue there, he thought, distant. In his mouth. Besides his own. He tried to bite down on it, but it dodged – almost playful – and he felt a rumble against his chest as the kiss turned shallow, teasing.

*Teasing.*

He was in shock, Charles realized. *Of course you are,* his mind said, coldly. He was cold through and through, even though the fire was close enough to touch. Then the other mouth was gone. His lips felt chilly, slick as they were in the cold air.

There was a clinking sound. The man’s belt, Charles observed. Blood dried black on the hands unbuckling it.
Charles dragged in a deep breath. Rasper: “I’ll scream.”

“Not loud enough for James to hear you, I hope.”

“… James?”

A low laugh. “Logan’s real name. James Howlett.”

“Oh.”

A rustle. Charles tried to focus. What was it – those – oh god trousers, and the man was naked and grinding against his hip. Another bite at his shoulder. You have to ask, he thought, and: too late. He couldn’t breathe.

There was blood on his face. The man’s blood – it had smeared all over him at some point – and Charles knew he was crying. Even when he managed to take enough breath to repeat:

“I’ll scream. I swear it. God,” his voice broke, “you’re an animal –”

“An animal,” the man whispered, “wouldn’t give you this.”

Something brushed his mouth. Charles tried to focus; couldn’t. He tasted it instead. Leather.

“So.” Callused hands palmed his thighs; squeezed. “Bite down if you need to. All right? Professor?”

“No.”

“Ah, now. Say ‘yes.’ Tell me ‘yes’ – one little word, go on …” The voice seemed actually … amused. Charles could hear the grin in it. He could see the teeth flash white. “‘Yes.’ Say it, Xavier.”

Charles shook his head.

“Say it.”

He chose not to reply. Instead, he turned his face away from the man. Looked at his raven, silhouetted against the fire. Black on red, orange, gold … His vision blurred and cleared, blurred again.

“Raven,” Charles whispered. Tried to move his hand to reach – he was bound, he remembered. Chained. Raven, he whispered in his mind. Help me. Help me.

The bird could not help much. But it fluttered its wings. Unable to fly – too tired – it inched closer to him on the floor, until he felt its feathers brush the throb on the side of his face. Pain everywhere, and the man’s fingers were gripping his thighs and his arse, eager, and the raven could do nothing.

Nothing except huddle close to him, comforting. Charles whispered, “Raven …”

“Oh.”

Despite himself, Charles blinked. Turned his head, just slightly, and focused on the other’s face. The stark lines of cheekbone and jaw were the same … but the expression was a warm one. Open. Amazed.
“I see her. Your raven.”

Silence.

“There –” the man tipped his chin. “Right there. She came to me at Dallas – did I ever tell you?” A slow kiss, brushed across his mouth. “I heard your voice …”

Slowly, Charles turned his face away – until he could stare into the bird’s eyes, jet-black and shining.

“Would she fly to me again, do you think?”

Charles saw the raven’s feathers ruffle, as he laughed with a horrible, grating sound. “When you’re in the middle of raping me? No.”

A pause. Flicking his eyes back to the man, Charles saw him stare …

Oh god, no. The fuckwit was honestly – confused? No. But: intent on him. Eyebrows drawn together, eyes narrowed.

“Rape? You said – whatever I wanted.”

Charles saw his own words puff over the feathers on the raven’s breast. “I also said: ‘stop if I say ‘no’. ’ Didn’t I?”

Silence.

He hardened his voice. “Didn’t. I?”

“Yes, but –”

“ ‘But’ nothing. This is rape. So either get on with it, or stop.”

For a long moment, the man did neither.

But then …

… Charles felt his breath coming faster, uneven, as the other leaned away from him –

– and pulled up his trousers.

A rough voice: “I’m … Xavier, I. The – the smell, that cologne –”

“Don’t try that with me.” His voice was trembling. “You were set on rape before you got a whiff.”

The man settled back on his haunches between Charles’ legs. “But … your heart.”

Charles did not want to think about it – the last thing he needed was a cardiac event in flagrante.

“If I concentrate,” the blighter’s voice sounded shy, “hard enough, I can feel your blood moving. In your heart. And this,” a hand on his sternum; Charles flinched hard, “this is the same as when I – when I tried to suck you. And when you drank the orange juice –”

“Only an animal,” Charles said, voice almost gone, “cannot tell the difference between desire and fear.”

He kept his eyes fixed on the man’s features. Watched, heart pounding, as the other tipped his head to one side, brought a hand up, and touched where Charles’ tears had tracked down through the
In his mind, Charles thought, distant. He looked like this. When I did – what I did. In his mind.

“Schöner Rabe,” the man whispered. “What do you want?”

His teeth were starting to chatter; he clenched them.

“Tell me.” Fingertips, gentle, brushed over his mouth. “Tell me what you want.”

Charles couldn’t help it: he whimpered where he lay. Saw his chest starting to heave. “I want you to get off me.”

The man’s jaw clenched – but he obeyed.

All of his naked skin felt freezing cold in the room’s chill, Charles realized. But … the other was moving away. Away, and retrieving his belt, sliding it back through the loops on his trousers, and frowning down at him.

“Go away,” Charles said, thinly.

The frown deepened. “But –”

“No: go away …” Charles twisted on the floor. His face was wet, tears tracking down through the blood. “Leave.”

“Charles, I –”

“Leave. And –” he was starting to weep in earnest, he realized. “Take the chain off. Unchain me and leave me alone – please, please –”

It was the surprise of his life that the man obeyed. Charles felt the metal on his wrists – and the shackle on his ankle – open and curl up and twist away. He could almost hear the remaining metal in the room quiver … but he kept his eyes determinedly fixed on his raven.

He saw the man reach out to touch the bird.

Away, Charles told Raven, fly back to me – keep away from him –

Curling onto his side, folding his arms over his chest and shuddering, Charles saw the raven fly to him and flicker into nothingness in the safety of his mind.

Safe.

“Leave,” he rasped.

“Rabe.” The man’s voice was low. “Geliebter. Will you let me –”

Charles grabbed at the hearthstones and dragged himself further away. “Go. Just – please, leave me alone.” His voice cracked on a sob. "Please."

For a long moment, there was nothing but silence, and the sounds of the fire.

Then the man left.

In stages, admittedly. And not before taking a blanket from the bed and covering Charles with it. But
eventually: he left.

When he was alone, Charles could only stare at the empty doorframe. Waiting for his eyes to focus again. And taking his time to realize: empty, there, meant … open.

For an even longer moment, all he heard was the rasp of his own breathing.

Then: “Get up,” Charles told himself.

But he couldn’t seem to move.

“You can do this. Get up.” He panted where he lay on the floor. “Stand up.”

It was excruciating to move his fingers. For the life of him, Charles hardly knew why. The back of his head hurt where the mug had hit it; the side of his face much more so. His wrists and ankle ached, where he had been bound … his mouth felt pulpy.

But he moved one thumb. Then both, then his fingers and his hands. “Hard part’s over. Now: stand up.”

Charles wavered to his feet. A wave of dizziness made him stagger. “Concussion, perhaps?” he mumbled, and: “fuck …”

The next few actions he remembered in flashes. Grabbing for the hot water handle in the bath three times; dropping the soap but still scrubbing the blood off his face and chest. Almost falling out of the shower when he was done. The headache and nausea were worse.

“Maybe Logan …”

Raven was too tired; the rest of his aviary silent. So Charles sent a formless surge of power in the direction of the kitchen. Like fluid from a blister ripped open.

Logan was gone.

“Oh.” He was shivering in the blanket. The fire was dying down. “Back to Dallas.” Like the man had said.

The man wouldn’t lie about that. Would he? Surely not. The other might be a murderer and a would-be rapist … but not a liar.

“I hope not.”

Charles felt tired. But, “the infirmary,” he told himself. No door, no locks, no chains anymore. He could walk there. He knew the way.

He fumbled with a candle, not caring when the fire licked at his fingers. Stepped carefully around the broken glass and mug, and turned left.

The hallways were long and very dark. Charles could hardly see, even with candlelight. And it was difficult to keep his eyes focused on the golden flickers on the stones of the wall – and then the glints and gleams on metal curlicues. There. The library door.

Through the library, Charles remembered, and down long white hallways. Halfway to the Hive, and turn right – opposite storage – and the infirmary was one of the rooms in that vicinity. Perhaps, he thought, swallowing a surge of nausea … perhaps there would be aspirin there …
He clutched the door handle. “Please,” he mumbled, “be open.”

It was.

And the library was just as he remembered it. Dark, though. Chilly and quiet. Charles looked neither right nor left as he staggered to the other door – the one leading to the greater part of the West Wing … “Please be open,” Charles gasped. He tried that handle, and then felt his breath leave him in a shuddering sigh.

For that inner door was locked.

“No,” he whispered. And it seemed he was too tired to keep going.

Charles watched, dreamily, as he sank to his knees. He only just managed to pinch out the candle wick with finger and thumb before his eyes closed. *Good.*

Because it would be a shame to thank Logan for his visit by setting the place on fire – and on Christmas Day, no less.

When he opened his eyes again, he was warm.

Charles blinked. A plush material rubbed soft against his mouth. The intricate patterns in the carpet curled and twisted in red and blue and gold. There was a blanket tucked round his shoulders … no. *Two* blankets.

Cautiously, he sat up. And dragged in a slow breath, as his head throbbed in pain.

“Oh …”

Charles massaged his temples. Winced, probing at the back of his skull. There was a lump the size of an egg there – and not from a small bird, either. He debated getting up from the low couch; had almost decided against it … when he caught sight of the tables by the fireplace. The fireplace, in which a blaze was consuming at least five logs, and quite rapidly too.

It was warm in the library - there was something else at work besides the fire. Charles peered down at his bony chest and arms. He was completely naked, he knew, beneath the blankets … and he should have been quite cold indeed. As it was, his teeth were not chattering from the chill.

Two tables. He swallowed. They had been almost the first things he had seen in this library. Shivering, Charles held the blankets closer and gazed into the room’s dark corners. Pale wintery light was filtering through the three tall windows – but it was nowhere near bright enough to chase all the shadows away.

On one table there was the familiar chess set. On the other, the candelabrum. But next to that last …

Charles watched the steam curling up into the air from the metal thermos. He knew better than to touch it. If the man had put it there, who knew what drugs he might have seen fit to use as supplements? Charles ran through the possibilities in his mind, wildly. Different kinds of sedatives. Barbituates. Anything to keep him immobile on this very couch …

Where he had been, in fact … for …

Mouth dry, Charles stared at the windows again. The sun was high. It was Christmas Day. So he had been unconscious for … hours.
He tried to stand up; sat back down on the low couch with a groan. *No use.* Whatever injury that stupid mug to the back of the head had done him … it had set up shop for the duration, it would appear. *Damn.*

There was the smallest scrape of metal on metal –

Charles jerked his head up, wincing. But he had caught sight of the chess pieces. One of them had moved. He squinted; it was almost impossible to tell which one. But there was no draft, and they were solid metal … so the only thing that could have made them twitch in the slightest was …

He gritted his teeth and wiped sweat away from his forehead. Very courteous of the bastard. Giving Charles advance notice that he would be prowling into range in minutes. Perhaps seconds.

As if on cue, there was a knock on the West Wing door. And as quickly as he could, Charles moved deep into the opposite corner of the couch.

He stared into the fire, so he would not have to look at the man easing into the room. Closing the door behind him, and pacing – almost silent – over the carpet.

Then he heard: “… Xavier?”

Charles shivered. “I asked you to leave me alone.”

“I know.” The man’s voice was rough. “And I will. It’s just …”

‘Just’ what?”

“You’re hurt.”

“I’m aware of that, thank you. Is that all you wanted to say to me?”

“… I’m sorry.”

“I should think so.” Charles felt an ugly twist in his stomach. Carefully, he turned to look at the man. The other was fully dressed; dark shirt and trousers. The lean lines of that face were set … but the face itself was stark white, the eyes dark smudges beneath eyebrows.

“And … Sorry for what, again? Do make a list.”

“For frightening you.”

“Yes. And?”

“For hurting you.”

“Quite. And?”

The man paused. Charles could almost hear the wheels turning in his mind.

“… and – for not listening to you?”

“Precisely. ‘No’ most definitely means ‘no’. Is that quite clear by now?”

A savage growl. “You *told* me, ‘whatever I wanted’ –”

“And I also told you: ‘If I say “no”, you stop.’ So if you plan on taking the first literally, surely the
second follows suit. Hm?”

The power of logic, Charles reflected coldly. For the other was silent.

“Besides,” he continued. “It’s usually better to default to the option that doesn’t make one look incandescently selfish.”

“All right,” the man spat. “Here.”

He thrust a container at Charles. “I brought you something.”

“What is it?”

“Archangel’s blood. From Dallas. Given to me for my leg. You can have it.”

Charles stared at the plastic container. There was an obscure dark thing inside. Probably a syringe.

“Does Archangel consent to all of these blood draws? Or do you chain him down, too?”

A rusty laugh, with no warmth in it whatsoever. “He wants to give more. The trick is keeping him from too much.”

“… He’s that dedicated. That committed to the cause.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

The man looked down at the container in his hands. His … clean hands, Charles saw. The bastard had washed off all the blood.

“I don’t know, Xavier. He’s never told me.”

And then he broke the container’s seal and drew out – yes, Charles knew it – a syringe and a vial. “Let me just –”

“No,” Charles snapped.

A snarl. “You’ve made your point, Xavier. You have your own will and your own mind, and you can stop me with a word. Now let me help you. You’re hurt.”

“And you were the one to hurt me. So if you think you’re getting a needle within three feet of my skin, you’re quite mistaken.”

For a long moment, the man only stared.

Then he carefully placed the vial back into the container. Placed the container on the floor and nudged it over to Charles with his foot. “Then you do it. But only if you want to. Some days you seem the type that prefers to suffer.”

“So you’ve been doing me a favor all this time? Giving me what I prefer? Very kind of you.”

The man hunched his shoulders slightly and backed away until he almost hit the fire. Then he glanced behind him and sank down – first kneeling, and then sitting cross-legged. Those long fingers plucked at the carpet’s fringe.
“What do you want?” the man said, abrupt.

Staring at the vial nestled in ice in the container, Charles remembered the other asking the same question. When Charles was bound and bleeding on his own floor.

“I told you already.” He kept his voice cold. “I want you to leave me alone.”

“What else?”

Charles stared at him.

Even from a distance, he saw tendons flex - as the man twisted his hands together, the one round the other. “I'll give you anything.”


“Not for sex. For – to …” The man sounded very young. “To tell you that I'm sorry. I'll give you anything.”

“Give me my freedom,” Charles said, instantly.

“Anything within these walls.”

His eyes were stinging. It had been a venture, yes, but to hear the unutterable spoken again … Walls. No escape, ever, it would seem.

Unless he somehow got through the next – however many days. Weeks? No, Charles told himself, weary. Surely Frost would be back soon, and the work of the Finder would start again. If Charles got through the next length of time with the man in the same bloody house – if he proved himself meek and inoffensive and trustworthy … then he could pull the wool over the fucker's eyes as quick as a wink, and escape …

He was so tired of it all, though …

There was a gust of wind outside. Charles peeked over his shoulder. No clouds, thank god – no storm. But the hollow moan of the wind sounded very cold.

Meek and inoffensive. And the easiest way to be typecast as such, of course, was to perch on a velvet couch all day with a book. Charles sighed. That, he could do. He’d even enjoy it.

“What do I want? Within these walls?”

The man nodded.

“Freedom,” Charles replied. He tossed up a forestalling hand. “I don’t mean freedom to leave. I mean: freedom to walk outside my room. Freedom to sit in this library and read. Freedom to go to the kitchen and make a bloody cup of tea. I don’t want to be locked up, and I don’t want to be chained. Ever again.”

“And how can I trust you not to run?”

Charles lifted his chin. “I might ask you the same question. Except as regards rape.”

“All right – fine,” the man muttered. “No chains. Is that all?”

Charles felt the blood drain from his face. He hadn’t expected – oh god he hadn’t expected the man
to agree. His mind fumbled for additional things he … wanted –

“I …” His thoughts landed on something completely inconsequential. “I want you to get rid of those sheets. On my bed, I mean. They reek.”

He would be sending the man back into the room redolent of … Shuvalov. Shaw. That cologne – the bastard had ripped his sweater in two after smelling the cologne … A trigger of some sort?

_Oh god._ “My sweater …” Charles mumbled.

Ridiculous, to be so upset about nothing more than a pile of blue yarn. For that was what it had become. Perhaps he could knit himself a blue scarf and wear it when feeling particularly suicidal.

“I’ll give you back all your clothes,” the man said, quietly. “And your books.”

“Just give me the understanding that ‘freedom’ means exactly that. If I want to go to this library,” he gestured at the shelves, “to read some _more_ books … you won’t stop me?”

The other spoke to the floor. “I won’t stop you.”

“You promise? Absolutely? This isn’t some mental hiccup that you’ll forget as soon as you go out that door?”

“I promise, Xavier. On three conditions.”

“I knew it.” For a moment, Charles did nothing but seethe; then he spat, “Let’s hear them.”

“First: if a door is locked, and you want to go through it – you call me. And I will decide whether or not to open it.”

“As long as you keep the library door, the kitchen door, and _my_ door unlocked at all times. Full stop.” Except Charles had the sudden surreal thought: his door had been torn off and smashed to smithereens. How very awkward.

But the man had made an impatient gesture. “Fine.”

“Fine, then. Next?”

A ghost of a smile. “Please don’t try to kill me again, Xavier.” Bony fingers touched the shirt, near the base of his throat. “The inconvenience has started to outweigh the amusement.”

“As long as you don’t try _raping_ me again – fine. Otherwise, no promises.”

The smile twisted. “Fine.”

A pause.

Charles took in a deep breath. “What’s the third?”

He half expected the man to demand something sexual; the hot light in those eyes hinted at it.

But instead he growled, “If you don’t eat with me, you don’t eat at all.”

“… That’s all?” Charles blinked. “Fine. As long as,” he added, feeling somewhat dazed, “you plan on eating regularly. Over the next – however long a time this lasts.”
“I leave at the new year.”

Seven days. *Seven days* until the first of January … Charles pressed his lips together to keep a giddy laugh contained. He could survive seven days. Perhaps even six, depending on how long the blighter lingered on the first itself -

Green eyes had narrowed. “So pleased about that, Xavier?”

Charles gave him an innocent smile. “Of course. I expect souvenirs, after all. Where are you going?”

“I don’t know yet.” The words were gruff – but the next were matched by a look of searing intensity. “Wherever it is … I’ll bring you back whatever you want. Just tell me -”

“Oh,” Charles felt his headache roil through his skull, “I was joking. There’s really no need to bring me anything.”

And there was no mistaking what happened next. The man sulked.

Christmas Day, Charles thought, staring at the other’s dark frown. Freezing cold outside, and here he was, naked in a blanket, in the library he remembered *smelling* almost four months ago … If his friends could see him now … his sister …

He blinked back a wave of dizziness.

“For fuck’s sake, Professor,” the man growled at him. “Take Archangel’s blood and drink this tea. And then I’ll make you some breakfast.”

The thermos wafted through the air and hovered over his lap.

With a sense of something closing within him … Charles took it. And took a long drink. Then he took the syringe and vial from their container. “Any tourniquet?”

The man tossed him a piece of elastic. Charles caught it gracefully, despite his headache. Then it was a matter of a few practiced motions before he flicked at a vein and injected himself.

He waited for unconsciousness. And when it did not come, after one minute, two … Charles breathed easier. He drank more tea. “This is the same ginger?”

“Yes.”

“Well. It’s good.”

“Your stomach feels better, then?”

“Of all things feeling poorly …” Charles couldn’t help it. He heard himself laugh, bitter. “It’s probably the best off.”

“That blood works fast for most.”

“I know. I've been given it once before.”

The throb at the back of his head was less painful already. Charles looked down at his hands. Strong hands - workman's hands, Geoffrey had always said. There were his own pale fingers, clasping the thermos. Shorter, stubbier - no. Less slender than the man's; that was a better way of putting it. He still had scars on his left thumb and a thicker thumbnail than on the right.
He sighed.

“Breakfast,” the man grunted. “Come on.”

Wobbling to his feet, Charles closed his eyes tightly. Then opened them and took a careful step. The library floor felt odd beneath his bare feet.

“Do you need me to –”

He held out a hand, fingers spread. “Stay away. I’ll walk at my own pace.”

The man made no protest. Just trailed him, to the side and a step back, as Charles made his careful way to the kitchen. He did not anything as the man put a plate in front of him and piled it high with fruit. The kitchen. Charles looked round. It was cold, but cleaner than it had been for a while. Except …

His eyes landed on the bloodstains next to the stove.

The man followed his line of sight. Hissed under his breath. “I’ll take care of that soon –”

“I’ll go,” Charles said shakily, grabbing his plate, “and sit in the library –”

“No,” the man snapped. “You eat here.”

Where I can see you, went unsaid.

Ten minutes, Charles told himself. He mechanically ate the fruit. Ten minutes and he could get away, and be alone.

It only took seven. Time passed excruciatingly slowly, due to the rough sounds of the man scrubbing at the bloodstains with a brush from beneath the sink.

Then he rose, washed his hands and held out more fruit to Charles. A pear, an apple …

Charles felt his stomach clench.

“Want any more?”

“No.”

Charles took his plate to the sink. Domestic routine. It was bizarre – fragile as an eggshell. Eating at the kitchen table and then washing a plate. He hadn’t done so since long before the last days of the Dallas campaign.

And he had never, ever done so in the presence of someone who had tried to rape him.

Washing finished, not without its challenges due to the blanket, Charles leaned against the counter and refused to meet the man’s eyes.

A growl. “Do you need anything before I go?”

He’s going. Charles’ heart jumped into his throat. He shook his head at the floor.

“Then I’ll see you tonight.”

His skin crawled. “In the kitchen. Only in the kitchen.”
“Only in the kitchen,” the man mocked. “And in the library, when I fetch you for dinner. Of course.”

“Where are you going?”

“None of your business.”

Charles blinked. “All … right. Could you please tell me where you’ve been keeping my clothes? I can’t run around in a blanket all day.”

The man opened his mouth to reply – then … smiled. “Here’s a challenge for you, Xavier. There are a few secret rooms adjoining that library. See if you can find the doors. Because in one of the rooms you will also find your clothes and books.”

“A challenge?” Charles tipped up his chin. “Huzzah.”

“And the thermostat is behind a panel. To the right of the door to the West Wing.”

… Thermostat …

There had been some central heating in Oxford’s larger buildings. The same at Cambridge. Rather more in Coventry … but to know it was here …

Charles settled more of his weight against the counter, not trusting his legs completely. The turnabout was ridiculous: the blighter was going from tracking his every move, keeping him locked in a room … to giving him free rein on these two floors. It was surreal.

Unless, he thought, the man actually believed he would keep his word.

So Charles considered. Perhaps he would do just that. Keep his word, his promise. For the next little while.

The man jerked his head in a nod at him. “Good-bye.”

Charles inclined his own head.

And listened, still in disbelief, to the sound of footsteps. And a door slamming.

Charles gave it two minutes, and then hurried to the manor’s front door. He pressed his ear against the massive wooden panels.

There was distant sputter of … an engine. He couldn’t tell what sort.

“He’s really going,” Charles told the door.

It made no reply.

That did not matter. Charles walked as quickly as he could to test the other doors on the first floor. McCoy’s lab was locked. Further down the hallway from it – where he had never gone, actually … another massive door was locked. Charles yanked at its handle. Perhaps it led to the West Wing. Or outside. The flagstones were icy on his bare feet.

No windows, except for the high arrow ones so familiar from his own room. The rooms. Charles bet himself: Jean’s would be open, and the others would be locked. He made his way back to the kitchen in a daze.

And for the first time in weeks, he made himself a cup of tea.
It did not take long to find the first of the library’s hidden doors. Charles had walked there slowly, still disbelieving. Jean’s room was locked; he mentally grimaced at a bet lost. The remnants of his door were gone, though his own room … He had darted a look inside before flinching away. His room still stank of Shuvalov’s cologne.

Charles picked up as many of the logs in the corner as he could carry and hurried away. He did not want to think about what had happened there. Even the physical memory of it – the man’s bruising grip and murmured words, the hands on his thighs and the tongue in his mouth … Charles almost sprinted the rest of the way to the library.

Closing the library door behind him had felt exceedingly strange. So had building the fire. And … finding, and adjusting, the thermostat. There were light switches in the same panel. Charles flicked them on and off.

Then he indulged himself, and his curiosity, by making his way through all the stacks as methodically as possible.

Books on every subject, sorted by every subject … He felt his fingers twitch. Five cases in, and his steps felt oddly buoyant. Charles picked a book on astronomy. Then a volume of Ovid – he checked – in Latin. Then a history of the Hundred Years’ War, and Anna Karenina in English. Which reminded him. Charles found what looked to be a Russian dictionary, in the corner of a shelf full of Cyrillic-scripted spines. And then he couldn’t really carry any more, so he went to place his armful on the couch.

Then he sat down to read, picking a book at random.

He made it a few pages in before stopping with a grimace. It was Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Were it the Ars Amatoria, Charles might feel better about wearing only a blanket to read, but as it was …

He got up and retraced his steps through the stacks, carefully. This time he left aside any thought of subjects or titles or scripts … and looked at the wood of shelves themselves, bowed with the weight of books.

There.

“Someone,” Charles whispered, gleeful, “should considering dusting more regularly.”

One bookcase shelf had streaks in its fine layer of dust. The case itself was snugged tight in the join of a darkened corner, and held books devoted to metallurgy. Surprise, surprise. Four streaks together here, and four together there. Charles checked the shelf’s underside. No sign of thumbprints – but he hadn’t expected any. He carefully placed his fingers over the marks of those of the man’s, eased his palms flush against the wood, and pushed.

Nothing happened.

“Hm.” Charles didn’t move. Instead, he cast his eyes down.

There was one particularly large book on the bottommost shelf. Charles nudged it forward … and caught sight of the metal knob beneath it. “Ha.” He pressed the knob and pushed the shelf – and the entire thing rotated inwardly without a hitch. There was a room behind it. Charles was thin enough to slide into the space between shelf and wall easily; he did so without pushing the revolving shelf-door further, just in case it locked automatically.
It was the work of a moment to find a light switch. One fluorescent bulb above crackled, and he could see – “Jolly good – wonderful.” Charles grabbed at the nearest open box, and pulled on pants and a pair of his jeans before he could think twice. Then a T-shirt and sweatshirt.

His heart leapt to see the cardboard boxes of his own books. He would move them back later, Charles decided. In the meantime …

He blinked, realizing for the first time how out of place the boxes looked, scattered haphazard on the stark grey floor. Disorganized against the geometric precision of … an entire wall of filing cabinets.

Charles tried to open one. It was locked.

Damn. A surge of curiosity almost left him breathless, but … “You can wait.” He would wait, Charles resolved. And he’d ask the man to unlock them when he came back. Even if they weren’t precisely doors.

He fell asleep twice. Once while staring at the fire and once while making his way through the Metamorphoses. He had drooled on the Ovid, but Charles was sure he wasn’t the first to have done so in the history of literature.

Charles had propped the volume on one of the chairs near the fire, keeping the gossamer-thin pages separate to dry. A shame, to have spoiled what looked like a fine antique. But really … who would notice?

It was when he was peeling two of the pages apart … that he saw one of the chess pieces move.

Charles jumped where he stood, heart pounding. Advance notice again, it would seem. It was dark outside; he had hardly noticed with the warm electric lights on. And Archangel’s blood had worked like a charm – all of his injuries were healed – so he couldn’t judge time passing by the surcease of pain.

He was thinking all this while running back to the hidden door, stomping on the catch and darting inside the secret room. Charles pulled and pushed the case closed.

It was only when he was staring at its wooden back – hollowed portions exactly those of a revolving door – that Charles realized. There was no release from the inside. And – just as he thought it might – it had locked automatically.

“Shite.”

An elementary mistake. He shook his head. Why had he even run in the first place? A testing of boundaries? Instinct?

Well, whatever it had been … it wouldn’t last long. Charles sighed as he saw the metal of one of the filing cabinets vibrate. Just slightly, but enough to convey to him that the other knew exactly where to look first.

And sure enough. There was a knock from the direction of the bookcase-door.

“Xavier?”

The door turned in place. “Ah.” The man looked unsurprised. “You found it.”

“I did,” Charles retorted, holding up a box of books. “I was just fetching these.”
“Which explains why you locked yourself in.”

“I didn’t know –”

“And which explains why you ran here so quickly in the first place.”

He blinked. “How did you know that?”

“Your jeans.” The man smiled. “Copper rivets.”

The ghost of a memory: Charles Xavier … and: you have a metal filling on the left side of your mouth. Upper jaw, back penultimate molar …

Charles clench his jaw tight. “Then I’ll just drop this off at my room,” he hefted the box, “and fetch my sewing kit. I’d rather sleep here tonight.”

“Why?”

“Because my room still smells like that filthy cologne. And I don’t know what it does to you,” Charles said, calmly, “but I don’t care one jot for it.”

The man shifted from foot to foot. Then offered: “I have dinner.”

“Oh?” Charles kept his voice casual. His stomach ruined the illusion with a growl; he sighed.

“Yes.” The other backed away from the hidden door, leaving him plenty of space.

So Charles breezed past, holding the box and keeping his head high. The man followed him, pausing only to consider the book propped on the chair by the fire.

“Had a bit of an accident reading Pygmalion,” Charles explained, opening the library door.

“Reading what?”

“Never mind.”

Charles dropped off the box and retrieved his sewing kit from his room. He made sure that the man did not so much as put a toe across the threshold. He gave one passing look at the poor remnants of his sweater on the hearth, and then resolved not to think about it.

He stayed silent through dinner, instead: focusing on what he would do next. And then he remembered –


The man looked up from his borscht. “What about it?”

“What are the files in there?”

“Records.”

“Records of what?”

“Of … campaigns. Battles, sieges. And the camps.”

Memory pushed their conversation from late October to the forefront of his mind. The conversation,
Charles told himself, not the fellatio. “Records of the camps. You said I could read those. Without your making any demands in return. Or had you forgotten?”

The man’s spoon scraped along the side of his bowl. His fingers moved clumsily. The color in his cheekbones was high – windburn, perhaps – though the rest of his face was pale and tired.

“I hadn’t forgotten.” And his voice was gruff. “Help yourself.”

Charles was nonplussed. “Just like that?”

“Yes.”

“But – they were locked –”

The man gave him a twist of a smile. “And now the relevant cabinet is unlocked, Xavier. Aren’t you impressed with me?”

Charles felt chilled. Reading records would be all well and good. But he resolved on another project for the evening – one he would accomplish as quickly and as thoroughly as possible.

He ate another bowl of borscht in silence. Then washed his dishes in the sink, nerves strung tight at the feeling of the other’s eyes on him.

*If you don’t eat with me, you don’t eat at all.*

Effective, really. Getting him accustomed to the other’s presence; gentling him like some shy forest animal. And in a civilized setting – at table – to boot.

Perhaps, Charles thought distantly, that was what the man had wanted all along. To stay with him in bed, warm against the winter’s cold, and talk, and touch and *kiss* until Charles felt as accustomed to him as he had been to his blue sweater. And as bereft without –

Charles snorted. *Nonsense.* He wasn’t the type to get attached to things, whether or not he could have sex with them. Witness his watch. The thought of it hardly interested him now. And as efficient a space heater as the other had been – and as lovely as it had been to be lazy and drowse in bed all day long … well, the library had a thermostat, and the man had tried to rape him. Changes, ranging from the positive to the negative –

The man interrupted his woolgathering. “I’ll be gone again tomorrow.”

“Hm.” Charles didn’t pretend to sound anything but bored.

The long fingers of one hand, shaking, rubbed over the stubble of beard. “Do you want anything? That I can bring you?”

“Not really. I’ll settle,” Charles said, placing the dishes carefully on the counter, “for food tomorrow, and for your keeping your distance from the library tonight.”

“I –”

He turned to look. And Charles narrowed his eyes – for the absolute *wanker* looked … wretched.

“I can’t sleep by you?”

“Fucking hell,” Charles ground out, “no. I want some space; I want you to leave me alone.”
“Not even on the floor? On the hearth,” the man pleaded, “I could sleep on the hearth –”

“No.”

Charles took his sewing kit and left. He half expected to hear a plate shatter on the door behind him as he shut it … but there was nothing of the sort. He gave the man grudging kudos for demonstrating self-control, however belatedly, and made his way back to the library.

It was easy enough to keep from thinking about the other, then. Distantly, Charles marveled at the idea. Ignoring the thought of something that had been such a vivid and vicious threat to him all these many weeks and days … that had held him down to assault him not twenty-four hours ago.

It helped that he kept busy. For that night Charles retrieved all of his clothes from the hidden room. He laid them out on the library floor, sorting them; then used scissors to cut out every piece of metal and needle and thread to mend the rips and tears. He was careful and methodical; warm and rested; and not thinking of how – from wherever he was – the man might just be able to feel each piece of metal falling to the floor.

Charles slept without dreaming that night. The library was passably warm.

However, when he opened his eyes and stretched, his first unwelcome thought was that it had been far warmer in his bed for the past few mornings. With the man curled round him, pressed against him ... holding him close ...

He sighed. The fact that he felt that way was not surprising. It was connected to such a strong physical memory, after all. Waking up warm when he had been so cold for so long. Being fed, when he had been starving. And washing himself completely clean ... Eventually. When the filthy blighter had let him out of bed.

In any other world, they could have progressed to bathing together by now.

But as it was, there was the hair-raising threat of some form of assault lurking round every corner in their interactions. To say nothing of the training in civilized behavior that left Charles feeling ... That the man was a dog. That Professor Xavier held the leash. And that their walk to the park would round corners into infinity.

He sighed again, and sent the thoughts packing.

And when he went to his room to wash, he noticed that the bed had been stripped. The floor had been cleaned, the chair and shelf moved back in from the hallway. And the remnants of his sweater were soaking in the bathtub.

Without thinking about what the porcelain would smell like for the next week, Charles walked to the kitchen.

There was nobody there.

He built a fire, using wood from the pile in the corner. Then Charles put water on the range to boil for tea, and – without thinking twice – called up his raven. It flew from his mind in a burst of feathers and energy, whirling round the room.

“Find him, will you?” Charles asked.

He didn’t have to wait long. The raven could feel the metal cloud from quite some distance – and did
not even have to fly out to see him. Instead, it landed gracefully, flexed its talons into Charles’ shoulders, and alerted him to the presence at the door, in the hallway –

– knocking snow from rough shoes and tossing a hat and scarf over the stove pipe.

“Um,” Charles said. “Those might catch on fire, there.”

The man growled, but draped the winter gear over one bench along with his coat.

“Cold out?” Conversation was civilized, after all. Even if it were just about the weather.

The man rolled his eyes.

_Fine_, Charles thought, nettled. He didn’t have to talk. Except: “Do you want some tea?”

“No,” the other grunted.

“For pity’s sake. Say ‘no, thank you.’ ”

“No,” and teeth gleamed in a smile as the man pulled a bag out of a coat pocket, “thank you.”

Charles smelled coffee from across the room. “Oh.” He gulped.

“Oh, I beg your pardon.” The man put a loaf of bread and a hunk of cheese on the table. “Do you want some coffee, Mr. Xavier?”

“Yes please,” he replied, fervently.

The man’s smile widened. “Too bad. It’s mine.”

“Well, aren’t we in a sadistic mood this morning.”

“You have no idea.”

“Where did you get it anyway?”

A shrug. “Syracuse. And I think they get it from Utica, and the people there get it from Albany.”

“A network of coffee suppliers,” Charles drawled, “through the entirety of what was New York State. And nobody to set up shop in Ithaca.”

“There’s nowhere to set up shop, Xavier.” The man didn’t even make one noticeable move – but Charles flinched as the macchinetta floated out of a cupboard. “We use all of what was Ithaca for combat training. There are those who wander through, admittedly. However, anybody who chose to live there permanently, whether wandering or coming home, would be a fool three times over. Before becoming a dead fool.”

“Because it’s so difficult for a mutant to see just who he or she is killing?”

“When he or she is learning how to wield plasma? Or electricity?” The man started to make coffee.

“Yes.”

"Oh, really," Charles muttered. "There has to be a better way."

He watched the macchinetta steam. Charles hadn’t even heard the water pouring against metal. He reached to pour the hot water for his tea out of the saucepan, and then stared. The sod had stolen it.
“And I wanted that tea, too. Idiot.”

The man only smirked at him.

Charles glowered at the flames beneath the coffee pot. His mind flew back – training in Ithaca, coffee from Albany – Syracuse – “Wait,” he said. “You went to Syracuse already?”

“It’s an hour and a half there; nothing too challenging. I had things to do this morning. Early start. Unlike some.”

“I’ll have you know that when I actually taught important things to students, rather than working as a psionic battery, I was a model of punctuality.”

The man made no reply.

*Things to do,* Charles thought. Like what? He flicked a glance at the other, out of the corner of his eye. The man still hadn’t shaved – although neither had he, not for almost a week. But Charles knew, even without a mirror, that he himself looked like nothing more than a long-haired waif. Whereas the other cut a bristling, shadow-eyed, disreputable figure, with hair just as stubbly as his beard, engine grease on his hands, and a frown etched onto his face.

Well. Hopefully the things hadn’t required any amount of diplomacy. Charles took a deep breath. He could smell the soap wafting up from his own body. He felt clean, yes … but also – oddly soft. Which was not the case, of course. Before his systemic starvation, he had kept pace with Logan’s runs, and brought down game with a rifle. And he had an entire assortment of trauma to process.

Like a box of chocolates, he thought, staring moodily at the man. With the Finder’s power for fondant and blood for cherry cordial.

Without turning, the other murmured, “Is there something on my face, Xavier?”


There were streaks of it on the man’s knuckles and fingers, after all. With any luck, some would transfer if he started pawing at cheek and chin.

But the blighter turned, instead, and looked straight into his eyes. “Would you mind?”

“Mind what?”

“Getting the grease.” The man flexed his fingers. “My hands are dirty.”

“Then – wash them,” Charles choked.

“Mm. But you’re closer. Standing right here.” Those eyes glinted. “Unless, of course, you were only staring at me, and you decided to lie rather than admit it.”

Charles sneered up at him, and before he could second-guess himself, laid a casual hand on the side of the man’s face. “Here.” And he rubbed along the jawline with one thumb. “Just this spot, here.”

Except it was difficult to keep his features twisted when he saw the man’s eyes go dark and – not soft, not warm, because this was a god damned rapist he was touching, Charles told himself frantically – and if he rested his fingertips on the stark line of cheekbone longer than necessary even for a lie, it was only to gauge the man’s pulse, moving his thumb down to the hinge of jaw and pressing into the jugular.
“Well, well,” Charles murmured. “Still the same, I see.”

“Xavier …”

He *tsk’d*. “That coffee will scorch.” And Charles lifted the macchinetta off the heat –

– only to breathe out, long and unsteady, as the man crowded up against his side and brushed his
mouth over the hair at his temple –

“Back off.”

“*Geliebter* …” The man’s voice sounded – broken. “Please – I’m sorry, I’m so –”

Charles’ mouth was dry. This close, the heat and the scent – even sweaty as it was – made all of the
blood in his body sit up and take notice. His stupid sodding *body*, who wanted its food and its
alcohol – and it stood to reason, Charles realized desperately, that his body had been so used to
regular sex before his kidnapping that now, *now* it had had a taste of what it had missed and was
howling for more …

He shuddered at the press of the other’s body, closer – *too* close – “No,” Charles said. “Stop.”

The man wrested himself away with a sharp hiss of air between his teeth. “*Verdammt.*” He made for
the door, grabbing his coat on the way, and flung it open.

“Don’t forget your –”

The kitchen door slammed. Then – Charles listened – the other followed suit, with a crash.

“ – coffee,” he finished.

Best to keep his raven close, perhaps. To light some warning thought-fires. And to make for the
library straightaway. Charles filled the thermos with coffee and – true to the letter of his word –
ignored the bread and cheese on the table.

*If you don’t eat with me, you don’t eat at all.*

The man could keep track of anything he brought from little towns, certainly – but Charles still had
the knapsack in his room. He retrieved it on his return upstairs, proceeded to the library, moved one
table closer to the corner of the couch, and tried the file cabinets in the hidden room until he had a
stack of manila folders.

Charles checked the angle of the sun. This shortly after the solstice … it was perhaps eleven in the
morning. He set the knapsack by his side, pudding close at hand.

It took him until early afternoon to read through the St. Louis folder.

Slightly more time for Atlanta. More time for Minneapolis.

And after he had finished the folder on Alkali Lake, Charles didn’t think he’d ever be hungry again.

Of course, his body had other ideas.

The thought-fires had alerted him as the man walked into the manor. He almost did not hear the other
open the library door. But he sensed steps – not a motion wasted – approaching, and then slowing,
and stopping. Waiting.
Charles stared into the fire.

The man spoke first: “Are you hungry?”

“How?” Charles had to clear his throat. He scrubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands; everything felt gritty. “I shouldn’t be.”

“Why not?”

“After reading those …”

A pause, and a tsch. Charles opened his eyes in time to see the other walk over to the couch and gather up the file folders. White, yellowing, and yellow paper on red velvet ... consolidated into one pile. Then the man sat down, lips a thin line, and started to put them back into order.

Ordered by date, or location, or atrocity? Charles held his arms close to his body, before he remembered: by date. Reverse chronological order.

“So.” The man’s voice was low. “Was denkst du?”

“You don’t want to know what I think.”

“Actually, Professor, I do.”

“Why?”

The man placed his hands atop the stack of folders, neatly, and looked at him. “You are a teacher.”

“I was.” Charles let his unhappiness take the form of a snort. “Before your lot came calling.”

“But you know war. The history of it, I mean. You know what people have done in war.”

“Of course.”

Was that arrogant? Charles considered; then sighed. “Which is to say: I’ve taught a few terms of grand strategy. Some overviews of the three wars of this century, some on the Napoleonic era, and rather more on the Greeks and Romans.” He shrugged. “The Peloponnesian and Punic campaigns, for example. Lysander and Scipio, and –”

“Let’s just assume, Xavier, that if it’s before the second war, I have no idea what you’re talking about.” A growl. “History.”

“You say that like it’s a bad word.” Charles rearranged himself in his corner of the low couch. He propped an elbow on the armrest, placed his chin in his hand and gazed at the man. “Whereas I believe you might enjoy reading some of the classics. Not Ovid, necessarily … but perhaps Thucydides.”

A snort.

“The classics. Tutoring in literature and – and the ancient Greeks and Romans.” His throat was aching; a swallow helped, but not much. “I should have been a scientist, you know.”

The man caught the difference in his tone. Tipped his head to one side, listening.

Charles smoothed the blanket over his own knees with his free hand. “I had wanted to research genetics. I remember reading of the experiments searching for the transforming principle. Mostly
during the Second World War, you understand, so the delivery of those articles took time … but the research had started to accelerate by the time I went to Oxford. I was twelve years old, there, in 1950 – and the bombs fell and even a colony of fruit flies became impractical to keep.” He sighed. “Let alone a mass spectrometer, or whatever they have in Ispra these days.”

The man was silent.

“Ispra,” Charles explained. “In northern Italy. It’s one of United Europe’s research establishments. And a mass spectrometer analyzes molecules.”

No reply.

“A molecule is –”

“Which experiments?”

Charles stopped mid-sentence. “Pardon?”

“You said ‘experiments.’ During the Second World War.” The man enunciated each word carefully. “Which experiments?”

“Oh. Those of,” Charles thought back, “Avery, MacLeod … and I’m forgetting a name.” He wasn’t – it was McCarty – but it would not do to show off. “At the Rockefeller Institute, in America that was. Why?” He gave in to curiosity. “What experiments did you think I meant?”

The taut line of that jaw was rigid. “They were similar to those done at Dallas.” The man tapped the topmost folder. “But done by the Germans.”

“Ah, yes.” The memories were coming back. Logan and McCoy and himself, and the map of Dallas in the workroom, on October first. The other two talking of the camp outside Dallas … We think Stryker got the idea from Germany …

“I remember the Nuremburg trials,” Charles offered. “And I remember reading about what the Germans had done. I was only seven, though, in 1945. And then … with nuclear war only five years later –”

“– it was no longer significant.” The man’s voice was cold. “A paragraph in your history books.”

“Nonsense. There’s a chapter on – on the Second World War in a text that I used …”

Charles trailed off. He hadn’t read that chapter, he remembered with a twinge, in two years. He had used biographies of Churchill and Patton and MacMurphy for his class. And Wars and their Leaders did not mention the Jews …

The Jews. His stomach lurched. There had been experiments done, on prisoners of war and the Roma and homosexuals and twins … but the vast majority … on the Jews.

The Jews, who were mostly gone from United Europe and the Kingdom of Britain. There were two synagogues in Oxford, and one in Edinburgh. There was probably one in Brussels; he had never thought to look. But many Jews not killed in the Second World War had gone to America or the newly founded Israel … and when the great cities of each were destroyed in World War Three …

Certainly there were wanderers remaining today; small pockets of Jews in each city left standing. But many had gone to Eretz Galut. And still more and more were relocating there every year. In 1959 – remember? his mind whispered – the Party of Purity had campaigned viciously against the Jewish
community in Coventry. Charles remembered a firebrand of a rabbi writing impassioned rebuttals in the weekly paper. Then a part of that congregation had moved to Oxford – but a smaller part had packed up and left for Eretz Galut entirely.

The queen, Charles remembered, had been young. Not five years in power. Certainly not used to cutthroat politics. It had not been her fault, or Britain’s, surely …

That did not change the fact that Eretz Galut was no ally of theirs.

In 1969, the fifteenth anniversary of its founding had gone by practically unnoticed in the weekly. Charles stared at the blanket, tracing its weave with one finger. Eretz Galut had been established at the end of April 1954, and her Majesty crowned in May – so the celebrations of that anniversary, he concluded, had taken precedence. That was it. Perhaps there had been more coverage in United Europe. All the same, he felt curious …

“What’s it like?”

A grunt. “What’s \textit{what} like?”

Charles smiled ruefully. The other couldn’t read his mind; he kept forgetting. “Eretz Galut. I’ve only ever seen a few photographs of it.”

And read one chapter, he remembered, of a glossy book in the shop on High Street. The images had been very vivid. A city atop a high hill – silvery towers shining through clouds and snow. Its walls, Charles remembered, had been immense.

“The capitol, for example. It looked quite striking.”

“Ir Tzedek. The City of Righteousness.”

“Just as long as it’s not self-righteousness. But … you must have seen it?”

“Seen it?” The man gave a faint smile. “I helped build it.”

Charles blinked. “How bloody old were you?”

“That was … hnh. 1954. In January. It was cold, and they needed shelter for the wounded –”

“Yes, but how old were you?”

A shrug. “Early twenties. What does it matter?”

Charles felt relieved; he could not say why. “I went on my first Oxford mission when I was seventeen.”

He waited. The other raised an eyebrow. “… Congratulations?”

“Thank you. So you see, we do have some things in common.”

A snort. “I had not realized you were looking for them.”

Honestly, Charles reflected … he had not realized that, himself. It was just conversation, though. Easy enough. And time to redirect it.

He folded his hands together. \textit{Professor voice}. “You had asked me, though, about the records of the camps. About what I thought. Why?”
“Because, Xavier…” The man’s look was intense. “I wish to know your opinion. I value it. If we are to present this information to the world, I need to know whether others will believe it or not - and if they will care. I knew already, but you showed me yourself just now – nobody cares what happened to the Jews, not even thirty years ago. So what will they think,” he thumped the topmost folder, “of what is happening to the mutants today?”

“You realize: that’s several different questions. And you’ve let the Free West control the flow of information up to this point. They’ll be quick to accuse you of fabrication.”

The man tilted his head. “We have photographs, videos. Eyewitnesses.”

“EBS eyewitnesses.”

“At first, yes. But for the last few – for Atlanta, for St. Louis … for Dallas. Once we realized what was truly happening, we made a point of inviting observers from United Europe to each camp’s liberation.”

Charles hunched his shoulders. “Who is this ‘we’?”

The man blinked. “My lady, of course. Although it was Yoshida’s idea. His father spent time interned in what was Utah, Before, during the war. None ever believed what was done to him. So Yoshida thought: best not to let it happen again.”

“Which war?”

“The second. The American government imprisoned many Japanese from – California, I believe it was.”

Charles supposed he could have asked for more details. But … he felt tired. And –

“I’m hungry.”

“You haven’t answered my questions, Professor.”

“Perhaps I need to think about them. And – and I shouldn’t be hungry,” he muttered. “In there …” He flicked his eyes to the folders. “It’s enough to turn anyone’s stomach.”

For a long moment, there was silence.

Then: “You could tell yourself: you didn’t eat any breakfast this morning. I saw the bread and cheese, you know.”

Charles kept quiet.

“Or you could tell yourself: this is the way the world is, now.” Then the man paused. And Charles could hear his smile. “There’s soup downstairs, Xavier. Have you ever had corn chowder?”

“Of course I have,” Charles lied.

“I only ask – because I hadn’t, before coming to this part of the world. It’s quite delicious. And if you are hungry enough to eat some …” A low laugh. “I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

“How can we laugh?” Charles turned on him and shoved at the folders with one hand, “Knowing what we know? You, how can you just sit there and –” and talk of chowder, his mind finished – but his mouth watered, damn it all.
“That sounds quite naïve, for a historian. Perhaps you’re trying to make me as uncomfortable as you, hm?”

And the other uncoiled from the couch, eyes glittering, and set the stack of folders down.

“It won’t work, Xavier. We can eat because we’re hungry. And we can laugh because,” he flicked a finger at the files, “everyone responsible for these experiments? Will die.”

“How do you – oh, wait.” Charles sighed. “That’s how you know. Because you’ll kill them all, is that it?”

“Some could die of old age. Or fall down the stairs, perhaps?”

“Right.”

“Or kill themselves before I get to them.” The voice was fucking pleasant. “I know several have done so.”

“But in the end? Dead is dead. Ugh.” Charles got up and dusted off his trousers. He was only shivering, he told himself, because the library had turned chilly. “Do all of your stories end that way?”

“Usually.”

“You must be a hit at parties.”

“I’m better at funerals.”

The fact that the chowder was delicious, Charles thought grumpily, staring down at his empty bowl, was the icing on the cake.

Well. Perhaps that was not the best image. The mind recoiled at the prospect of chowder icing. Unless the cake were a crab cake, and even then –

“You want more?”

“Yes, please.”

The man set down his piece of brown bread. He refilled Charles’ bowl and set it back down in front of him. Went to the icebox, retrieved the carafe of orange juice, and poured him another glass. “All right?”

“Mmph.” Charles was too busy cramming a bite of potato into his mouth to reply properly. Ordinarily, he would have thought potato rather redundant, with a chowder containing chunks of it already ... but the man had baked three in the stove, sliced them lengthwise and covered them with slices of cheese and ham, and that had been it as far as Charles was concerned.

And speaking of concern …

“Easy.” The man’s voice was low. “You’ll make yourself sick.”

“Mmphno ahwont.”

“What was that?”
Charles swallowed. “I said: ‘no I won’t’.”

“Just as long as you’re sure.” The man raised his cup of coffee in salute. “Professor.”

The mockery was easy to ignore. Charles saved his best manners for committee dinners and council gatherings – and if he were hungry, and eating too fast, and disconcerting his jailer in the process, who cared? Besides, if he was acting uncouth, then the other was making an excessive show of good manners. Taking careful spoonfuls of soup, not letting a drop go to waste. Tearing the slice of bread into small chunks. Rationing the coffee, sip by sip.

Charles let his spoon fall with a clatter. Sod this for a farce. The soup was damn delicious, so he’d drink straight from the bowl. And lifting it to his mouth – he did.

When he put it down he saw the man looking at him, bemused.

“What?” Charles said.

“Does it taste as good as it sounds, Xavier?”

“Fuss fuss – and yes, it does.”

“I gathered that.”

“So, you’re just trying to make me feel uncomfortable or lose my appetite.” Charles rolled his eyes. “It won’t work.”

“Well … that’s something.” The man moved his legs around the bench, the better to massage at his right knee. “I suppose.”

He finished his soup while Charles demolished the rest of his second potato. And after that … Charles took a drink of orange juice and almost hiccupped. He was full enough to be drowsy, all of a sudden, and the man was doing the washing up without having finished his coffee.

“Do you want some more?” he asked.

“More what?”

“Coffee.” Charles nudged the small white cup with one finger. “I could make you some, if you show me where you keep it.”

A snort. “I don’t think so.”

Charles began to roll his eyes as the other walked back – but saw: that walk was a limp. Again. He hadn’t noticed it in the library, but now …

“What happened to your leg? I thought it was healing.”

“It is.” The man sat down carefully. “It just does not seem to care for excessive cold.”

“It’s quite cold here to begin with. Was it worse outside today?”

“Somewhat.”

“We must be going through quite a bit of firewood.”

“There are still plenty of dead trees.” A faint smile. “Don’t worry, Xavier. I won’t let you catch a
chill.”

Charles idly tipped his glass from side to side, watching the remaining orange juice slosh. “Did you make that chowder yourself? It’s delicious.”

“Yes, it is; and no, I didn’t.”

“Then where did it come from?”

The man shrugged. “I went to Utica today.”

Charles’ eyes widened. “Utica?”

A nod.

The maps from the library flashed through his mind. “But that’s … that’s almost a hundred miles.”

“Indeed it is. And almost thrice that to Albany, and I went there and back again yesterday. Don’t look so shocked.”

“Bloody hell, man – no wonder you looked exhausted last night. The state of the roads –”

“ – doesn’t concern me,” the other finished for him. “I take a motorcycle, and if something’s impassable I can just …” he set his coffee cup down and flexed all of his fingers, “lift the metal over, under, around – whichever way. It’s a challenge.”

“A challenge?” Charles frowned. “I thought you could tear down city walls, smash tanks, deflect hundreds of bullets at once … that sort of thing.”

A shrug. “That’s in war.”

He tabled the puzzle for later. “So you went to Utica today and Syracuse this morning. Just to get soup and coffee.”

“You flatter yourself. I went to scout. Albany is always crawling with Free West spies. Utica and Syracuse, usually less so … but my lady told me to expect more around this New Year.”

Charles was proud to see his hand stay steady as he drank the rest of his orange juice. “MacMurphy. That’s why there are more spies here, now? Trying to find him? Rescue him?”

“MacMurphy and his command, yes.” The man’s voice was calm. “And Stryker’s agents have picked appalling weather for it.”

*His command.* It seemed almost a distant nightmare: the soldiers, blank-eyed and lurching in lockstep, bent to Frost’s will. Making his bed with those crimson sheets. Charles bit back a hiccup of laugher – shock, he told himself. But to think that he had had a member of the commander’s inner circle plumping up his pillows …

“What happened to them?” He set his glass down. “The soldiers, I mean. Frost was controlling them the night – the first night we –”

Charles did not care to finish. He saw the man’s eyes darken.

But the other’s voice was still calm. “It would have made the most sense for my lady to take them with her. To Dallas, and then to Mexico City.”
“That’s sick and inhumane. But as a demonstration of power, it makes sick and inhumane sense, I suppose.”

Then Charles thought more carefully. And narrowed his eyes at the blighter.

“Lovely use of the conditional voice there, by the way. It would have made the most sense for her to do – just – that. But did she?”

A smile. “I have not heard from my lady since she left, Xavier.”

“That’s not an answer to my question.” Charles glared. “Although it is very slippery of you. Well done.”

The man’s smile broadened into that disconcerting display of teeth. Rather than stare at it, Charles busied himself with taking his dishes to the sink.

“I know the delegates from Zhōngguó got MacMurphy for their Christmas present –”

“They don’t celebrate Christmas, Professor.”

“Fine, then. For Chinese New Year come early.” Charles sank his fingers into a dishtowel. “But did they take the rest of the soldiers as well?”

“Not all of them, no.”

“How many?”

“Sixteen, I believe.” A shrug. “Four tried to escape on the way to Albany.”

“And were killed.”

“Of course. It would not do, to have them make their way back to Denver. You must concede that.”

“I’m conceding nothing. All I want to know is …” and Charles dragged in a breath, “did you kill any of them?”

The man stared at him for a long moment. The long fingers of one hand traced the rim of the coffee cup.

Then: “No, Professor. I haven’t killed a single one of them.”

“Is that the truth?”

A growl. “Yes.”

“Well.” Charles turned back to the dishes. Scrubbed and then ran the water as hot as it could go.

“I suppose that’s – that’s a good step. Quite positive. I just think it would be intolerable if I knew, in retrospect, that I had shagged you fresh from the slaughterhouse.” He rinsed the soup bowl, plate and glass. “Whether or not you had bathed.”

He set the dishes on the cloth to dry. Then looked over his shoulder, about to continue talking – Charles’ stomach, full of food as it was, twisted and clenched.

The bastard was staring at his arse.
Well. There would bloody well be *none* of that. He kept his voice casual. “Do I have something?”

“… Hnh?”

“On my trousers.” He flicked the dishtowel behind him. “There.”

The man’s eyes glinted. Then – Charles gulped and backed into the counter with a thump – the other eased out from behind the table and stalked towards him. One step, two, and the blighter was right in his personal space, fucking caging him in the corner by the sink –

“Oi,” he said through gritted teeth. “Go away. Sit.”

“Really?” And the man held up his coffee cup. “I’m just going to wash this.”

“… Oh.”

“Why don’t *you* sit, Professor?” The voice was warm, even though the smile was glinting, almost vicious. “You look so … strained.”

“Wanker,” Charles snapped, and went to sit down with a clatter on the bench. “And to think I had hopes of your manners. I had hoped that your precious lady would take one look in your lovely little head and think: ‘Jolly well done, Xavier – a model of civilized behavior, wrought in one week’ –”

But he broke off with a gasp.

The only sound was the clink of the cup as the man set it to dry on the towel. Charles hardly noticed. For he realized …

Frost would indeed look in the man’s head. He was sure of it. She would look at his memories, just to see what she wanted to see –

“Oh, no.” Charles dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. Ground them. “Oh *shite*.”

“I told you,” and the man’s voice was mild. “Eat that fast and you’ll get sick.”

But Charles wasn’t sick. He just knew – he *knew* …

*God.* If Frost were to look now, all she would see was Charles ascendant, Charles bending the man to his will – denying him, conditioning him, making him behave like a civilized human being. The opposite, in truth, of what she had intended.

He was going to have to fuck him again, Charles realized, despairingly. He was going to have to let the other be as savage as he wanted, just to fool Frost …

“Xavier.” The man snapped his fingers in front of Charles’ face. “If you’re going to be sick, go to the sink.”

“I’m not going to be sick.”

“You’re as white as snow.”

“Lips red as blood,” Charles mumbled to himself, and: “You.”

He looked up. The man was hovering, frowning. “What?”

It could work, Charles thought. As long as he remained in complete control. As long as it was all on
his own terms …

He shivered.

“Schatz.” The man’s voice was rough. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m not your treasure,” Charles whispered.

“And why not?”

“I …”

The food sat heavily in his stomach. Suddenly his clothes were constricting and hot, and Charles felt dizzy.

“You’re sick,” the man growled. “I told you.”

“I’m not,” but his head was swimming. It was the shock, Charles thought. Realizing that Frost would – that he would have to –

“Here.”

There were arms, lifting him. More gently than they had on the day of the solstice, before that night, when the two of them had first … No violence, no urgency … but still, the principle was –

“Oi,” Charles said faintly. “Could you ask? Has anything I’ve said about consent even registered in whatever you call your mind?”

“There’s no need to insult me, Xavier.”

“Then ask me,” he croaked. “Please.”

Except … no, Charles thought. Frost wouldn’t expect the man to ask –

Too late. “May I pick you up, and take you to your room, and help you to bed without doing anything to hurt you?” The man’s voice was dripping sarcasm. “Please?”

“… All right.”

A growl. The man started for the door.

“Wait –”

“Wait for what?”

“The third potato. May I have it?”

“Of course. I don’t like ham.”

“That’s right. It’s not kosher, is it?”

“… Not what?”

Charles paused. “You lived in Eretz Galut for how long, and you don’t know –”

“Shut up about what I know and don’t know, Professor,” a low growl, “and take the damn potato. Just don’t come crying to me if you get even sicker from stuffing yourself in bed.”
Charles leaned down from his place in the man’s arms. Picked up the potato and tucked it into his shirt. It was still warm from the oven.

“Upstairs,” the other said, and strode out the door. Well. Limped, rather.

The man made it up the stairs without falling, though. He was truly, unnervingly strong. Charles felt the bunch and twist of sinewy muscle beneath the bones of his own shoulders and knees. And the warmth – god damn it all, the blighter had tried to rape him not two nights ago, and now Charles was thinking about his warmth …

Or his smell. He pressed his face closer to the man’s chest and felt something like despair. He had gotten used to the other’s scent: sweat, musk, whatever one wanted to call it – and something else there that he couldn’t quite name … Charles took in a deep breath. Something was making his eyes sting. Frost. The thought of her flicking through the man’s memories of – of sex with Charles … god …

Charles exhaled raggedly. His breath puffed damp against the other’s shirt. What could he do? What could he possibly do?

“Here.”

The man stepped over the threshold of the room and paused at Charles’ bed. Then stooped.

“Pull the blankets back,” he ordered.

“Why?”

“Xavier. This is for you. Not for me. Pull your own blankets back, so I can make sure you won’t freeze in the night.”

Charles sighed and tugged at the bedclothes. The man grunted, satisfied, and maneuvered him beneath the sheets.

… The clean sheets.

“Oh.” Charles could hardly hear his own voice. “You – changed them?”

The man had turned and bent to build a fire. “You asked me to.”

“And last night I slept in the library … well.” A sigh. “Thank you.”

“… You’re welcome.”

The fire was catching, with the small sounds that had become so familiar over the past few months of his life. Charles stared at the flames licking the pieces of wood. He willed them not to blur in his sight.

They didn’t.

He was dry-eyed as he considered: Frost would want to see him broken. Broken and begging, humiliated in every way. Charles supposed that the near rape not two days ago could suffice … unless she were to take a closer look at its ending. What if she did? What if she saw their earlier bargain, his and the man’s?

She knew nothing of their entire twisted game of back and forth. Frost only saw him on his back, and the man as a ravaging animal. Anything else, and she would realize Charles’ deception. And
who knew what she would do then?

*Everyone can be deceived.*

The thought hadn’t crossed his mind in some time. Too much else to occupy his attention. But this … this deception, this move in the game, would take all of Charles’ nerve and skill. He just knew it.

It was warm in the nest of blankets and sheets. He put his nose to the latter; inhaled. They were made of flannel, and smelled – felt – quite clean.

Charles sighed. He felt so much better, lying down. He snuggled further into the blankets, brought the potato to his mouth –

“I see that.”

“Bollocks, you do not.” Charles growled, nosing out into the chilly air from the depths of the bedclothes. He dragged another blanket from the pile of clean ones at the foot of the bed. “How can you see through fabric?”

“Can’t.” Sitting on the hearth, the man turned to face him. “But I’ve stolen food enough times to know the sounds. Hitching breath.” He arched an eyebrow. “Little noises. Like a pig with a truffle.”

“No pigs in Eretz Galut.” Charles took a bite of the potato; chewed as obnoxiously as he could.

“Plenty in the woods by Shuvalov’s estate.” The other sighed. “And are you trying to disgust me again, Xavier? This time, perhaps, by acting like a child. Hm?”

“I think you of all people know that I’m not a child.”

“So … I’m a person now. Am I?”

Charles was silent.

The man’s voice was bitter. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“No. You don’t get to make me feel guilty. Not when you were the one to try and rape me.”

“I can only apologize so many times, Xavier –”

“I disagree.” Charles held the blankets closer. “I think apologies build character. Do you even know what it’s like? To have someone hold you down and do things to you against your will?”

“Absolutely.”

“How so?”

“Shuvalov.” The man was unmoving, a lean black silhouette in front of the fire. “But first when he was Schmidt. He would tie me with leather, and with rope, and do things to me. First with glass, and wood, and fire … you understand.”

The man touched his collarbone; Charles heard a quiet breath. “And then he realized that I was not so strong after all. Not at first. So he used metal - just to help me could feel everything he did.”

Charles closed his eyes. Hardened his heart. “So … that means that you can do that to other people? Hm?”
He heard a rough sigh. “Eat your potato, Professor.”

“You didn’t answer me.”

“I don’t have to.” The shadow rose from where it sat, looming black in the firelight. “You can’t make me answer questions for nothing. You never wanted me. I see that now. You just wanted things from me.”

“As you wanted things from me,” Charles growled. “Sexual favors … Really? With your bloody good looks? You expect me to believe you never had the opportunity?”

A pause. “What do you mean?”

“What do I mean?” Charles snorted. “You’d have men and women throwing themselves at you if you bothered to wash more often. And even if you didn’t, with your gift you could pull together a pile of gold and buy yourself enough sex to keep your cock sore for months.”

Silence.

The man’s voice rasped in the darkness. “I … never wanted that.”

“Never wanted that much sex? You could have fooled me.”

“No – I mean.” The voice had turned almost agonized. “You. I only wanted you. All that you are, Rabe. All of you. You make me … want to …”

Charles’ skin prickled. ‘Want to’ what?”

He heard a rustle. The man was crawling towards him – he caught the dim outline of shadow, and felt warm breath on his face. “You make me want to … civilized.”

Charles shut his eyes, despairing. Just when he had realized Frost would pick the man’s mind like a thief rifling pockets at the market, the sod came out with that corker.

“Well.” He felt empty. “You’re doing better at it. Three loud cheers.”

“… I am?”

“Yes.” Charles reached out in the dark and touched the man’s hair. The stubble was growing out. It did not feel unpleasant; more like a cat’s fur, really.

“Just remember to listen. Language is so important; it’s what sets us apart. Animals grunt and screech, but … we can say ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ And that, my friend, is civilization. Understanding ‘yes,’ and ‘no’ … and respecting them. Respecting the truth in words.”

Silence stretched.

And the man’s voice was almost inaudible. “You called me ‘friend’.”

Charles swore to himself. He had, hadn’t he? Bloody fucking hell, how had that happened? Bosom friends with a rapist, less than forty-eight hours later –

“It slipped,” he gritted out.

“So – we’re not friends?”
“No.” Charles yanked the bedclothes tight. “I’m afraid not.”

“‘Truth in words’ – and yet yours are false.” The man dragged in a breath. “I am many things, Xavier, some worse than others. But at least I’m not a liar.”

“Well. That just means we’re well balanced. Don’t you think?”

A growl. It could have been a laugh or a curse. “I suppose.”

“Then if you suppose … You may join me here tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll wake you for breakfast, ja, and –”

“No.”

Charles made his voice throaty. And shifted within the bedclothes. Let the warmth unfurl from him, along with his scent, and waft towards the man.

“You may join me here. In bed. Tomorrow morning.”

The pause was electric.

“… What?”

“Leave me tonight,” Charles said, languid. “Let me sleep. And if you can do as I say, tomorrow … if you promise to obey me … Then you may come to me, in my bed –” he leaned in and ghosted the words over the man’s mouth, “and have what you want.”

“You,” the man whispered back. His breath was hot. “I want you. Schatz –”

“Will you stop with that?” Charles hissed at him. “I’m no one’s treasure; least of all yours.”

“You think I’m an animal; I think you’re a treasure. We are well balanced, then, moya lyubov …”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“Mein Geliebter.”

Charles shuddered. “Save your fine words. Bring them to me tomorrow.”

The man’s mouth was so close … “What time is tomorrow?”

“You’re the one with the watch –”

“Say the word.” The voice was hypnotic. “Say the word and I will give it back to you.”

“No. I don’t want it anymore.”

“Then – at what time?”

“I …”

Charles fought to breathe. He had to do it; he knew. It could be done, as long as he kept his nerve. He’d set out careful instructions – rules. Hell, he’d establish a safeword. And then he’d play the man like a fish on a line, do anything necessary to reduce him to an animal in rut – establish the memory to show Frost …
And if he played it well, Charles thought, he might even be able to break him of all this unnecessary brutality. He would just have to be careful.

The man leaned forward – close enough to brush Charles’ lips with his. Charles flinched back. He would have to be very careful.

“When, lieber Professor?” Those lips peeled back from teeth in a grin. It was almost god damned audible. “Schöner Lehrer …”

Charles chose a time at random. “Ten o’clock.”

“Ten,” the other breathed. “Yes. You … will you let me – Charles.”

And the man pushed forward and kissed him before Charles could dodge; thrust his tongue into his open mouth before Charles could object.

Charles felt his eyes almost roll into the back of his own head. God … god it was hot and slick, and what was he doing? This – this thing was his would-be rapist, and Charles was accepting a kiss – returning it with interest …

He sucked on the man’s tongue and then pulled back, abruptly.

The other’s breath was fast and ragged. “Why did you –”

“I’m tired,” Charles said, plainly.

“But – why can’t we …” The man sounded almost incoherent. “Now, Xavier. I want you now.”

“No.”

“Why not?!”


The man was dragging in desperate breaths, but managed to repeat: “Tomorrow morning. Ten o’clock?”

“Yes.”

“Yes …” The hot press of a kiss into Charles’ hand. And then there were only a few slight sounds, as the other went away in a rush. Feet and fabric and the sounds of one long accustomed to moving silently … but too unsettled for a normal state.

Charles gulped and closed his eyes. Ten. He could do it; he knew he could. Frost could be evaded. Everyone could be deceived. Including her.

He let his hands open – and from one of them, the fingers nerveless and numb, fell the potato. From the hand, Charles realized, that the man hadn’t kissed.

“And just as well,” he told the potato where it lay on the floor. “You would have broken the mood.”

Or wrecked my plan, came the thought, and oh god. Ten o’clock …

But he could do it. For Charles was many things – a charmer and a rake, a liar and perhaps even a cheat … but one thing he had never been, and would never be, was a coward.
Chapter End Notes

On the Rape/Non-Con tag.

Regarding consent: in the first place, it strikes me that it's dubious in the extreme from the start, since Charles is a captive. However, he negotiates within his captivity from a position he creates for himself: one in which he perceives himself to be powerful.

But in the second place, I put the tag on for this chapter because - although Erik doesn't actually rape Charles, all the build-up - physical and emotional - is graphic enough to be triggering. At least, IMO.
Charles felt the metal of the bedframe dig into his palms as he tightened his grip. *God.* He hadn’t the foggiest fucking idea *how* it had happened, he thought, wildly. Except that wasn’t quite true, was it? He had invited this upon himself. He had arranged it and bloody well scheduled a time, and then – and thus –

Thus the position in which one ex-Oxford professor found himself – a position both figurative and literal.

To wit: getting fucked into oblivion.

The night before, Charles had stared at his tightly clasped hands for what felt like an hour – making a plan. Conditioning. Reward and punishment. He was not a coward, after all. He could think through things calmly and distantly, without the tangle of emotion that had tripped him at crucial moments thus far.

The plan was twofold. Item one: give Frost a series of images so vivid and forceful that she would be pleased with her punishment of him. And, presumably, refrain from digging into the man’s perceptions of the motivations of Charles’ actions. Which sounded like a labyrinth – but really, everything would be seen in that hellhole of a castle anyway, and Charles did not think Frost had patience enough to go through it in its entirety. Not while running the risk of getting muck or mire on her crystal gown.

He remembered the unicorn’s human eyes … *blue* … and he shuddered.

Item two of the plan, then. Link an instance of physical brutality to a punishment so memorable that the man would forever after refrain from trampling over his consent.

The two together would take some maneuvering – but Charles was confident. Part, if not *all,* of the reason he had been so rapidly put into shock with the assault early Christmas morning had been the surprise of the whole thing. A day of being cosseted, then losing twenty-four hours to unexpected sleep … and then Logan going from caroling to spouting blood in five minutes. It had all been surreal and vicious and too damn fast – and it had not given him any time to come up with a plan. An effective plan, he corrected, on the mental plane. The glass had done its job, but poor Raven had
fallen into the river. So … he needed a strategy that would work.

He thought back to when the man had choked him with Frost’s diamonds – and to his panic attack when he, Charles, had deliberately gone comatose. It would not be difficult to recreate the situation, or even to feign it. The challenge would be to link action and punishment effectively enough, since the man had misinterpreted word and gesture before.

Charles felt more and more drowsy, staring into the fire. Ironic: how warmth and relaxation had helped him originate something so cold. He felt a moment’s qualm; then crushed it. One must be cruel to be kind, and since he had no interest in being kind …

The other deserved some pain in return, Charles told himself. So he would not lose sleep on that account. He had held his blankets to him as tightly as possible and had fallen asleep indeed, but not before reviewing. A tableau for Frost; a punishment for the man. Two birds with one stone.

Everyone could be deceived; that monster easiest of all.

“Hell –” Charles gasped as his head hit the bedframe, making his eyes water. He moved one hand from the railing and reached, trying for the man’s forearm. There it was, slippery with sweat. Charles grabbed at him. “Let me,” panting, “let me just – could you –”

“You,” the other rasped, shoving forward again with a snap of his hips. “You –”

Charles had woken up feeling well-rested, which had been a surprise. He had gauged the time as quickly as he could from the stripes of sunlight on the floor. Had padded to the hearth and built a new blaze, had eaten the last of the applesauce for breakfast, and had set several alarms in the hallway. And a larger thought-fire at the bottom of the stairs.

Then he had returned to bed, to strategize and to eat pudding. *Eight o’clock*, his mind whispered, “… and all’s well,” Charles murmured to himself, “all is well on a winter morn …”

He was no town crier – and he hardly needed one, either. Especially when all the fires flared, one after the other, as the man paced up the steps and stopped outside the door.

Well. Outside where the door used to be.

Sucking pudding off his fingers, Charles raised his eyebrows. “Yes?”

The man was staring, jaw slightly slack.

Charles waited. Then: “… Good morning?” he tried again.

“I brought you some tea.” And with one jerky motion, the man held out the thermos.

“Why, thank you.”

No reply. Charles hummed to himself and opened another container. He considered, shrugged, and started licking the pudding right out of it. And smirked to himself when he heard the man make a strangled noise.

“Can I –”

“May I.”
“May I come in?”

“It’s only just gone eight, I believe.” Charles yawned. “Come back in two hours. Could you make sure the bath pipes are thawed? And leave the tea inside the doorway, please? Thank you.”

“It’s half eight.”

“An hour and a half, then.” He flicked his fingers at the man. “Shoo.”

As a test, it had gone well – and the other had passed with flying colors. For he had only stared at Charles, eyes wide, before backing away. The tread going down the hall had been just slightly uneven; the thought-fire at the base of the stairs informed him that the man had missed the bottommost step.

Charles had permitted himself one tight smile before tossing the plastic onto the fire. Then he had reached beneath the bed and pulled out Frost’s diamond choker.

“Ah. That hurt –” Charles panted, “stop it.”

A free hand had set fingernails into the sweaty skin of his back and dragged down; he let go of the man’s forearm to try reaching behind and swatting.

“I’ll stop,” the man whispered. He did – but only to clap one of his hands, quick as a flash, over Charles’ fingers where they were searching. He wrenched them into the small of Charles’ back.

“All right?”

“Yes, but … really, is this quite necessary?” Charles was a good part of the way toward losing his balance and planting his face in the pillow. His mind flew to the image and his face flamed – and he already felt the burn in his other biceps as he tightened his grip on the railing. And sure enough, there was the man’s voice.

“The other one.”

“No.”

He could practically hear the man’s smile. “Give me your other hand, Charles.”

“No. I like it where it is.”

A slight lean back, and then a thrust forward that made Charles wonder, dazedly, if the bedframe would actually break.

“But do you like the rest? Tell me, Professor –” He felt his grip on the railing waver – no, was that the metal wavering? What …. “Tell me.”

“I –

“Tell me you like it.”

And oh god no – the other man’s voice was the thing making the metal vibrate. Charles almost let go in a panic before remembering: oh that’s right, I don’t want my face shoved into a pillow for the rest of the morning, do I?
He had stared at the sodden remnants of his sweater at the bottom of the tub, before calmly shifting them to the hearth to dry. He had taken a quick shower. Then Charles had fetched the tea, one of Ororo’s incense sticks, and the bear grease. He had drawn a bath and crumbled incense into the hot water, since the alternative was to smell like the horrid cologne still clinging to the grout.

He had soaked for much of the remaining hour: drinking tea, washing hair and body with the soap, relaxing as best he could. It had been a matter of seconds to put the choker back on and flick the clasp shut. Easy enough, physically … but Charles had to fight a wave of revulsion at the cold weight of the jewels on his throat.

The hot water had helped a good deal.

All too soon, his mind had informed him that an hour had passed. He had flicked the bath drain open and given himself a brief look in the mirror as he opened the container. Pale and still gaunt, but the jut of his cheekbones and the hollows round his eyes were starting to smooth out after five days of food. That, he supposed, was something.

It was just as well that the choker was already in place. And quite necessary to have the clasp shut first … before his fingers got too greasy to handle the delicate metal. For Charles kept his motions clinical, impersonal, as he daubed up as much of the grease as he could with two crooked fingers and carefully worked one finger, then two, straight up into his arse.

He had caught sight of his own mouth in the mirror. His lips had a sardonic curl at one corner. For the Oxford Casanova, every day was a prepared and pliant day. Some days more literally than others.

Something deep in him had twisted. Well. Two somethings, really – but the sensation that made him squeeze his eyes shut was not a physical one. Rather, it was … Charles shook his head, and edged around the sink so that he could lean his brow against the wall. It wasn’t his heart, certainly, so perhaps it was just indigestion.

“Enough,” he told himself. “Hurry up.”

It was approaching ten. And even if the man were planning on being considerate, Charles had no intention of guiding him through the process of preparation again. One excruciatingly awkward time was enough. He flexed his fingers, turned and crooked them, working to slick as much as he could reach. “One last; come on.”

As far as prep went, it was one of his fastest. And he’d had scores of hurried clinches at the Rose in Bloom for practice. Charles swallowed against a pain in his throat, focusing on the movements of his three fingers. Memory, that slag, would intrude. His first woman had been a whore; come to think of it, his first man had been a whore, too. The fumblings of fellow students didn’t count. But the first man to have taken him apart systematically … using a voice of honey to talk him through the importance of preparation … had been …

Charles bit his lip. Not a whore. Who had he been, again? Rather short and stocky. Blond. Or perhaps sandy-haired? Regardless, Charles was fairly sure that he himself had been either drunk or sixteen. Or possibly both.

“Ah, sweet memory.” He had stabbed his fingers in a final thrust and then yanked them out, heedless of the twinge. Then Charles methodically washed his hands and went back into his bedroom. He tossed the dry remnants of his sweater into the wardrobe – and, without thinking about anything but how many buttons to close, he donned the indigo robe that Frost had given him.
He had blinked. Glanced out the doorway. There was no sign of the man. And it had to be getting on towards ten …

To hell with it. Charles had placed the empty thermos by the door and retrieved the wooden comb from his box, as well as the metal cup. He flipped the carved container of grease onto the bed. He poured himself a brimming cup of Shiraz – a fine thing, just before ten in the morning – and downed it.

“Ugh.” The wine had gone off, but alcohol was alcohol. Charles downed another cup – and that put paid to the bottle – and tossed metal and glass back into the box. Then he started working through tangles in his hair whilst pacing. It would not do to sit; the last thing he wanted was the silk to be spoiled with grease.

He had felt the thought-fire go up in one flash. Every single flare sparking … The man, taking the steps two at a time.

Charles had taken a deep breath. Firmed his jaw; focused on one particular snarl in his hair. Made his eyelids droop, languid. So when he turned to look at the other, frozen in the middle of the doorway, Charles had been aware of the picture he made.

After his bath, he had debated whether or not to use Bobby’s razor to shave. He had decided not. For even though the line of his jaw would have been even more striking against the indigo as ivory, rather than brown and stubbly, shaving at that point would have taken away from the impact of the lesson to come.

That and he needed the razor to be sharp.

“I …”

The man’s voice caught.

Charles arched an eyebrow. “Yes?”

There was silence. The man was staring.

“Does this look all right?” Charles had brushed his free hand down the robe’s front, tapped the jewels at his neck delicately. “I thought we could have a variation on the first time we … well.” He curled his mouth in a smile. “You know.”

He could hear the other swallow from a room away. Then: “You’re beautiful,” the man said, thickly.

“Mm.” Charles had gone back to combing his hair.

“I brought you this.” And the man had held out an apple.

“Bring it here.” Charles had given him another smile, holding up the comb. “And help me, please? There’s one knot that won’t come undone.”

“Tell me.”

“Would you believe me?” Charles gasped for breath. “If I told you that I liked it?”

“That’s not answering the question, Xavier.”

He couldn’t say anything more; he had to focus on keeping hold of the bedframe. Charles blinked
sweat out of his eyes. In order to stay upright he had to shift all his weight onto his elbow – all his weight and some of the man’s weight, god, because the other had leaned forward and started a precise snapping of hips at a bone-rattling pace.

And really, that was ...

Charles felt drunk. His thoughts sloshed through his head, the last dregs of wine in a bottle. His blood was hot, surging; pulsing hard through his veins and making his cock throb. He waited for the right beat, canted his hips back slightly – then remembered. Bloody idiot wouldn’t know what a reach-around was, so he, Charles would just have to – just as soon as he caught his breath.

Just as soon as he got his hand free. He tugged where the other had it pinned to his back; there was only a growl in reply, “The other one.”

“What –”

“Give me –” and oh fuck he felt the next few thrusts in the back of his throat and the man was panting for breath, and he sounded greedy, the utter wanker – “your other hand. Give me.”

Charles had considered the next steps as clinically as possible. He knew he looked like a statue: immobile, set face … but as calm and liquid-eyed as a deer. The man had gazed at him worshipfully. And – Charles swallowed a laugh. He was as clean as Charles had ever seen him. Even his hair looked to be a lighter red-gold in the weak morning sun.

He reached out and plucked the fruit from the man’s grasp. “Thank you.” Then he had taken a bite, savoring the tart taste. “My hair, please.”

And … say what one would about him, but the man had an uncanny way with knots and tangles. Charles had focused on the apple, on the gentle tug of the comb’s teeth. Not on the hollow feeling in his gut.

A vicious thrust, and Charles felt his own mouth drop open – Then another. The man switched hands, used his right to grip Charles’ wrist, worked the fingers of his left into Charles’s hair, and yanked.

“Athor of –”

“Fuck your mother,” growled against his hair, and – shite – the bastard had slammed into him again. Although really, Charles had asked, he supposed, and he should defend his mother’s honor - she had been a dead sight smarter than this brute, but he could only moan because – again, god, and – again – he whimpered.

A hiss slithered hot over his sweaty back. “If you need to say it, say it.”

“I don’t,” Charles gulped, “need to. Say it.”

A sharp twist to his arm, pinned in the small of his back, and Charles couldn’t help it. He heard his own strangled cry, before the man’s free hand slapped over his mouth.

All of the weight now pressing down against him, into him, and his arm was trembling where he was still gripping the rail. Move, move, get him away, so Charles seized the opportunity and bit him in the web between thumb and index finger, digging in with his teeth – The man snarled and yanked his hand away, set it on Charles’ left shoulder and shoved down –
And Charles, off balance, felt his grip waver one last time, and give.

After the hands on his hair had stopped moving, Charles had gently tossed the apple core into the fire. Then he had turned and laid both of his hands flat on the man’s chest. “Well. Good morning.”

The man had stared at him, breathless. Had dropped the comb. And then husked, “Good morning.”

Charles slid a hand up to the side of the other’s face. He was careful to keep his thumb away from the scar; he could not say why. The stubble was flat beneath his palm; definitely a beard now. He stroked down, gently. The sound in reaction was perfectly audible. Truly, Charles thought, smiling to himself … Truly, it was like petting a cat.

“Well, now.” He had made his voice as caressing as his hand. “What shall we do this morning?”

The man’s eyes had looked drugged. He licked his lower lip; took a clumsy step forward –

“Ah.” Charles had placed a finger on that same lip. “We have something important to discuss first. A rule. Can you listen to me carefully?”

“Yes.”

“‘Yes’ and ‘no’ seem to have gotten quite confused in that head of yours.” Charles paused. It was odd, that color had come and gone in the man’s face. He shrugged to himself; went on. “So what we’re going to do is this: if at any point, either of us wants the other to stop – absolutely, positively stop – we will say a word.”

“A word?”

“Mm-hm. Pick a word.”

“I …” The man looked dazed. “Rabe –”

“Nothing in German.”

“Then you pick it.”

“Fine.” Charles had trailed his thumb across the man’s lip, pressing. “The word is: ‘blue’. Say it.”

“Blue.”

Charles dropped his hand and backed away.

“No! No, I mean – not blue, opposite blue –”

He laughed, “So you see? Say ‘blue,’ and things stop.”

“But I don’t want you to stop.”

“Yes, I gathered that. Now, you may kiss me, after –” Charles had raised his hand; the man’s chest hit it with a thump – “after you tell me whether you understand … and agree.”

“I understand.”

“And you agree?”

The man’s color was high again. He nodded.
“Say it.”

“I – I agree. I’ll do it; I promise.”

“Good,” Charles had breathed. “Come here and kiss me.”

Some sound that might have been words, strangled – and then that mouth on his, a flick of tongue and Charles parted his lips. He tasted the faintest hint of coffee.

He supposed that the man tasted apple. Which, Charles had thought as he licked deeper, could have been unfortunate. He chased the coffee’s bitterness; tried to suck a moan out of the other’s mouth. It was just as well that the man hadn’t seemed to have brushed his teeth. Toothpaste combined with apple would have tasted like poison.

His arms were pinned behind his back and his face was pressed into the pillow. Charles was glad he couldn’t actually see himself; surely it looked ridiculous. Foolish, but – he gasped – but what was actually more important than how he looked was the fact that the pillow was suffocating him.

The bruising pace continued. The man had taken both of Charles’ hands in one of his, freeing up his own hand to clamp down on the back of Charles’ neck. He had done that before, Charles remembered. Had caught him, pinned him, and held him down in the woods, grinding his face into the leaves and dirt.

Then, though, everything had smelled fresh – the earthiness of the forest floor, yes, but the sharp smell of autumn air and leaves. Now, even with the new sheets, all he could smell was sweat and sex. Except he couldn’t smell, because he couldn’t breathe –

Charles twisted his head to one side as best he could. “Blue.”

It was muffled by the pillow; the bastard didn’t stop. Panic gripped his throat. He thrashed in the man’s unrelenting grip, spat out against the pillow pressed on his teeth. “Blue, blue damn it –”

There was a gasp behind him. And then: Thank god. The man let Charles’ hands go and moved away. Which was good, which was excellent, even if that cock pulled out with a sensation that set Charles’ teeth on edge. “Ow.”

“I didn’t hear you. Are you,” the other panted, “all right?”

They had kissed, and kissed, and the man’s long fingers had slid through the open front of the robe and curled into Charles’ waist. And – amazingly, Charles thought – for the first time ever, the other was the one to break the kiss and lean away.

Of course, it had just been so he could trail his fingers over the silk from the inside. “May I take this off you?”

“Yes,” Charles had whispered. “There are only the top three buttons. Go ahead. But put it on the chair without crumpling it, please.”

The man had obeyed, his hands trembling. Then he had looked back at Charles and, carefully, had stepped close to him again. Laid rough palms on the jut of his hipbones. “You’re looking less thin.”

“I’d like to say the same about you, but my view is impeded.” Charles had palmed the hair on the man’s head; scratched. “Strip.”
The other had grinned broadly and done just that. Dark green sweater, white t-shirt, trousers .... Charles had noted different details, methodically. Detached. The hole in the green sweater, for instance; it had widened somewhat. Then the man had draped all the clothing on the chair, and all Charles could do was look at that lean body, coolly assessing. The bruise on the man’s face had faded; the cuts on its other side looked better. But the vicious slash Charles had made with the glass on Christmas morning had only just, it appeared, scabbed over. The same for the cut on the man’s abdomen. There were purpling bruises where Charles had jabbed and punched.

The whole made him realize: it was quite lucky that he was far more civilized than the man, than Frost. Otherwise, Charles would have had to admit that the panoply of wounds made quite a pretty picture.

“Are you all right?” the man repeated. “Xavier.” A hand landed on his shoulder and shook. “You said the word.”

“And you followed the rule.” Charles dragged in a breath. “Well done.”

He heard a growl. Sighing and pushing up on his elbows, Charles spared a glance over his shoulder, and – oh, dear god. That couldn’t be comfortable. He looked away again, but not before one small part of his brain shrilled, how the hell had that even fit?

“I just … couldn’t breathe.” He made a show of massaging his throat; the diamonds bit into his skin. “With the pillow against my face.”

“Oh.” The other was still panting.

Charles stared down at the pillow. Distantly, he saw the stains of his own sweat and saliva. “Which isn’t to say that we have to stop. I would only ask, please, that you leave me the use of my two hands.”

“I will,” the man said, instantly.

“Good.” Charles gripped the bedframe again. “It helps me to be braced, you see, when you start getting … ah. More forceful.”

“I didn’t force –”

“Oh my dear,” Charles drawled, “I never said that. I only mean that … you’re very … single-minded. Determined.” He tilted his head, aimed his words back. “Dedicated to wrecking me with your cock. Three loud cheers.”

Silence.

“Really: it’s not a bad thing. And for that matter, you deserve a reward for stopping when I said the word … so. Until you come, feel free to go as forcefully,” he shifted his knees on the mattress, spread his legs farther apart, “as you’d like.”

The man said nothing. Charles did not know how to interpret the silence – and he was so curious … Carefully, he stretched out a tendril of thought and brushed the man’s mind.

Well. Someone was having his own metallic fireworks show. That and … Charles bit down on the inside of his mouth so he wouldn’t snicker. Blaring loud and clear from the man’s mind, occasionally jangling into gibberish, was the modified version of the periodic table.
Charles let his touch dissolve and kept his voice low. “Whatever you want, as fast and as hard as you want. Just grease up a little more first.”

A rustle behind him. “I don’t see it.”

“Must have fallen off the bed – well. I know you are hardly an expert in these things, but since all’s pretty slick already, saliva will do.” Charles sighed, and pushed the pillow off the bed. “Just go ahead and spit. Like before.”

Because Charles had gasped for breath when the man had first pressed his cock in. Had run his hands up and down the man’s forearms. The sweat, the scent, the muscles ropy and hot against his own back … it was almost too much. So close, so deep and so –

“Are you all right?”

“I …” He breathed in again, deeply. Then out. Looked back over his shoulder. The other’s mouth was slick on the bite mark, now faded to a greenish bruise. Charles rolled his hips. “I just needed a moment. And I want to know if you like – this.”

“What do you m – oh,” the man groaned.

Charles had eased up – only slightly – and then squeezed again, bearing down with all of his strength. The sound in reply was incoherent.

Charles had grinned to himself, triumphant, even as he saw a drop of his sweat hit the pillow. All of his problems would be solved in one fell swoop by the wanker falling down dead of a heart attack. But perhaps it ought not to be attempted.

“Move a little.”

“ – ’s too tight –”

“Try your best,” he had said, falsely sweet. “And you can always use more lubrication. The grease is right –”

Except Charles had heard the sound of spitting, and had to grit his teeth. Jolly good that the blighter was obeying him, yes; but really, the sensation was not the most refined –

Then strong fingers had tightened on the bony arches of his hips – and at the next thrust Charles had let all thoughts of refinement slide out of his head.

Now he only stared back at the man over his shoulder. Saw the other’s mouth twist, just slightly.

Then Charles blinked at the hand thrust under his chin.

“Spit.”

“I – really,” he said, “you do it. You’re the one that’s going to be finishing up in me.”

“Yes, but Professor,” the man whispered, “as you have said, I am hardly an expert in these things. I don’t know how much is enough. So: spit.”

Charles felt faint. It was disgusting, and uncivilized – but what argument could he possibly make at this point? So, not thinking about it, he swished saliva through his mouth and spat into the man’s
hand.

He didn’t think about the slick sounds behind him. Focused on staring down at the rucked-up sheets, until there was the hand again. “Xavier?”

He did nothing.

“So … was the one enough?”

Charles spat again. Saliva trickled down his chin; he only realized it when the hand came back a third time and a finger wiped his skin clean. “Enough?”

“Well,” and Charles cleared his throat, “just this.”

The bastard might shock him, but he’d never intimidate him. Charles swore it to himself. That made it far easier to bend down and lick the man’s palm while spitting. He made it messy. Or … messier.

Charles didn’t really want to think about what he was tasting.

He drew back. “There.” Curled his lips at the man in a sardonic smile. “Have at it.”

“Thank you,” the man growled, “I believe I will.”

Perfect, Charles thought. If Frost had any doubts about the man’s acquiring better manners, one glance at this would set her at her ease. Especially when the man tugged roughly at his hips – he yelped as his arse canted up – and shoved back into him with no ceremony whatsoever. Fucking hell –

He winced. Not even an hour ago, Charles thought, it had taken a good three minutes to get to the point of his head hitting the bedframe. Now, though, one strong thrust made the same thing happen. And he could see – shite, of course he would have to be hard. Bloody stupid body, getting off in the most degrading of circumstances.

Charles let his head fall to his hands. There was no sense in a pose that would end up in him getting a concussion. He wasn’t whimpering, he wasn’t. Only: panting. Panting at a slightly higher pitch than the other – who was snarling something under his breath. Charles couldn’t hear him.

Frost might understand, if it was Russian. Hopefully it was something filthy – the words certainly didn’t sound like endearments. So. She would be pleased by his humiliation. Now … what was the best way to keep her from prying further? Perhaps some complicity, some helplessness … some pleading …

A growl, and oh fuck that thrust had made his back molars rattle. He could hardly think –

Except: what a good idea. Nothing would amuse Frost more than to see him broken and begging in his own pathetic lust.

“No – wait,” Charles gasped. It was difficult to breathe. “Put your hand on me.” And the other was going to say something, so Charles grabbed back for one of his hands, tugged it forward and bit. “No arguing. No – don’t come until you – ah god,” because the man hadn’t let up the pace, “put your hand on me.”

“Where?” the man panted.

"On my cock, you idiot. Where do you think? Just do it and I –” He choked, because the other had wrested his hand away from Charles’ grip, and then there was the scrape of callus, rough over heat
throbbing with his pulse “– like that – harder.”

And he wasn’t whimpering, or crying out. All he was doing was gasping again, shoving his face into the damp sheet and cursing where it would be muffled as he came.

... god.

There was sweat in his eyes. That was why they were stinging. And hot runnels of sweat down each side of his face, and oh, the man wasn’t slowing down at all, and it had gone past pleasure into hurt, and: “Any time you’re ready,” Charles mumbled.

But the man fucked him harder, somehow. Had taken his hand from Charles’ spent and aching cock and pushed him down into the mattress before grabbing his shoulder – and Charles couldn't help it. Even biting his own hand didn’t help. He cried out – it was too much – but could hardly hear his own voice, not over the slap of skin on sweaty skin and the other's hissing breath, the snarls … Charles didn't know if they were in English or German, or any language. He didn't understand a word.

"All right," he gasped. “Enough.” Turned his head. That hand would surely leave another mark, over that bite; Charles didn't care, he just wanted – wanted it finished, now. Now it could stop.

He licked the man’s hand. Tasted salt; heard a curse. But he kept his voice steady, even though it was hoarse. "Enough. Come for me."

Breath gusted over the sweat of his cheekbone; Charles winced. The man had pinned him with all of his weight, and the press of Charles' own cock into the mattress was everything that was oversensitive and raw – so when the hand on his hip moved to grab at his hair again, Charles elbowed back with a snarl of his own: "Fucking come, will you –"

A rough snap of those hips; he yelped.

"You want it?"

Charles fisted his hands in the sheets. "Yes. Finish it."

"Say it," the man rasped in his ear. "Say you want me to come in you."

"Fuck you –" he spat, but the hand in his hair clenched hard, and Charles had to squeeze his eyes shut.

"Say it."

He was so tired, and all the aches were starting to thrum together into pain. Why, with all the prep, Charles didn't know ... but he did know that one halfwit with all the finesse of a boar in rut was not going to break him.

"Oh please," he said flatly, "please come in me. You don't know how desperately I want your come; I don't know how I lived without it all this time. If only I could reach –"

Charles broke off with a shiver; he covered it as a deep breath. It was because the man had clawed strong fingers through his hair, bared his nape and dragged the sharp edge of those teeth over sweaty skin. And had come hard, needless to say – he could feel it in the last movements that were more jerks than thrusts, as deep into him as the man could possibly go.

Finally.
Charles fought the urge to pull away. Waited for a long moment – two long moments, fuck. Then picked up where he had left off. "If only I could reach, I'd lick your come out of my own arse. There." He gathered all his strength and bucked his hips back, trying to get the man out. "Are you done yet?"

There was a pause. Charles was conscious of the smallest things: the wet patch beneath him, the tinny ringing in his ears, the thud and slosh of his heartbeat. The man’s breath, still hot and damp on his nape.

And then the other's voice, a rasp. “That’s really – something? To do?”

“What are you even talking about?”

No reply – just a hand leaving his hip, tracing up ... then long fingers parting Charles’ stringy hair on his nape, and a kiss pressed to his neck. A pause while the hand slid back down, slipping. The man flexed his fingers into Charles’ hips as he eased his cock out; the ache spiked into a throb.

Then kisses down his spine, a hot tongue daubing at the sweat …

Wait, Charles wanted to say. Wait. What? But something had happened to his voice. The words had frozen in his throat.

The mouth continued to move down. Slowly.

Then he felt those long fingers squeeze his hips and then move, just slightly up his back, caressing. The man wasn’t touching firmly enough for Charles to feel the calluses as anything but the lightest brush of rougher skin – rougher than the small of his back, where the man kissed, and definitely rougher than the curves of his own arse, even though it wasn’t really curvy since he had been starved, and even though things would have been quite different had the man palmed him there when he, Charles, had been riding horseback regularly. An experiment, to replace the message runners, and it hadn’t worked but he had enjoyed riding – and certainly the saddle had hardened him to anything softer, anything more gentle –

His mind slammed back into the present when he felt the man kiss –

“Ah –” and he choked, because – it was unbelievable, and his breath was uneven and high-pitched. Those hands gentle on his arse, caressing – he couldn’t think –

Except the other squeezed just slightly, and – spread. Him. Hot breath, and then Charles almost jumped out of his skin at the sensation of the man’s tongue, hot and wet, dragging slow over one cheek.

“Say the word and I’ll stop.”

“I.” Charles started. His breath hitched. “I …”

Don’t need to say it, his mind finished. He wasn’t afraid. All he had to do was think back to someone else doing this. Compare the two; catalogue. And – Charles cursed himself – and finish up the deception for Frost, and lay the foundation for the man’s own final conditioning –

“Go ahead,” he finished.

“Really?”

“Yes.” Charles crossed his arms beneath his face, resting his damp forehead against them. “If you
would be so kind.”

“Kind …” The man growled. “You’ve called me sweet, and now you call me kind. Tell me, Professor.” His breath was cool on the slick trails he had left across Charles’ skin. “What would your students think, if they could see you right now? Spread wide and ready to have me lick your ass?”

“Oh, my students …” Despite everything, Charles laughed breathlessly. “I’d make them take notes.”

“You’d –” a gasp, and then, unexpectedly, a choked-off laugh in reply.

_Didn’t know he could laugh._ Interesting. “Yes. It’s not mentioned often in erotic literature, you see … Somewhat of a last taboo. So it would be very educational for them to – _nngh._”

“Don’t know if I ever mentioned,” the man said, licking again, “but sometimes I think you talk too much.”

He was so sore that he felt every single millimeter of that hot, slick – Charles groaned. “Why the hell haven’t you fallen asleep yet? You get off and pass out every god damned time – _ah_ – so why haven’t you –”

“Every time,” the other murmured against his skin. Kissed him and flicked his tongue over Charles’ hole, lapping up what Charles couldn’t quite feel, but what he knew _had_ to be come – and he was shivering and couldn’t seem to stop.

“Every time,” the man repeated, breathing out another laugh. “All five of them.”

“Six,” Charles gasped. “Counting this time.”

“Ah, but I haven’t fallen asleep this time, Xavier. I thought that was your point.” The man sounded smug. He lapped again - then tried thrusting his tongue in, and _fucking hell_ the sensation spiraled up his spine and went off in his head like a Roman candle. Charles choked back another groan. He heard the man make a low, pleased sound – then the tongue worked him harder and Charles squeezed his eyes shut – _do it_ – and grabbed the diamond choker round his neck.

He twisted the necklace back and forth. Focused on his own panting. On anything but the rhythmic thrusts of the man’s tongue, alternating with slow, dragging licks. It was all right, Charles told himself, to be writhing against the sheets. Even if he had come already, he would have to be superhuman or petrified or _dead_ to keep still at a moment like this. He tried rocking back just slightly; there was a sigh against him, and … had that scrape on his sensitive skin been – teeth?

“Mm.” There were few sensations more bizarre than a growl vibrating – where it was vibrating – _right now_, he thought, faintly. The man had licked a wet trail upwards and laid a sloppy kiss on his tailbone, and Charles could feel the rasp from his words right in the cleft of his arse. “May I bite you?”

Charles gripped the choker more tightly. Made no reply.

“Professor – I’m asking. Just as you instructed. And now,” another damp sigh, “I can’t hear you …”

It was easy enough. Charles yanked at the necklace; felt one of the diamonds cutting into his skin. He made his voice small. “_Nnh._”

The man’s voice was silky. “Is that a ‘no’?”
“No, it’s only…” He shivered. “I’m cold.”

“Ah. Well, we can’t have that, can we?” And the man bit – not terribly painfully, just a nip – before his weight left the bed.

There was a series of thumps. More logs, being added to the fire. Charles tried to keep from hyperventilating. Focus on the plan. He spread his fingers over the necklace. The diamonds were becoming warmer, though their sharp angles were no softer. Stay focused.

He made the mistake of looking over at the fire. When he saw the other turn where he was crouched, grin widely with – those teeth – and uncoil to his feet in one smooth motion, Charles felt his heart shoot into his mouth. And then the bed was shifting again … and the man draped the velvet coverlet over Charles’ shoulders before setting one wiry arm over the small of his back, holding him down, palming his arse with the free hand, and setting teeth into flesh with a growl.

Charles gasped.

“Just say the word, Xavier.” The man waited, and when Charles said nothing, he purred, “Sehr gut.”

And he bit again, harder.

Charles shoved the necklace against his throat, ripping skin. Bleed, he told himself, savagely. Go on.

It took quite some while. For the man to leave off biting, with a satisfied purr, and lick and kiss his way back up Charles’ body. Charles tugged carefully at the coverlet, making sure the material concealed his neck. He focused on the stiffness of the velvet – ruined from the water, days earlier – and on the faint scent that hadn’t come out with washing. So to speak, his mind slurred.

He was exhausted, fucked-out and shivering, but it would not do to fall asleep. Not like the man, who had nuzzled close and tugged Charles against the warmth of his body, and who was now breathing evenly in his ear.

“Told you you’d fall asleep,” Charles said, coldly. “Fucker.”

He dragged himself out of bed. Now for the rest of the plan. He could do it. He knew he could.

Charles gathered up the scissors from the sewing kit, Bobby’s razor, and a shirt he picked at random. Then, considering, he fished out the two remaining shards of glass from where he had hidden them in the mattress. The man didn’t move. He wasn’t snoring – he never snored – but he appeared dead to the world, breath soft and regular.

He wouldn’t be able to control the metal of razor or scissors now.

Without a backward glance, Charles marched into the bathroom. Well. Hobbled, really. And the humiliation of that just honed the edge of his resolve. It was a wrench, to refrain from taking a long shower – but he closed the door instead and gazed at himself in the mirror. There was blood on his throat. Not enough, but it was a start. And there … falling over his shoulders, damp with sweat …

He had never hated anything of his own as much as he hated his hair at that moment. Nothing more than a pile of dead skin cells, and yet others thought it was something to be perfumed; combed; caressed … and then yanked, as though he were a horse and the man held the reins, riding him …

Charles had only intended to take a bit. He only needed some, for his plan … But looking in the mirror, he realized that he wanted it all off.
“Well.” He took a handful of his long hair. “I’d say it’s been lovely – but that would be a lie. So …
A not-so-fond farewell to you.”

And without any further dramatics, Charles started in on the most satisfying haircut of his life.

Most satisfying. Not the best, certainly. He had tried sawing longer locks over the edge of the glass
when he remembered that the scissors would do a better job trimming. There was a trick to it,
though, and the shards cut his fingers several times. But that dovetailed perfectly. He smeared blood
over the diamonds.

It took longer than he had thought to cut off everything. The pile of hair in the old shirt became quite
impressive. Charles placed it to the side and started trimming the shaggy remnant down to the roots
with the scissors. That finished, he took a razor to his head, and shaved as close as he could.

_Not too close._ “Vanity in your manipulation? Hell, Xavier,” and he tapped the clogged razor on the
sink, rinsing it. “Grow the fuck up.”

But he did not want his head to be bald and shiny. Something about that just seemed wrong.

“Although as far as ‘wrong’ goes?” Charles stared at his reflection. “I think I’m on my way.”

For he looked … ghastly.

There was stubble on his head, with bloody scrapes where the razor had gotten too close. He had put
the razor to the use he originally intended for it: shaving off the start of his beard, just to make the
guant lines of cheekbone and jaw more prominent. Hair a bloody stubble, eyes sunken and glittering,
gore all over the diamonds on his neck …

And now for the trickiest part. Gritting his teeth, Charles pressed the necklace close. Then he
squinted into the mirror, checking to see where the faint marks lay, and traced over them with the
edge of the glass. Certainly not deep enough to cut his throat, but – “ah, shite –” deep enough to
duplicate the man’s work on the night of the solstice.

Frost had combed and perfumed him, trussed him in that silk robe and served him up like a feast.
And the bastard had choked him with the necklace on her orders.

And then Charles had retreated into his mind and scared the man shitless.

“Jolly good.” His voice sounded thready. One of the cuts had, perhaps, been slightly deeper than he
had intended. There was a runnel of hot blood down his neck.

Then Charles gathered up his shirt, careful not to let the hair fall. He walked out, calm, made himself
comfortable on the hearth, calmer – and … calmest of all, he tossed the hair onto the fire. Then he
considered and tossed the glass shards into the fire as well. Covering his tracks.

The hair had crisped in a flash. Its odor immediately made his gorge rise. Charles arranged one hand
on his throat, to look as though he had clawed at the jewels. “Come on, dear,” he crooned at the bed.
“Time to wake up.”

The burning hair smelled horrible. Charles knew he looked horrible. And as he closed his eyes,
calmly, retreating into his mind … well. Charles knew that he was completely fine.

But the man, of course, didn’t.
His reading room was … peaceful. For the third time since waking, Charles yawned. He leaned back into the golden chair.

Waking. Upon his arrival, and after checking carefully to see that the damage done by Frost had not withstood his own efforts at healing, Charles had slept. For quite some time, too. He discovered upon waking that, while he had been sleeping, the birds of his aviary had hopped and fluttered into his lap, one by one. Except for his penguin, who had leaned against his armored legs – and who pecked him when he woke up.

And, oddly enough … except for his raven, who was stalking up and down one of the long tables. And had been, since his entrance through all the window’s veils.

“Whatever is the matter?”

The raven squawked at him, mantling its wings.

“Really.” He felt nonplussed. “I haven’t been here since the solstice … and I stop in, and you greet me with this?”

A crahk, rattling – even louder than before.

“Is this about the river?” Charles drummed the fingers of one gauntlet on the gold brocade armrest. “I am sorry … I hadn’t known that would happen. You were very brave, though. Surely you don’t think I did that on purpose? Led you to something poisonous?”

The raven flapped its wings fast. One black feather floated to the floor.

“What is it?”

He had hardly finished the question before the bird screeched loud enough to stab his eardrums. “Really,” Charles snapped. “You could be more careful –”

The lights in the reading room flickered.

“ – with – oh.” He clamped both hands on the armrests. “Did you do that?”

There was no reply. Tense, Charles waited. Only a moment later, the lights flickered again – and this time, when they came back into brightness, they were dimmer than before.

“And I didn’t do that, so … What on earth?”

Charles rose, intending to set the rest of his birds on the seat of his chair. The motion woke them all, though, and a chorus of chirps and hoots started up.

“Ugh, enough. Such a cacophony. It’s really …”

The lights dimmed further.

“… hardly necessary. But,” Charles said, slowly, “I think I’ll be going back. To – reality. How long has it been?”

The raven took a split second to fly over to a shelf. It nudged its black beak against a heavy golden clock.

Charles squinted. “Half past twelve. And we surely could not have had sex for two hours, so … at least an hour.” He bit his lip. “Hm.”
He hadn’t considered how long it would take for the lesson to be learned. But now –

The lights flickered again. And this time they stayed out for five seconds in a row. Charles did not count, and he did not see the thinnest golden hand on the clock in the darkness … but he felt the grating *tick* of that same hand, vibrating through the heavy metal timepiece.

“I suppose I should be going then.” He set the clock back down, dusted off his gauntlets, and gave his raven a formal nod. “Until next time.”

Charles flew out of his mind, back into the real world.

It was still warm on the hearth. The stink of burned hair was still strong.

And there was a pair of strong hands latched round his throat.

Charles dragged in a gasp and wrenched his hands up. Clawed at the man’s forearms, his wrists –

“*Gott – you,*” the bastard rasped, and threw his own hands down to Charles’ shoulders, holding him tight – and then he buried his face in the crook of Charles’ neck. Almost … sobbing? *What the hell?*

“You were choking me,” Charles said, dazed.

“You were *gone.* I didn’t know what to –” but:

“No,” Charles hissed. “*No.* You do not get to choke me. You never get to choke me again – ever!” It was perfect, though, for it dovetailed so neatly with his plan. “Look what you did, before.” He shoved the man away and worked his thumbs beneath the choker, brandishing it as best he could. “See the blood? That was you.”

“But I – but,” the man was staring. Charles blinked, despite himself, at the look of utter horror in those eyes. “I didn’t know –”

“So you can’t control yourself?” A sneer. “Spitting and biting and *choking* – how very like an animal.”


“So that means you can choke me now, is that it?”

“I –”

“No self-control. How uncivilized.” And speaking of which … His nostrils flared, and he felt a roil of disgust. “I’m gone for an hour, maybe, and you *still* smell like come.” Come, he thought – and some bizarre variation on sweat. Overpowering, with an acrid undertone of …

*Fear.* That was the smell of fear. He ought to know – he remembered it from Oxford missions. Charles blinked. The man’s skin looked clammy. The terror of the Free West and his own personal monster, stricken by fear … The thought sent a vicious twist of satisfaction through his gut – but Charles found his own self-control and decided, firmly, that fear was no excuse.

“You hair,” the other choked.

That was no excuse either. “I wanted it gone. Get up.” Charles stood tall, not caring that he was naked. The other had pulled on a pair of trousers – and could not stand. Ridiculous.
“The smell, when – the hair burning.” And the man sounded incoherent. The whites of his eyes were showing all about. “Burning.”

“That’s not the only thing that smells. Get up. Now is the time you take a shower.”

A strangled gasp. “No.”

Charles felt his eyebrows fly up his forehead. “Really? No wonder your personal hygiene leaves so much to be desired – oh, that’s right.” He sneered. “You have your bucket.

“Come on. Up you get,” and he grabbed the man’s arm. “Time for a shower.”

“No – no, please –” The man sounded almost hysterical; which would have been funny, had he not reeked so. The pungent smell of adrenaline-laced sweat almost overcame the stench of burning hair. Perhaps, Charles thought, dragging the other into the bathroom and turning on the water, it was another type of mutation. One for body odor.

“No, I don’t want to –” the man gasped. “No.”

“Get in.” Charles felt something in him coil and seethe; he found himself able to combine a shove with a lift, and then a push to the fucker’s shoulders made him collapse into the tub. “For god’s sake, it’s just running water.” Lesson learned, point made – but that didn’t mean he had to put up with the man smelling like a savage.

Charles reached for the shower lever.

“Blue.” The other’s voice was almost inaudible. “Blue.”

“Really,” Charles sighed. “That was for sex. And sex? Is over for now.”

He turned the lever and watched, raising an eyebrow, as the man flinched into the tub’s corner and covered his head with his arms.

As simple a thing as a shower. Bizarre.

“I’d recommend losing the trousers,” Charles said.

There was no reply. The man was shaking under the water’s flow, a full-body tremble. Frowning, Charles checked the water. It was chilly.

“Oh. Sorry,” he said, “I had forgotten. Just – heat it up yourself, though, why don’t you.”

He dragged the curtain shut, wrinkling his nose at the scent of the cologne caught in its folds. Then Charles flicked open the choker’s clasp, ran some water into the sink and dropped the jewels there to soak.

“I’ll be back shortly,” he said.

There was the sound of the shower. And no reply from behind him.

In his room, Charles put on some clothes as quickly as he could, grabbed the thermos, and then half-ran into the hallway. He could not say why the sound of running water was so disconcerting. But it echoed loud in his ears as he made his way towards the kitchen, intent on finding the coffee whilst the other was occupied.
He had found the coffee surprisingly easily. Grains led back to the bag tucked in the teabox. Part of the paper was sticking out, in fact; it looked as though the man had forgotten to clean up. He had probably been too eager to run upstairs and fuck him, not three hours ago.

Charles had brewed some in the macchinetta, feeling strangely unsettled. He had wrapped his fingers round the thermos for warmth after filling it. He was not hungry at all, oddly. It seemed that the apple had been enough.

He shivered. Perhaps it was the strange, rubbery lightness to his neck, or the cold on his shorn head. All these many months with the weight of longer hair – and never in his life had he had no hair. A hat, Charles decided. He would walk back to his room and find a hat, and wear it for the next little while. Only to keep his head warm.

But if the man were waiting to attack him, in retaliation …

Charles gritted his teeth and walked up the stairs. He called up his raven.

The bird took quite a long time to appear. And when it did … its feathers were very black, reflecting no light, and vibrating in an odd way.

“Well. What’s –” wrong? Charles had meant to say, but the raven swiped at his scalp with its beak and he winced. “Really. Is that necessary?” If ever there was a bird in a temper …

“Just fly ahead a moment,” he whispered. “Check to see if he’s at the door.”

Doorframe, his mind corrected. But the raven had flown away, fast. Charles felt it circle and swoop – he blinked. There was that mind, all the metal dull and still.

“Well.” He bit his lip, reeled his raven back in. It disappeared, quick as a wink and with no sound whatsoever. Disconcerting. “That’s good, I suppose.”

He walked quickly to his room. The man was nowhere to be seen. But he heard …

Charles stared at the bathroom door. Shite. It had been twenty minutes – perhaps even half an hour – and the water was still running.

Not as forcefully. Perhaps, he thought, the pipes were starting to freeze. But why would the other let that happen? Unless … Charles gulped. Unless it was a trap.

But the raven had not seemed to think it anything of the sort.

Charles felt his brow knit. Perhaps it would be best to cut to the chase.

“In for a penny.” He set the thermos down by the wardrobe, out of the way. Added a few more logs to the fire. And then he walked to the bathroom and flung open the door.

The sound of running water seemed very loud.

Cautiously, Charles walked to the shower curtain. He drew it backed, and peeked –

And stared.

The man hadn’t moved. Not to reach for the soap, not even to take off his trousers. He was staring at nothing, water dripping from his hair and the stark bones in his face. And his lips were almost blue.

“What …”
Charles felt a wave of consternation. *What the hell?*

“If you didn’t want to take a shower,” he said, “you could have just – told me –”

Except, he realized, the man had told him. *No,* echoed through his mind. *No. Please …*

“Um. I’ll turn that water off, shall I?”

He did. The man did not move. Stayed huddled in the corner of the tub instead.

“Hello?” Charles rucked the rest of the curtain back. “Are you there?”

No answer.

He took the man by the shoulder to shake him, and winced. The other’s skin was ice-cold beneath his fingers. “Fucking hell, you’re freezing – come on.” He tightened his grip. “Get up. Get out of there.”

The other did not move.

“Shite,” Charles muttered to himself. It was one thing to condition someone. It was quite something else to give him hypothermia. He strode back into his bedroom and grabbed some blankets from the pile at the foot of the bed. Laid several out by the hearth, hurriedly, and took one into the bathroom.

“Come on.” Without thinking twice, he stripped off his socks and clambered into the tub, grabbed the man’s left arm and slung it over his own shoulders. “Up you get.”

He chivvied the man out and wrapped the blanket round his shoulders. Bent and, without thinking about it, unbuttoned the sodden trousers and stripped them off. No briefs; no surprise there. But that hardly mattered, since there had been nothing erotic about the process at all, and the other had slumped against the bathroom wall, eyes dull.

“Oi.” Charles reached up and patted one stark cheekbone. Then slapped, lightly. “Snap out of it. Come on.”

No reply. And the man’s skin was still ice-cold.

“Come on,” he repeated, hearing the dismay in his own voice. “Talk to me.”

It wasn’t as though the other were being stubborn, he realized. Nothing Charles was saying appeared to register. Hypothermia, Charles told himself, feeling panic start to bubble within him. It was one thing to condition a man; quite another thing to send him into a mental shell or give him back to Frost … fucking frosted.

“Bed,” he mumbled, before he could think twice. “March.”

It wasn’t a march, though; far more of a stumble on the man’s part and a tugging and towing on Charles’. He tossed the trousers at the hearth to dry, drew back the bedclothes and shoved the man onto the mattress. The topmost sheet Charles stripped – it was stained and disgusting – and he did the same for the pillowcase. But he drew the remaining sheet up to the other’s chin, and then pulled all the blankets at the foot of the bed onto him at once.

The man stared at the ceiling.

Charles shifted his weight from foot to foot. Reached out and put the back of one hand to the other’s throat. Still so cold …
“Damn you,” he hissed under his breath – and stripped before he could change his mind. Then Charles grabbed the two blankets warming on the hearth, and brought them to the bedside. “Make room.”

He didn’t wait for the man to do so – just lifted all the bedclothes and pushed him over. The wiry weight of muscle and bone was fucking freezing, and: “God damn it,” he snarled, “why did you do this to yourself? Here.” And Charles wrapped the warmed blankets around them both, pulled up the rest of the blankets and sheets, and took the man in his arms. “You have to warm up. Come on. Get close.”

Standard procedure in the field, Charles told himself desperately. He had done this once in Banbury, so long ago. He wrapped all of his limbs around the other and sucked in a breath between his teeth, feeling the man’s body start to leach all the heat from his own. Come on, he told himself. Come on. The man stayed cold for quite a while. Charles lost track of time passing – he only punctuated it by getting up and casting a frantic look round the room for something else to heat. He looked under the bed. Nothing but – he snorted, despite himself. Somehow he had overlooked the potato when he had fished out Frost’s necklace that morning. He placed it in the fire’s coals, then waited until he had added another log before using a sweatshirt to scoop the potato back out. He then brought his improvised warmer back to bed, only pausing to snag the thermos. Its metal was still hot.

“Here.” He tucked the warmer between them and urged the man to sit up. “Take this.” Charles wrapped those long fingers around the thermos; coaxed: “Drink some.”

The other awkwardly tilted it to his mouth and took a sip of coffee. Charles heard his teeth clattering – and reached out just in time to catch the thermos when it fell from the man’s shaking hands.

“Here.” Charles put the thermos down on the floor. “Lie back down. Come here; come closer.”

Lying down, the man made eye contact. The normal green glitter was gone; those eyes were unfocused. But the expression …

Charles looked away, even as he wrapped the other in his arms. And he winced. It seemed that once the man started shivering, he couldn’t stop.

“Easy.” He tucked the blankets tighter round their shoulders. “Be easy. Take a deep breath. In,” he ordered.

The man obeyed. Charles heard it rattle in his lungs.

“And out.”

Breath gusted over his shoulder. The man had tucked his face into the crook of Charles’ neck, heedless of the dried blood, and close enough for Charles to feel the brush of his eyelashes. In any other circumstance, the contact would have set his teeth on edge … but now … He bit his lower lip and brushed a hand over the man’s hair. Caressed: once, twice – and Charles heard a hitching breath, and a mumble, and decided to set up a pattern. Something comforting and rhythmic –

His mind stumbled. Comforting?

“What are you doing?” he whispered to himself. Comforting this creature. The man who had done horrible things to him … But.

But, his mind whispered back, this isn’t normal.
Charles increased the chafing, doing his best to warm the cold skin. He felt the chatter of the other’s teeth where the angles of cheekbone and jaw pressed against his own throat and shoulder. A normal reaction to being tossed into an unwanted shower or bath would be: cursing, punching, laughing, possibly setting a bucket of water to fall on an unsuspecting head in revenge. It depended on the nature of the relationship.

But near catatonia? Not normal.

“What the hell set that off?” His voice was muffled against the man’s short hair. “Talk to me.”

“Verbrannt.”

“Ah.” Charles bumped his chin against the other’s temple. “Talk to me in English.”

A long pause. Then: “Burned.”


A trauma? Perhaps triggered by the smell of scorched hair. His mind raced, trying to put together pieces. But what could link a shower to a housefire?

Cautiously, he brushed his power against the man’s thoughts. Eased through the sluggish coil of metal shards. Then … Charles landed as gracefully as he could on the river’s edge – and stared, horrified.

It was dark. Pitch black night. He saw the dim reflection of red light on the river, twining through the unnatural green glow. The corpses were shadows bobbing in the water.

And it was so dark, Charles realized … because on top of its being night in the man’s mind, it was snowing.

The snow, however, was like none he had ever seen. It was black. Black – he caught a flake on a gauntlet – and oddly solid. Almost like ash. Charles brought the snowflake close, smelled … and almost gagged. There was the scorched odor, and something oddly greasy –

Suddenly the darkness became absolute – and before Charles knew it, he was blinking into the man’s face. The other’s eyes were squeezed tightly shut.

Then he opened them in an exhausted glare. Croaked: “Stay out of my head.”

Perhaps that had been a variation on Jean’s dismissal. Perhaps she had taught it to the man. Charles made a note to ask her later, and swallowed. “Welcome back.”

The man flexed his jaw. Then blinked, looking oddly miserable. “I’m sorry.”

“What –” Charles felt his own jaw drop. “Whatever for?”

“Choking you.”

“For pity’s sake.” He set his nails into the man’s hair and scratched briskly. “We can talk about that later. What happened, with the shower? Had I known, I would have never –”

Charles almost bit down on his own tongue. Because he *had* known. Perhaps not specifics, but … He tasted bile at the back of his throat. The man had used the bloody safeword, and Charles had ignored him and turned the water on.
“Was it … I don’t know. A trigger, or a link, in your mind? I got the impression that’s what that wanker’s cologne was –”

“Wanker,” the man whispered against his neck. And Charles felt the smallest huff of laughter.

“Good, good,” and he rubbed the man’s shoulders. Trying to warm him further. “We can call him whatever you want. ‘Wanker’, ‘bastard’, ‘devil’, ‘cream-faced loon’ –”

“What?”

“That last? Shakespeare. *Macbeth*, I believe.” Charles put on an oratorical tone. “‘The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon!’ Or perhaps *The Winter’s Tale*? ‘Thou fresh piece of excellent witchcraft!’ Sweet Will knew how to turn a phrase; that’s certain.”

The man only snorted. Then sighed.

Charles chafed his neck. Hesitated … and then pressed his lips against the man’s forehead. “What was it?”

A full-body shudder. “Memories.”

“Like what?” Bad enough to strike the man mute and staring? What on earth –

“Burning.” The other spoke into Charles’ skin, voice muffled. “They burned the bodies.”

“… Bodies?”

“Mm.”

“Where?” Charles frowned. “And when?”

A sigh. “During the second war. I remember the place, but not how I –” Charles felt his breath hitch. “I don’t remember –”

“What about the bodies?” Charles pressed. “You remember bodies burning? Why didn’t someone tell the police? This was before World War Three; certainly there would have been –”

But he trailed off. The man was laughing. Laughing against his neck, almost choking. “Ach, Rabe. Not so intelligent after all.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You never read about it? In a history book? But no,” the man sighed, “of course not. Or if you did, you don’t remember. But that is because – thirty years on, and it does not matter anymore.”

“What?” Charles dismissed own ruffled pride. Stroked the man’s hair. “Tell me. I’m a historian,” he breathed, “so tell me the story.”

“The story.”

“Yes.”

“It’s not really any story. A story changes. This did not – I saw it so many times. Some were strong at the beginning; others were not. And … all were separated, you see: the weak and the sick and the childr - and all who were not strong. And always, in the end, the showers. They were put in the showers.”
Charles felt his stomach turn over. *Oh bloody hell* –

“And none came out alive.”

Silence.

Charles licked his lips. Tried to speak – but what could he –

“It was – where I was put to work, you see,” the man explained. “I thought that if I lay still and did not talk, *Herr Doktor Schmidt* would stop. And he did. He gave me the choice: work with him, or work as *Sonderkommando*, even though the others said I was too young.”

“And that was?”

The man’s voice was quiet. Distant. “We took the bodies from the showers. We cut off their hair and took off their rings. Took them to the ovens. And I saw them all burn.”

“You saw –” Charles choked, “Jesus Christ –”

“Oh, no.” The man laughed again, horribly. “*Nicht Christus*.”

“That’s right,” and he stammered, because he remembered – just a few books, and newspaper articles that he had read before World War Three, but he *remembered*. “That’s right. It was the Jews. And you’re – Jewish, and you were in one of those places; my god …”

The other was still shivering. Charles chafed at his shoulders again; held him closer.

“And it made you remember? The … mention of a shower.”

“And the smell,” the man said. “Burning.”

“How long did you – have to do that work?”

A swallow. “Schmidt wanted me back. So he came to me and said: I could be even more useful. They took the rings - they wanted all the metal. So he said I could pull out all the fillings without using pliers. Save time. And I didn’t want to.” A dragging breath. “He said: pull out the fillings or go back to the lab.”

“And you went back.”

“I went back.”

Charles felt the man trembling against him. They were pressed tightly together, but there was no sexual charge, no tension. Nothing but the thrum of horror in his mind and the chill remaining in the other’s body.

What could he say? What could he *possibly* say? Nothing, Charles realized, grimly. He could only lie there and do his best impersonation of a hot water bottle.

“Oh,” he remembered, and reached down for the thermos. “Drink some more.”

The man obeyed without a word. He drank awkwardly; coffee trickled down his chin. Charles watched, not saying anything, and wiped up the spill with a thumb. Then he waited. Remembered, and muttered, “I forgot sugar.” *Sorry*, his mind said; the word stuck in his throat.

“Doesn’t matter.” Just as awkwardly, the man gave the thermos back to him. “Thank you.”
“You’re welcome.”

Charles set the metal back on the floor without taking his eyes away from the other. The man returned the look, eyes a dull green-grey.

It was excruciatingly difficult. But Charles took in a deep breath and said it anyway:

“I’m sorry.”

The man blinked at him. “What for?”

“For –” he laughed, raggedly. “For ignoring the word. You said ‘blue’. ”

“I thought that was for sex.”

“No; it’s the principle of the thing. I was – set on my own ends. And I did something to you that I shouldn’t have done. So: I’m sorry.”

A flicker of light had returned to the man’s eyes. “Your own ends? And what might those be, Professor?”

“I know I haven’t said this before, but I will now.” Charles felt exhausted. “Don’t call me ‘Professor’, please. I’m not one anymore.”

“Then what shall I call you?”

Odd, to feel his eyes stinging, when they hadn’t before. He blinked hard. “I don’t know.”

“Hm.” The man shifted where he lay close to him; brought up a hand and passed the back of it across Charles’ cheekbone. “Well. What ends were you set on?”

“I suppose I – wanted to hurt you.” Charles felt empty.

“And you did.” A considering sound from the man’s throat. “Intelligent after all.”

“What?”

“Intelligent to figure out a way, geschickter Rabe. I’m not that easy to hurt.”

*Keep telling yourself that*, Charles thought.

“What other ends?”

He heaved out a sigh. “I fear what your lady will see when she looks into your mind.”

“She doesn’t –”

“Of course she does. That’s how she found the memory of you taking out my filling. Isn’t it?” Charles watched the man wince; he pursed his lips and continued. “That’s how she got the idea for her midwinter night’s dream, isn’t it? Love’s romantic union …”

“Love.” The man flicked his eyes away. “You flatter yourself.”

“If you say so, Geliebter.” Charles let a small spark of mischief turn the word to honey in his mouth. Then, because he was curious, he ignored the flush at the base of the man’s neck and asked, “Just how did you learn to pluck fillings from teeth anyway? If you refused to do it for Schmidt?”
A muscle jumped in the other’s jaw as he looked back at Charles. “In 1954,” he said, “my lady and I left Eretz Galut after the victory there. We parted for some time. And I used information the elders had given me to track down as many of the guilty as I could. Of those I knew, most had died in the third war … but some still lived. And when I found them I killed them.” His eyes looked empty. “I pulled out their fillings first.”

“And did that bring you peace?”

“I –” The man shivered. “I don’t understand you.”

“Never mind, then,” Charles sighed. “Did you kill Schmidt – Shaw that way?”

“No.”

Charles waited. The man said nothing more. He merely drew his left hand over Charles’ face, rubbing his thumb along the jawline. “I would give you this back, if I could.”

“What?”

“Your filling.”

And Charles was suddenly hyperaware of the touch of the metal ring. He forced his voice to stay calm and even. “That’s quite all right. It's fine where it is.”

“I should not have done it – it dishonors the memory of the dead. And you’re not like those I killed afterwards. You’re not like them.”

“Well, I should hope not. And if I ever become like them, you have permission to pull out all my teeth and feed me porridge for the rest of my days.”

The man’s mouth quirked. He let his hand fall to the pillow. “Why do you fear what my lady will see?”

So much for diverting him. Charles weighed all of his options; then sighed. It seemed it was a banner day for truth.

“She had her own intentions, in bringing us together. And I’m afraid,” he enunciated the word carefully, “that she will see what I have told you, and tried to teach you – and what you have told me … And she won’t care for it.”

“Teach me?” The man blinked.

Charles gave him a look from beneath lowered lashes. “You haven’t learned anything over the past few days?”

Another blink, but then – ha. Charles couldn’t help himself; he grinned as he saw the idiot flush crimson to his hairline. “Oh.”

“Well, thank goodness. For a moment I doubted my own pedagogy. Yes. ‘Oh.’ And I believe that your lady thought: ‘Oh’ would range from that bit with the filling, to me crawling and begging you for food, to me being chained and brutalized – hell,” Charles sighed, “you took the chain off me. And she won’t approve of that. She’ll bloody well hurt me for that –”

“What?” The man’s nostrils flared. “Hurt you?”

“Yes.” Charles raised an eyebrow. “Leaving aside the fact that she ordered you to choke me once” –
and his memory was fuzzy. Something like *do she eh go air eke* ... "It’s easy for her to do so, with the Finder."

“I’ve … never been in the Finder.”

“Of course not. You’re not a telepath. But imagine someone’s run current through your skull and fried your brain like an egg, and you’ll have the general gist.”

The other’s eyes were wide. He inched closer to Charles. Raised one callused hand to Charles’ newly-shorn head; touched him there, hesitating. “Then … what shall I do?”

Charles went still. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t want you to be hurt. Not anymore.”

Not anymore. Well. That was a positive step. Charles blinked hard – focus – and heard his blood thunder in his ears.

“You can feel her touch your mind, I assume? My si – friends,” he caught himself, “say that they see birds when I communicate with them.”

“With my lady, I see snow. And I feel cold.”

“Right. Then: all you need to do is concentrate on certain memories when you feel her touch. The ones in which I’m hurting. When,” he gulped, “when you put me on the floor on Christmas morning. And on the bed, just now.”

“I hurt you? But you didn’t –”

“Not this morning.” Charles couldn’t help it – he felt his face heat. “It’s just that – it was a little humiliating, you biting my arse. I won’t be able to sit down properly for at least a day.”

Best not tell the other that the hard fuck meant the same, but for a good half week.

“You could have said the word.”

“Yes. I chose not to.”

“Why? If it was humiliating?”

Charles shrugged. “You seemed to want it so badly.”

For a long moment, the man gazed at him, eyes glowing. Charles returned the look, and then shifted beneath the blankets.

“Well. Speaking of wanting something badly … It’s the middle of the afternoon.” His throat was sore and his eyes felt gritty. Too much emotion in too few hours. “And I feel like another visit to that library of yours. I –”

“No.”

“No?” Charles felt his voice crack. “What do you mean? Please, I do so enjoy looking –”

“I mean: it’s not just mine. It’s yours too.”

He blinked. “What?”
“It’s yours too, now. I want you to read whatever you like in it.”

Charles felt excitement go off in his head like a firework. “Whatever I like? Those records, then – of the war with the Free West?”

“Except those,” the man sighed. “Greedy.”

Charles wasn’t, of course. He was just curious. “Fine then.” Charles squirmed under the blankets. He wanted to dash off as quickly as he could – he had left the Russian dictionary on the couch –

“Only …”

Charles waited. “Yes?”

“Will you let me stay here? And stay with me?” Those eyes were lowered; the man’s shoulders were hunched. “For a little while?”


For he told himself: it was rather cold. And for a library full of books, he could wait a little while. And the man was still shivering, tucking himself close to Charles’ body – and it only seemed just to wait until he was warm again.

Charles half expected the man to fall asleep. He lay there, though, breathing steadily and staring at nothing. And when Charles got up to put another log on the fire about an hour later, he looked back to see the other wrestling with the blankets.

“Now, just one moment.” He padded back to the bed. “If you can’t even throw off a sheet you’ve no business going anywhere.”

The man glared at him. And threw off the sheets.

“All right.” Charles held up his hands. “Jolly good. I am suitably impressed by your sheet-throwing abilities, but I still think –”

“Give me my trousers.”

“What do you say?”

“Now.”

“Um.” With a gulp, Charles backed up. He bent to the hearth and fumbled for the man’s trousers. They seemed mostly dry. He held them out. “Here.”

The man prowled toward him and snatched them back. Then put them on. Charles watched the flex of lean muscles, saw the lion tattoo move with his shoulder. One would think that a predator would look stupid, putting on trousers. Apparently it was not so.

No belt, Charles saw. And then he blinked as the other walked straight out the door.

“Wait.” He picked up the shirt and green sweater, and followed for a few steps. “Where are you going?” In the direction of the library, he saw, but surely –

“I have things to do.”
“Not half-naked, I hope. Unless you want another go with hypothermia. Here.” He held out the remaining clothes.

The man glowered. Then took the shirt.

“Don’t you want your sweater?”

“I tore yours. You keep that one.”

“Green,” Charles replied, “is not my color. Why don’t you –”

“I’ll go get another one. So – keep it.”

“Where do you keep your clothes, anyway?” Perhaps by the swords in storage, Charles thought, but:

“My room.”

“You have a –” Charles swallowed the rest of his words. Why on earth had he thought the man wouldn’t?

“Yes. And I’d like to go to it now. So if you’ll excuse me –”

“May I see it?”

“No,” the man snapped.

And then he stormed away.

Charles peered after him, disconcerted. Although upon further reflection, he could see why. The man had to feel vulnerable, after … telling him so many things. And while some sank into vulnerability like a soft blanket, others stripped it off and threw it as far away from them as they could.

He folded the sweater and put it in the wardrobe. Then he carefully made his bed and got dressed in his own clothes. It was surprising how much colder he felt now that he had no hair on his head. Charles ran fingers over his scalp, grimacing, and considered wearing a hat. Decided against it. It would look too ridiculous. He found the first aid kit and dabbed ointment on the shallow cuts – and when he caught sight of the diamonds in the sink, Charles grabbed them and tossed them beneath the bed again.

He walked to the library as carefully as he could, adjusted the thermostat and built a fire. Charles considered books on wars and history, and decided instead to read the most boring text on mineralogy he could find. To start, at least. He needed space from what the other had told him …

But it would not hurt to check the facts.

Swallowing, Charles picked two books that seemed relevant from the shelf that held bibliography on World War Two. And, on impulse, he took the slim volume wedged between them. Printed – he checked – first in Turin, and this, the second edition, in Eretz Galut. In both Italian and Hebrew.

Charles dismissed the logistics – wouldn’t it have to be read front to back in one language, back to front in the other? – and saved that book for last. His Italian was serviceable; it would not be so difficult.

Times passed. And the book turned out to be difficult indeed. Though not in the way Charles had anticipated.
He did not look up when he heard a chess piece scrape across the board. Nor did he move to look when the library door opened.

“Xavier?”

Charles did not answer.

Footsteps approached him. “Did I not tell you where the lights are?”

“By the thermostat,” he replied, dully. “I know.”

“Then why are you sitting in the dark?”

Charles was silent.

He heard the man walk round the low couch – and he saw, out of the corner of his eye, that lean silhouette black against the firelight. Charles tried to control his shiver. It didn’t work, though; it appeared he was colder than he had at first thought –

“Rabe. If you go and shear yourself like a sheep, you should not be surprised when you take a chill. Here.”

And Charles valiantly controlled his surprise at the feeling of a knit hat placed on his head and tugged down to cover his ears. “Wear that.”

“It’s …” He checked with a deep breath – and sure enough, there was that smell of sweat. “It’s yours, though.”

“Keep it. As a gift.”

“… But I don’t have anything for you.”

A sigh. “Just come and eat dinner.”

“But –”

“And don’t argue about it? That would be the greatest gift in all the world.”

Charles thought of arguing just for the hell of it. Then decided not to. Instead, he followed the man out the door without a word. And in the chill of the manor halls, he was glad for the hat.

They had eaten assorted soups for dinner, the man still wearing his winter coat. He had explained something about not being able to go to Albany – but Charles had been too busy guzzling orange juice to listen. He refused to be ashamed; after all, his body was still recovering. And what with the spectacular sex it had hungrily enjoyed that morning, it wanted nourishment as well. Charles had wondered, distantly, if he had a counterpart to his aviary composed of nothing but ravenous creatures of the id. Food and sex and sleep. He had caught himself nodding off, and then had looked up, blinking.

The man had smirked.

And then had said: “Go to bed.”

Charles had walked to the door – then turned. “Planning on joining me?”
The man’s smile had gone. He merely blinked.

“Not for sex,” Charles said, hurriedly. “I’m still –”

“You’re limping. Did you somehow fall, in the library? You should not be in the dark there; the stairs are –”

“Oh, you absolute idiot.” Charles couldn’t help it - he smiled. “If you go and fuck someone like an animal in heat, you should not be surprised when they have trouble walking afterwards.”

Color came and went in the man’s face. “I’m not an –”

“ – animal, I know. I shouldn’t have used that expression. No: you’re not an animal, so you’re not sleeping on any hearth. You have to admit, it’s warmer together – and since I have no intention of giving this hat back,” Charles finished, “I don’t want you to catch a cold.”

The man merely sat there, staring at him.

“Just … could you wash?” Charles gestured at the table. “I’ll do it tomorrow night.”

He hadn’t waited to hear the reply. Had just gone upstairs, and to bed, and tried to fall asleep.

Charles couldn’t help feeling the other join him in bed later, smelling like soap. And then it was very warm.

And Charles had plenty of time to second-guess himself in the morning, when he woke up to watch the other pull on clothes again and leave without a word.

He did not know what to think. Except that the sight of the Hebrew of the man’s tattoo, combined with the dual scripts of the book the previous day, had given him an idea.

The man had left him a plate full of fruit and the thermos. Charles took both to the library. Tattoos. That was what all three books had informed him, when he had read them the day before. The grim cataloguing system in the camp called Auschwitz-Birkenau: starvation and torture, brutality and despair, encompassed in one line of numbers.

So Charles now knew what the smallest tattoo was. The script around the lion, though … He looked through the library until he found a series of mammoth volumes in both Hebrew and German. And using the image of the man’s shoulder that he had imprinted in his mind, he flicked through page after page, searching.

It took him another visit to the library after dinner, with the lights blazing, to find it. They had eaten the last of the soups; the man had said nothing, but had looked exhausted. And after finding the text, Charles had gone back to his room … only to find the man asleep in his bed.

Well. He had undressed and climbed in beside the other, feeling oddly blank. Charles had asked for the man to join him there. He supposed the other had taken it as open invitation. And at least the other wasn’t up to any sexual demand. So to speak.

It was strange, though, that for the last thirty-six hours … he had not been afraid. Had not felt the need to use his birds or his wits to keep the other at a distance, his thought-fires or his alarms to alert him to the other’s presence. Instead, he just felt the man’s feet warm against his own in bed.

Strange, Charles told himself. Strange and oddly sad, that it should take mutual trauma to bring them to that point. But the man had given him a hat – he plucked at the knit – so he would give him the text tomorrow. Mutual gifts instead of pain and hurt. And hopefully the current armistice would
continue until he was alone again.

The next morning he woke late, to an empty bed and a pile of fruit waiting for him in a bowl. Charles donned the green sweater, careful not to tug at the tear. Best to mend it, perhaps, and sew up the hem ... Surely, he thought to himself with a sigh, he had enough yarn now.

Charles shook off the memory, rolled up his sleeves, and decided to make it another day in the library.

He kept himself busy by memorizing chunks of Russian script. He could not say why – except that Frost used the language with impunity, and he would love to see the look on her face when she realized he could understand her. And having a visual reinforcement of the few memories he possessed of it being spoken … well. It would be a useful start, perhaps.

It was harder going that he had thought it would be, though. Photographic memory notwithstanding, his mind had not had to buckle down and focus on texts to the same extent since his qualifying exams. So Charles wasn’t surprised when he looked up late in the day to see the man crouched by the library fire, watching him – and realized that he hadn’t even noticed the other’s return. Poor Raven and company … His entire aviary, slaving all day to build a Cyrillic shelf in his reading room. God forbid they unionize.

“Hello,” Charles said. He took off the knit cap and scratched his head. The stubble had gone from novel to downright *itchy* in a mere thirty-six hours. Charles supposed it served him right.

The man smiled. “Keeping busy?”

“Mm.” He shut the dictionary and the Dostoyevsky; tugged at the volume of the *Tanakh* that he had found yesterday. It had taken him until the morning to remember the actual name of the Hebrew scriptures; not ideal, Charles supposed, but he had had other things on his mind.

“I have something for you,” the man said. He sounded excited.

“Really? What a coincidence.” Charles moved from the table to the couch, taking the volume with him. “I have something for you, too.”

“Mine first?”

Charles smiled. “I suppose so.”

“Close your eyes.”

Charles felt his smile vanish. He swallowed hard; tightened his grip on the book. “Why?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Is it anything – alive? Or anything that used to be alive?”

The man shook his head.

“Fine.” Charles closed his eyes.

“Hold out your hands –”

Gritting his teeth, Charles did.
“– and cup them. Like you’re going to drink water.”

“Like the chosen ones of Gideon,” he said to the darkness, cupping his hands.


“I read bits and pieces of the Tanakh yesterday.”

“And of the age of the righteous judges.” The man sounded pleased. “But you can’t sit there and tell me that you’re one of Gideon’s chosen, Xavier.”

“Why not?”

“Because you would have sweet-talked the Philistines into going home without a fight. Without any bribery, even. Though these might have sufficed as well.”

Charles heard a strange creak - a wooden latch? - and then a sound that was not quite a rattle.

“Thank you for the compliment,” he said, “but I think it was the Midianites. Not the Philisti –”

He sucked in a breath at the feeling of – what was it? Not marbles, but cold pebbles or stones, falling into his cupped hands. Overflowing them, and pattering onto the floor.

“Open.”

“My hands or my eyes?”

A snort. “Your eyes.”

Charles did so. And stared.

He was holding …

“My god,” he breathed. “What are these?”

The man sounded eager. “Do you like them?”

“Like them? I don’t – I just never –”

Charles fought to keep his jaw from dropping. There, in his hands, lay piled high countless jewels. Rubies and diamonds, sapphires and emeralds – glints of green and yellow and red, and the soft glow of pearls … more than he had ever seen in one place in his life.

“Are they – they aren’t glass –”

The image of the man rooting through a tub of paste jewelry at a market craft booth made him cough back a laugh - disbelief. Not hysteria, because he was calm about it. Even though he had only ever seen the Crown Jewels once, under guard in Coventry – “Where did you get them?”

“Here and there.” The voice had gone from eager to … happy? Shy? Charles did not know; he didn’t want to think – but the other was continuing, with: “Do you like them?”

“I …”

Charles looked up from the priceless heap. Stared at the man’s eyes. He knew he must look rather dazed, but the crazy sod did not seem to notice.
Instead: “Then they’re yours,” the man said, smiling. He reached out and carefully laid his palms alongside Charles’ hands. Pressed just slightly; closed them.

Or tried to close them. More of the jewels pattered to the floor – Charles’ hands, cupped and being pressed together, weren’t broad enough to hold them all. “Wait,” he gasped. “They’ll fall. They’ll -”

A bright smile. “Schöner Rabe.” And the man began to pick up the gems at Charles’ feet, one by one. He placed the wooden coffer on Charles’ lap and started putting the jewels from the floor back into it, one palmful at a time. “I want you to have them all. All except for the one, my favorite – if you see a leather bag, please tell me. Is it in there?” He peeked at the coffer. “Do you see?”

“No. I – I don’t. And why aren’t you …”

He wasn’t using his power, Charles thought, still stupefied. Oh. That was because -

“I took out all the metal.” Another rattle, emerald and sapphire on wood. “So you wouldn’t be frightened.”

“I’m not frightened.”

“No?” Another smile. “Good.”

“Although –” and Charles poured his own two handfuls into the coffer, shuddering, “I might be, if you were to tell me how many people you killed for these.”

“I didn’t kill anyone.” The man looked up from where he knelt, eyes shining. “I found them in different places. Different ruins of different cities. This one,” he held up a jewel – Charles choked – the size of a robin’s egg. It was blue. “This one I found in what had been Washington, D.C.”

“And you didn’t have to kill –”

“No.” He placed the immense jewel in the coffer. “It was in a basement, and it had its own glass case. I believe someone stole it from a museum, Before.” A serious look. “It was on a chain, with other diamonds – but I took the metal out.”

“That’s a diamond?” Charles felt woozy. “My god.”

“When I showed my lady, she let me keep it. Since it was blue.” A smile. “I set the pure ones in steel for her.”

Charles remembered those jewels, glittering from their metal settings, round Frost’s wrist and … and neck. He frowned. She had the same tokens that everyone else wore. Why, when she was the leader?

The man was still talking. “ – And there was a skeleton next to it, and the basement door was locked a dozen times from the inside, so I assumed –”

“How did you know to find it?”

“I didn’t.” Another smile. “The one who took it had taken other things, too. Weapons; a set of armor. I felt a scimitar; I wanted to see it – and then there was this.”

This.

These.
Charles ran his fingers through the glittering heap in the coffer. Teabags in the metal box; jewels in the wooden one … It was too completely surreal to be believed.

“Ah, there.” The man fished out a small leather pouch from where it had fallen beneath the couch. “This one I found by the diamond. And I will keep it – but you must have the rest.”

Charles darted a look up from the coffer, curious. “What’s that one?”

The other stared at him. Then his face split in a grin as broad as Charles had ever seen on a human face. “Greedy, are we, Xavier?”

He felt his face turn scarlet. “No, I’m not – I mean, I was only wondering –”

The man tipped back his head and laughed, tucking the small bag into a pocket of his trousers. Charles could only glower down at the jewels. “I’m not greedy. I was just curious.”

“Curious,” the other said, his voice affectionate. “There are worse things to be.” He paused. “Like … greedy.”

“Oh, shut up,” he muttered. Then he ignored the man and slid his fingers back into the pile of gems. The sensation was like nothing more than his same fingers trailing through a heap of coffee beans, in that wooden crate at the shop on High Street at home …

Charles took in a deep breath. Let it out.

The man had fallen silent – and was now … Charles checked. Now looking at him, wide—eyed.

“I wonder …” Charles said. “I wonder if you think …”

“Think what?” the man replied.

Charles rested his hand on the top of the pile; felt the polished facets of the gemstones slide under his fingertips.

“Do you think that giving me these – makes everything better between us? Permanently? Is that what you think?”

There was a pause. Then:

“No.” The man tipped his head to one side. “I don’t think that.”

For a long moment, he only gazed at Charles.

“They’re very beautiful, schöner Rabe, so I thought to give them to you.” One corner of that thin mouth tilted up. “Like to like.”

Silence fell.

The man poured the last of the gems into their coffer. He looked up at Charles, still smiling. Just slightly, though. And rather … ruefully.

Suddenly the box felt immensely heavy on his lap. Charles swallowed hard.

“It’s not that I don’t – or that they’re … I mean.” He gestured at the jewels, feebly. “They’re lovely. It’s just …”
“‘Just’ what?”

“Putting aside whether or not this is recompense, or – atonement for anything … and whether or not one can put a monetary value on – on what’s happened, anyway –” On what you’ve done to me, his mind said, coldly, but Charles winced. He had done things back, after all. The shower. He should never have –

“Putting that aside, I only have one thing to give to you. And it’s nothing in comparison.”

A slow smile, heated. “You put so little value on yourself, Xavier –”

“Now, you see? That is exactly what I mean. You assume I’m talking about my – my body, or having sex, or something. When I had something completely different in mind.”

“Different?”

“Yes.” Charles reached for a book that he had placed to the side. “Take off your shirt.”

The man blinked in surprise. “Why?”

“You’ll see. Here, let me –” and Charles reached.

He could not help but see the other flinch away. That had not happened this morning, or yesterday morning … but then, he hadn’t tried to help the other dress either time.

Charles let his hand fall. The man’s shirt, when Charles had gone into his mind … and then the shower … He felt himself flush. Memory, though; just memory. Not shame. He only needed time to – process things, to work through them …

A pause. Then:

“’s all right,” the man mumbled. He edged closer, and leaned against Charles’ hand. “Go ahead.”

“No – you see? It’s not all right.” Charles managed to keep his voice level only with an effort. “I shouldn’t have done that. I should have asked you first.”

“But I’m telling you now,” the other replied. “It’s all right.” The lean face was still for a moment, in thought. Then there was a flash of a smile. “Here.”

And then he peeled his turtleneck up over his head, deliberately stopped whilst enmeshed in it, and wiggled his fingers. “Help?”

Charles snorted despite himself. “Fine.”

He helped pull the shirt off. Then he flipped to the correct page, and found the text.

“It’s your tattoo,” Charles explained. “Here’s what looks like the correct Hebrew – but the translation’s in German. So you’ll have to forgive me if I butcher the pronunciation. It begins with: Wer unter dem Schirm des Höchsten sitzt … how does the umlaut go again?”

A grunt. “Give that here.”

Charles surrendered the book with a smile. He watched the man place it on his knees and bend his head to read, brow furrowed. The light of the late sun spilled through the library windows, making his hair gleam red and the line of his shoulders gold.
The cut from the glass, now … five days old? Six? However many days old, it had not healed. It was an ugly slash, inflamed and oozing pus where the scab had cracked.

“Have you even cleaned that cut?” Charles snapped.

The man did not look up. “No.”

“Well, it will scar unless you do. And don’t you have enough already?” After all, Charles thought – in certain angles of light, when the near-invisible lines became apparent, the crazy sod looked like a patchwork quilt.

The voice was absent-minded. “I want this one.”

“Why?”

The man looked up from the book and smiled. “It’s yours.”

Charles chose not to reply.

Instead, he looked down at the jewels again. Ran his fingers through them, trying to focus on details of weight and color rather than any thought of their worth. His fingertips caught on the massive diamond, though, and he deliberately shoved it to the bottom of the coffer.

“You’re right.” The man sounded pleased.

Charles looked up. “About?”

“This is it. I remember the Hebrew. Yo-shayv b’sayser el-yon, b’tzayl sha-dai yis-lonôn. Omar la-
donôy –”

“In English, please?”

“Give me a minute.” The man narrowed his eyes at the text.

“And where you do remember it from?” Charles felt puzzled. “If you don’t remember your tattoo?”

“It’s from the Tehillim. This one is recited at burials.”

“At … burials. Which you remember.”

“Yes – after the battles. I remember all of those. Ulan-Ude, Selenginsk … But to the people, all of 1953 gets grouped together as one. Bitva pri Baykale – the Battle of Lake Baikal.”

“And there were burials.”

“Of course there were. And had you been there, Xavier, you would have heard this.”

The man cleared his throat. “‘You who dwell in the shelter of the most high, who abide in the shadow of the omnipotent: I say’ – you can say ‘to you,’ here … ‘I say to you of the lord who is my refuge and my stronghold, my god in whom I trust –’ ”

“I think I know that text.”

“Do you?” The man’s eyes brightened. “How so?”

“It’s a psalm, isn’t it?” Charles shrugged. “Sometimes it’s sung in church.”
“So the goyim use it too.”

“At various services. Evensong, and the like.” He steered the subject back. “There’s some striking images of warfare in it, I do remember. Perhaps that’s why they gave it to you.”

“Yes. ‘He will save you from the ensnaring trap, from the destructive pestilence. He will cover you with his pinions and you will find refuge under his wings; his truth is a shield and an armor.’”

“Not that part,” Charles murmured, “but the next.”

“Ah, yes. Here. ‘You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, the pestilence that prowls in the darkness, nor the destruction that ravages at noon. A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand, but it shall not approach you. You need only look with your eyes, and you will see the judgment of the wicked.’”

For a long moment, Charles could not think of anything to say.

The man spoke into the silence.

“Ten thousand … That was why they gave it to me.”

Charles tried a weak smile. “Then I’m surprised they didn’t put it on your right arm.”

A quirk of one eyebrow, and the man darted a look at his right shoulder. “Good point.”

“And aren’t tattoos forbidden for observant Jews, anyway? In the book of Leviticus?”

“Well, Professor,” a broad grin, “I can only assume that they saw these,” the man gestured to his left forearm, and behind him, to his lower back, “and thought one more could not hurt.”

“Hindi, Russian, and … this …” Charles laid his fingers gently on the numbers. 24005. “Twenty-four thousand and five.”

The man looked at Charles’ fingers on the number. Then looked up at him.

Charles gave him a level look in return. “I don’t suppose it would do any good to say that I’m sorry?”

“Sorry for what?”

“Really – ‘for what’ … Did they say that psalm in the camp, too? For burial?”

“No. People were not buried there, you see.” the man replied, just as level. Then he thought again. “At least, not until the very end. But before then they were burned – as I told you.”

“And you were a child.”

“I was thirteen when I met my lady in the winter of 1945. I know this because she helped me to celebrate my birthday the next spring. 10 April, 1946, and I was fourteen.”

“How old were you when you were taken there?”

“I –”

Charles had been turning his head away, little by little. Now he turned back to look at the man.
Who was frowning. “I don’t know.”

“You have to know. How old were you –” Charles tapped his fingers on the other’s forearm, “when you got that number?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Silence.

Charles felt cold. He could only stare, lick his lips, and croak:

“What?”

“The number.” The man tugged his arm free of Charles’ fingers, frowned at it.

Then he looked back up; tilted his head to one side. “You know what it is, then? Some days I’m curious. Some days not, but …” He trailed off. “What is it?”

“You don’t –”

Charles closed the coffer lid, and gripped it hard. The carved edges bit into his palms, grounding him.

“You don’t know what that tattoo means?”

The man shook his head.

Impossible. That was impossible. Unless the other had the most extensive case of selective amnesia on record. Charles racked his brain for things he could ask. What about …

“What’s your earliest memory?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Just – just tell me. It’s important.” Charles would not let his hands tremble. He kept his eyes fixed on the other’s face. “Tell me.”

“Shuvalov – when he was Schmidt, in the camp. I remember the day he killed my mother. And how he killed her, and why.”

“You don’t remember anything from before that? How do you know your birthday?”

“My lady looked at the records. She said I was born on the tenth of April, in 1932.” A ghost of a smile. “And in Berlin.”

“Your lady …”

Frost.

Charles fought to keep his breathing even.

All of the images cascading together; all of the pieces sliding into place.

The White Queen enthroned at the stadium; the man kneeling before her … Her fingers pale against the red-brown stubble of his hair …

Of all things to flash into his mind next, why would it be the memory of the first time he had spoken
to her? Perhaps the link was her fingers. Frost, manicured nails brushing the string closing the
dossier, fingers looping it round the catches, into a figure eight. Infinity. Looping round and round,
the glitter of her nails – binding and closing away the summary of Charles’ former life …

But all of Charles’ instincts united to tell him: the man’s mind was not just a dossier to Frost. Not a
tattered collection of photographs, an autograph album through which she could flip. No. The man’s
mind was a book. A book … thirty-seven years old, with a battered cover. Wide open.

And she … was rewriting it. Every time she touched the man’s head; each time he knelt to her. Free
West soldiers screaming in their coffins of ice when his raven had flown over the manor, on the night
she had given him to her Prince. Those same soldiers more dead than alive, shuffling along in Frost’s
wake like puppets on strings.

Following her every command. Just like the man did.

My god.

Shaw’s cologne; scripts and snow. Wake and wake to war. Making and breaking links, creating
triggers and erasing taboos – erasing memories. Or locking them away …

To create her Prince, her attack dog on a crystal and diamond chain …

… Except for that moment at the Battle of Dallas, when he had obeyed Charles instead.

Careful, his mind whispered. Be very careful.

“So …” Charles took in a careful breath. “Your lady. She celebrated your birthday with you?”

The man nodded. Then smiled again, wry. “I had never had cake before.”

“How did she – come to meet you? At Shuvalov’s estate?”

A frown. The man was obviously thinking, casting his mind back. “I know that he met her in
Moscow. At the Morozov palace, I believe. He invited her back to Dvorets Shuvalovyk – she played
the piano, I remember. And then she became my tutor.”

“Your … tutor.”

A sharp nod. “I had forgotten how to read.”

“And she taught you again.”

“Yes. German came quite quickly; Russian was more difficult. Literature, some poetry –”

“Poetry?” Despite everything, Charles felt his lips twitch. “What sort of poetry?”

“Pushkin, mostly.”

“No Goethe? Schiller?”

The man shrugged.

“Well.” Charles tried to smile. “Perhaps I should give you a reading list.”

“Thucydides, yes?” A smile in return. “I’d like that.”
“Only if you have time, of course. What with wars and rumors of wars.” Setting the coffer of jewels aside, next to his pile of books on the velvet of the couch, Charles dusted off his hands. He kept his movements deliberately casual. “Did it take you long to relearn German?”

“I told you. Not long at all.”

“Any other subjects? Mathematics, the sciences …”

A shrug. “Mathematics was always easy. I made a study of some geology, some chemistry … not much else.”

“And in order to speed things along … did Frost ever touch you? Where no one else touched you?”

A pause.

Charles darted a look at the man. He seemed confused. Careful. Oh, be careful.

“Did she touch your mind, I mean.”

“Oh.” The man’s face cleared. “Not when I studied languages, no.”

“But later …” Goosebumps had spread down his back. “Later, she did?”

“Yes. To help me with my power. You see,” and the voice was quiet, “although I am older now, when I was younger and growing, the things Shuvalov did … They hurt me. My lady told me that there were less painful ways to unlock my power, and offered to show me them.”

Charles felt his pulse thumping in his ears. “And you accepted her offer?”

The man nodded. “It has been a great help to me.”

“And did Shuvalov know about this?”

A snort. “He only knew that my strength was increasing. He only cared about that. He often said he could flay me to get what he wanted. And without my lady, he would have done so.”

Charles looked the man straight in the eye. “How do you know that to be true? How can you be sure?”

Those eyes glinted back at him, blue-green chips of ice. “Xavier – I told you: my earliest memory is one I carry with me,” he touched his heart, “here. I will never forget it. Schmidt told me to move a coin on his desk. Fünf Reichsmark. I tried, I failed, and he shot my mother where she stood. Behind me, and to my right. He shot her in the head, and she died.

“And then my power answered me.”

“You moved the coin?” Charles’ voice sounded small, in his own ears.

“No.” The word was as rough as a curse. “That coin was made of silver – non-ferrous. I only learned to work silver and gold, and others like them, after I had grown stronger. Silver, and the bastard knew it.”

“You said your power answered you –”

“Yes. I wrecked Schmidt’s office and his laboratory; killed some soldiers with their own helmets. But then he made me carry all the bodies to the crematorium … and my mother …”
A hard shake of the head. The man scrubbed his fingers over his short hair; pressed at his temples. “And then he had enough of that same laboratory put back together to tie me down on a table and start his work.”

Charles could only stare at him.

The man flung his hands down and stared back. Then, after a long moment, he raised his eyebrows, and pulled his turtleneck back on. He stretched and brought both hands up to massage his shoulders.

“Was there anything else you wanted to ask me, Xavier?”

Charles focused all his thoughts on one point, shoving aside the horror, the numb disbelief.

“The death of your mother. How do you know,” he stumbled on the words, “that you won’t forget that memory? If your precious lady can rearrange your mind at her leisure?”

“Rearrange?” The man tilted up his chin. “She helps me unlock my power, Xavier. That is all. I asked her to do that very thing — and she showed me her favor, showed me how to build the castle of my thoughts. She has my token and I have hers. I have known her my entire life. And with her aid, I was avenged for the death of my mother and the suffering of my people.”

He paused. Those green eyes narrowed. “And even if she were doing more — I have some defenses against telepaths. As you have seen, yes?”

“I remember a cloud of metal,” Charles mumbled. “And a metal forest. And — that river …”

“The layers of shielding. She taught me that.” The man uncoiled to his feet. “I’ll go get you some tea. You don’t look well.”

But before the other could walk away, Charles caught at one sleeve of his shirt. “What if —”

The man waited. “Yes?”

“What if I were able to show you? In your mind,” Charles blurted. “If you’d let me, I’m sure I could find her — find how she has …”

He trailed off in the face of the man’s sardonic smirk. Dark eyebrows arched nearly to the other’s hairline.

“ Wouldn’t that be convenient, Xavier? All I’d have to do to prove you right is let you into my mind. You, a telepath who has broken in there before — to ravage and to destroy. That sounds like the best idea I have ever heard. And I have heard certain strategies to take Denver involving President Stryker and large amounts of hashish.”

Defeated, Charles glared at the coffer on his lap. “You need to work on your sarcasm.”

“And what better judge than you, geschickter Rabe?” The man’s mocking look had gone. He was smiling. “Are you hungry?”

“Maybe.” He scraped at the wooden edge of the lid with one fingernail. “Yes.”

“Then we’ll have some food. Come on.”

Charles rose with a sigh, holding the jewel box close. It was rather ridiculously heavy. He looked down at it as he walked to the door. There were smudges of fingerprints newly visible when the coffer emerged from his shadow, so Charles took off his hat and started polishing the wood. It was
odd, how he couldn’t take his eyes away from it. He didn’t even flinch when he almost walked straight into the man, who was holding the library door open.

He did look up at the other’s breath of laughter. “Be careful,” the man told him.

“Well, of course.” Charles lifted his chin. “I can put them in my wardrobe on the way to the kitchen. Do you honestly think I wouldn’t be careful with a king’s ransom?”

“I meant – be careful not to hurt yourself. Hit your head on the door, trip and fall. But it’s good to know you like them so.” Another smile. Somehow … soft. “Schöner Rabe.”

Charles quirked a smile of his own. It felt pained. “Ravens do like shiny things.”

“Mm.”

The man was staring at his eyes.

Charles held his gaze; refused to look away. And refused to flinch when the man slowly brought up one hand, and brushed long fingers over his shorn head.

“Rabe …” A thumb touched his cheekbone. “With all your feathers gone.”

“Hair grows back. And quickly, if one has enough vitamins.”

The man did not move. Except for the slightest caress of those fingers, light as the brush of a bird’s wing.

His heart thumped twice, hard. “Please stop.”

A twist of the mouth, but the man obeyed and let his hand fall to his side. Then he turned away and started walking down the hall. After a moment, Charles scrambled to catch up.

“What, then,” the other said, roughly, as though they had been talking all the while, “has enough vitamins for you?”

“Oh, oranges. Definitely oranges.”

“And here I have none. Tomorrow,” the man said, decisive, “I shall bring you some.”

“I’d like that,” Charles replied.

He did not miss the man’s quick intake of breath. For the moment, though, Charles focused on the weight of his coffer, on the air – cool on his neck. And did not think of the one walking at his side.

Memory, and memories taken away, Charles could consider later.

For now, he just hoped that the idiot wouldn’t uproot too many orange trees for his sake.

Chapter End Notes

There is a vivid flashback to the Holocaust; specifically, the practices of the gas chamber & crematorium. Historical accuracy is very important to me - so if there are details incorrect, please let me know.
Also, the dual-language book on the Holocaust that Charles reads in the library is Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* - the account of his experiences in the camps. It has the English title "Survival in Auschwitz."

There are different numbering systems for the Psalms, depending on the sources used. See this link for more details: [Psalm numbering](nb a Catholic website.) The text on Erik's shoulder is thus drawn from Psalm 91 (90 if from the Latin or Greek translation of the Hebrew.)

I found the transliteration of the Hebrew on this site: [Jewish burial rites](nb) - and used the translation given there.

Finally, a word on the Auschwitz tattoo. I know that in the film, and in certain parts of comic canon, it is 214782. I found an explanation at this website - [FAQ - Magneto was right](nb) (under "What is Magneto's tattoo number?" - that explains that 214782 is too high a number for Erik to have been in one of the first groups of Jews to be imprisoned in Auschwitz.

Thus the number was retconned, later, to 24005 - and I've chosen to use the latter here.
They stopped at Charles’ room so he could carefully place the coffer full of jewels in the wardrobe. He did so, tugging his hat back on. Half of him wished for a lock to the wardrobe door. That and he wished for a door back, period. If only to close it, so nobody passing through the manor at random could sneak into his room and steal the treasure.

“Come off it,” he muttered, closing the wardrobe door with a snick. “Nobody will steal anything.”

“Hm?”

The man was waiting in the hallway. “Nothing,” Charles told him.

With a raised eyebrow, the other pushed off the wall and strolled to the kitchen. Charles kept up, though with difficulty. Not because he was weak or dizzy, but because of how his mind had caught on the thought of the gems … there in his wardrobe, just begging him to pour them out on the blanket and gaze at them.

“So,” he said loudly. “What did you do today? Besides taking out all the metal from those bits of jewelry?”

The man smiled at him while opening the door to the kitchen. “Errands. Mostly Syracuse again – here and there, though. I ran into a convoy from Rochester; they were pleased to have guarded passage.”

“What’s there to guard against?”

“Free West saboteurs are one thing – but surely there was an outlaw problem in Britain as well?”

Charles filled a saucepan with water for tea. “Yes. The city gates close at 1900; anyone out past that
time has to have their reasons in triplicate and signed by certain authorities … or end up running the
risk. Outlaws.” He pursed his lips at the stove, feeding more wood to it. “What a way to make a
living.”

“Until they no longer live, yes.”

“You have capital punishment for theft, then?”

“Not precisely.” The man peered into the stove. Charles did not see him move, but a sudden crackle
of flame made him think that certain parts of the iron had been momentarily superheated. “But we
hardly have the resources to feed those jailed for it.”

“So how do you control them?”

“Much the same way Oxford does. Or, at least, the way I assume it does.” The man reached down to
massage his right knee. “Consolidated settlements with strict curfews, and as many guards as can be
spared on the farms in the summer. Shortened growing season, you know.”

“Mm–hm.”

“And,” the man concluded, “certain inducements to the outlaws. The third scouting unit based in St.
Louis is almost completely drawn off ex–bandits of New York that was, and their pet motorcycles.”

“And they did this out of the goodness of their hearts?”

“High rates of hazard pay. That and the guarantee of at least one meal daily.”

“Which is more than can be guaranteed here in New York that was, is that it?”

“Basically. The students,” he gave Charles a serious look, “get the best of the tithes. And the
settlements are always very prompt with them. However, this past summer was one of the worst I
can remember. Damned if I know why – but it was cloudy for weeks on end.”

“And chilly. I remember it very well.”

In fact, Charles thought, his last round of sex before being Taken … had been in late summer, yes,
and enjoyable enough, yes – but all the more memorable for having as a chaser a warm and sunny
August day. He closed his eyes at the memory.

“Now we have Dallas, though.” The man’s voice sounded … not gleeful, precisely. But edged with
a fierce joy. “Their stores, there – they had laid them in against a siege. I had never seen anything
like it. Even in Eretz Galut.”

Charles opened his eyes again; peered down at his fingers. “So you took all that food –”

things. Takes them between separate locations in an instant,” he snapped a finger and thumb, “and
did just that with the non-perishables. Which meant that everyone local could start going through any
of their supply about to spoil … which means …”

Charles looked up. “Which means …?”

“I left it outside. The cold preserves it, yes? But I thought you could heat it up –”

“Left what outside? Wait – don’t go out, you idiot, it’s starting to storm –”
He spoke to the door, though, as the man ran away. Charles blinked. He hadn’t been mistaken, had he? The light wafting through the arrow windows, on the walk back from the library, had been dimming, and he had heard the wind picking up … Charles waited.

Not for long, though, because the door flung itself open and there was the man, holding something. He laid a thin, flat box on the table. With reverence.

Charles looked at him. Then looked down at the box. “What’s this?”

“Open it.”

He flipped the lid open. Blinking. “It’s – pizza?”

“You know it?” The man sounded excited. “I had never had any before coming here, to New York that was. Like corn chowder.”

“Oh.” Charles looked down at the dish. “Your travels never took you to Italy?”

“No.”

“And I suppose you never had much inclination to stop and chat in cafés …” Charles flipped the box lid up and down, aimlessly. The establishment had spilled sauce across its top.

“Do you want some?”

He jerked his eyes away from the vivid red splattered over white cardboard. “Oh! Yes, of course.” Best show more enthusiasm, just in case. “I’ll just lay a bit on the stovetop to heat, shall I?”

Charles did. It was vegetable, he saw; no meat. A pity, but … were those artichokes? Despite himself, interest stirred. And became more and more pronounced as the cheese started to bubble.

The man had been going through a few boxes and bags in a corner of the kitchen. Out of the corner of his eye, Charles saw him putting items in the icebox, in the cabinets. He fished out a bowl and put fruit into it.

“Why the sudden feast?”

“Perishables, like I said. I wanted to be sure you had enough,” the man explained, looking over his shoulder. He held up a bottle of wine. “This ought to see you through for a week. I’m leaving on the New Year, and my lady will be too occupied with her preparations here to assign you a new Monitor –”

“Wait.” Charles felt his jaw sag. Three different things to shock him. The man was leaving in two days, which sounded a lot closer now than it had on Christmas … Frost was returning shortly after.

And … there was a bottle of wine. Right there.

“Don’t suppose we could open that?” He tipped his chin at the bottle. “It would go well with dinner.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“I have no idea, truly. I’m full of surprises.” Charles laid the heated slices on plates, snagged two glasses. Then he seated himself in a rush and started eating with gusto.
The blighter used a metal strip to uncork the wine. And – Charles rolled his eyes. A knife and fork, to eat a piece of pizza? Hyper–civilized, if anything.

“Budem.” The man raised his glass. “Long life.”

“To civilization,” Charles replied, raising his.

Although Charles made a valiant effort, he could not finish the pizza. The man had eaten one slice and then watched, sipping wine leisurely, as Charles went back for seconds and thirds. Charles had gotten used to the feeling of those eyes on him. And this time he had been more worried about bits of olive catching in his teeth.

“Good?” The man’s voice was soft.

“God, yes.” He swallowed his last bite; cleared his palate with the last gulp of wine. “And to think that not even ten days ago it would have thrown my digestive system for a loop.”

“But you’re better now.”

“Yes. Yes, I – oh,” and Charles looked indignant at the glint in the man’s eyes. “You can’t be thinking about sex right now, can you?”

“Mm.”

“I just ate half a pizza. Did you not notice?”

The man shrugged, with a slight smile. “Are you not drunk enough? Is that it?”

“Was that the plan? Stuff me full of food and try to get me drunk enough to shag? Well, that sounds like the best idea I have ever heard. And I have heard certain strategies to take Denver involving President Stryker and – large amounts of hashish – and really. Who came up with that one?”

“It’s best left unsaid. Although it is a thought, Xavier. Do you suppose you would prove more … pliant …” and the man lingered on the word, almost caressing, “… if I were to give you some?”

“‘Some’ – what?”

“Hashish.”

“You have that – here? Of all places?” Charles knew his eyes were wide. “I wouldn’t think trade networks far–flung enough. I mean, it’s not just something you can pick up in Utica.”

“Albany,” the man corrected. “Zhōngguó. They gave me some at their embassy.”

“You’re joking.”

A firm shake of the head. Those green eyes were gleaming, and the smile was sly, now. “What do you say, Xavier?”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“And now what do you say?”

Charles had waited in the hallway while the man strode off, not half an hour after they had washed
the dishes. But he had not waited long. For before he knew it the man had returned, carrying a lacquer case and a small bundle of wax paper.

It was easy enough to beckon the other inside. “Let’s get a move on, shall we?”

“I was waiting for ’please’.”

“Please, then. Please –”

“Eager, are you?”

“It’s the novelty,” Charles said brightly. “Something for a long winter night.” He blinked at the wind’s moan outside. “I’m glad there’s enough firewood here. Did you … Did you go and bring more?”

“Maybe.”

“When?”

“You were in the library.”

“Well, really, there was no call for that.”

“Of course not.” The man slouched by the fire, extending his right leg. “I haven’t showed you how to use the telephone.”

“… You have a telephone?”

“Maybe?”

Charles turned away. The man waited; then tsk’d at him. “Don’t sulk, Rabe. Just build the fire for me. It would not do to get cold in the night.”

“Not when we’re too drugged to go stoke it, is that it? Fine.”

For a long moment there was only silence, punctuated by the soft sounds of the fire catching. Then the man’s voice wafted round him like smoke. “Here. Look at this.”

Out of curiosity, Charles turned. He blinked in astonishment, though, before catching hold of the inlaid ebony pipe. It was elegantly carved and perfectly balanced, with lacquer creatures out of myth prowling up and down its sides. “It’s lovely.”

“Isn’t it?” The man sounded pleased. “It was a gift, a long time ago.”

“From?”

“Nobody you would know. Besides, I think he’s dead now.” A wry smile at him. “He headed up the Triad for a while, after they moved north. I … helped him once.”

“Ah.” Gang warfare in Zhōngguó, Charles remembered dimly. How very disreputable. And speaking of which – the man had unfolded the bundle and brought a piece of metal to bear on what looked like a lump of tar. Charles watched for a moment.

“Can I help?”

“Isn’t it ‘may I’?”
“Well,” Charles started – he hadn’t just been corrected, no, not at all, “I’m technically asking if there’s anything physical that I can –”

“Xavier.”

“What?”

“Go relax.” The man waved him towards the bed. “I know what I’m doing.”

Charles tugged off his knit hat. Laid it in the wardrobe, covertly checking the coffer as he did, and then flopped down, stretched out without a fuss. He yawned – the food a warm weight in his stomach – and propped his chin on one hand to watch the other work. “You do this often, then?”

“Not that often, now.” Metal flashed on the strange tar. The wax paper crackled. “When I was younger, on the steppes. Hunting trips out of Eretz Galut.” He held a metal strip up to his mouth, flicked his tongue out for a taste. “In Zhōngguó it’s a form of currency. Used in bribes, goodwill offerings – things like that …”

His voice trailed off as he took hold of the pipe. Charles squinted, trying to see. But the man was backlit by the fire, so all that was visible was his silhouette and the smooth motions of his hands.

Oh.

Charles felt his nostrils flare. There was a heady scent tickling them. Resinous and strange – a mix of plant matter ... and sweet. Wonderful – “Oh, I recognize that.” He grinned.

“Really?” The man rose to his feet; loped over to the bed. “I hadn’t thought it of you.”

“My depredations confined to sex alone? Hardly. No,” and Charles sat up to make room. “Surely this is the incense of a misspent youth.”

After settling on the bed at Charles’ feet, the other bent forward to stretch - like a cat - and held out the pipe to him. Charles took it, grin widening. He caught sight something shiny, stuck through the black drug – “What’s that?”

The man was inching up – little by little – to wedge himself in between Charles’ body and the wall. Charles would have laughed, but he was too busy trying to inhale.

“Trade secret,” the man said, but Charles had a mouthful of smoke, so he could not press him. And then, several moments later, he had forgotten the question.

They passed the pipe back and forth. The wire twisted into the bowl glowed red hot, but only at certain moments. For the man was watching him, eyelids heavy, and he timed the wire heating up with Charles’ own puffs.

A fascinating solution, Charles realized, to the problem of keeping everything hot enough to produce smoke. No need to hover by the fireplace, no need to juggle coals in a dangerous fashion. Even if the man’s careful attention to timing meant most of said smoke was being inhaled by one Charles Xavier: expatriate, ex–professor – psionic battery–for–hire and professional captive …

Although … the hashish had started to bat his thoughts round and round, like a cat with a feather on a string. So Charles did not feel sad or angry at all. It was lovely. Everything was lovely. He thought to say so as the man took back the pipe.
The man coughed on the smoke. “What?”

“I said,” Charles repeated, “that – it’s lovely.”

“Oh.”

What did the other think he had said? Lovely. Dove–ly. Above love. Who knew?

Charles watched lazily as the man took a deep pull on the pipe and tipped his head back. That long line of throat … Muscles working as he exhaled, and – Charles felt his lips part – as he managed to draw the exhaled smoke back into his nostrils. Some astounding sleight–of–hand. Or sleight–of–nose. Charles wasn’t sure what to call it, but it befit a dragon, lying somnolent and sleek upon a heap of treasure …

*Treasure.* Before he knew it, Charles had slipped and slid off the bed, to stumble over to his wardrobe.

“Xavier ... Where are you going?”

*Oh.* Right. Nobody could have stolen the jewels, because nobody else was at the manor. Jewels. All his. Charles knew they would be perfectly safe. So he pretended that he had leaned against the wardrobe out of wooziness, and lurched over to the hearth. “More firewood,” he said.

“*Danke.*”

“No trouble at all.” Charles placed two more logs on the fire and turned, leaning one shoulder against the mantel. The room was starting to shimmer in front of his eyes – but he could see the man quite clearly, if he focused through the haze. And that long line of body sprawled on the bed … dark trousers, black turtleneck riding up just slightly …

Charles swallowed. His mouth was watering, which was a bit ridiculous given how dizzy he felt. He looked for something just as ridiculous in turn for his next focus – something to take his mind off lean muscle and pale skin. *There.* The man’s feet were bare. There would be nothing sillier than chubby toes and bunions on the feet of a legendary menace … Except: *damn* it. Charles had sidled closer, to look, and the long lines of metatarsals were just as elegantly wrought as the rest of him. It wasn’t fair.

“Xavier …”

He looked up. The man’s eyes were glinting through the smoke. He raised his eyebrows. “Come back to bed.”

He took another pull off the pipe, and exhaled in a strong stream through both nostrils.

Charles stared, fascinated. “*Guten Abend, Herr Drache.*”

“*Er wäre noch besser wenn ich dich wieder im Bett hätte.*”

“What …” Charles’ thoughts moved as slowly as molasses. “What does that mean?”

“Only that ‘the evening will be even better when I have you back in bed.’ Never fear. This dragon,” and he grinned, baring white teeth, “will ask before he bites.”

“How very well–mannered of him.”

“Come, *Rabe.*” The man shifted to make more space. “I would not have you be cold.”
“Kind of you.” Charles smiled, weaving his way across the room. He flopped down with a sigh; the other grunted at the impact. Still, if he hadn’t wanted to be flopped upon, Charles thought, he should have moved his arm.

Or perhaps Charles should not have aimed the flop at that particular body part. As it was, it only took one abrupt flex of muscle beneath cloth, where Charles’ cheekbone was snugged up against a biceps, for him to find his face plastered against the man’s chest.

“Mmph.”


“Let me up.” Charles pawed at him. “And give me some more. I want some more.”

“You only ever have to ask. Here.”

Charles took the pipe as the man gently pushed at his shoulder, pressed a strong hand into his opposite armpit, pulled up so that Charles could rest neck and head on the pillow instead. That arm was a warm line under his shoulders, now, and the man took his other hand away. He passed it over his own face, inhaling deeply, before reaching out to tug at Charles’ sweater. The man’s own green sweater, Charles remembered. But his now. His to wear, his to repair .... And it was lovely and warm. He wasn’t giving it back.

Charles sighed around the pipe stem, inhaling as much of the smoke as he could manage. It wasn’t his fault that the green knit was loose and baggy. The man might have been built like a greyhound, but he still had a breadth of shoulder proportionate to his height – a height more than Charles’ own. It wasn’t fair: tall, and slender, and a dragon. Charles blew smoke at the ceiling, blinking fuzzily. Not fair. Even if the dragon liked to pet him. As the man was doing now: gentle touches on his shoulder, fingertips brushing beneath the sweater neck, tracing his collarbone. He took another deep pull. Exhaled.

“Oh …” Charles heard his own voice, faraway and dreamy. “… That’s so good.”

“Mmm.”

“Have you ever wondered if – when the stars were gone for so long … Do you remember that? The winters. 1951 and 52, all year long … Do you remember?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever wondered – if they wondered – what happened to us?”

“If who wondered?”

“The stars.”

A long pause. Then: “Xavier.”

“What?”

“Would we even be visible from Alpha Centauri?”

“Oh, we have studied astronomy, I see …”

“Not much.”
“Hm.”

“Just enough to realize when you, Professor, are chasing the dragon.”

“Not a professor anymore. And dragons don’t exist.”

“It’s an expression.” A yawn in his ear; the man stretched. Charles heard the pop of his shoulders. The arm beneath his shoulder flexed again. Charles thought to protest – but he didn’t really care that the other seemed to want to be his pillow. And it was just as comfortable to inch closer. He turned on one side, slightly, leaned back against the man. Felt both arms drape round him, warm hands clasping on his chest. And as the beard brushed across his own shaven head with a scraping sound, the man’s voice vibrated against his scalp.

“From Zhōngguó. That’s where I first tried it. And afterwards … they use it on the steppes, you know? I told you that, didn’t I?”

“As well they might, because ‘it,’ my friend, is quite exceptional.”

“Black hash, they call it. Trade for it.” The rough voice was sounding increasingly slurred. “From down by the edge of the New Caliphate. And sometimes in Eretz Galut, the sages ‘… And I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: And also on the men–servants, and on the maid–servants, in those days I will pour out my spirit –’”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Yoel.” The man was nuzzling close. “Prophet.”

“Oh - Joel?”

"You would say, yes."

"That’s right. Well. Shut up for while, will you?"

A drowsy sigh. And … Charles considered tensing up. But didn’t. The man’s callused hands had been placid on his chest, holding Charles close. But now they were starting to massage small circles. Charles could feel the touch through the green sweater, warm and gentle, sending prickles of heat down his back – but nothing to be concerned about, since everything around him felt soft and comforting. Even the air.

Then Charles wriggled closer, to get warmer. The other tipped his body, just slightly. And –

The one thing that wasn’t soft was the man’s cock, now pressed against Charles’ arse. Huh. Two layers of trousers, to say nothing of pants, and Charles could still feel it. Lovely. But the opium mixed in meant that surely they would both fall asleep sooner rather than later, after spiraling down … Best to distract him in the meantime.

“And what do they see?”

“What?”

“Those sages, smoking their sacred pipes on the steppes. What do they see? The past? The future?” Charles elbowed to make a bit of room so he could turn onto his back, ignoring the other’s huff of protest. Then he tipped his head to nuzzle against the man’s throat. He felt his own breath puff hot and damp against skin. “I wonder: did they ever see us? And what were we doing, before we fell
asleep … Don’t you feel like sleeping?”

Silly blighter, ignoring the hint. Charles could almost hear the loopy smile, all teeth, as hot breath gusted over his forehead. The man mouthed a kiss against Charles’ brow and breathed heavily on his face as he shifted lower. Before long Charles felt the same breath on his sternum. Warm, even through the sweater.

“Those sages once had a wondrous vision that they related to me. They said: they saw me, two nights before the goysische New Year, and thus 1970 … I was in bed with you,” the man sounded pleased, “and I was sucking your cock.”

“Oh, please.” A pause. “They really said that?”

“… I made that up.”

“Exactly.”

“But may I suck your cock?”

“Not this again –”

“Please?”

“You’re joking,” Charles snorted, and nudged the man’s abdomen with one knee. The other was making rapid tracks lower – south for the winter, he thought, and choked back a giggle.

“Not joking.” And the blighter went for the tie of his sweatpants. “Please? Bitte?”

Really, how could the man be comfortable, practically folded in half as he was? He needed to leave off such nonsense. Charles reached out and grabbed belt loops. Tugged. But instead of falling back, the other leaned and shifted, and –

“Ow.”

Charles couldn’t help it. He laughed. The man had tipped over, and only caught himself on one elbow, falling. And not before he had cracked his forehead on one of Charles’ bony kneecaps.

Not that it was as amusing, Charles thought, pushing with his free arm, to have the other’s equally bony shins knocking him in the head. But it could be worse. He could have a face full of feet. Or –

“Oi,” he said, taking his other hand from the belt loops and pushing more forcefully. “Get out of it.”

“Please, let me?”

Fingers tugged at the tie to his sweatpants, just as – Charles flinched. The man had flexed his feet against the bedframe and the entire thing had vibrated. Fuck. “Stop that.” He made his voice sharp. “No powers in bed.”

“Oh - sorry.”

And then – Charles gulped as he felt the rasp of calluses, the cool touch of fingers on his cock. Cool, because although he wasn’t hard, it was hot – everything was hot – and the air had gone from feeling soft and comforting to pressing against his face with the weight of a dozen quilts. That and the room was starting to spin. How interesting.

“Wait,” Charles said. “I don’t –”
He had to break off in a groan, as the man leaned forward and breathed on his cock. Then there was a flicker of tongue. Charles hiccuped. “Could you – not? Please?”

“You don’t want it?” the man slurred. "Schöner Lehrer ... Let me? Please?"

There was long wet drag of tongue, from the fold of his foreskin to the thatch of hair at his groin. Charles had propped himself up on one elbow, to see – and when he caught sight of the man’s slow smile up at him, eyes glinting with the firelight, he couldn’t help it. He fell backwards with a thump. Tried to focus on something. Anything. There – the inseam of the man’s trousers, in front of his own face. Charles tried to count the stitches. Anything to get his mind away from what was going on below –

He felt a puff of breath, cool on the wetness of saliva. The man was lapping at him, harder – then the heat of that mouth closed around the tip of his cock and the blighter was tonguing at his foreskin – Charles winced with the memory and braced himself – but nothing painful happened – no bite –

But he wasn’t getting hard, either. Charles only twigged to it when he felt another gust of breath. A grunt – frustrated? And: “No powers in bed.”

Charles blinked. “What do you mean?”

“You’re using your – mind. Power. Thing. Otherwise you’d be –” and there was a jab of tongue at his flaccid cock – “you’d want –”

He felt a laugh building up, but only allowed himself a snort. “Because you’re that irresistible? Really?”

“I don’t know.” The licking was faster, more sloppy. Then another pause, and: “Am I not doing it right?”

“Oh, hush.” Charles reached down to scratch at the man’s hair. “It’s because of the mix. Hashish has a splendid effect on the mind, opium equally splendid … but put the two together and the latter will make you,” he yawned, “want nothing more than sleep.”

“I had the same, and I want –”

“Yes ...” Charles turned his head, smirking, and pressed his face against the tent in the man’s trousers. Tent, hell. If they were smoking on the steppes, it was technically a yurt.

“I can tell you want, my dear. You had the same,” he nudged closer, and heard the other growl again, “but I’ve had much more of it. Which is all your fault.”

“My – what –”

“Fault. You were the one to heat the wire when you did. I got much more smoke. So leave off now,” Charles pushed at the man’s brow, “there’s a good chap.”

A sulky mumble – he felt the press of tongue against his balls.

“Come on.” Charles nudged up with one sharp hipbone. “Stop.”

“Fine.” It was almost a snarl. No – too drunk-sounding to be a snarl. But whatever it was, the man had slid away, onto his back … or as much of his back as he could manage. The poor sod was crammed up between Charles’ body and the wall. Charles stretched, luxuriously, pulled his sweatpants back up. And then shifted over to make more room.
“There now,” he soothed. “You were doing very well. And I see that you, ah,” he eyed the man’s own obvious hard-on, “that you might like the same – but may I table that matter? I want to do just as good a job as you were doing,” Charles reached out, found the hand nearest him, and laced his fingers through the man’s. “And I’m a bit too loopy right now, to manage properly.”

Which was a total lie. And even if he didn’t want to demonstrate the most scintillating fellatio the world had ever seen … he could always just lie back and let the man fuck his face. The thought, though, made him queasy: those lean thighs on either side of him, straddling; slender fingers gripping his shaven head, searching for traction - maybe even clawing, oh God; green eyes glowing down at him, ravenous, as that cock hit the back of his throat and further, again and again –

Or perhaps the queasiness was from the opium. And thank heaven for the latter. The man took a long moment to reply – and when he did, it was: “… What?”

Charles hid a smile. “‘What’ to what?”

“I mean,” the man sounded groggy. “What did you say?”

“I said: come here. Come up here.” Charles tugged at the man’s hand.

The other obeyed. And – gracefully, Charles saw, blinking. They were flying high as kites, and the blighter made it look utterly natural to coil his body in on itself, turn round and stretch, and wriggle up to rest his head on Charles’ shoulder. Where he stayed, with a sigh.

“Good.” Charles petted his hair. “Very good. Now: are you as tired as I am?”

“Mm–hm.”

“Then I’ll pull up the blankets,” he did, “and we’ll go to sleep.”

“I …” The man’s jaw cracked in a yawn.

“Exactly.”

Charles kept his strokes gentle and regular. Not a stubble of hair, not anymore. It was growing out. And its thickness felt like the grain of velvet beneath his hands. What, he wondered, would his skin feel like? Silk? Charles pressed an experimental kiss on the man’s brow. Not silk – too warm. Slightly damp with sweat –

The man made a soft, animal sound deep in his throat. He drew closer to Charles, curling those long wiry arms around him. Holding him tight.

“Just like that,” Charles murmured. “Go to sleep.”

Whether or not the man obeyed immediately could not be said – only because he had fallen asleep himself. But he could not be blamed for that, Charles thought. It had been the drugs. And everything was so warm …

Until he blinked awake, with a shiver.

Charles groaned to himself. Stared up at the ceiling, into the dark. It was practically absolute – the fire had almost completely died. Only the bed of coals glimmered through the blackness.

Carefully, he looked over at the man. Well. Over and down, and not that far away either. That short hair was brushing his chin; he could feel slow regular breaths warm against the base of his neck.
“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again,” he murmured to the man’s head. “Thank God you don’t snore.”

There was no answer, but of course he expected none. Charles shifted again. Peered down the bed – ah. The heaviest blanket lay bunched at their feet. They were covered by another, but even with the warmth of two bodies … He blinked at the sound of the wind outside. A low moan that whistled up into a shriek –

“Brr.” Quickly, methodically, he peeled the man’s arm off his chest. Charles grabbed the pillow behind him and managed to shove it under the man’s head before he eased away completely. There was a sleepy mumble, and: “Shh,” he whispered. “Sleep.”

His own fingers, brushing over the man’s brow and temples … Ha. The other could almost be a dog in truth. One soothing stroke and he was gone.

Charles stared. In the darkness, his hand looked pale against the shadow of the other’s hair …

He bit his lower lip. Did some mental arithmetic: cubic roots. Matrices. All in working order; everything as fast as it ever was. The drugs, it appeared, had worn off. Briefly, Charles wondered if he had his aviary to thank for that. But just as quickly he dismissed the distraction and slipped out of bed. Rebuilt the fire, blowing patiently and fanning the coals with a book – until the first flames took the kindling. Then a bigger chunk of wood, and another. Charles laid a teepee structure, poked it with a stick to check its stability …

And turned on his haunches to look at the man.

A sudden realization made his skin prickle. This was how the other must have seen him, the second night after Dallas – the night the man had built a fire for him. Charles shivered, remembering. He had been huddled on the bed, wrapped in a manteau and beneath heaps of blankets – but still freezing … So, excepting the vantage point of the hearth, perhaps it wasn’t as similar after all.

For the man lay draped over the bed, body limp. Lips parting occasionally, whether for a breath or for a mumble. Lashes dark on pale cheekbones. Relaxed … at peace.


It sounded sibilant, cutting through the pop and snap of the fire.

He uncoiled to his feet. Took a step forward – but then:

“Ah.” Charles smiled to himself, rueful. “More important things first.”

For whatever his own daring and cunning plans, Charles had greatly regretted not brushing his teeth before bed. He took a moment to do so. Focusing on the mint taste – he was on the last tube, damn – and not on the thought of what lay ahead.

Except that it was different than before. He spat into the sink. Rinsed. “Different,” Charles told his reflection. Or, at least, what he assumed was his reflection. He could hardly see in the darkness, even with the door open. Different, because the last time he had plotted something in the bathroom, it had all gone straight to hell. A close shave – he ran a hand over his scalp, grimacing – in more ways than one.

This, though … this was just a small thing. Just the tiniest look – to see what Frost might have done in the man’s mind. With the drugs, the other would stay sleeping. Or if he glimpsed Charles there, he would assume it was a dream. Maybe. Probably.
The problem, Charles thought as he paced back to the bed, was that he hardly remembered anything of his only other visit. *Visit* … An odd way of putting it, but he could hardly think of a better. *Jaunt. Journey. Trip.*

… *Intrusion.*

But it wasn’t going to be an intrusion; not at all. Nothing harmful, nothing intended to hurt. He would only pause the briefest while there. Just to see what he might see.

Charles tugged the heaviest blanket out from where it was caught at the foot of the bed. He settled himself back down, close to the man again. Pulling the blanket up over them both, he smiled at the sudden spike in warmth. *Perfect.*

Enough to keep anyone warm and sleeping – for quite some time, too.

“*Right.*” Charles caressed the man’s hair with one hand. Before he could second-guess himself – *now, now, do it now* – “*Raven,*” he whispered, “*fly with me –*”

– and he was in.

In, and – Charles gasped, realizing. On the other side of the river. The forest side. *Safe.*

It was very dark, though. Oddly … humid. And quiet.

“*Raven?*”

He kept his voice low. Circed on one heel, anxiously looking. Where had the raven flown? In Angel’s mind, his owl had stayed with him; in Jean’s, his penguin and his tiny brooch bird could not be pried away … But in the man’s mind, he remembered now, his raven had flown to the highest battlement. Had perched on a statue’s shoulder, and only fluttered away at Charles’ request.

And then it had plunged straight down a well, down into the deepest darkness, to rescue him …

Charles looked round again, feeling his breath hitch. He was … remembering. It was odd, and frightening. But the night of – their first kiss – and early Christmas morning, when the man had held him down to –

He shuddered. Both times, once invited and once not, he had landed on the far side of the river.

Charles squinted across the water. It was silvery in the dark, giving off a faint green glow. There were black shapes wending their way through the silver. Or … bobbing, he supposed – like soap in the bath, or –

“*Oh,*” he mumbled. “*That’s right.*”

*Corpses.* He had forgotten.

Trembling, Charles turned to stare at the forest. In the dark it gleamed silver as well. Just like the river, only flowing vertically, not horizontally. The metallic trees clinked and rustled, like coins having a sly gossip. Whispering: who is that mysterious armored man? And why …

“‘Why the fuck is he back here?’ An excellent question.” Charles felt for his sword; hefted his shield. His nerves were strung tight with tension. “This was not the best idea. Admit it now, and perhaps you’ll be able to – get out …”
But could he? He bit down hard on his lip again, mind whirling. Could he fly away without his raven? And where was it?

“Hello?” he called. “Where are you?”

Something splashed behind him. He whirled, gasping –

“Oh God.”

There was a dark shape rising from the water.

“Oh God oh God …” Charles stumbled back, raising his sword. This was how it had happened in the other – incursion. The first one, oh God, he remembered it now. The man had waded out from the hideous river and had gone for his throat with a pair of immense iron swords. Although he had chased Charles through the woods, first. To the castle.

Sod caution, sod whispering. The man had to know he was here, now, so Charles called, “Raven! Fly to me – hurry!” He looked round once more, frantic. “Where are you?”

And then – he shivered in relief as his raven landed in a flurry on his shoulder. It had no trouble dealing with the pauldrons … but then again, Charles remembered, it never had. At least, not in the man’s mind. The raven had not seen Angel’s or Jean’s – and had not deigned to fly back to his shoulder in Sean’s, after he had removed the memory. How would it behave now? After he had landed in the man’s mind without permission, again.

You didn’t ask! he remembered Jean saying, cold as ice in her anger. And Charles hadn’t this time either. Well. He had offered, but the man had said ‘no’ …

“No,” he said to the raven, shivering. “And now he’s – oh. Oh God.”

For the dark figure had reached the riverbank. And with a sloshing noise, the man left the water behind and prowled towards him.

What could he do? What could he possibly do? Charles stood in place, frozen. He thought, wildly, to run – and the raven gave one flutter of wings, feathers batting sharp against his ear. So he stayed in place. And squeezed his eyes shut.

He heard nothing. But he felt something warm - breath against his skin.

Charles bit back a whimper.

He felt … The man was … nosing at his throat. Smelling him. One bite and he’d bleed to death – the other could tear his throat out –

Charles gasped. Tried: “H–hello?”

Another breath puffed over him; then, for a long moment, there was nothing. Cautiously, Charles opened his eyes.

The shadow had moved away. It had glittering eyes that looked at him in return. Charles squinted. He could hardly make out features in the gloom – but it was definitely the man … dressed in black. Arms hanging loose at his sides. And there – he gulped – there were two knives – swords. One in each hand. Long and sharp.

“Um.” He kept his voice level with an effort. “Nice – night for it. A walk, I mean.”
The raven fluffed its feathers on his shoulder. Charles saw the man’s face turn toward it. *Good.* Carefully, he edged to the side. More – a bit more … Perhaps if he waded back across the river, found his way to the other side … perhaps then he could fly away …

The memories were returning, though. In a rush – like grains of sand stinging his skin. He had flown out of the depths of the man’s mind. He remembered it, now. So technically he could probably fly away from this very riverbank – if only he could – he nerved himself to start running.

Instinct him stop in place, and turn.

The man was following him, Charles saw, skin prickling. Those eyes gleamed, reflecting whatever light shimmered on the water as well. Silvery and eerie – from the mountains, he saw, turning to look. The vast peaks looming in the distance, glowing in the darkness, steaming with what looked like a noxious fog.

He carefully looked back at the man. Firmed his foothold – difficult, given that he was edging closer and closer to the water. But the other … Charles shivered. The man was leaning forward - every line in his body tense.

“Listen,” Charles began –

Those teeth flashed white in the darkness.

“Wait.” He held up his hands – well. Held up sword and shield. “I can explain. I –“

The man lunged.

Charles was caught off guard. He dodged the wrong way, for the thing had feinted to one side before that lunge. And then he couldn’t breathe, for he had been tackled in the stomach, or below – he couldn’t reach with his shield in time. Tackled, and borne down into the water –

– which tasted – and felt – like *death*.

*No*, Charles meant to say, but his mouth falling open in a cry took in only more of that foul water. *No* –

“No!” he screamed, and thrashed beneath the bedclothes –

– but the man had him in an iron grip. Around the waist, before he snarled again, bestial, and pinned Charles – hands to shoulders, one long leg thrown across his two quick as a flash –

… Before moving more slowly, to straddle him. Charles gasped for breath, and winced at the other’s full weight pressing him down into the mattress. Twin points of pain, one in each shoulder – “I’m sorry,” he choked.

“Sorry?” the man hissed. “*Sorry*?”

Charles had a split second to stare at the look in the man’s eyes. Gleaming green in the firelight. Enraged.

Then he couldn’t see those eyes anymore, because the man had lunged forward and kissed him hard. *Fuck* – no, *no* – He struggled, kicked, tried to break free, but those hands were unyielding and those teeth had clamped down on his lips and drawn blood.
Charles gasped at the pain from the bite. Which meant that he opened his mouth, which of course meant that the other pressed forward with a guttural snarl, deepening the kiss by force. Just as – Charles thrashed against him, but the bastard had kicked his legs apart and – *God no* – had dropped down like the rock in a deadfall trap. Charles cried out into the kiss – *no* – and brought his hands up to claw at the other’s eyes –

And the man drew back, teeth bared. “*What?*”

“*No,*” Charles gasped. Pushed at the other’s chest. “I don’t – I said ‘no’ –”

“So did I. Didn’t I?” Strong hands shook him. “*Didn’t I?*”

Pressing his lips shut, Charles tasted blood. He gulped it down … and his skin prickled. For the man had laid one slender finger against his mouth. And was staring at him from above, his long body stretched out above Charles’ own.

“You listen to me, now, Xavier. And listen well.”

Charles stared up at him, mutely.

The man was breathing like he had run the steeplechase. His eyes looked wild.

“You told me ‘no’ – and you told me that it was fucking important to listen to you, Xavier. And I did.” His lips curled back from his teeth again; it looked horrible in the firelight. “It took me a little while, because,” he shook his head hard, as if to clear it, “I don’t know. But I understand now. And when you’ve told me ‘no’ – I have stopped. Haven’t I?”

Fighting not to shiver, Charles nodded.

“But … I told you ‘no.’ Stay out of my head. Don’t go in there. Keep. Out. *No.* What part of that is so difficult? Xavier? What part of that *don’t you understand?!*”

“No part,” he gasped – but it seemed the other was finding it difficult to stop, for he kept on, almost spitting with rage.

“Doesn’t it mean the same thing, if I tell you ‘no’? Even if it’s ‘blue,’ or ‘stop,’ or – whatever other words – I –” the man shook him again – “I don’t understand. Tell me why, Xavier. Tell me why you do these things. And when,” and his voice cracked, “when I was sleeping.”

Charles’ breath caught.

The man’s eyes were glittering in the firelight … but differently, now. And a gleaming line tracked down one stark cheekbone.

Charles felt something hot land on his face.

*Oh.*

Carefully, he shifted one shoulder. The man let his grip slacken – didn’t bother pinning Charles again … Merely closed his eyes as Charles reached up and laid one hand on the side of his face.

“I’m sorry,” Charles said.

“I.” The man’s voice caught. Raped in his throat. “I don’t understand you.”

“Oh – here. Let me up.”
Shivering, the other obeyed, moving back and to the side. Charles dabbed at the blood on his lips as he pushed himself upright. Then he let the adrenaline carry him through in a turn. He pressed his face against the man’s throat, tugged down the turtleneck – ignoring the huff of surprise – and kissed his pulse. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know you … that is. I didn’t think.”

The lines of tendon and muscle felt taut as rope drawn tight.

“Or maybe,” Charles murmured, “I was thinking too much. I tend to, you know. Over–think things. I’m so clever, I’m so sly –”

“Geschickter Rabe,” the man said. Voice thick.

“Something like that.” Sighing, Charles moved from the other’s throat to his cheekbone. Kissed the damp tracks there – the man’s breath caught – and moved down to the roughness of beard, brushed over it and found the thin line of mouth.


The man’s breath came in shallow gulps. Warm, uneven. “Oh.”

“And I won’t do it again.”

A snuffle. “Promise?”

“Yes.” Charles kissed him again, and drew back. Traced the symbol on his sternum – “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“Don’t die,” the man gasped, and Charles bit back an undignified snort of surprise as he was caught in a throttling embrace. That was – almost too tight. He tried to breathe carefully. Who needed a functioning ribcage anyway? Not him.

And he didn’t need higher brain functions either, which was a good thing. For the man had pressed another kiss on him, flicked his tongue once … Charles opened his mouth. Let the other dive for his tonsils and bear him down to the bed. All for a good cause. Caress him. Reassure him.

*Everyone*, his mind whispered, *can be deceived.*

Except he lost his nerve before the first clothes had even come off. Adrenaline, perhaps. Belated shock. All Charles knew was that his teeth would have chattered, had they not been locked in a kiss. And his shoulders felt stiff as the man held him down and thrust against him. And even given the trousers –

Charles winced. Tried his best to relax. The other’s entire body was warm, after all: it wouldn’t have to cause him any pain or fear. Wiry arms holding him tight; all of that muscled weight pinning him; the sharp jab of hips, slotted between his own thighs.

The man drew his mouth away. With … oh dear. That had definitely been a slurp. Charles blinked up at him, tried to smile.

Warm breath on his face. “You taste good.”

“Toothpaste,” Charles replied. His voice came out higher–pitched than he had intended. Wavering.

The man looked long at him, eyes narrow. Then he raised an eyebrow. “Do you want this, Xavier?”
“Far better to ask ‘may I fuck you?’ ” Charles replied, rolling his hips; he felt rather than heard the grunt rattle through bones and flesh. And the sod was hard as a rock. Fine, then. Just – find the grease, strip off all his clothes, lie back and think of Oxford –

“No. Do you want me to fuck you?”

A pause.

And Charles bit his lip. “Um.”

“You don’t.”

“It’s only that I’m tired,” he hastened to assure the other, “and that I’m still –“

*Frightened of you*, he didn’t finish – because he wasn’t. Not frightened. Not anymore. For beneath the bloodthirsty veneer, the blighter was the biggest pushover of a starry–eyed romantic he had ever seen. Charles stared up at him, mouth twisting.

“You startled me,” he finished, “is all. We were sleeping well.” Charles rested one palm against the other’s cheekbone; the man leaned into the touch. “Couldn’t we just sleep some more?”

A kiss to the palm of his hand. Charles controlled his flinch, because, “Fine,” the man growled.

“Thank you.”

“Mm.” A shift off and to the side; the heat of that body pronounced but no longer all–encompassing. Charles did not resist as the man tugged him close. He tried to relax again, enough to sleep. Rather difficult, when wrapped round by arms as strong as a python’s coils.

“Sleep,” the man grunted into his ear. Charles made no reply. Merely tried to obey instead. *Just this once.*

He hoped he would not dream of castles or mountains … or rivers of the dead. A river, he thought, blinking drowsily, to bind him; a forest to enclose him; a castle to imprison him. But Charles had had none of that. He had escaped. And Raven had flown free …

He must have slept after all. For when he blinked again, sunlight was shining through the high arrow windows. The storm had gone – there was no wind, although the air in his room was frigid. The thermos was placed by the side of the bed. Charles reached out to touch it. Cold as any stone.

So the man had gone some time ago. “Albany,” Charles muttered to himself, “the crazy sod. Must have left early.”

He sighed. It would not do for the other to return and catch him lolling on blankets and pillows. God only knew what he would do. Roust him out, jibing – or strip and join him, panting for it. Charles could not decide which prospect was more unpleasant.

“Neither, then,” he told himself, and made it to the kitchen five minutes later.

He stoked the stove and reheated the contents of the thermos. What time was it? Charles thought of his watch, briefly, and dismissed the memories. He could check the angle of the sun through the library windows.

He gazed longingly at the pizza leftovers in the icebox. But: *if you don’t eat with me*, whispered through his memory, *you don’t eat at all …*
Best not antagonize the man needlessly, after he had so kindly gifted him with illicit drugs. And, for that matter, refrained from breaking any of Charles’ limbs after the incursion into his mind. Charles grimaced as he made his way to the library. Truly amazing, that he should be grateful for the other not committing unspeakable acts of violence.

Although … the look on his face, after being kissed …

Charles dismissed those memories too. He settled on studying Russian again. *Crime and Punishment* in the original, a dictionary, what appeared to be a grammar primer, scribbled on and bent at corners.

He passed a peaceful enough morning, though his stomach started grumbling as time wore on into noon. Perhaps it had been the drugs. Or a body completely reawakened: food, alcohol, sex – it wanted it all, and as much as it could have –

Even though he did not set any thought–fires, the man’s return did not catch him off–guard. The sound of an engine was quite loud even through the library’s windows. Charles found himself peering outside before he could think twice. Then he sat back at the table; made an effort to look studious – and sent his raven out to see just what the other was –

Raven was still hovering over the kitchen when the library door opened quietly. Charles blinked. There was the man, looking windblown and tired – but grinning at him, nonetheless. And shedding coat and hat, scarf and gloves onto the red couch.

“That was quick.”

“*Rabe, Rabe.*” The man prowled over on stocking feet and thrust a paper bag at him. “I saw you fly. Checking up on me, were you?”

“How can you –” But Charles halted mid–sentence, as he took the bag and registered its weight. “Oh. *Oh,* is this –”

“Yes,” the other replied. “Just don’t get any juice on the books.”

“I won’t.” Charles eagerly peeled the first orange. “But only if you have some too. You can’t keep giving me things.”

“And why not?” The man drew the desk chair over to the table. Let a carrying case fall on wood with a thump. “Is there room enough?”

“For you? Well of course – it’s your library.” Charles hurried to shove his books to the side. “What do you have there?”

“Work.”

He waited. “… Of what sort?”

The man raised his eyebrows. “Nosy, are we?”

Charles sighed. “There’s a difference between nosy and curious. And I was just being polite.”

“I’m sure.”

Quickly enough, the other took out several sheaves of paper. Charles squinted for a better look. Two topmost pages all in Russian. One cover page in English; a few sheet–sized maps. And then a whole section in what appeared to be – Spanish –
“Was there something you wanted to say, Xavier?”

Charles shrugged. “Are you hungry?”

“No.”

“Even after riding all the way to Albany and back.” He kept his voice skeptical. “In the cold. I know the storm stopped before you left – but even so, subzero will work up an appetite.”

“And if I said I was, you would get me something?” The man did not look at him. Focused, instead, on fitting a steel nib to its reservoir handle. “Fetch and carry?”

“Why not?” Charles got up from the table. “So: are you?”

The man stared. “I …”

“Come now. You’ve stuffed me full to the gills with food the past ten days. What do you want? I’ll fetch it.”

“Just … an apple. Some fruit, or something – I.” The other looked dazed. “Nothing that will stain, in the library.”

“Then I’ll be back shortly.”

Charles went down to the kitchen, and availed himself of the pizza. Open season. If he was kind enough to fetch for the other, he’d be kinder to himself. If anything, he thought, filling the thermos again after water had boiled – if anything, this would be an amazing opportunity. If he had a powerful enough drug, he could slip it into the man’s tea, wait for him to drink and then examine his mind at leisure –

Shaking his head to dismiss the thought, Charles snagged two apples and returned to the library. The man was hard at work – but he looked up long enough to smile … besotted – ha … as Charles held out the fruit. “Enjoy.”

“Thank you.”

Charles kept his smile sleek as he traced up the man’s arm from the hand gripping an apple. He laid both palms on the man’s shoulders. Bent to press a kiss into his hair.

And bent forward just a bit more, to try and see more of the documents.

“Charles …” There had been a delighted shiver, but apparently the man had twigged to the ruse. For his voice was now a growl. “Stop.”

“But what are you reading?”

“Status reports. Background material.” With a raised eyebrow, the man drummed slender fingers on the topmost sheet of paper. “Intelligence findings.”

“Oh. Might one ask what was found?”

“One might.”

Charles waited. Then: “So? What was –”

A tsk. “What was found? Is none of your business.”
At the glare Charles sent him, the man smiled. It was oddly … sweet? No, Charles thought, shivering. It couldn’t be. For even if the sod was looking at him fondly, behind those eyes lurked the animal, still — and whatever Frost had done to him —

“I could very well ask your advice on a few matters, Schatz. But please do not think you can caress me into doing your bidding.”

“Seems to have worked well so far,” Charles muttered.

“Ah. But never,” and the man grinned, taking a bite of apple with sharp teeth, “with my duty.”

He turned back to the papers. Charles kept sulking, but then decided to keep an eye out instead.

It was a fascinating exercise, to watch others work. Charles had already had opportunities to do so, of course. Exam takers, students in tutorials … even Raven, at the table with her arithmetic. Everyone was unique. All had a different style.

The man read through sheet after sheet of paper, sorting them neatly. He laid maps to the side and scanned the occasional memo. Charles glimpsed comments in the margins, scrawled in pencil. The man wrote using the steel–tipped pen. His handwriting was strong, slanting to the right. It looked familiar — oh. Of course.

Charles sighed to himself. That had been the handwriting on the map of Denver. The third time he had come to the library — he shuddered, despite the warmth of the fire crackling, and the thermostat … When this man — this man, sitting placidly across the table from him, taking neat bites of the second apple, now, and making notes on a memo … had strangled him near to death with a steel watch chain. Watched him bleed and vomit, kicked his ribs in and broken his wrist —

The pen had stilled.

Dragging his eyes up from it, Charles looked the man in the face. That face — bony, handsome in a terrifying way … Green eyes only flickering once, as he spat apple seeds and stem into his palm. Then intent on Charles again.

“Was ist los?”

“Nothing,” he said, looking away. He piled the orange peels together — got up, shakily, from the table, and went to toss them in the fire. A few acrid bursts later and they started to catch. Damp, though. They’d take a while —

“Huh.” There was a yawn, and a crack of bones. Charles turned to see the man stretching, arms flung back over the chair as far as they could go. The gruesome sound had been either his back or his shoulders. “That smells nice.”

“You should try it some time. Orange peel — but they burn more easily when they’re dried.”

“Things tend to.” And he rose from behind the table. Stretched out one leg, then the other — lunges. Charles heard additional popping noises.

“Good lord, man. Was that your knee?”

“Knee’s fine. Everything else, though …”

“I’m thirty-seven.” The other walked over to a window. “I’m not old.”

“Thirty-seven? Robbing the cradle.” The most casual of steps took him back to the tableful of papers. “I’m only thirty-one, you know.”

“I do know.”

Of course – the dossier. Charles grimaced at the table. Glanced up again at the man. The severe lines of nose and chin were silhouetted against the cold white-blue of the winter sky. He looked intent – but on what, Charles could not see. There was no way he could miss the flash of the steel ring, though, on the man’s thumb. As he brought up his left hand to rub the back of his neck. Still looking thoughtfully … into the woods, Charles realized. That was the view. Nothing but trees, grey-brown, jagged and stripped bare by winter’s cold.

A still-bright sky. It could not be that late in the afternoon.

“What time is it, I wonder,” he said. Quietly.

The man raised an eyebrow. Placed a hand in his trouser pocket –

– Charles stiffened.

There was his watch. His father’s watch, gleaming, sunlight on steel dazzling his eyes.

“A quarter past fourteen.”

Two hours to dusk, then, or a little less. Charles’ mind had pulled the figure from some almanac – but most of his thoughts were occupied. Staring at the watch.

And then looking up at the man, who had flicked his eyes back to Charles, and whose gaze softened. He closed the watch’s cover and beckoned with the same hand. “Come here.”

Charles looked away. “No, thank you.”

“Xavier. Please come here? It’s beautiful outside.” The man’s voice was soothing. “I want you to see.”

Want to gloat, more like. But Charles shuffled over, eyes wandering anywhere but the window. Over the chair back, the tabletop, the documents –

His gaze snagged on the Queen of Britain’s seal.

And the topmost papers. In English.

“What –”

“Come here? Bitte?” A hand landed on his shoulder and tugged. Charles did not have time to wrest free. Before he knew it, he was pressed flush against the man’s side, and the same hand was patting his shoulder.

Did the man intend it to be comforting? Bloody hell, he’d have to do better than that. Charles had just seen her Majesty’s written word – or a report on the same – on the desktop – tabletop – of the military leader of the EBS – his to-do list? To do … what?

“Don’t,” he said, not knowing how he’d finish. “Please don’t –”
‘Don’t’ what?’ The man sounded puzzled. “I just want you to see – look. You can see the river from here.”

Charles only half registered a distant glimmer of silver. He felt himself shivering.

“You’re cold? It’s the watch, the memory. Isn’t it? I’m sorry.” Strong hands started chafing his shoulders. “I’ll give it back to you – here, take it.” Warm steel dropped into his nerveless fingers. “I had to replace the cog I told you about –”

Charles couldn’t keep hold of the watch; could only watch it fall. The man caught it with his power, though, before it hit the floor. “… Charles?”

He said nothing.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you want it back? I could work gold into the cover, if you’d like, or make a design with jewels. An inlay. I’ve tried those before – I could make it look –”

“What,” he said, voice thin, “is happening in Britain?”

Silence.

“What are those papers about?”

The man drew the watch back to his hand, now cupped on Charles’ chest. Charles watched the chain glide through his fingers, like a friendly silver ribbon. Everything seemed to be moving more slowly.

“It’s nothing serious, Rabe.”


“Is it?”

The chain coiled neatly round the watch. Rested in the hollow of the man’s hand. “A home that let you go? A queen that let you leave? The best part of Britain,” and Charles shuddered – the hand with his watch was petting his sternum. Caressing. “The heart of the best of Britain – right here. I can feel it – and I say that your home is here now, Xavier. With me.”

“No,” he muttered.

“And why not? Because you are so worried about your precious Britain? It’s nothing important, Charles.” The man’s voice rasped in his chest, pressed against Charles’ back. “It’s nothing. News of an uprising or two – nothing that merits any of our military, especially given the spring –”

“Uprising? Who? Against whom?”

The man’s breath gusted hot over his hair. “If I tell you, will you say this is your home?”

“No.”

“If I tell you, will you ...” A kiss, dropped on the back of his skull. ”Again?”

“If you’re asking me to kiss you, no. God.” Charles squeezed his eyes shut. “Must everything be a bargain with you?”

A pause.
Then the man spoke softly. “The uprisings are of … mutants. Against your queen’s rule.”

“Why? Tell me why –”

“My lady wanted another round of recruitment. The war always heats up during the spring and summer, and surely this year will be no exception –”

Charles’ mind was still howling at ‘recruitment’ as the man kept going.

“… but there are some problems now.”

“How so?” He licked dry lips. “What problems could there possibly be? No one can withstand the Takers – there was that incident at Cambridge I heard tell of –”

“Mm–hm. Yuriko. Six years ago, wasn’t it?”

“ – god. My point is: if your precious lady wants something, she’ll find bloody wiggle room in whatever binding agreements she has.”

“They argue, in fact, that that is precisely what she has done. To our detriment.”

Charles bit his lip. “Explain, please?”

“It’s actually all your fault, Rabe. You see: with your recruitment, my lady violated a clause of the treaty between our two nations. None past the twenty–first year, and there you were, one and thirty. And now there is resistance to the notion of our going there twice in one year. Apparent resistance, of course, since we have not yet infiltrated this group. But your queen was disconcerted enough to protest to a diplomat over tea,” the man’s voice was mocking, “and that has never happened before. Thus: it is a matter for concern.”

Charles could say nothing.

“Your queen,” the man continued, “is … contradictory, to me. She has to protect her people, yes? A blood right to them – their loyalty, her protection. And yet she casts our kind out.”

“That’s not true.”

“The mutants there. Non–humans, the empowered … You were never encouraged in any way. Taught or trained. Were you?”

“We hid,” Charles gritted out. “But that was because of you. The Takers.”


“Ah,” Charles said, trying to cover while he racked his brain for something – anything. He had never heard of any such group while he still lived in Britain.

“We have only the most basic intelligence. Do you know anyone named Mystique?”


The man hummed into his hair. “So you see – it’s a task for our intelligence forces … but nothing more. You need fear nothing, Charles. Your shining isle is quite safe.”

Which was tripe, Charles thought, savagely. In this world – this brave new world of monsters and
winter and death … fortunes could change in a second. Fates hinge on a word. Just because he need
fear all, though, did not mean that he would. He only wished he could be at home. With his sister,
snug in their kitchen. Or – on New Year’s Eve, he remembered, they would be out with friends. The
midpoint of the endless whirl of gaiety spanning the twelve days of Christmas. Charles felt his throat
close. He would not cry. He would not. He wouldn’t give that bastard the satisfaction of seeing him –

“Xavier?” The man’s left hand moved from his shoulder to his face. Touched the stubble of his hair.
“Don’t be afraid.”

Charles jerked his head away from the hand. Unfortunately, that put him on a collision course with
the man’s chin – he winced as it nudged his right temple. “I’m not afraid.”

“No,” the other mused. Brushed a kiss over his brow. “I’m sure you’re not.”

And Charles shuddered as he felt the nudge of – oh god, that hard line of cock had bumped his hip,
and did everything get the man off? Tears, or angst, or just international politics? Fuck.

Quick as a flash, though, the other had drawn away. Charles peered at him narrowly. There was a
flush over his cheekbones; he avoided Charles’ eyes and stuffed the watch back into his trouser
pocket. Which had the unfortunate effect of stretching the fabric over … Charles gulped.

He lost sight of it as the man strode to the table. Shoved the papers back into their carrying case,
willily–nilly, and locked it. Then he paced over to the couch. “I’m going outside.”

“… Why?”

“Take a walk – fresh air. I have things to think about.”

Surely he couldn’t be going outside for a wank – the cold would snap his cock right off. Maybe …
Charles blinked. Maybe he was telling the truth. But if that were the case:

“May I come too?”

The man turned in the middle of pulling on his gloves. Stared.

“It’s just …” Charles did his best to look woebegone. “I haven’t been outside for weeks.”

“It was probably too cold, Xavier –”

“ – and nobody could be spared to guard me; yes, I know. And in recent days we have been, ah …
busy. But I should like it, very much. Please?”


“Of course I can be quiet. I’ll be the quietest churchmouse on this side of the –”

“Fine. You’ll need better boots for it, though. And another hat.” The man was galvanized. “I’ll go
get them. You go put on another layer –”

“My boots are fine.”

“I saw them in their box, Xavier,” and the other jerked his head towards the shelf concealing the
hidden room, “before you took them back. They’ll get snow in them in five seconds flat, with the
drifts the way they are.”
“All right, then.” Charles firmed his voice. “But please: nothing with metal.”

“No metal?” The man rolled his eyes. “Fine. Go get dressed.”

Jogging back to his room and pulling on another layer of clothing took his mind off Her Majesty’s plight, at least. A resistance. It was odd, Charles thought, tugging on a third pair of socks. Odd, that such a thing would coalesce when he had left. Not that he wasn’t flattered at being their catalyst—but he would have preferred to be there, on the ground with them, fighting for a cause he could believe in.

Fighting …

Britain’s mutants, rising against an unjust rule. He worried for Her Majesty – but at the same time, Charles worried for them. Where had they gotten their information? How had they even found out the treaty’s terms? Perhaps there were sources in United Europe – the repository of law, or the more ordinary libraries in Brussels … Surely not from an EBS source, as the information received would be prejudiced at best and wrong at worst.

And speak of the devil …

The man hovered on his threshold. Charles went to meet him; took the boots and hat. He blinked at the presence of the fleece and second scarf; took those too. Then he put everything on in layers, topping it off with his manteau – and exhaled in a rush as sweat immediately beaded between his shoulder blades.

“Good lord, it’s hot in here.” He shoved his remaining foot into the boot. “Right. Let’s get a move on, please?”

“Certainly.” The man’s smirk was very broad. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Didn’t warn me of what?”

They clattered down the stairs. “Of just how cold it is, Xavier. Try not to spit at anything. It will freeze.”

“Spitting is rather vulgar, I’ll have you know.”

“Then look in a mirror when you start in on one of your little rants.”

“My – what?”

“On proper behavior.” The man sounded sly. “I shouldn’t have to wish for an umbrella whenever you get going. Very uncivilized.”

“Oh,” Charles said, indignant, “you’re just trying to provoke me. And you’re one to talk. You’ve spit on me more in the past few days than I have on anyone in my entire life.”

“Really?” the man drawled, hands on the front door’s locks and bolts. “Even when they begged you for it?”

“Begged me for –” Charles’ mind caught up. “Oh. Ugh.”

“No ‘ugh’ about it.” The last of the locks made a crunching noise – and – Charles gulped. The sod had slid his tongue over the front of his teeth, in a way that was distracting, to say the very least. And then he murmured: “I thought you were delectable.”
“Well, I’d tell you to kiss my arse, but – oh god –”

The man grinned, looking very young. But Charles couldn’t concentrate on him for long. Mostly because, “Fucking – hell. Bloody buggering fuck it’s cold!”

“I told you. Didn’t I tell you?” The voice was edged in glee. “And now –”

“Now,” Charles interrupted, “I have to run!”

And he did. Tearing down the single tire tread in what had to be the manor drive – from the man’s motorcycle, surely. Whatever it was, it had better-packed snow. His boots squeaked on it in tandem. Charles ran as far as he could, as fast as he could … which really was not that far or fast at all.

As he lurched to a stop, Charles reflected. It wasn’t that he was out of shape. He bent his head as his hands went to his knees. He was smiling, despite everything. For it had been the weeks of Finder work, the starvation and the cold, that had sapped his strength so. All the potential was still there. Yes, he was wheezing – but it sounded like a happy wheeze.

The sun was bright, even if low in the sky. And that sky was as blue as the mammoth diamond in his treasure coffer. Charles felt like running again; he settled for arching his head back and dragging in as deep a breath as he could.

He could hear the crunch of approaching footsteps, even through two hats muffling all sound.

“Everything all right?” The man’s voice was dry.

“Fine,” Charles said brightly. For … it was fine. Britain would keep. Her Majesty had proved herself a capable leader for fifteen years. And he was warm enough, bundled in a ridiculous amount of clothing – and he would regain strength, now that there was more food … Or perhaps it was just the icy freshness of the air, going straight to his head like the finest champagne.

He took another deep breath. “Thank you for letting me come out here with you. I just …” Charles smiled at the man. “It’s wonderful.”

A blink at him. Those green eyes looked oddly pale, with the darkness of the man’s knit hat and the high collar of his coat. And his scarf was an indeterminate color. Almost too ragged to be called any garment at all.

“Do you often take walks in the winter? And was it this cold all the way to bloody Albany this morning? How did you –”

“Xavier?”

“Yes?”

“I thought you said you could be quiet.”

Charles opened his mouth to reply. Then shut it, slowly. With a look of utter innocence.

The man tipped his gaze to the sky. “Thank you.”

They started walking down the drive. Charles listened to the squeak of his own rubber soles on snow; the grating crunch of the man’s boots. The other had left them outside the library door, Charles remembered. Because – ah, yes. He caught a glimpse of metal, flashing through snow. Some sort of aid with the ice – perhaps a modified cleat. The man had probably made it himself.
Before Charles knew it, they were at a turning.

“Here,” the man said. “This is West King Road. Northeast and you’ll hit the main ruins: Ithaca College and Cornell. Due north and you’ll run into the big lake. And north and a bit west –” he tipped his head, “and you’ll get to see a waterfall. But we’ll walk down the road as much as we can. There are at least a few tracks there.”

Charles scampered to keep up. He had to admit that the blighter had better boots. It was excellent, though – a thrum of satisfaction in his mind – to have Ororo’s maps confirmed verbally. He remembered, of all things: “waterfall – *Jean –1968 Q3.” She had probably taken Jean there herself. A year and a quarter past, now …

He sighed. It was a hope so often repeated by now that it had become more rote words than anything else … but it couldn’t hurt to repeat them to the winter air. “Stay safe,” he whispered. “Wherever you are.” Miss you. Love you all –

“What?” the man said.

“Nothing.”

Charles watched the other lengthen his stride. Ororo had rescued him, he remembered. Swooping down out of the sky at the first battle in the Dallas campaign; bringing lightning and thunder with her. The storm. Storm …

And – Red One, pacing through the snow next to him.

Charles determinedly steered his thoughts away from that memory. After all: as “blighter” the man had begun, and blighter he would ever be. Even though technically he was merely a witness to the destruction unleashed on the earth by Shaw. Shuvalov. Whichever. And he had enough hatred left for that mysterious Herr Doktor to revert to a foaming beast at the faintest whiff of his scent.

Charles shivered. Steered his thoughts away from that memory, too.

And why focus on his own mind? Why, in fact, keep quiet at all? Just because the other wanted to channel some brooding Russian antihero, stuck on the steppes –

“Penny for your thoughts,” Charles said.

A grunt. “Be quiet.”

“Surely that thought’s only worth a fraction of a cent. I’m serious –” and he kicked at the snow.

“What are you thinking?”

“That I’d like it to be quiet.”

“Surely the world is quite sufficiently quiet. Not a sound in the trees” – not quite true, since there was the rattle of wind on branches – “and not a bird to be heard.” And that was true. Charles briefly wondered if his raven could make noise, in the real world. He shrugged. Perhaps a question best left for later.

“Xavier. I’m leaving for Brussels tomorrow, and for the next weeks – month, maybe – it will be nothing but talking. Words, words words. So I –”

“I like talking to you.”
The footsteps stopped.

Charles turned. The man was staring at him. “You do?”

“Of course.” He smiled. A bit of a fib, perhaps. But a useful one. For the sod had blushed — color rising straight up to the ragged edge of his knit hat.

“What …” The low voice caught. The man had to clear his throat. And Charles watched, amused, as he kicked at the rut in the snow with one boot. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I enjoyed talking about Britain. Not —” and he lightened his voice deliberately, faced with the other’s glower, “— to spy, or to be nosy, or anything like that. It was only that it was nice to hear of home. I’d certainly like to offer any advice, if I may. You had mentioned you might ask for it … Hm?”

“Not about Britain.”

Damn. “That’s a shame, since I’m a native. Any other problems on your mind, then? Geopolitical conflicts? Taxation disputes? Knee still sore?”

“My knee’s fine.” The man turned on one heel and started to walk again. Charles darted after him, just in time to hear, “There’s a problem with the plans for the southwest, though, and Mexico. What do you know about the latter?”

Plans for the southwest … god. Charles kept his face neutral. “A fair amount. Representative democracy; three major political parties and several minor. President Almaz is considered weak by the far right, but only because he refused to build walls to keep the Central American and Texan migrants out. And … let me think. I remember quite a bit of discussion in recent years, about the faltering medical system there. An overload of cancer patients, I understand, and the government can no longer afford to subsidize treatment —”

“I mean war, Xavier.” The man fumbled in his pockets without breaking his stride. He took out a pack of cigarettes, shook one into his palm and lit it. “Not medicine.”

“They were allied with the Free West, I understand. From the lack of a sudden attack on Mexico City, I assume that Frost has been negotiating with them.”

The other exhaled smoke. “Yes. And they were a Free West tributary state … but that’s been dissolved, now.”

“… What sort of tribute?”

“A set monetary amount every year. Soldiers for Stryker’s campaigns, and some key exports. Coffee, for one.”

Charles quirked an eyebrow. “Which would explain why we’re suddenly flush?”

“Mm–hm.” Another puff on the cigarette. “Decent amount in Dallas.”

“I see.” Charles took in a deep breath. The smoke hit him in the nostrils; he coughed.

“Sorry.”

“It’s no trouble.” He made his voice arch. “But I’ll only forgive you if you give me one.”

The man raised his eyebrows as he dug out the pack again. Charles plucked the cigarette from his
gloved fingers with a grin. Then he let the other light it. Matches. It must have been handy, Charles thought, taking his first drag, to have John on the battlefield - fetching light with a snap of finger and thumb. Really, though …

“I would think a lighter would be more convenient.”

“It was stolen at Dallas.”

“Really? Who would have – oh dear. I’m thinking of a certain pyromaniac. Are you?”

A snort. “Yes. But I figured he could keep it.” The other took a deep drag, hissed smoke out between his teeth. “Tell his fellows a story: Jack stealing from the giant –”

Charles laughed. “ ‘Fee, fie, fo fum.’ How often do you smoke, anyway? I’ve never seen you do it before.”

Except he had. Charles blinked, shivering. Halloween night, the man striding out of the woods with a duffel bag in one hand, cigarette at his lips. Weapons from the stable; Alex dragged there screaming … Before the run to recapture Sean.

And putting out the cigarette in Victor Creed's eye -

Charles shook off the memory with an effort; did his best to conceal his shudder. "Cigarettes, that is. I know we both smoked last night –”

The man smiled at him. “Not that often. Sometimes, to concentrate. And outside like this …” He turned the smile up to the open sky. “Plenty of air.”

“Hm. Great minds think alike.”

“How so?”

“I only ever smoked at a local pub. Planning sessions for the Oxford missions.” Charles coughed around the cigarette. “I always thought it helped me focus … but I seem to be out of practice.”

Geoffrey had given him his first cigarette, and had been the one who had taught him to swear. Charles smiled to himself. Days gone by: the ceremonial black–tar cigarette before a mission, the use of “shite.” God knew Geoffrey had bellowed it enough, mostly to Charles' back when he ran ahead into gunfire –

Of course, then Charles had grown up. And the first time that debauched Irishman had gasped it in bed with him had been one of Charles' greatest victories. Ha - Geoffrey had never thought that -

“So.”

The man's voice cut into his woolgathering. Charles shook his head to clear it; tried to focus.

"Now that you’ve had some …” The man exhaled. Smoke licked round his white teeth, bared in a smile. “Have you had any great thoughts?”

“Concerning what?”

A snort. “Concerning the southwest and Mexico, Xavier. With Dallas ours now, there is a choice of roads. To the north, we are safe. You know how Canada split into its warring provinces? Cold took most of them. And those left … Some migrated south. The Inuit have kept to themselves. The Québécois joined us, as did the Maritimers and those of the Plains. It took a year to sweet–talk New
Vancouver, and they’ve since become one of our strongest northern cities.”

Charles felt dizzy. He chalked it up to the tobacco. “Where are you going with this?”

“We’ve drawn the line in the north; we took the Willamette Valley early on and Boise too. We have the plains of both Canada and the United States before, with the Dakota guarding. St. Louis is ours, and now Dallas … And thus my lady has to make a choice. Press on directly eastward – through Kansas and Oklahoma – or go round and close the loop from the south. Go through Mexico, put pressure on New Mexico and Arizona before. Then Stryker will have nowhere to retreat, come the attack on Denver.”

“And … when might that be?”

The man sighed. “Don’t know. All I do know is that my lady visited Mexico City to sound Almaz.”

“On?”

“On whether or not we could move our forces up the river. Attack the Free West from due south, instead of from the east … But.”

“But what?”

“We’re stretched quite thin already. Even with my lady using the Finder …”

Another drag on the cigarette. Charles watched smoke gust from the man’s nostrils.

They were walking through trees, now, having left the road for a winding path. It was high on a ridge. Charles could see the blue sky through the latticework of tree branches, wisps of cloud burnished with rose and gold. He kept pace with the other, clapping his arms to his sides to keep the blood moving.

“That keeps her busy, does it? Just what would she use it for, in peace?” He watched the man carefully for any reaction. “I helped with roll call during the Dallas campaign, but I assumed that was a wartime practice.”

“War doesn’t stop just because there’s no battle going on, Xavier –”

Charles bristled. “I know that.”

“– and my lady’s work is of vital importance regardless. The third war leveled communications on this continent,” the man said, matter–of–fact, “and the networks have never been completely restored. It was part of the reason we were able to take Washington, D.C. so quickly.”

“I’d like to hear that story sometime,” Charles murmured.

“Sometime.” A smile flashed around the cigarette. “Early on, my lady put the Finder to work communicating between cities. That led many in the northeast to swear allegiance to us. She could find long–lost relatives; she could pass information on in the blink of an eye. Compare that to unpredictable phones and intercepted radio – and she proved quite popular.”

The fearsome Frost as a glorified telephone operator. Charles smirked at the image. Still, he reflected, taking a last puff of his own cigarette … the work was indeed vital. In Oxford he had seen on a daily basis just how frustrating it was to have communication unreliable or unavailable outright. And towns and hamlets in Britain were isolated, what with the message runners and riders being the only methods of …
Charles frowned to himself. Communication. It certainly was an effective way to control people … Control what they know, and how quickly they know it, and control them as well …

The one flickering vid screen at the Rose in Bloom, and Oxford’s weekly … …

Charles shook off memories and focused on the trail. And on the man’s words.

“So. We do not have the resources to maintain a front that stretches from St. Louis to Dallas – and to start flanking the southwest. Thus, either we consolidate along that front and press through Kansas and Oklahoma … or Mexico helps us with the attack on New Mexico and Arizona Before.”

“Has your lady expressed a preference?” Charles did not think his tone too snide, but he could not be sure.

Not that the other noticed. He was staring at the path, eyebrows knit. “Natürlich. She wishes things to proceed as quickly as possible. A southwest flank would catch Stryker off his guard. After the winter battles for Atlanta and St. Louis, we had to fortify our position for a good six months, each time. But …” The man sighed. “I do not see my way to it. How it can be done without the loss of too many of our people; critical people. And we don’t know the terrain as well. In Dallas, we had agents placed - an entire network, early on. In Albuquerque, in what’s left of Phoenix … we have nothing.”

“Although given the climate there, if you don’t attack this winter you’ll have to wait until the next.”

“I know.”

They walked in silence for a while. Until the man broke it, with: “So. Your thoughts?”

“I’ll have to think.” Charles threw the remnants of his cigarette to the snowy ground. “Just a bit more. You don’t mind?”

“Your thinking? No. Throwing these out?” The man crouched to retrieve the filter. “Yes.”

“Really,” and he couldn’t help it: he laughed. “The last few shreds of tobacco – so very vital to you?”

The man glared, about to retort –
– and then they rounded a turn in the path – and Charles gasped.

In front of them lay a frozen waterfall. It had more of a remarkable width than any outstanding height. So broad – and Charles’ eyes caught on something. At one side a gentle curve of snowdrift hinted at steps ascending; the line of trees was suspiciously even, following the drift’s contour.

Water must still have been running beneath it; below them, downstream, the river still bubbled up black in places. Air holes in the ice. The entire surface of the waterfall, though, was frozen solid and sparkling. More tints to the ice – blue and green, grey and purple – than Charles had thought possible in the world. He exhaled, hugging himself at the sight. Then thought to say:

“It’s beautiful.” He gave the other a smile, as kind as he could make it. “Thank you for showing me.”

One shoulder lifted in a shrug. The man wedged his hands even deeper into his coat pockets.

“Now.” Charles turned his smile sly. “Mexico. If you’re still interested?”

“Yes. Of – of course.”
“May I have another cigarette?” And Charles watched, smirking to himself, as the man fumbled lighting one for him. He took it, enjoyed the acrid hit on the back of his throat, and blew a stream of smoke up to the sky. “I propose that you make use of Mexico’s favorite terrorist export. The Heirs of Aztlán.”

A pause. Then: “How so?”

“Surely you know their platform – if indeed such a group can be said to have one. Hm. Their aims, shall we say; their goals. They had a powerful presence in Dallas and a network through the southwest, as I understand – strictly because … their goal? To retake what they see as having belonged to Mexico at the height of its power. The states Before: Texas and Oklahoma … Arizona,” he smiled a sly smile, “and New Mexico. Oh, and California, but that you deem off-limits, in negotiations.”

“… Negotiations?”

“It’s just an idea.” Charles sucked on the cigarette greedily; his mind clicking rapidly over the possibilities. This. I love this. “But you might propose to President Almaz … that the EBS makes use of the Heirs of Aztlán in order to secure New Mexico and Arizona. And having succeeded … That same group may take possession of that same territory. On the understanding that they are an EBS tributary state, their allegiance is to the leadership of the same, no rebellions, exchanges or refunds, et cetera et cetera.

“This would be a threefold accomplishment.” He heard himself lapsing into a lecture; he didn’t care. “First, obviously, the success of the southwest flanking maneuver would require far fewer EBS casualties. Second, this would take pressure off Mexico – and Almaz, specifically – to invade the same territory, retaking it alone. Which – again, if I understand correctly – Mexico is infinitely incapable of doing.”

“That’s right,” the man murmured. “Not enough resources.”

“There.” Charles smiled through the smoke.

“But you said a ‘threefold accomplishment,’ Xavier. What’s the third – fold?”

“That third is the one that could prove a bit of a wrinkle. You see – thirdly – this would clear the Heirs of Aztlán out of Texas. Thus ensuring fewer terrorist attacks on you, as the new flavor of oppression in residence. Of course, you’d have to be willing to cede local control of Arizona and New Mexico… but I assume it’s practically a wasteland anyway, what with the bombs.”

“There you are wrong, Xavier. It’s actually the part of the continent that experienced the least fallout. When the bombs hit Los Angeles, the wind for the next month went northeast. Or so my lady tells me. Arizona and New Mexico dodged a bullet.”

“Says the Artful Dodger himself. So, then,” Charles mused, “it’s better territory than I thought. All the more reason for those silly little Heirs to get excited about it. For you see … I’ve observed, in recorded human history – that when you offer an outcast or resistant group a homeland, they usually come round to it. Some faster than others.”

The man folded his arms over each other; frowned down at the snow. “It would be – tricky.”

“Well. That’s why you have me.” Charles grinned; pinched out his cigarette and offered it to the man – who pocketed it. “And I will tell you now, that what you have to do is try to make them believe it was their idea. Plant it, somehow – feed and water it … But the Heirs of Aztlán have to come to you
with the proposal.”

“Why?”

“It’s the way the human mind works.” He curled his grin into a smirk. “The proposed— to has leverage that the proposer lacks. They’ll come to you, inflamed with the prospect, and all you have to do is sit back, twiddle your thumbs and extract what concessions you want from them. The pursued has all the power— holds all the cards. Perhaps even a dance card. And those who pursue dance to their tune.”

For a long moment, the man was silent. Staring at him.

Then Charles saw the long line of that mouth tilt up at the corners. “Geschickter Rabe. You believe that’s true?”

“Of course. I’ve seen it borne out, time after time.”

“You think you have all the power … between us?” The man arched an eyebrow. “Hm?”

Charles caught his breath. It wasn’t that he hadn’t seen that one coming— he had. But the look in the man’s eyes made his skin prickle.

Nonetheless, he straightened his shoulders. Kept his own lips curled … but softened his voice.

“I don’t think I have the power …”

Charles backed up, leaned against a tree— and fixed the man with his eyes.

“I know I have the power.”

He let the words fade into silence. And then he waited, watching.

The man kept his own eyes narrowed. “You flatter yourself, Xavier. You think that I—”

“— would come here and kiss me, if I asked. Wouldn’t you?”

Charles smiled to himself. He could have sworn he heard the click as the man’s jaw dropped. He turned his voice honey—sweet.

“I would rather like you to kiss me. It’s your last night here, after all … and it’s so very cold outside. What if I said I was cold?” He gave a theatrical shiver. “What if— I wanted you to come here, and kiss me … warm me up?” He ran his tongue over his lower lip. “Would you?”

“I …”

The poor dear sounded dazed.

“Come here,” Charles commanded. “And kiss me.”

_Ha._ Even at this late a point— _he can be taught._ For the man staggered forward, wide—eyed, and planted his gloved hands on the tree trunk, left and right of his ears— _Well._ His ears beneath two hats. Charles could not really feel heat from the other’s body, what with the multiple layers. The only point of heat was his mouth—

— his _mouth_, god …
as the man kissed him, pressing him back against the tree trunk and tonguing at his lips until Charles opened them. And then it was even more hot, and wet, and — loud, given the silence in the woods. Even the water not yet frozen, falling from rocks to ice and more ice, was a distant hiss compared to the moans echoing through the trees. From both of them. Damn. But Charles could not be silent, or remain unmoved. Especially because the other had moved his hands down, gripping tightly at his waist, and was hoisting him up the tree trunk as easily as breathing.

Charles focused in on the kiss. He tasted smoke. Caught at the man’s tongue and sucked it — the other gasped into his mouth and ground against him, shuddering. Charles had to be sure of his grip. Arms round the man’s neck; good. Legs … why not? He braced his back on the rough bark and tossed one leg round those narrow hips — and the other bloody well whimpered.

At that, he had to break the kiss — and with a laugh, no less. It was quite amusing. The terror of the Free West, slavering over him like a dog —

“Don’t—” the man gasped against his mouth. “Don’t stop. Please — again?”

“Here.” Charles dropped a kiss on the tip of his nose. “I’ll kiss you some more when we get back inside.”

“Inside?” The other’s breathing was heavy. Panting.

“Of course. We can’t very well fuck out here — someone would end up with frostbite. And I do not intend that someone to be me. What you choose to do in your own time, of course—”

“Wait.”

Obediently, Charles closed his mouth. Looked inquiring.

The man shook his head as if to clear it. “We’re — going to …”

“Fuck? Well, I had thought so. Don’t you want to?”

“Oh please, please — why can’t we do it right now?” Gloved hands scrabbled clumsily at him. “Please?”

“No. It’s too cold out. Come on,” and Charles pushed him away, slid down the tree trunk, and slipped to the side. “Over the river and through the woods — back to the manor we go.”

“Wait!”

He stopped and turned, waiting for the other to catch up. And Charles had to roll his eyes when he did, for the man insisted on holding his gloved hand.

They walked quickly through the woods. Charles watched his breath puff out, white and steaming. The little of his skin exposed to the air was prickling — and not just from the cold. He felt strangely giddy.

He tugged at the man’s hand and broke into a jog. The other kept up easily. Charles grinned to himself, then picked up the pace just a bit — before he slipped and skidded with a yelp.

The man kept him from falling. “Careful.”

“It’s easy for you to say. You’re the one with cleats.”
The other crunched a boot into the patch of rimed snow. His smile, in the shadows of the trees, was as wide as Charles had ever seen it. “I’ll make some for you too, if you’d like.”

“No, that’s quite all right. Thank you.” Charles did not try sprinting again. He was rather out of breath.

The man had not released his hand. Their gloves were bulky, but the other’s grip was tight. On an impulse, Charles squeezed. A pause – and a squeeze back – and he would have said something, but the man dragged him off the trail.

“Wait. Where are we going?”

“Look.”

They had emerged from the woods on the edge of a ridge. Facing due west, it seemed, for there …

Oh.

“That,” Charles managed, “is a lovely sunset.”

“Isn’t it?” The man sounded –

Charles did not know how he sounded. Young, perhaps. Or … happy.

He blew out a breath. “Quite a picturesque walk you have here. The forest, the waterfall, and now this. I only wish I could have seen it before.”

“Sunset’s always clearest in winter.”

Perhaps the other had a point. The rose–orange and gold glowing at the horizon, shimmering up into the sky and touching the edges of the clouds … It was almost painfully beautiful.

Due to the clear air, perhaps. Charles hugged his free arm close to his body. He was shivering – from the cold, surely. It was only becoming more intense, slipping into his lungs like a knife made of ice.

He tipped his head back, craning to see the stars. Dusk was only just beginning to fall. Few stars to wish on … Charles traced the ecliptic, caught sight of Mars. Not the brightest he had ever seen, but glimmering red halfway up the firmament. Due south. He squinted in the fading light. There was the tiniest spark in the distance, in the middle of an opaque black shape –

“Bloody hell.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Did I leave the lights on in the library?”

A pause. Then a snort. “It appears as though you did. Ah, Rabe –”

“It won’t matter, will it?” Charles bit his lips. “I don’t know that there are any blackout laws this far east – whether or not the Free West can –”

The man squeezed his hand. “They don’t bomb here. Not anymore.”

“But they did?”

“Natürlich. In 1955.” The man was staring due south, at the outline of the manor. “Then we …
diverted their attention.”

“How so?”

“Destroyed their remaining nuclear weapons in early 1956. And took down CIA headquarters that First Quarter day.” He sighed. White breath licked the clean lines of his nose and brow. “Do we have to talk about it now?”

“Of course not.” Charles edged closer. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” A smile. “I know your curiosity, Xavier.”

“I am rather afflicted with it, aren’t I?”

An answering hum. Charles let himself be pulled in closer, little by little, until he was leaning against the man’s side. The gloved hand left his and pressed at his far shoulder. Charles smiled to himself as he settled flush against the other’s front. Thank god for several layers; he didn’t have to feel anything … out of the ordinary. Untoward. But the arms wrapped round him were very nice.

He felt a kiss press against his left cheekbone. The man’s lips were warm, but his beard scraped. Charles nudged back against him with his head. And thank god for two hats, because otherwise he would have frozen, what with a shaven scalp and all –

“Charles.”

The man’s voice was throaty.

And when had the sod started calling him ‘Charles’ again? Well. It didn’t really matter; not at this late point. “Hm?”

“Can we go back now?”

“Of course.” Charles turned in his arms, tipped his head back, and kissed the hinge of the man’s jaw, just above the ragged scarf. “The sun it setteth every day, after all.”

“… What?”

_Twelfth Night_, and not even accurate. But who cared? “You’re leaving tomorrow. Best make this evening … memorable. Hm?”

Charles nipped at the man’s jaw, just slightly. He smirked at the other’s gasp; and then gasped in turn – although really, he should have seen it coming – as the man mashed their mouths together.

“Mmmf.” He plucked at the dark jacket’s front. Then pushed, just a bit.

The other growled in his throat, quietly. And instead of releasing him, he tipped Charles' head to the side … enough to find a better angle to lick into his mouth.

A delicious shiver prickled down Charles’ back, even given his many layers. He stepped up his efforts, found the man's tongue and flicked his own against it and under in an undulating pattern. Then Charles relished the other's sudden sidestep, crunching in the snow - weak at both knees now.

_God_. It was lovely.

... It was _lovely_ – hot and wet and breathless – but enough was enough. At least, for outside.
The man let go on the third shove. He looked dazed. Again. Charles felt his smirk widen, even as the spit left on his lips turned frigid. That concussed expression would never get old.

“Come on.” It was his turn to take the man’s hand and tug. “Let’s go. Any more kissing here and we might just tumble off the ridge. And then where would we be?”

“At the bottom of the ridge.”

“Yes, but possibly with broken bones. We’ll have to hurry.” Charles squinted. “It’s getting dark.”

Walking alongside him, the man tugged off the glove of his free hand with his teeth, and fished inside a pocket. He took out something, and fumbled with it.

A match flared. It was impressive, one-handed, but Charles rolled his eyes nonetheless. “Even with that fine, useful and in no way limited light – I want to be sure you’re in one piece. All the better to shag you into next week, yes?”

All the better, he thought while ignoring the man, to see him off. Off and away – Charles did not even want to consider him remaining at the manor any longer, laid up with a broken leg, waiting for someone to deliver however many packs of Archangel’s blood would be necessary to heal him.

He accepted the box of matches; pocketed them, and changed the subject. “Next week you’ll be in Brussels.”

“Yes.” The man sounded breathless, pulling his glove back on without letting Charles’ hand go. Really, they weren’t walking that quickly. Charles kept his eyes on the path.

“You said … talking. Who is going to be there, anyway? I’ve only ever been to Brussels a few times, for conferences. And I know that the U.E. has its headquarters there, and that you’ve had them witness the freeing of the camps –”

“Yes. United Europe has offered peace talks. Brussels being in neutral territory, you know.”

“… Peace talks. Between the EBS and the Free West.”

The man’s sharp nod was perfectly visible, even in the dusk.

“I …” Charles started to speak. Fought for words. And fought to throttle a rising snicker. “Diplomacy, is it?”

“Yes.” That voice sounded … proud? Oh, bloody hell.

Charles lost the fight, and laughed. “Diplomacy? You?”

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m just trying to picture you as diplomatic. Charming and well–mannered; dressed to the nines and dancing through the night; good lord.”

“What makes you think,” the man said, quietly, “that I can’t be any of that? Do any of that?”

His hand had tightened. And his voice sounded – not angry. Just … Blimey. Charles rolled his eyes. Of all the times for the silly blighter to show his sensitive side –

“I might remind you, that when you first came to me? You hadn’t taken a bath for over a month.”
“I had my –”

“Bucket, yes; how many diplomats do you think wash from a bucket?” Charles snickered. “I can see it now. The look on the face of the Président de la France – excusez-moi, j’ai besoin de ce bac, Monsieur –”

“Va te faire foutre!” The man jerked his hand away.

“Oh – for pity’s sake, I’m joking, I’m joking. Come back.” Charles darted after him up the path. “I’m sure you can be very diplomatic. After all, you’ve – come to acknowledge and respect the word ‘no,’ hm?”

“Fuck off.”

“You said that already. Calm down.” A touch to the arm should do it … even through layers of coat and glove … yes, there, there. “Shh.” Charles felt a thrill at his power. His own voice, his touch: both music to soothe the savage breast. And he could. Always.

He stroked with his fingers. Even gloved, even with the other’s jacket … he could feel the tension leach out of those shoulders. “Shh. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have teased. I’m sure you’ll be wonderful.”

A growl, low and angry, wending round the dark line of the man’s back. Charles smirked. “Et voilà. You can see through flattery; that’s an excellent start. Does anything in particular concern you?”

Silence.

“After all,” he nudged the man’s shoulder, “you have, at your side, Oxford’s standout socialite. Come, now. Is there anything on which I can advise you? I’m not limited to military strategy.”

A grunt.

“Really, you’ll have to do better than that. Why don’t you – ah. Turn round and smile. Pretend I’m a fellow diplomat. You’re making an impression; I can offer you forty tons of iron ore and an aircraft carrier; come on.”

Slowly, the man turned.

“Give me a dashing, debonair smile. Come on – show me the smile.”

Charles had looked down, speaking, digging the box of matches out of his pocket. He struck one, the better to see –

“Christ!”

He dropped the match, but not before the light had made the man’s teeth gleam in a way that reminded him of – Charles gulped, heart hammering. He had taken a step away; instinct. It wasn’t his fault. The bastard looked like a lion.

A hungry one.

“Um. How about – lips together?”

The man obeyed.

“Now turn them up at the corners.”
He obeyed again. And Charles sighed, relieved. That was much better. Even if the other’s expression was still rather terrifying.

“And here is a tip for you. You can use it,” Charles explained, “to distinguish between people you like and people to whom you are merely being courteous. Let the smile move round your eyes if you like someone. Keep it still if you don’t care for him or her. Or them.”

“Will you show me?”

“Of course.”

Charles struck another match. “Friendly.” He smiled casually, let his eyes light up.

“And unfriendly.” Easy enough, to relax all the muscles round their corners.


“I know.”

“Will you do the friendly one again?”

“For you?” Charles beamed. “Anything.”

The man smiled back at him.

“Very good. Just like that – only enough to keep your expression warm, really. Any more and you’ll look manic. And for the love of god, don’t bare your teeth.”

“Why not?”

“Just trust me. And now … hm. Show me a handshake. Right hands, gloves off.”

He tossed the match into the snow and stripped off his right-hand glove; watched the man peel his off as well. Then Charles stepped towards him, smiling. “Think iron ore. And – I don’t know. Sunshine and flowers.”

“What do you even mean?”

“Diplomacy. That’s what it is. Flowers, chocolates, promises you don’t intend to keep. Shake on it?”

The man obeyed.

“Good! Excellent.”

A broad smile. Charles smiled back. “And now you let go.”

“Oh.” The man did. “Sorry.”

“That’s all right. You don’t have too loose a grip, which is good – you have to watch for it being too strong, though. Control is important,” Charles told him. “Watch out for your own strength. And you must control your temper.”

Those eyes were serious. “For diplomacy.”

“Exactly. Nobody will want to dance with you if you break fingers.”

“… Dance?”
And those eyes had gone wide. Deer staring down a rifle barrel – Charles savored it, pulling his
glove back on. The man followed suit, still staring. “Yes, dance. How do you think diplomats
occupy themselves on a late night?"

The deer had gone from disoriented to disgruntled. “I don’t dance.”

“And why not?”

A mulish shrug.

“It’s not that difficult.” Charles swayed from foot to foot. “If you can keep on your feet in a battle,
tumbling to and fro … then surely you try dancing. Hm?”

“I …”

“Come, Geliebter.” He painted his voice with sweetness. “Come take my hand. There’s no moon,
but there are stars in plenty. I would have them see you dance.”

“You …” Looking down, the man shuffled forward through the snow. “I.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know how.”

“I rather thought not.” Charles leaned in; brushed a kiss over one stark cheekbone. Felt the man’s
breath gust against his own face; hot and damp. Uneven. “Let me show you one, then. Quite basic.”

The man took a moment to speak; when he did, his voice was gruff. “All right.”

“Right. Your left hand holds my right, out like this,” Charles demonstrated, “and your right supports
my back. Put it there. No,” and he reached back to adjust the man’s grip, “higher.”

“Like this?”

“Exactly. Don’t even think about groping some poor lady’s arse on the dance floor.”

“… Lady?”

“Ah.” Charles raised an eyebrow at him. “Last I heard, United Europe – though relatively forward–
thinking – had not yet permitted same–sex couples in ballroom tournaments. And the Free West sees
even implied homosexuality as the utmost in depravity, hm? So yes, I am taking the female steps
here. I can dance either, you know – backwards and in my sleep.”

“But I …”

“Oh, buck up. Nobody’s asking you to marry anyone. You just have to be charming,” Charles
placed his left hand on the man’s right shoulder, “or at least well–mannered. And that includes being
polite to female diplomats. And dancing with them.”

The man stayed still. Waiting – ah. For instruction.

“If you’re ready? Then this is what you need to do. Left foot forward, right foot to the side – aim for
two o’clock.”

He mirrored the other’s movements. Not that bad, considering.
“… Good. Now bring your left foot to your right foot—“ Charles wobbled, “and don’t let go of me—I don’t want to fall in the bloody snow!”

“Sorry—”

“That’s all right. So. Now you have the first three—and now, reverse them. Right foot back, left foot back to seven o’clock, bring your right foot to your left foot.”

He followed the man’s steps. And there they were, back where they began—quite neatly, too. Charles blinked. Then smiled at the other. “You see? Not difficult at all. Try again. And you lead.”

The man looked at him expectantly.

“Which is to say: you start and you steer. Press your fingers into my spine to tell me where to go. Highly gendered, yes … but the man leads. Hop to it.”

“Oh. So I—”

And the other went through the pattern perfectly. Charles had to roll his eyes. “And you thought you’d have a problem with it?”

“I suppose not.”

“I’m ashamed of you, underestimating yourself like that. Right, then. I’ll show you some turns—and hesitations, too. Those are elegant. Just do what I say, and try to keep up.”

The man kept up with no trouble at all. Charles thought the only trouble might be the snow … but even that proved inconsequential. It was so cold that the drifts on the road were still powder–dry in what had been the shade of the trees. There was no moon up; dusk was rapidly turning into uniform darkness. So, while he could, Charles enjoyed the sight of crystalline snowflakes kicking up with each of their steps, pluming through the air.

He found himself humming a waltz. The other picked up the tempo seamlessly and swept him along the road. All the lean strength, animal grace—Charles smiled into the gathering shadows. He could have predicted it. Only a few missteps—them stumbling into the snow, Charles laughing—and the man was turning out to be a complete natural.

Charles counted out the last steps, “and turn, and—stop. There!” And he spun out of the man’s grasp, and sketched a bow. “And now you—” the man bowed, and Charles had to clap his gloved hands together. “Perfect.”

“Really?”

“I’m only going to say it once. Can’t let it go to your head. After all, that’s what they’ll be trying to do.”

“What?” The other’s breath was coming in white puffs; he smiled at Charles, shy. “What will they be trying to do?”

“Flatter you. Trick you,” Charles grinned back. The blood was pumping in his veins from the dance—it was colder than Banbury, and he was still warm. “Cozen you into revealing all of secrets of the Brethren and Sistren. They might even try,” and he slinked forward, “to seduce you.”

“… Seduce me?”
“Mm–hm. I wouldn’t be surprised if they clap their eyes on you and deploy … well. The clap. In the form of individuals of ill repute.”

“What?”

“Whores, my dear. I’m warning you against gonorrhea–laced … hell, syphilis is far more of a threat these days. Syphilitic whores – watch out for them.”

The man’s jaw had dropped. “But. Why would I …”

Charles watched him, amused. “Why does anyone? Helen’s was the face that launched a thousand ships. And while few approaching her influence have wended their way into diplomatic circles in our day and age… the principle is the same.”

“What principle?”

“Sex.” He enunciated carefully. “Exchange of goods,” a smirk, “for information. Although ‘goods’, in these cases, are often ‘bads.’ Very, very – bads. So be careful of who you fuck, all right?”

“I …”

“It’s all right, you know.” Charles smiled more brightly. “I don’t know how tight a ship your lady Frost has run up to this point, but now you know how nice it can be. Sex. Hm? So what’s to keep you from trying a woman, or a few new men? Just be careful for the syphilis, and – ah. You’d better find a copy of the Kama Sutra, and read it, because not every woman I’ve known has altogether enjoyed being fucked up the arse. There are a few key differences, you know.”

Charles couldn’t help it; he laughed at the other’s dazed expression. “Come off it. I’m advising you – I’m good at it, and the solution to syphilis is to find some rubbers at the local pharmacie, and –”

“I have a different solution,” the man interrupted.

“And what, pray tell, is that?”

The other stared fiercely at the snow. “You.”

“I … beg your pardon?”

“Only you.”

Charles blinked.

There was silence. And with snow dampening everything … His own thoughts sounded very loud. One loud, blaring: … What?

The man darted a look up from the rut in the road. Searching for – Charles’ reaction.

Charles closed his mouth with a snap. At some point, it had fallen open. “Well,” he said. “Um.”

Another pause.

“Ah.” Charles made a show of adjusting his gloves, looking down at them. “I don’t know whether to be flattered, or to run screaming for the hills.”

There was the sound of a snort. “We’re on a hill already –”
“Not as high as we were –”

“– and if you ran, Xavier … I’d catch you.”

Anything for a change of subject. Charles looked up from his gloves; made his voice dismissive. “Not with that knee.”

“My knee’s fine.”

“Prove it.”

The man’s eyes glittered in the shadows. “Watch this.”

And before Charles could stop him, he took off running down the road.

It was unnerving. The lean figure vanished into the shadows much more quickly than Charles had expected. It made sense – dark coat and hat, dark boots and trousers. But he still felt the back of his neck prickle as he peered down the road. How to tell …

Of course. “Raven,” he whispered.

As the bird flew from him, Charles breathed out in one fierce rush. All of its strength and power, and courage … It was not frightened by any shadow. After all, its feathers were such that it darted through them with no trace. Power over them; power over fear …

Now, to cast the net wide. He stretched out his power through the bird. Started searching.

Sweeping forward, though, in wider and wider arcs … there was nothing.


A sudden flash of instinct made him wheel Raven round. It soared across the sky - its own ecliptic - and plunged behind Charles, searching, and finding -

“Bloody -”

He hadn’t even finished the yelp before the snow muffled it. “Ow!” Charles struggled against the tight grip; hearing the man’s rough laugh. “Fuck, you idiot - let me up! That’s not funny!”

“I think it’s funny. ‘Prove it,’ you said, and I -”

“- proved it, yes. Now let go.”

“No.” The sod flipped him on his back. And sat, pinning him playfully.

Charles stared up into those glittering eyes, feeling nothing more than consternation. Well. He felt … embarrassment, perhaps. Clever bastard, sneaking round the way he had. And - he felt cold, because the snow was pressing up against his back.

He shivered. “Let me up? I’m freezing.”

“Mm.” The man leaned forward and kissed him. Sloppily. Licking. Fucking hell. It was like owning a god damned Rottweiler.

“Yes, yes, very good.” He shoved the other back. “You win. You proved it - now please, let me the
fuck up, if you will, before I freeze my arse off.”

“Can’t have that.” But the man bounded to his feet and pulled Charles up. Then wheeled him round in his arms, ducked in for another kiss.

Charles swatted his shoulder. “No.”

“Please?”

“No,” and his teeth were chattering as he pushed the other away. “It’s past time we went inside - come on. I’m starving.”

“Funny you should mention it.” And the man bared his own teeth. “I am, too.”

“Yes, but I’m not your dinner, you ridiculous creature.” Charles started trudging down the road again. Fifteen minutes, maximum, and they would reach the manor. He could build a fire in the stove; a big one.

“But you see? You run, and I’ll catch you.”

“You only caught me because I had forgotten to check my blind spot. Given a head start - well. That and my veils. You could never catch me.”

“Ach so, with Jean’s toy; yes. Geschickter Rabe - I would still find you. I can feel your blood, now.”

Charles huffed. “Even if you can, which - really. Given enough distance, I’m sure it would pose no difficulty. But even if you can … surely there are ways to evade it.”

The man smirked. “Prove it.”

“Fine.” Charles wheeled on one foot, feeling his breath heave. “Fine. I will. But -” and he raised a finger, “you have to actually let me run this time.”

“You need a head start?”

“No. I only need ten minutes. And then,” Charles returned the smirk with interest. “I’ll beat you back to the manor. I’ll have a pot of bloody tea made before you give up. All right?”

“But if I can catch you, going into the manor -”

“I’ll - I’ll do something -”

“What?”

Charles thought … then decided to keep the rest of the smirk to himself. “I’ll let you suck me off tonight.”

“Really?” The man sounded ecstatic.

“Yes. Ten minutes.”

“Ten.”

Charles tensed his muscles. “Starting now. Close your eyes.”

The other obeyed, face cinching tight. “Starting now - go.”
Charles ran.  

He counted off the seconds. *Two minutes. One thousand, two one thousand* - His pulse pounded in his ears; he had to snuffle back fluid in his nose. Charles wasn’t quite sure where he was going -  

*Damn* -  

- and he had to stop and bend over, doubled and wheezing, at the turning of West King Road. Back within sight of the manor - he squinted at it, at the flicker of the library light in the darkness - and in under four minutes.  

Six left.  

Charles sucked in air. Swallowed against the metallic taste in his mouth. He needed a plan, and - *metallic* … He needed to find someplace to hide, to throw the man off the scent. If indeed the blighter could sense his blood.  


Where, though? There was a hidden entrance to the manor on the grounds somewhere - once inside, he could undoubtedly find a room with metal in it. Metal in it -  

“Oh!” It came to him in a flash. Ororo’s map, unfolding before his eyes, and his raven flying up into the air to show him the way. “The stable. Right.”  

He set off towards it - he knew exactly where. “Been there twice,” and Charles coughed. He winced at the cold air in his lungs. He had been starved for so long, and he was thus so far from proper form … It would not do to push himself.  

He lit a match as he walked through the woods. Enough to see by – only to watch his step. It would not do, now, to take a branch to the eye.  

*Seven minutes - one one thousand, two* -  

But - there. The clearing. Dusk was almost turned to night complete; but just enough light left to see the outline of the low stone building. Even if the door were locked - he could hide behind it, trusting in the chains and tools inside to keep him hidden.  

Charles came to a halt outside the door. Every nerve quivered, alive and thrumming. His raven arced down to him through the sky, flew ahead through the heavy door as Charles tried it.  

Open. “Yes.”  

He nipped inside and shut the door firmly. Hugged himself, gleeful, swallowing back the taste of exertion - metal - pooling in his mouth.  

“Yes, yes -”  

But Raven was telling him -  

Charles blinked.  

He tasted metal. But he also … smelled metal.
The stable was pitch black. Raven, careening back into his mind with a screech - Raven, pitch-black feathers vanishing from sight -

Charles could see nothing.

And all he could smell was blood.

The door was a heavy weight at his back. He didn’t want to reach out with his power. He didn’t want to know …

But.

He shivered. “… Hello?”

There was no sound. It was warm inside the stable. Given the freezing cold outside? Unnaturally warm. Yes, he could feel drafts, skating over his face … but sweat was beading in the small of his back.

“Hello?” He made his voice sharp. “Who’s there?”

Then, before he could lose his nerve, Charles struck a match.

*Red.* Grey stone, grey walls – but in front of him was what looked like … a table, and on it was a tangle of red. Redredred … Red, with *chains* on it –

Charles dropped the match with a gasp. The light died instantly. His glove scratched. The smell of blood, curling into his nostrils, settling and clotting –

He almost jumped out of his skin at the sound of a slither and clank of metal.

And a rasped:

“H-hello?”

“Oh my god,” Charles choked. “Fucking – hell, who is that? Who are you?”

Another metallic sound – clank. Clash. And another voice, stronger. “We might ask you the same thing.”

“Not the Red, that’s for sure.” A third voice.

“British accent,” said the second, rasping again.

It was like some – vaudeville – antiphonal horror show. “Answer me,” Charles snapped. “Answer me, or I’ll –”

He turned round, trembling, and struck another match. There had been a rusty panel – here – no, there –

Charles shoved his palm against the switches.

Electric lights crackled and flared. He wheeled on one boot, staring. Even as curses went up from the cells to his right and left, Charles fixed his gaze on the table directly in front of him.

There was a man lying on it.
Charles walked forward. His rubber soles caught – he looked down, automatically. Saw the blood on the stone floor. Sticky. He jerked his eyes away; stared at the man on the table. A glimpse of silvery hair, completely – his stomach lurched – completely naked, and covered, covered in blood. And …

Charles stared at one arm, numbly. Where it was affixed to the metal tabletop with a shackle.

Poking from the flesh were what looked like …

… Wires.

“Turn those god damned lights off!”

The first voice rang out behind him. Charles jumped and turned away from the body on the slab – the corpse. The one who had spoken was slight and dark-eyed. Dark hair in a short cut; thin face. Chained, Charles saw – chained hand and foot. Broad shackles round both wrists. Narrow hands gripping the cell bars.

“Turn them off!”

“Why?” Charles couldn’t help staring. The uniform – oh god, that was who they were. The tattered remnants of a blue uniform with an orange bird embroidered on the front pocket.

“You’re Free West.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” the second voice rasped.

“You’re prisoners.” His words sounded numb and stupid to his own ears – but Charles didn’t care. Shock. It was the shock. “I’m … Oh god. I’m a prisoner too.”

“Bullshit,” the third hissed, but,

“Prisoner of?” The first voice had gone calm and cool.

“Of – the EBS. I’ve been here since September – they – they took me from Oxford –”

The prisoner drew in a long, slow breath. His eyes were wide and dark.

“… Are you Charles Xavier?”

Charles almost reeled from the sound of – his name, his own name in the mouth of a complete stranger – “Yes.”

“Charles.” The voice was still calm. “I’m Mark MacTaggert. And I’m telling you right now: turn the lights off. You’re sending up a beacon for miles around; practically telling –” the words hitched, “the EBS that you’re here. So turn them off.”

“Right,” Charles panted. He ran to the panel, slammed off all the lights. “There.”

“Thank you.”

“No trouble – Mac –”

“MacTaggert. But call me Mark. Chris is to my left – Chris?”

The second voice rattled. “Hello.”
“And Rick is across from me.”

The corpse? But – no, the third voice. Saying: “Captain, don’t be a fucking fool –”

“That’s enough. Is Lucas still alive?”

A curse. “I don’t know.”

“Lucas.” Mark pitched his voice to carry. “Can you hear me? Charles,” he said, and Charles heard the same voice turn to him, “could you please check on the man in the cell across from me and to my left?”

“Of course.”

Charles hurried to the fourth cell’s bars. He tried the gate. Locked. He reached inside, felt for something – anything –

There were chains, but there was also cloth covering what felt like a leg. No: an arm. Charles tugged at it. He heard a bubbling moan.

“He’s still alive,” he said. “Sounds in pretty poor condition.”


“Enough, Rick. Charles. Listen to me,” and Mark sounded urgent. “There’s a sledgehammer and – other tools – upstairs in the attic. Can you get them for us? One hit to these bars and we’ll be out. We need to escape – we need your help. We’ll take you with us. I swear it. You’ll be free.”

“Captain,” Rick spluttered again, but,

“Captain.” The second voice – Chris – coughed wetly. “Sir. The tools.”

“What about them?”

“… Metal.”

It sounded as though Mark had swallowed hard. “That’s a risk we’ll have to take. So are these bars, after all, and so’s the handle of the – oh shit, the door!”

“What?” Charles squeaked.

“If he’s here – damn it!” Mark’s voice hit him from the darkness with all the force of a skillet. “He’ll have felt the door open. Charles Xavier,” and the skillet turned into an anvil, “will you help us?”

“I –”

Charles’ head was spinning. He stumbled backwards – jostled the table and gasped, shying away from the corpse. Who did they – who was Mark –

But he could guess, of course. For if these four – four, and the remnants of a fifth – had been in the stable … for who knew how long … The only EBS person left at the manor – gone every day, to Syracuse and Utica and Albany – hours on end –

The man. Of course. Of course it was him. Fighting back a surge of sickness, Charles called forth his raven – sent it flying as fast as it could go, to find –
“Oh god,” he choked.

“What?” Mark’s voice cracked. “What is it?”

“He’s coming.” For there was that dark metal cloud, twined round with the lines of the blueprint, knotting and unspooling and coiling in on itself as it walked along –

Prowled along –

Straight for the stable.

“He’s coming here.”

Silence.

It was only broken by the fourth – Lucas? – wheezing in what sounded, horribly, like laughter.

“Lucas. Good to know you’re still with us.” Mark’s voice was calm. “And Charles?”

“Yes?”

“Hide. Take off anything you have that has metal in it, and fucking hide. Not up in the attic – he’ll go there. Take an empty cell. And then don’t come out, no matter what you hear.”

Charles felt his mouth sag. “But I –”

“Hide!” the captain ordered – and Charles let his instincts take over. He darted for the second cell past Chris, landed heavily on the floor inside it. And called his raven back to him.

It glided over the metal-flecked blueprint, now at the edge of the stable’s clearing. Then it wafted past each of the Free West soldier’s minds in turn – Rick, Moira, Chris, Lucas – and –

Wait.

… Moira?

Charles felt his eyes go wide, even as his adrenaline surged. The Free West captain was a woman. But the others – he heard all of their chains, clanking and scraping as they slid as far away from the doors of their cells as possible. Did the others think she was a man? Why on earth would she –

Then there was a scraping sound from the other side of the door.

“Oh god,” Chris groaned.

“Shh,” another hissed. Charles couldn’t tell who.

And then the door creaked open.

Charles squeezed his eyes shut. Even through them, he saw the flare – blackness of eyelids flashing red – as the lights went on.

No sound. The prisoners were dead silent. The corpse – well, of course he wouldn’t make any noise …

Charles brought one hand to his mouth. Bit down hard on one finger, to keep himself from screaming.
Then he heard a rustle from his right.

“… Found you.”

“No,” he gasped, and surged to his feet. Darted past the man and ran – no, no no –

His boots caught on the blood. And Charles had only just reached the door when he heard a grating crunch from its lock.

He tried the handle anyway. No use.

“… Charles?”

The man’s voice sounded – puzzled.

Heart hammering into his throat, Charles turned round. Pressed his back against the door. Choked: “Stay away from me.”

“What?” That lean figure with its dark clothes … Except the other peeled off his gloves, stuck them in a pocket. Took off his hat, tossed it down on the table – Charles felt his thoughts splinter – and massaged at the back of his neck. “I found you. And now,” the confusion was edged in laughter, “as you agreed, I get to –”

“How can you even stand there and talk to me?”

Charles knew he sounded demented. Not shrieking – but if a whisper were a scream, that’d be it. “You’re standing in a – lake – of dried blood. You’re not noticing that there are four prisoners starving and chained,” he pointed, shaking, “in these cells! And – and you’re bloody well using a corpse as a – hat. Holder.” He stuttered to a stop.

The man blinked. “Oh. MacMurphy?” He plucked his hat, delicately, from the Free West commander’s blood-crusted shoulder.

Charles felt his own blood freeze in his veins as the man smiled.

“He’s not dead.”

Charles could only watch as the man raised both eyebrows. The wires – oh god oh god metal – in MacMurphy’s arms, and legs, and chest … moved.

The commander’s body twitched against the restraints. His mouth worked. There was no sound, though, besides a gurgle. And the runnel of fresh blood, pooling onto the metal table.

It took a long moment to accept that he was seeing what he was seeing. A crimson bubble forming at the older man’s mouth.

Was he trying to speak?

Then the bubble popped, and Charles had to clap his hand over his own mouth to keep from vomiting.

“What’s wrong, Rabe?”

The man’s voice sounded … soothing? Gentle? Even as he reached out one long-fingered hand and
adjusted what looked like a metal cable, jutting from MacMurphy’s side –

“Are you insane? What do you think is wrong? How long has he been like this?!”

“I brought him back on your Christmas. There was a Free West attack on Zhōngguó’s embassy, in Albany, the day before.” One side of his mouth quirked in a smile. "While we were sleeping. Remember? When we -"

"No," Charles snapped. "None of that. Are you telling me they did this to him?"

"Not all. But some." The man raised an eyebrow. "They had done most of what they wanted to do to him by the morning of your Christmas. And so they took the other soldiers and left for Qûfù later that day.”

One of the prisoners – Chris? – groaned.

The man did not react. Kept his eyes fixed on Charles.

“Dear god.” The blood pounded in his head. “And these four are just paying you a bloody holiday call, is that it?”

“I needed them.” The man leaned against the table. Ran a hand idly down MacMurphy’s sternum. The commander's dog tags floated into the air above the skin - but metal rippled beneath the same skin - writhing, twisting. Arms jerked against the restraints.

“Why?"

One eyebrow went up. Deliberately, the man glanced from side to side. Then a smile quirked one side of his mouth. “Their tracking devices.”

Charles realized that the chains had been making the softest clinking sounds during their entire conversation. Realized it in retrospect, though, as utter silence descended.

“These clever, clever little things …” the man mused. “Beneath the skin of the wrist. Used to be metal; now they’re plastic. But one can sense the disturbance, round the blood vessels. In any case. I took those devices, Rabe – but I know you would not approve if I killed the prisoners afterwards. So they are here. I left the heat on.” He sounded … proud? “And I leave them food and water every day.”

A clanking sound. Charles stared, eyes wide. The man in the cell across from Mark – Moira – Rick, he remembered. Rick was scrabbling at the shackle on his left wrist.

“And why,” Charles said, voice thin, “take the tracking devices?”

The man stretched. “When I ride to Albany, Utica, Syracuse, wherever … One is all it takes to bring a whole contingent of would-be rescuers out and running. You’d think they’d have put the pattern together by now.”

“You bastard,” Rick choked. He slammed his hands against the bars. “You absolute bastard. I’ll kill you –"

The man laughed, teeth flashing. Shackles bit into the prisoner’s wrists like hungry snakes. Then the bars started sprouting iron tendrils, twining round tattered blue cloth and the Free West soldier shrieked – the others were shouting, even Moira, calling down curses –
“Stop!” Charles screamed. Louder. “Stop!”

With a tilt of the head, the other – stopped.

“Yes?”

Charles could say nothing.

The man blinked at him, fishing his pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. Charles watched, numb with horror, as he shook one into his palm. “Do you still have the matches?”

“You could have killed him just now –”

“But didn’t you hear?” A grin round the cigarette. “He was going to kill me. Charles, Charles … geschickter Professor …”

He prowled round MacMurphy, straight up to Charles. Leaned in, so close to the door –

There was no sound from the Free West prisoners. Even the groans of the injured had stopped.

For the other plucked the cigarette from his mouth – held it between two fingers. Charles felt the thin paper rolled tight brush his cheek as the man cupped his face –

“Geliebter. You’ll protect me from them. Won’t you?” His voice was husky as he leaned in further. “Please? As I would protect you?”

Charles couldn’t move. The man smiled, slowly … Brushed a kiss over his mouth.

There was no mistaking the strangled sounds from behind him.


He was sure the man hadn’t noticed, though. For all he did was give Charles a smirk. “You did promise me something, Schatz. If I won.” He slid his hands to Charles’ shoulders. And then down.

One hand went into a pocket; took out the matches. But the other …

The other found Charles’ cock. Palmed it, through the fabric of two pairs of trousers. The man lifted his eyebrows. “May I?”

“Oh my holy god,” Mark – Moira – choked.

Her voice broke Charles’ sickened trance. He shoved the man away as hard as he could. “Absolutely – god, no! Are you out of your mind?” He watched in horror as the other struck a match, lit his cigarette. “Here? After – this? After these prisoners – they’re – oh no. No, no, I can’t do this.”

“Can’t do what, Charles?”

“No.” Charles turned to the door; choked back a sob. He wouldn’t – not in front of everyone. But – the blood, and the way MacMurphy’s feet, of all things, were angled up rigid …

Where the wires spooled out of his legs …

Charles turned back, and looked at the commander’s shins. Saw spreading patches of … black. Or grey. Stomach twisting, he bent down and sniffed, just once.

“God.”
“What?” the man grunted. Green eyes flickered at the sight of Charles wiping his own.

“That’s gangrene. This man has been lying here for, what – six days now? Being tortured like this? That rot creeping up his legs is fucking gangrene, you sadistic bastard – and if you had any scrap of a soul at all you’d – you’d –”

“I’d what?” The man exhaled a cloud of smoke. “Aren’t you forgetting something, Charles? This … man,” he gestured with the cigarette, “was responsible for the destruction of China Before. Nuclear bombs in 1950. Remember? Or had you forgotten?”

Charles was silent.

So were the prisoners. All eyes fixed on the man, who was prowling round the table to MacMurphy’s head.

“Now these –” he gestured to the prisoners, “I have not killed. I know from you, Charles, that it would not be civilized to do so. My lady will have them for her pleasure when she returns –”

One of the prisoners – Moira – inhaled sharply; the man ignored the sound.

“ – and in the meantime, they have my hospitality.”

“Watching their commander be tortured to death?”

“Is it torture, Xavier, if the person deserves it?”

“Deserves –”

“He has the blood of hundreds of thousands on his hands. Who deserves this, if not him? And I have not even done … all I could have done.” The man took a deep drag from the cigarette; blew smoke down into MacMurphy’s face. “I have left him his fillings. Respect for my dead people. And I have left him – whatever that thing is.” He gestured. “On his heart.”

Pacemaker? Charles’ mind offered. He numbly shoved the thought aside.

“It led me to consider, though: would he survive other metal being placed into him? He was the one to assist Stryker when they did that to James, you know.” The man looked up at him. “At Alkali Lake. You remember the records.”

“I … Mutant X. That was Logan? Those … the metal plating on his skeleton. Mother of God. Of course. And you’re telling me MacMurphy –”

“Ja.”

The man drummed the fingers of one hand on the metal table. Arched another eyebrow; lifted his thumb –

Metal loops popped out of flesh in MacMurphy’s – in his neck –

“Stop,” Charles hissed.

The man obeyed him with only one grimace.

There was more blood bubbling at the commander’s mouth. Eyelids, gummed together, twitched – and blood frothed as his lips moved too. “Fu’ you lenzer –”
A growl from the man; long fingers flexed— but, “No.” Charles kept his voice hard as iron. “You’ll stop this.”

“Everything I’ve done he’s deserved—”

“But at some point, the cycle has to stop. Even if he does deserve it. You have to … You don’t have to forget. Never forget. But you have to set aside what he has done.”

A pause.

Then, horribly, the man started smiling.

“… Set aside what he has done? Really?”

Charles stared.

“So. Tell me Rabe. Are you planning on doing the same? Or am I so much more of a monster than this one here?”

He flicked ash onto MacMurphy’s face. Took another drag. Smiled at Charles from around the cigarette.

“And are you so very much more important than so many of the world’s dead? That what we have done to you ranks on the level of outright nuclear destruction?”

Silence.

“Tell me, Charles. Tell me.”

The whisper caught at his ears. *Tell me. Tell me.*

He couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Unlock the door.”

The man raised an eyebrow. At Charles’ back, metal crunched.

“Outside,” Charles croaked.

He turned on his heel and left. And didn’t have to look behind him to sense the man following.

__________________________

Outside, the darkness was absolute.

The man, though … Turning to look at him while knee-deep in a drift, Charles saw the lean silhouette poised on the stable threshold. He tilted his head to one side. Exhaled smoke. And closed the door, slowly … leaving just enough of it ajar for a thin beam of golden light to spill across the snow.

The horizontal windows glowed, set high up in the walls. They might as well be beacons, Charles thought, dully. Signaling far and wide: *come here, come here. Charles F. Xavier, gone to earth and hiding here …*

The man shifted from foot to booted foot. Then, abruptly. “Well?”

Charles sighed.
“You told me ‘outside,’ Xavier. Why?”

“Come,” and Charles swallowed. “Come away from the door. I don’t want them to hear.”

A snort. “Who will they ever tell?”

The realization twisted into his mind like a needle. Who indeed? If the man had his way, those four prisoners would be … killed? Lobotomized? Frost’s. Frost’s, within the week -

And who knew what would happen to MacMurphy?

“What will you do to him?” He kept his voice quiet. “Now?”

“The commander? I’ll wait for him to die.” The man sucked on the cigarette, eyes narrow. “He’s close.”

Charles shivered. “Come away from the door, please.”

“Why do you care, Xavier?”

“They might,” he swallowed, “be able to – plot. Something –”

“No. That’s not what I mean to say.” And the man paced over to him, ignoring the snow where it caught in the creases of his trousers. He had left his hat and gloves inside, Charles saw, distantly. But he wasn’t shivering.

“MacMurphy,” he was saying instead, voice low and fierce. “Why do you care about him?”

Charles closed his eyes. A character from his history texts. His strategy unfolding while Charles watched from the Finder … A mind corresponding to a figure larger than life. Until the commander had been captured, and imprisoned, and reduced to a bloody wreckage.

“In a stable, starting on Christmas Day,” he heard himself muse. “Perhaps you have tried to fool me with displays of stupidity. But you’re really quite clever, aren’t you? And cruel.”

He felt a puff of hot breath on his face. Smoky. The man was very close. “Cruel? You would call me cruel, only for giving a thing like that his just reward –”

“You would have done that to me.”

Charles opened his eyes. Stared flatly into the man’s. “Wouldn’t you?”

The other could only stare back at him, wordless, for a long moment. Then: “No. No,” with increasing conviction. “I would never.”

“You yourself told me – Halloween night, remember? Before we made our first bargain.” Charles kept his voice level, quiet. “You told me that you would take your time, killing me. And that you would … take whatever you wanted from me, before you killed me. And that at the close, I would be begging you to –”

“No.” The man threw his cigarette into the snow. “I –”

“Don’t pretend you didn’t say it!” Charles hissed, trembling. So much for self-control. “You would have done the exact same –”

“No!”
Charles bit back his instinctive flinch. The man had seized his upper arms – the grip hurt, even through his manteau and two sweaters and shirts – and he focused on the glitter in those green eyes.

“No, Charles,” the other gritted out between clenched teeth. “That was before I knew you. Before I – before. We.”

“Before we fucked,” Charles finished.

“I’ll never hurt you. I promise.”

Charles made a sound of contempt. “You’ll never hurt me again, you mean? Because you have already. Several times now.”

But the other continued, doggedly. “I’ll never hurt you again. And – and if someone … I’ll kill anyone who hurts you. Because you’re mine.”

His skin crawled. “What?”


Charles stared. Really, he should have seen it coming. But –

“Sex,” he said, thinly, “does not make anyone belong to anyone else. Full stop.”

“But my lady –”

“Fuck your lady,” Charles ground out. “She gave me as a gift to you; you as a gift to me – you blighter, it doesn’t mean a thing! It’s just her sick and twisted gift to her own bloody self. Setting me up to be tortured; setting you up to get even more blood on your hands –”

“But – Geliebter. You,” and the man swallowed. “You – showed me. You taught me. You took me to you – I’m yours.”

The horror creeping over his skin landed in his stomach. And churned.

“I am yours, Charles.” The man extended his hands; touched the fingers of his right to the ring on his left thumb. “And if you want me to … if you think it more humane, more civilized to do so … Then I will kill the commander for you.”

“What.”

“MacMurphy.” Green eyes glowed in the narrow line of light from the door. “You are correct about the gangrene. And the amount of pain he must be in. So if you want me to, I will kill him.”

A pause. “But only if you want me to.”

An offer … to kill. Charles breathed in. Out. God. The entire hideous tableau in the stable – almost a week’s worth of torture for MacMurphy and his people … How much of it was the man himself, and how much was Frost’s influence?

What was he? What was actually – him? And what belonged to the thing he had been molded to be?

“I …”

The man’s eyes glinted at the sound of his voice. “Do you want me to?”
“I don’t want you to kill anyone. I want you to – stop.” He gulped. “With this. This torture. You gave the soldiers heat and food for a week? Well, you had them shackled and undergoing psychological torment for just that long.”

“The Free West operates camps in which they do the same. More than the same. To our kind, Charles – yours and mine –”

“So it’s all right to descend to their level, then? The EBS should – be the better men. Women. Better than torture and torment, even in an endless war.”

The man’s mouth thinned. “So you would have them all go free, Xavier? Just like you – free to fly back to your precious Oxford and hide from people who would persecute you. Cower away from anything that could change the world.”

“Don’t make me laugh,” Charles spat. “Change the world? I wouldn’t trust you and yours to change a car tyre. You’d see fit to melt the nuts and bolts rather than leave them be. And I am not a coward.”

“Too cowardly to tell me the truth.” The man stepped closer to him. “You have no further ideas than I do; you’re just whining at me because you disapprove. I have MacMurphy – I shouldn’t punish him for his crimes? I should just let him go?”

Whining? Charles pushed back his rage; let Professor Xavier take over. “Right and wrong. He should not go free, but neither should you be the one to punish him. There are other places to keep him, though. Holding places. In preparation for a trial, through the International Assembly.” Charles kept his voice cold. “In Brussels.”

The man was silent.

“Their proceedings draw off the principles laid down at the Nuremberg Trials. Remember those?”

“… I was told of them. Later.”

Charles lifted his chin. “And you never bothered to read up on them in a book. Or anything like that.”

“I …” The man’s shoulders hunched. “No.”

“Oh course not. Another reason for you to be careful, in Brussels. The Free West could very well intend on having you arrested for war crimes.” He saw the other flinch; pressed on. “Although I’m sure your precious lady has thought that through already. Prepared counter-intrigues, bribing someone to arrest Stryker. Lovely mockery of the entire system, and what it was designed to do.”

“I don’t – I didn’t know.” It was a mumble, aimed at the man’s feet.

“And your lady didn’t tell you?”

“No.”

Silence stretched between them: the man staring at the snow, and Charles brooding.

Then, “Rabe …”

Charles looked up. “Yes?”

“I’m sorry. For – the torture.”
Well. That was something, he supposed. Charles felt nothing but tired, though, as he looked at the other. “It’s rather too late for him. Your apology, I mean.”

“Yes.”

“So …”

“Do you want me to kill him?”

Back to the beginning. Charles exhaled shakily. He felt himself wobbling on his feet. It wasn’t fair – the other must have been watching him like a cat would a mouse, for he lunged forward and caught at his arms. Held him tightly.

“Because I will. For you.”

“And you won’t demand anything in return?”

There was a long pause. Then: “I won’t.”

His face pressed against the collar of the man’s jacket. Charles couldn’t stop shivering. Perhaps it was the cold, now, after all. Or the idea: that he had only just dodged another bargain. The blighter was worse than a skinflint at a flea market – always setting out terms, conditions … Sod jeweler. In another life, he should have been a lawyer.

“Then,” he said wearily. “Perhaps you should.”

“If it’s what you want –”

“I don’t, you idiot,” Charles heard his own ragged breath. “I don’t want more death.”

And then – God – it seemed that he was crying. Just the tiniest bit. But in the utter cold, the tears were turning icy on his cheeks in seconds.

The man made a small sound in his throat. Took one arm away from Charles’ back, and took hold of one side of his ragged dark coat. Charles flinched as he felt buttons undoing themselves – but then the other was wrapping the coat around him, holding him as close as possible.

God, it was warm.

And the man’s voice was a low vibration against him. “What do you want?”

“You to let me go back to Oxford. But that’s not going to happen, is it?”

A growl. He sighed against the man’s sweatshirt. No surprise there.

“Besides that.”

“I want …”

Charles closed his eyes. The last week … He could not imagine going back to chain and shackle …

“I want the freedom I’ve had. To go to the library,” he sniffed, “to walk round unchained. Always. I don’t want anything, or anyone, to take that from me.”

“Ah.”
“I suspect your lady is going to have a different opinion about it, though. I don’t know why she hates me so. When I never did anything to her.”

“But … you did.”

Charles froze. “What?”

“You hurt her.”

“No,” he whispered. “No – I can’t have. I didn’t. … What makes you say that? What makes you even think that?”

“You don’t remember?”

Charles felt his heart thump once, hard. Memory. Frost. Oh God, his memory –

“No.” It was a croak. “I don’t remember. What happened?”

“When you first came to the manor,” the man said, softly, “I watched over you. In the library. You were resting on the couch.”

“I was drugged,” Charles said, trying to back away. The other held him close, though, and kept talking. As though he had not said a thing.

“My lady did not let me give you water. But she permitted me to carry you when she took you to her bed –”

“ … What?”

“She had me take off your shoes. And I did – I remember kneeling, thinking she would tell me when she wanted me to go. I wanted to stay, to look at you. I had never seen anything like you, Rabe. You had looked at me, once, while you were on the couch that first night – your eyes were so blue … But then you went back to sleep again.”


“Like this.” The man tilted his head, slowly, and pressed a kiss against his brow. “But on your mouth.”

Charles felt frozen.

“Just the one. But then – then, Charles. Ah. I saw your raven.”

“You did?”

“It flew into the room and screamed. Or it could have been my lady, screaming. I was not sure afterwards – different people ran in, to help my lady. For quite some time there was confusion. After that, though, they dressed you again. They took you to the plated room downstairs .. but they left your shoes. I took them there later. Even if they would not let me go in -”

”The plated room?”

“The metal lining it dampens telepathic power. I do not know what you did to my lady – but for a night and a day, she could not speak.” The man’s breath puffed hot against his forehead. “We were in disarray without the Finder. Jean had to operate it for a time.”
Charles could see the fine grey of the man’s sweatshirt close to his face. Shock. Everything seemed to have slowed. His heartbeat sloshed in his ears.

He had been sedated for a week. They could have done anything, he had thought …

… and it turned out, one of them had. Or had tried.

Frost. Taking him to her … bed, dear God, why? Why on earth would she do anything of the sort? And for his raven to strike back and defend him …

No wonder she had never trusted him. To fake a lesser power had seemed the height of good strategy – but all that time, all of it, she must have known that he had been trying to deceive her …

“Well,” he mumbled against the man’s chest. “Thank God for my raven.”

“And I will protect you too, now. She will not take you from me.” The voice sounded assured. Possessive, like the hands that stroked down the back of his coat. “You’re mine. You chose me, not her.”

The whole tangle … Charles felt his pulse thump in his head. He had to sort it all out after a sleep – now, he just felt exhausted. Conflicting motives, danger and sex and death.

He pressed his forehead against the other’s throat, above the scarf. Sex. He had thrown it on the table as a bargaining chip, so many months ago. But now, it seemed that the man wanted him enough to place himself against Frost …

Oh.

That was a thought.

But, Charles’ mind told him, coldly. It has to be his idea. Lead the blighter into it. Let him conclude that he had been the one to come up with the whole damn thing. Panting for it.

Charles would just reserve the right to go back on his own word. As he always had. Flexibility, after all, was so important.

So. Before he could lose his nerve. Recourse to the waterworks.

“I can’t believe,” he snuffled, “that she would do that.”

“Shh.” The arms held him close. “You’re safe.”

“I don’t feel safe. And you’ll be gone, and I’ll be chained.” He made his voice waver and break. “She’ll chain me again, when I want to be free.”

“Schöner Rabe …”

Charles could almost hear the gears in the man’s head turning. Go ahead. Think it through. Come on.

“… It would be difficult, to persuade her.”

“Yes.” He shifted in the other’s arms. Peered into his face – made his eyes wide. “I don’t think I can.”

Which was true.
“I think,” and the man licked his lips. “I think – I can. If I ask Jean for help.”

“Jean?” For a split second, he almost lost the ruse. “No, keep Jean out of this –”

“My lady would never hurt her. Jean,” and the man’s voice sounded eager, “makes tiny jewels, edged in fire. In her mind. I saw, once – she sent me an image of it, when she gave one to Zelya –”

“What on earth for?”

“There was – ah. It was last year. In June. We were in Brazil, and he wanted to … We, ah, actually went to see a football match in Rio.”

“Oh.”

“My lady had not wanted him outside in Brazil, you see – the people did not know we were there to negotiate with their government. And Zelya sticks out in a crowd.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

“But,” and a laugh, “he found me a goyische priest’s robe, he held his tail on his arm, and to anyone who asked we pretended to be practicing for Carnaval. And the game was splendid. I had only seen two before. None as good as that one.”

“And Jean helped you?”

“Zelya realized that my lady would be able to see it in his memory. And Jean – she overheard him, when he brought us back home. She likes him. So she gave him that jewel … and it worked. I shall ask her for one, and conceal anything I need conceal to protect you. If you indeed fear her searching.”

“Yes, I do. I’ve told you – I’m sure she’s gone through that drafty brain of yours. I’m sure she could see your time with Azazel just as easily in your mind as in his –”

“But she wouldn’t.”

“No?”

“No. She swore it to me. When she gave me her token. I have hers, and – Geliebter …” The bare hand with the ring brushed Charles’ face. “I have yours.”

How were those fingers not freezing off, at this point? Charles had no idea. All he knew was that dread had settled in his stomach.

Here it comes.

“And – I would give you mine.”

Knew it.

“If you take my token, Rabe …” A kiss, light and elusive, brushing across his cheekbone. “You will keep all the freedoms you have had, these days past. I will protect you. And I will kill MacMurphy for you.” The voice was low, twining into his ears. “If you take my token.”

Good. The man had thought of it himself. And now, to play the play out.

“Something tells me,” Charles said, “that it would not be as simple a gift as that.”
“Mmm.”

“What would it mean?” He pushed himself off the man’s chest. Backed away. Every part of his body cried out to return to the warmth, but the cold helped him think.

Because … even if it was Charles’ plan – his own manipulation …

… Even if it was so, the sight of the man’s eyes glittering in the dark made the dread in his stomach twice as heavy.

“What,” he repeated, “would it mean?”

“Only that you would be mine, Charles Xavier.”

“Ah. Just more sex, then –”

“Not just.”

Here it comes.

And it did. For the man said, quietly:

“If you take my token, Geliebter … You must promise to stay here forever.”

Then there was only silence.

Charles finally broke it. “Forever?” He tried to laugh, but couldn’t. “You think I’ll live … Together, we will live forever. Happily ever after. Is that it?”

A low laugh. “I doubt I will live past this war’s ending, Schatz. But while I live: you must stay here. You must promise me.”

“And fuck you.”

“Mm. I would be so happy if you did … yes. But you could always say ‘no.’ And I would obey you.”

The voice was caressing - easing out of the darkness, coiling round his limbs ... Charles shuddered.

“Come into the light,” he mumbled. His throat felt dry.

The light – that pathetic little beam from the door … Trembling, Charles stuck his gloves into his pockets. There were the matches. But he could not grip them in time, before he saw the man’s dark shape slipping forward across the snow.

“You’re mine, Charles Xavier. Once, you said you wanted me. Show me that you want me now – show me that you’re mine, and I will do all these things for you.” The whisper was just as resonant in the feeble light as it had been in the darkness. “Show me that you’re mine, and I’ll kill him for you.”

“No.”

Damn this for a farce, anyway. It was time to bring it to an end. Charles felt his shoulders sag. “It has to be the other way round. Put him … out of his pain, first. Make it clean. Make it god damn painless. I’ll check, do you understand? If you think of lying, or of tormenting him – I’ll look in your memories –”
“No you won’t.” The voice cut like a knife. “You’ll stay here, forever, and you’ll stay out of my head. Understand?”

“Ah, but you have my token already. I might not be yours yet, but that token says you’re mine. So what’s to keep me from looking, if I want?”

“The same thing that keeps me from chaining you to that bed – and fucking you until you scream. And I want to. But you said ‘no’.”

“Fine. Fine – I’ll stay out. But I’ll still know. I swear to you.”

The man had gone completely still. “Is that a ‘yes’?”

Charles closed his eyes. His plan, his choice.

It still hurt to say it. But say it he did.

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

Tense, Charles listened for a long moment. He heard nothing. Had the other fainted?

“I agree,” he said. “I’ll take your token, and you – mmph –”

The man had covered the space between them in one stride. Perhaps two. And he was kissing him wildly – hands clutching Charles’ manteau, and then arms whipping round his back to yank him closer.

“Ah –” Charles’ eyes opened wide as he struggled; started pushing at the man’s chest. Then the other angled his mouth differently and slid his tongue in, hot and demanding – relentless. Charles saw his own gloved hands clench into fists; felt his entire body quiver.

It took some time to push him away. But Charles eventually managed it. And gasped for breath, just as the man did.

He saw the other trembling. Long hands reached out to tuck Charles’ scarf back in – it had worked its way loose. Those hands were shaking, too.

“Bed,” the man growled. “Now.”


“Yes, but you, Charles – in bed. Now.”

“Fine.”

He turned on one heel. Started walking, straight into the darkness of the woods. He would bat aside tree branches with outstretched arms, if he needed to. After less than a minute, though, Charles wheeled – clenching fists at his sides. The other was following him.

“I don’t need a bloody escort.”

Silence.

“For God’s sake: you can trust me. You have to trust me. And besides, you yourself have said … if I
“Always.” The man’s voice rasped out of the darkness. They had left the clearing behind. “Anywhere in this world. You’re mine, Xavier – and wherever you run, I will always find you.”

Every nerve stretched to its breaking point. Everything he had learned weighed on his mind. Surely the longest session in the Finder had not been this excruciating.

One last thing, then. To learn. Or, at least … to confirm. Because something told him: he knew already.

“So,” Charles said, voice cracking. “I’m yours.”

A nod.

“Then – whose am I? Who are you?”

“I thought you didn’t want to know.”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

He found the matches again. His hands were so cold, bare as they were. Charles would put his gloves back on, yes, but … he needed to see this … Somehow, he knew that he wanted to see. Perhaps to make it so that the name came from another person – and not some sort of monster, fresh from claiming his soul. And there was no moon for light. No light at all.

He struck a match.

In the light, the man’s eyes glowed. He was smiling.

Charles almost dropped the bloody thing – that expression … *God*. But he caught the match awkwardly. Let the fire lick at his fingertips.

“Besides,” he whispered. “MacMurphy said: lenzer. ‘Fu’ you’ – ‘Fuck you, Lenzer’? Is that part of it?”

“His pronunciation is atrocious.”

The flames hurt – he had to drop the match. It went out. Charles fumbled for another. The wetness in his eyes felt cold. All of it, so cold … “Don’t laugh,” he mumbled. “Not about him. He’s going to die.”

“Yes. He is.”

Charles struck another match. And in its flickering light, the man’s eyes now looked … still strange, their gleam. But his expression had softened. “It’s ‘Lehnsherr.’ ”

The intonation was indeed quite different. “And – the other?”

The man smiled. “Erik. Erik Lehnsherr.”

Charles stared.

For quite some while, it seemed. For before he knew it the match went out.

*Erik.*
“Well,” and his voice cracked again. He tried for another match; his hands were trembling. “Erik. It suits you. Erik of the EBS. The Red One – oh, of course.”

And of course it was true. He had known it long ago, it seemed. “Erik the Red.”

A low sound. “I prefer – just Erik.”

“Ah. Well, Just Erik … I’m Charles.”

He moved to strike the match – but gasped as the man closed a hand round his wrist before he could complete the motion.

“Charles …” Both hands, clasping his. The man’s were warm. *Erik*, Charles told himself. Erik’s hands were warm.

And it seemed they were warming his own. “Charles … You’re *mine*.”

“Really. I can be both, you know.”

A quiet laugh. Breath warm on his mouth, and then his jaw – warmer, because the man – *Erik* – was drawing closer. And even in the pitch darkness, Charles could almost feel the contours of his face. Perhaps it was his own breath, sliding over planes and angles, as the man – “Erik,” he whispered to himself, it was *Erik* – brushed a kiss across his cheek. Then drew back along his jaw. Kissed his lips, gently.

Charles tugged his hands away, and struck a third match.

This close, he could see the colors twining together in those eyes. Green and grey … Blue. And up round them: the white steam of their breathing, intermingling.

The thin line of mouth tipped up at one corner. “Please don’t set us on fire, *Geliebter*.”

He swallowed. “I won’t.” The match was already burning down to his fingertips. Substandard quality. “Ow.”

A *tsk*. Long fingers reached – flicked the match, and it went out.

Then Charles felt a kiss there. And a hand holding his own in place, so the man could lick at the burn and whisper:

“Go to bed, Charles.”

“I can’t go to bed if you don’t let me go.”

“Fine, then.”

The hand let go. And a few breaths later, the voice came from further off. “Go to bed.”

“How will you –”

But there was only the sound of footsteps on snow. Moving away.

Charles realized: he was staring into the dark. “Just – turn around,” he told himself. “Go home.”

There was a way to see where the man was going, of course. But Charles wanted his raven close to him. Not flying away. Not sensing the *want* that had to be radiating from the other, bright as the sun
He wasn’t that far from the manor. It was easy enough, with the remaining matches, to stumble out of the woods unscathed.

And the front door was open. Easy enough to lean against it. Close it behind him.

Charles hardly remembered finding his way to his room. His own door, of course, was still in splinters somewhere.

He used the last match to relight the fire. He piled as much wood on it as possible – he felt so cold … Cold. Frost.

“In my sleep. On her bed. What did she do?”

And more importantly, Charles thought to himself … What, if anything, had she done to his memories of that night? Even his drugged mind, sleeping, had to have stored something …

“Only one way to find out,” he said quietly.

Then Charles sat down in his chair. Frost’s chair, he thought, numb, but: “Not anymore.”

And in his chair? Flying back into his mind – his reading room – was as easy as breathing.

“I would stop,” he breathed to Raven and his aviary, fluttering round, “and chat if I could. But I have to find – something. If indeed it’s here.”

Charles looked around. The reading room air felt warm, smelled clean. Leather and bookbinding glue and dust, yes – but pine and sandalwood and tobacco as well. He couldn’t smell any metal. And he couldn’t feel any snow.

The gossamer veils fluttering in front of the vast window were in impeccable order. Softly swaying, untouched and unharmed.

“I suppose … rest did it.” He spoke softly to his entire aviary. The birds were clustered round, perched on his pauldrons and gauntlets. At his feet, his penguin looked up at him, solemnly. “Rest and food.” Charles shivered. Everything in order … but …

“Is there anything,” he whispered to the birds, “of Lady Frost here? Any trace – however small? Find it. If there is. Please …”

He did not have to repeat himself. The aviary exploded into action, albeit almost silently. Feathers whisked round his head as they flew up to the tops of shelves, down along the floorboards. Charles could not watch them all at the same time. He flicked his eyes from bird to bird instead, waiting, hoping against hope that there was no –

He heard a hoarse crakh.

Charles whirled and stared, heart pounding. Raven, perched on the edge of a bookcase. Looking down. He jogged to the distant case, trying to move as quickly as he could.

The raven’s eyes, darting back to Charles, were eerily intelligent. It leaned forward, fluttered down,
and tapped its beak against a shelf.

An empty shelf.

“Oh,” Charles mumbled. He ran gauntleted fingers over the shelf. Dust. A few patches, where other books had stood. “But how … and where …”

Except: his fingers hit something hard. Small and hard … and cold. Like a tiny lump of ice.

Breathless, Charles grabbed the mysterious something and showed it to his aviary. “What do you think?”

He heard a chorus of cheeps and cries. “I know. I’m not sure either.”

Held up to the light streaming through the veils, the mysterious something glittered.


The nightingale made an excited noise.

“Yes, you too.” He focused all his attention on the tiny diamond snowflake. It had no tendrils of power stringing from it. No spikes of anything that resembled Frost’s persuasion, language of threats and coercion …

“Just a note. ‘Frost was here’.” Cursing under his breath, Charles realized: “A bloody souvenir, of all things.

“And I’m not keeping it here a second longer. Raven,” he commanded. “Fly with me.”

Not to Charles’ real room, in the real world; no. He was dimly aware that his physical self was in in the high-backed chair, huddled alone in the cold and the dark.

But the White Knight flew over the forest with his raven. Looking for something.

For someone.

Not for the man, though. “Not Erik,” Charles mumbled to himself – and almost lost his focus as his raven shrieked in response. But that was only because the bird had found the person he was looking for.

MacMurphy.

Because, “I had promised, after all.” Charles whispered to the raven. “I told that bastard,” Erik, his mind whispered, ErikErikErik, “keep it clean. Painless. So I’m here to see – if he’ll keep his promise –”

He had to break off. There was a storm in MacMurphy’s mind – a welter of rain and cloud and unrelenting waves. Waves, because –

“Good lord.” They were flying above an ocean, slate grey and roiling. And before Charles knew it, a vast shape loomed in front of them, on a straight course out of the darkness.

“A boat.” He gasped at its bulk, even as they soared over the stern. They flew over a control tower, bristling with spikes, and wheeled to land on – “Oh – that’s amazing.”
Raven flew to his pauldron and perched as soon as Charles came to a complete stop. Breathless, from hitting the flight deck at a run.

Then they paused.

Charles gazed around him, shuddering. It was dusk – just as it had been outside, at the manor, earlier in the evening. The sea churned around them; beneath his boots the boat pitched.

The raven flapped its wings for balance on his shoulder. Pecked at his scalp – oh. Charles blinked. Here in a projection, in another mind … He had his hair back. He tossed the brown locks out of his eyes, even as the bird made another go, this time at his ear.

“What is it?”

Raven took off and flew ahead. Charles peered after it, as it flickered in and out of sight in the gloom. And before he knew it, the bird was crying out to him from the base of the control tower.

Charles walked forward. Then broke into another run.

And stopped, staring at the person slumped on the deck in the tower’s shadow.

It didn’t look as though he was breathing.

“Oh,” Charles breathed. His throat felt tight. “Are we – is it over?” He felt his raven perch on his shoulder again, talons rattling on armor. “Is he gone?”

The person chose that time to stir, of course. And try to sit up. Charles gasped; armor clanked as he knelt.

“At ease,” MacMurphy coughed.

“I – what?”

“At ease, sailor.” The commander’s eyes were closed.

“Sir.” It was difficult to speak. “I’m not … I’m not from your boat.”

“Boat?” Another rasping cough. And Charles felt his eyes go wide as MacMurphy grinned, hoisting himself up, sitting cross-legged. The older man leaned forward, letting his arms rest on his knees. His uniform was dusty … and it was American, Charles realized. Not Free West. It was easier to see, now - somehow, it had grown lighter in the commander's mind.

And MacMurphy looked …

The commander opened his eyes, and immediately squinted out towards the horizon; shielding with a palm.

“This is no boat, son. This is the Majestic. She’s an aircraft carrier. And if you call her a boat again, I’ll have to keelhaul your ass before going to kick some Commie ones.”

“I didn’t think that worked, with keels of the modern day,” Charles said.

“Shit. Storm’s coming.” MacMurphy was still looking out over the sea. Not listening. “Night, too. God damn – we won’t make it to Okinawa before tomorrow night at this rate. What would you say if I –”
He turned to Charles.

And gasped.

Charles blinked. Then looked over his own shoulder. “What is it?”

“Oh … my God. My holy Jesus.”

Charles was silent. Surely the commander would explain –

“Are you an angel?”


You’re on a boat, Charles wanted to point out, but: “You’re – in your mind,” he said, gently. “I am too. I hope it’s all right with you.”

“Yeah.” A rough swallow. Charles could hear it – and he saw the whites of MacMurphy’s eyes.

“That’s fine. My mind? But – this is the Majestic. 1950 tour.”

1950. Of course.

Charles closed his eyes.

“I just heard from Harry. He's doing all right and all, which -” the commander coughed, ”- is good for all us here. And then this damned storm kicked up, and I – I …”

He coughed again, harder. Then doubled over, retching.

“Easy.” Charles couldn’t help it. He opened his eyes; laid a hand on the older man’s back. “Breathe deep. Be easy.”


“No,” Charles said. It was almost impossible to speak past the ache in his throat. “No, you’re not.”

“Well. Shit, that’s a plus I suppose –”

“You’re dying.”

“I’m – what?”

“Dying.”

And there they were. Charles blinked, hard, as his eyes watered. He felt something trickle down his face –

“Oh.” MacMurphy’s own eyes were dry. If anything, he looked …

… Less confused, perhaps. Understanding.

“Makes sense.” Clean-shaven face, tilted to the side. The commander looked young, so young. No blood, no metal. No pain. “I didn’t think it would happen here. On the way to Okinawa – it was a
good year, you know. 1950."

You’re not there, Charles thought to say, but – no. Let him stay in his memory.

In his own room, in the physical world – Charles knew he was crying. Not that he cared about doing so in front of a commander. But … perhaps it was his raven. Helping him keep control.

As if hearing his thought, the bird fluffed its feathers against his ear, and ran its beak through his hair.

“Summertime 1950 … and I got an angel on deck. Shining armor ‘n all.”

“I’m not an –”

“Gabriel – no. Michael. Tell me something, Mikey boy? About that storm there.”

MacMurphy had pointed. Charles turned to look –

And stilled.

There was blackness approaching from the horizon. Utter dark, spreading across the grey sky like a pool of ink.

“Looks nasty,” the commander continued.

“It’s not.” Charles turned back to gaze down at him. “It’s peaceful enough. Quiet.”

“A storm like that –”

“It’s not a storm.”

Charles paused. Drew breath, and said:

“It’s the end.”

MacMurphy stared back up at him. Eyes wide. “… The end?”

“Yes.”

“This is it, then?”

“I’m afraid so –”

“Well. I’m not afraid.” And the commander lifted his chin. “Thanks, though. For stopping by. But you can get going, if you need to. Mike.”

“I …”

Charles turned his head at a clatter. Raven had dropped something to the flight deck.

It was Frost’s snowflake, gleaming crystal through the gathering dark

The bird ran its beak through his hair again. Crrrr’d into his ear, softly.

“Go on, son.” MacMurphy waved a hand at him. “Get going.”

Charles couldn’t help but obey. Shakily, he got to his feet. Stared down at the commander, lying beneath him – eyes closing …
“Feels like a sleep; that’s good.” The voice. Charles remembered it from broadcasts. From a vid he had used to teach. “Good sleep, yeah?”

“Yes,” he choked. “Just – sleep.”

“Thanks. Oh, but – listen. Before you go?”

“Yes?”

“Tell me.”

And MacMurphy fought to open his eyes. Succeeded, and stared back up at Charles.

“Tell me. Will it be all right? Will I … What will happen?”

Charles felt his lips part. He licked them. Tasted salt.

And said:

“I don’t know.”

The commander sighed. “... All right. Go on, then. Before it hits – go.”

“I’m so sorry,” Charles whispered.

“Don’t be. It had to happen some day. Now: go, son. Go.”

It was getting dark – so very dark that Charles could hardly see Raven soar up into the sky. He cast one last look over the sea, the deck - Frost’s crystal glinting up at him. MacMurphy … Resting his back against the control tower. Eyes closed. Waiting.

Charles followed his raven. They flew over the raging waters and then up and away - away from death, unfolding over sky and sea, inevitable. And away from all the memory of a life, closing round about that mind like a cat curling up to sleep.

Sleep, Charles thought as he felt the borders of that mind waver - the liminal flickering and fading. Sleep. It was all he could think and say, as he left MacMurphy behind to die. Sleep, with death as dream.

Chapter End Notes

Sigh.

I hope you liked!

Also, I would like to please claim A Prize. For going 300K words ... without naming one of the two in the gd FIC PAIRING.

*dies*
*is buried with pronouns in Canopic jars*

:D
Epilogue - II

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for reading thus far. Here is the end of Part II. The soundtrack for the latter half of Part II, as well as for this epilogue, has been - and is - 'Right Where It Belongs', of Nine Inch Nails. (Please note that the previous is not only playing over a video montage of bombs being dropped - but also seems a different version than the usual. Reznor + a more acoustic vibe? Don't know.)

A few more specific thanks first.

1) My utmost gratitude to Eti, Kay, Tak and Azryal for their read-throughs and their feedback, whenever either was given. An extra above-and-beyond thanks to Eti for her Italics Intervention, administered around ch. 26. I'm gradually going back and scrubbing the previous chapters - so if you've thought the good ol' sign of the italic an eyesore and/or distracting, deliverance is nigh.

Aaaand a final thank-you to Tsubame, for her editing. Along with the italics scrub, I've been fixing errors in the earlier parts of this fic. In sum: if anybody ever needs to lob a correction at me, whether it's English or German or logistics or "Charles somehow grew a third arm in that recent sex scene" - please do so.

2) A huge round of thanks to the amazingly generous people who have made art, craftwork, and music for this fic. I have compiled their work in a separate AO3 posting. You may find it here. All works given are accompanied by links to the LJ, Tumblr, or Deviantart account(s) of their respective artists. These direct links can be found - without images - in the first chapter/TOC as well. Please do click through to give them feedback - my posting here is intended as a compendium/placeholder.

3) Finally ... thank you, so much, to everyone who has read and commented so far. If I have not replied to you individually, please know that I greatly value your feedback and appreciate the time you take to let me know your thoughts.

Catch you at the end. I hope you've enjoyed Part II.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was easier, Charles thought, if he told it as a story. He had played the storyteller after all … this night of all nights, for his students. Each and every year.

“Once upon a time,” Charles whispered to the chair's back, where he leaned against it, “in a faraway land, a young prince lived in Queen’s College House.” His voice cracked. “He had everything he wanted, even if he didn’t know it, then. He had his students, he had his friends. And he had his sister, who he loved.

“But one day, the prince …”

Charles listened to his own words trail off.
It was dark in his room. The fire had died down. Its coals were a red-orange blur in the corner of one eye; out of the corner of the other, Charles could only see the weave of the chair’s upholstery.

“Well. There can’t be more than one prince in a story. Can there? Although … I suppose I could call him the beautiful princess. The fair young virgin in a lonely tower – oh,” Charles coughed. His laugh had caught in his throat; turned into a half-sob. “Oh. I …”

The room was just as chilly as it was dark. He must have slept after leaving MacMurphy’s mind. Dully, Charles considered sending his raven out to look for the other – Erik, he told himself. *His name is Erik.*

“But alas, Princess Erik. You’ll have to be left all alone.” He was too tired to search; Raven as well …

Charles curled up further into the high-back chair. He rested his head on his arms; stared ahead at nothing. All alone. “In good company, Princess …” He let his imagination take the idea and bring it to an ending: Erik staring from a castle tower – Erik wandering through a darkened wood – Erik lying in an ice-crystal coffin –

He heard footsteps.

Charles shuddered. “Stay away,” he whispered to his raven. “All of you – stay safe.”

When Erik paused on the threshold, Charles knew what the view was. A slight figure, completely alone, booted feet drawn up beneath him on the chair. Staring at nothing.

“Charles?”

He made no reply.

Erik paused. Then asked, “May I come in?”

Charles nodded. And the other eased into his room and paced over to him. *So close …* Charles could almost feel warm breath coasting down, over his face. Not over his bare scalp, thankfully. He had not yet taken off his hats.

“It’s very dark and cold in here, Rabe,” Erik said, voice gentle.

*I’d have it no other way,* Charles considered – but kept from saying it.

“Planning to suffer, then?”

He made no reply.

“Xavier. At least take your boots off.”

“I took off my gloves. Isn’t that enough?” He shivered. “And it’s ‘Charles’. After all, I’m not planning on calling you ‘Lehnsherr’ anytime soon.”

“Good.” A smile.

And Charles blinked as Erik gracefully went down to his knees. He took off his gloves and placed them on the floor; Charles watched the long fingers move, knuckles and tendons shadowed in the firelight. Then Erik grasped one of Charles' boots and, matter-of-fact, eased it off his foot. “Your pronunciation being what it is, you understand.”
Charles did not dignify that with a response either. Only kept watching, instead, as Erik divested him of his remaining boot and several layers of socks.

“Can you –”

“Hm?”

“Can you leave one pair on? It's cold in here.”

“It need not be.”

Charles heard his pulse rush in his ears as Erik cupped one callused hand round his heel. Then stared as the other bent forward and placed a gentle kiss on his ankle.

His breath was very warm.

Charles twitched his foot away. His mouth was dry.

Erik leaned back again and stared in silence. Until he said: “I have something for you.”

It took him a moment to dig into a jacket pocket – but then he poured metal into Charles’ upturned hand, lying limp on an armrest. Why take it out that way, and not use his power? – Charles wondered, but then saw –

He felt his stomach lurch.

Dog tags. With blood on them.

And there was blood on Erik’s fingers as well, tacky against the skin of Charles’ wrist as the other stroked down his bared forearm and over his hand – light, gentle touches.

“Geliebter.” That voice was rough. “Will you take this as my token?”

“I’d really prefer not.”

A growl. “Why?”


He straightened in his chair; nudged the other man with one bony knee. Long fingers had alighted on the knuckles of Charles’ right hand. Staring down at the rusty red daubed over those fingernails, Charles tugged his own fingers free.

“Please let me get up? I can’t –” he gulped, “I don’t want to look at the blood. It’s … These dog tags are MacMurphy’s, aren’t they?”

“They’re yours –”

“No – no. I don’t want them. Please don’t be offended,” and Charles heard his own voice crack, “but I saw him die, and I don’t want to wear them and think of that every day –”

There was a pause.

“You saw him die?”
“Yes.”

“How? I know you obeyed me, Rabe – I lost the touch of your blood when you went through the front door.”

_Fuck._ Charles shoved his instinctive horror away, even as he pushed at Erik’s chest again. He lifted his chin. “I went into his mind. For what it’s worth, I could see that it was going to be peaceful. So … thank you for that, I suppose.” _Thank you_ for a death; dear god – but Erik growled:

“You asked me to do it that way.”

Charles squeezed his eyes shut and pushed harder. “Don’t even start. Let me up.”

Erik yielded. Almost before Charles knew it, he was staring down at the fire’s coals and fighting a wave of dizziness. He caught at the mantelpiece with his free hand. In the other, the blood on the dog tags stuck to his skin.

Charles didn’t care how he looked, walking unsteadily to the bathroom. He was still wearing his coat, scarves and hats, of all things, even as the stones of the floor pressed cold against his bare feet.

“Charles,” the man began, but Charles spoke over him. Not turning to look.

“I’m just – I’ll just wash these,” he said, holding up the dog tags. “And I’ll. Wash – I mean, I need to. Sweaty.”

Quick as a wink, he closed the bathroom door behind him. And stared at it, tense. Half expecting to hear the other’s footsteps, prowling, and a wrench as he yanked the door open –

“Erik.” For god’s sake - _his name_. Not ‘the other.’ Not ‘the man.’ _Erik_. Charles must have said it louder than he had intended, though, because then he heard that voice at the door.

“Yes?”

Charles shivered. “Could you please give me a candle? I can’t see in here.”

Which was true. The bathroom was pitch black.

He heard nothing from the other side, at least until a gentle tap on the door. “Here it is.”

“Thank you,” Charles mumbled.

“… You have to open the door, you realize.” Erik sounded amused, damn him. “I can’t fit it underneath. Not lit, at least.”

“I,” he began.

“I’ll go make you some tea,” the low voice continued. “Shall I? It will be warm. And you can do – whatever needs doing.”

_Fine_, Charles thought at the door. _You do that._

“I’ll be back in a moment.” The voice was further away.

And Charles heard footsteps. He hardly trusted his ears … But one brush of his power confirmed it. That presence was walking down the hallway. Down the stairs. Gone.
Charles opened the door and scooped up the candle from a flagstone. It was steady enough, wedged in the remnants of the lantern. He dropped the dog tags on the bathroom sink, and set the candle next to them – where it sent up a brave flame.

The light turned his eyes into dark hollows, in the mirror.

Charles stared for a long moment. Mirror, mirror ... But for that fairy tale to work, prince and princess alone would not suffice. No. They would need an evil queen.

So he whispered to his reflection:

“Once upon a time, in an even more faraway land, a young prince was held captive in a grim cell. He had been chained and starved and left in the darkness, but he still had friends. And he remembered his sister, who he loved.

“An evil queen came to his cell each day and said, ‘Kiss me, young prince, and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them.’ But the prince refused her, and each night slept alone in his chains.

“But then one day, the Queen looked in her magic mirror and said, ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall …’

Charles let his voice fade away. Because …

“I don’t know the part of that prince’s story that rhymes.”

He stared at his reflection. “I can’t …”

Think about it, his mind finished. Frost kissing him … No. He would not even think about it. He would save it for the morning. Frost kissing him; MacMurphy’s death. The children in battle, Logan’s blood – his own hunger and and his pain …

Charles saw his mouth twist, even as his eyes glittered in the darkness. He could feel the burn in them. “That young, stupid prince. My god,” and his voice broke. “You fool. You thought you could – you still think you can –”


“Live a peaceful life,” he muttered to the mirror. “A hermit, somewhere. No queens, no wars. No dragons.”

He shivered at the memory of the previous night: the man, sprawled on the bed. Watching him with heavy-lidded eyes; exhaling a stream of smoke that curled round the sharp bones of jaw and nose – Herr Drache …

Erik. “For the last time,” Charles told his reflection. “Call it what it is.” Not ‘monster’, or ‘other’ … “Erik.”

He stripped and showered, focusing only on the room’s chill and the lukewarm water. After drying as best he could with the green sweater, Charles tugged his manteau back on. It was the warmest thing in that bathroom, after all. And Erik would probably have him out of it in two minutes – but until then, he’d be damned if he was going to shiver naked.

Not that he would have to. Charles hadn’t promised to fuck him. But he had agreed to stay at the manor, so he could put two and two together. Forever, his memory whispered.
Charles rolled his eyes at the bathroom mirror. ‘Forever,’ his bony British arse. Promises were made to be broken.

But the way Erik had kissed him, after he said it …

The way he had looked at Charles, eyes glinting, as he had said his name …

Charles left MacMurphy’s dog tags by the sink.

Then he tugged his knit hat down past his temples, and picked up the candle in its lantern frame. Opened the door as casually as he could, even as he felt his heart sink. Promises, promises: all of them hanging from him like chains. It felt as though he were damned already.

He gave the chair a miss and went straight to his bed. The blankets were there, after all. And he was so tired … Almost too tired to stay awake, let alone do anything more adventurous.

So, if Erik was going to try to fuck him, Charles would have to make it clear from the outset how very much he disapproved. He would not say ‘no’ – not outright. Perhaps a different angle would be best – one different from any he had taken before. Agree. Then stare at the ceiling, feel nothing, feign no interest. Cold-fish it. That ought to cure the other of his obsessive lust in a few sessions.

Something to consider, when Erik returned from – wherever he was going. Peace talks. And after … who knew? Charles would resign himself to the other rutting away like some animal – but no more of this pretending to have been moved by it. It sapped him of all his energy.

He did not have to wait long before the man returned, now missing the winter gear, and wearing the sweatshirt and trousers that didn't quite match. Charles watched as Erik left his boots on the room’s threshold. And as the other walked inside and turned, blinking, to gaze straight at him, where he lay curled up beneath the bedclothes.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine.” He kept his voice low. “Just tired. And a little cold.”

“Here, then.” And there was that bleeding thermos again. “Drink that. It’s the ginger that you like.”

“Nothing else in it, I hope,” Charles had mumbled, taking the container. It was warm to the touch.

“Just ginger. In the summer, I’ll bring honey for you.” Erik locked long arms behind his own back and stretched. Then he slouched down on the floor, next to the bed, and leaned his shoulders against the mattress.

Summer. Charles unscrewed the top with nerveless fingers. Summer? Laughable. Somewhere perhaps it had once been warm, with the sun shining twelve, fourteen hours in a day. Not here, though. Never here.

But he drank the tea anyway.

Silence stretched between them after he had finished. Charles kept his fingers twined round the thermos. His nest of blankets was warming up; the tea had certainly helped. He wished for the second hat, since his was letting heat escape. He reached beneath it to scratch; the hair growing in was itching –

“All right?”
“Fine.” He bit back a sigh of vexation. It would be lovely to do things without someone else hanging on his every move, wide-eyed and adoring. He would have fled the Takers last August – adopted a spaniel if he wanted something to lick his foot and grovel …

But … no. It would not do to underestimate him. Erik. Charles slanted a look at him from the corner of his eyes. The same creature who had cavorted with him in the snow had received all the intelligence reports, had made chains in the stable wrap round the prisoners like snakes …

And had given him a king’s ransom of jewels as a bloody thank-you. Or as an homage of sorts. Like to like, he had said – beauty to beauty … Charles sucked his lower lip into his mouth, watching Erik from beneath lowered lashes. Ha. Those eyes had gone wide.

Even with demands and promises, with chains and jewels and the hidden history of the world unfolding … All that in the air and Charles could still lead the other round by his cock.

Which would have been a satisfying thought at any other time, perhaps. But now? He was tired.

Charles gave up, and yawned.

“Tired?”


The man tipped his head against the edge of the bed. “Then you had better sleep.”

Charles raised an eyebrow. “Set up my rest, so in a few hours you can give me a stirring valedictory with your cock? Is that it?”

A snort. “I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do. Even though you did say …”

Utter bollocks, but Charles decided to take the bait anyway. “What did I say?”

“You said,” the man whispered, “that if I found you … you would let me suck you.”

He was edging his hand towards Charles’ knee; his palm brushed over it and smoothed up and _in_ – gently. Almost teasing.

Charles swallowed against the dryness in his throat. “But I lost focus on our little game when I saw MacMurphy. So … it’s not quite fair, you understand. That you won.”

The other blinked. Then took his hand back and eased forward, resting his forearms on the bed. And Charles couldn’t help it – he shivered as Erik leaned against one of his bony knees before rubbing his face down the line of Charles’ shin. Said line was softened a bit by the blanket, and by the food over the last week and a half, perhaps, but still prominent.

The man closed his eyes. And – bloody hell. He seemed to be set to go to sleep, his face practically in Charles’ lap.

“What are you doing?” Charles whispered.

A rough sigh. Lean hands slid over the covers and up to his thighs. He gently caressed Charles through the blanket – then moved up further, thumbs finding the bony arch of hips. _Geliebter._ The man drew in a deep breath. “I’ll miss you.”

“I … Forgive me if it sounds self-centered, but I rather assumed that already.”
The man laughed.

Erik, Charles reminded himself, shivering. Erik laughed. It was soft, vibrating against the blanket and into his flesh. And then he said, “I assumed that you assumed. I think.”

“Clever.” He reached out a careful hand. Brushed it over the other’s hair. “I do so enjoy cleverness.”

Erik leaned into the touch, his eyes falling shut. “I shall try to read clever books, then, while I’m gone.”

“How long will that be, do you think?”

“A few weeks, a month perhaps in Brussels … But after that? I don’t know. Especially if it’s California.”

Charles let the ensuing silence stretch. He focused on the softness of the hair beneath his fingertips. Like velvet, he had thought the night before. And so it was still. Crushed velvet, flattening beneath his palms as he brought his other hand to touch, fascinated. Lovely.

Erik sighed against him.

“Very nice.” Charles caressed down the side of his neck; back up to his hair. “I only hope mine grows back as finely as yours has. Why on earth did you have it cut so close, anyway?”

“… Lice.”

“Well. Just as long as you don’t have them anymore.”

“I don’t.”

“Good.”

Because he didn’t – have lice, Charles meant. The other had probably bathed more in the past ten days than he had in as many weeks. His hair was still … lovely to touch. So lovely … even though Charles didn’t have the excuse of mind-altering chemicals this time around. He moved both hands gently, brushing up and down, over and over –

“Mm.” The rough voice had turned drowsy. “I like that.”

“Do you?” Charles brought his fingernails to bear, alternating small scratches with massaging strokes. “This, too?”

“Oh.” Erik sounded drugged. “Yes.”

Smiling, Charles pressed on. The great idiot – putty in his hands. If he just put MacMurphy, the Free West, war, and kidnapping out of his mind, then it was quite enjoyable to watch the other nestle closer, seeking out his touch. No small order, to set aside the entire butcher’s bill. But perhaps for five minutes.

Or ten.

In the pursuit of … something for himself.

Charles felt his smile twist. He had the man’s sweater; he was going to get some sort of token – though none covered in blood. On that he would put his foot down. And there were the jewels, of course …
“Once upon a time,” he murmured, soft enough so the other would not hear, “a young prince was given a great treasure. He protected it, kept it close – for he knew that with it, he could do anything …”

For it was true, Charles realized, his heart suddenly pounding. He could use smaller jewels as bribes. If he could only make his way to one of the nearby settlements – he could send a letter, or use a village telephone. Or – hadn’t the man said something about a telephone here?

His fingers had clenched in the other’s hair; Erik tightened his own grip with a contented growl. It broke Charles’ concentration. He raised his eyebrow down at the auburn hair, at the head nuzzling up and down in what felt like an attempt to map his calf muscles.

“Really,” he murmured. “They can’t be as delectable as all that. Especially through wool.”

But Erik wasn’t listening. “May I,” he breathed instead. Shoved up against Charles’ hands and stared into his eyes. His own were glittering strangely. “Please?”

Well. It seemed they had come to a point. So to speak.

Something for himself, then. Charles sighed, resigned. “‘Please’, what?”

“Please,” Erik whispered. “May I suck your cock? Please?”

Charles rolled his eyes. “Keep whining like that and you’ll break something. But,” and he gave the other an admonitory push to the head at his growl, “if you can keep from using those teeth, you might as well. If only to shut you – oh god –”

For Erik had surged onto the bed. His lean hands at Charles’ hips yanked – Charles saw a flurry of blankets and then yelped as chilly air hit his legs. “Oi.”

“What?”

“It’s still cold in here.”

Erik was breathing heavily. “I’m not cold.”

“Well, I am, and I’m the one that’s going to have everything on display in the next minute. Could you build up the fire? Please?”

”… Right now?”

“Yes. Please.”

Erik wrenched himself away, strode to the fire and began flinging wood onto it. Charles watched in alarm.

“It’s not going anywhere. I’m not going anywhere – you don’t have to –”

A shower of sparks went up. Really. That was quite enough.

Charles flipped the bedclothes back and opened his coat. He shivered in the chill – damn. Just as he thought. But he sneaked a glance at the long line of back hovering over the fire. Good – Erik hadn’t seen. And … Charles exhaled shakily, despite his best intent. Erik had stripped off his sweatshirt and peeled off the shirt beneath it … Slowly. Up over his head. And the flex and twist of muscle –

Charles jerked his eyes away. It would be best to get a head start. Matter-of-fact, he spat a few times
Once upon a time, Charles thought to himself, dizzy, a young prince was getting his cock sucked by a bloodthirsty dragon.

Except … well. The dragon was being quite restrained. He hadn’t felt a single press of tooth. Which was good. Erik had responded eagerly to his instruction – “Lick, for God’s sake, and not one bite, or we’re done” – and …

“Oh.” Charles felt his breath hitch. His eyes were squeezed shut. “Oh, god –”

Certainly not a fairy tale he would tell to anyone under the age of sixteen; good lord.

“Good – god, like that – Oh. No. No, not like that – What are you doing?”

For there was cold air on his wet cock now. Charles grimaced and reached down with one hand. Batted around, blindly, until he felt short hair. He pushed at it. “You need to keep going.”

“And you,” the man rasped, “need to stop using your power.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Du.” A cough. “How have you not –”

“Not what?” Charles felt giddy. “What’s wrong? You were doing so well.”

“You haven’t come yet. How is that possible?”

He couldn’t help it; he laughed. And since he could almost feel Erik bristle in wounded pride, Charles made sure that the same laugh turned … oh, hell. He might as well pull out all the stops. Enter the Oxford Casanova, stage left – husky whisper and all.

“My dear …” He trailed a finger down the man’s face, blindly. Even without looking, though, he could feel the other’s shiver. “I am what I am. And one part of what I am is: controlled.”

“But how much.” It wasn’t even a question. Just a mumble against his cock; warm. Then a scrape of beard and a sigh that felt wet and hot against his hip.

“Quite a bit. So.” Charles scratched through the man’s hair – it was damp – and let his hand fall to his abdomen. He opened his eyes just a fraction. Erik’s right hand had fisted the sheets; he was resting his forehead on it now. His hair was darker. Sweat, Charles decided. Lovely, that the room was so much warmer now.

“So,” he murmured, “you have nothing to be ashamed of.”

Erik huffed and looked up at him. And the sight sent a spike of arousal straight into Charles’ gut; twisting and coiling. Twin daubs of color high on stark cheekbones; dark brows drawn together into a frown … and that thin mouth looked – wrecked. Slack and fluttering just slightly as Erik drew in deep breaths. Shiny, with what had to be pre-come. Absolutely delicious.

Charles gave him a lazy smirk. Watched as those green eyes went wide, fixed as they were on his own. “Try, try again.” He slid his hand down over one of his sharp hipbones. Trailed his fingers over Erik’s brow. “You’re lovely. It’s lovely – I promise.”

“Is it?”
“Mm-hm.”

“I’m not – doing anything wrong?”

Charles laughed again. “Schöner Drache, there’s absolutely nothing wrong about what you have been doing … It’s lovely.”

“Not a dragon,” the man mumbled. There was hot breath on his groin again.

“Then what shall I call you?” Charles heard his own voice, dreamy. He rolled his hips as Erik opened his mouth and sucked him down. Except – damn it, not too much, because he felt the poor sod cough again.

“Schöner Löwe – beautiful lion? Schöne Kleine Maus?”

A growl – dear god that had felt amazing around his cock. Then another slurp as the man pulled off.

“Just – call me Erik. Fuck,” he panted over Charles’ cock. “How hard is it? To understand?”

“I suppose I’m having some difficulty understanding,” Charles replied. “It’s very hard, you see. Be a dear and move to the left – that is, your right. I could very well put your eye out.”

And he watched, breathing heavily, as Erik obeyed. Moved round him to the right, flattened his free hand between Charles’ hipbones. Erik’s free hand, because the other hand – ah. That hand was stroking back up from its tantalizing exploration below … back to his cock, and circling the shaft. Charles pressed his lips together, staring, as Erik licked him. Once, twice, and more … Then he leaned back and glared at Charles’ cock, as though it had done him a personal injury. And took a deep breath.

“Really. The poor thing hasn’t – bloody fucking hell –” Charles felt his head kick back as he fought with all his might to keep from thrusting up into that hot mouth. “Jesus.”

Another vibrating growl.

“Sorry. Forgot. Fewer Christian epithets; let’s see. Oh, that Elijah would come again! My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof –”

Erik snarled, yanking up and off his cock – one long wet pull that practically made Charles’ eyes cross. “Xavier –”

“Charles.”

“Charles. Tell me,” Erik’s voice was a rasp. “Tell me how.”

“‘How’ what?”

“You know what.”

“You want me to come? Really?”

“Yes.”

“Really, Geliebter?” Charles let his voice darken. “And how do you want me to come?”

There was a pause.
“Many different possibilities, you know.” He sighed, rocking up just enough to smear the wetness of his cock on the side of Erik’s face. “I could come here. Or on your chest - you will put some antibiotic on that cut, won’t you?”

It hadn’t healed correctly yet, after all. Which made sense. It hadn’t yet been a week. And it seemed Erik was paying no attention whatsoever, for he was hanging on Charles’ every word. Charles knew from the quality of the silence, the little hitching breaths –

Broken by: “What you did for me. I want to do that.”

“What – swallow it?”

“Yes.”

“Well. That,” Charles murmured, “is slightly more difficult to manage without choking. But it can be done. Let me just –” he inched backward, ignoring the rumble from Erik's throat and the pawing at his hips. Charles grabbed his pillow and folded it in half; shoved it under his head. “There. This way I can see.”

“See what?”

“What you’re doing, and what could be done better. Now. You really want this, do you?”

Erik was staring up at him. His eyes were even wider than before; his hair darker. He nodded eagerly.

“You want me to choke you with my cock? Really?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, yes I would.” Charles grinned. “All one really needs to do is get a hand on the back of a partner’s neck, hold them in place, and go to work. Let me tell you now, though, that it’s considered quite aggressive to do so – and rude, if you haven’t at least established the possibility of it before actually having sex. Or if you take someone’s whimpers for pleasure rather than discomfort.”

He had gripped himself, hard, halfway through his little speech. Nonetheless, Charles was proud to have managed words with so many syllables, what with his mind screaming for that mouth to get back on him again. Erik seemed to share that thought – he made a sound almost … bloody hell. Almost like a moan. Sod that. It was a moan.

A desperate one. “Why are you telling me this? I want it.”

“I’m telling you … because of the – syphilitic whores. You promise me that you’ll ask for permission before you batter their throats with your cock.”

“You.”

“… What?”

“Only you,” Erik breathed, and dove for his body again. He swatted Charles’ hand away.

That was right. He had said that just a few hours ago, and – Charles sucked in a breath. Gazed down at the sight of Erik … well. There was no other word for it. And even though the Oxford Casanova had seen it all, it was still …

Oh.
He couldn’t really. Put the words together, it appeared. Because Erik was licking, and smearing kisses where he hadn’t licked, and bringing long fingers up to curl round his cock and tug, just slightly. Then he closed his lips around the head with a moan … and sucked … and Charles couldn’t really take the sight anymore. He had to let his eyes fall shut.

But he didn’t have the energy to plug his ears. So he still heard every sound. An entire symphony of Erik worshiping Charles’ cock with his tongue. Fuck. Precocious of him. And that compliment was coming from one Charles Xavier, who could have sucked cock for Britain. What with the Olympics coming back and all. Coming. Oh god, he was -


A slurp. Then: “Why?”

Erik had moved strong hands to each hipbone, pressing down. And when those long fingers flexed, Charles had to bite back a whimper. And he had to grab the base of his cock again. Just to keep from coming.

“Because. That way, the come won’t choke you. Or – not as much.”

He felt delirious. It was ridiculous, to remember so far back. Fifteen years and counting. Charles squeezed his cock harder, fighting to enunciate clearly. “It’ll hit the back of your throat, and you won’t aspirate, and you won’t – notice the taste –”

Although he had been eating fruit recently. Not because he had had fellatio in mind. But that could be a side benefit.

“You don’t taste bad.” The words were a hot murmur over his skin.

“Oh.” Charles opened his eyes. Stared up into the room’s darkness. “Thank you? I think.”

“You taste wonderful.”

Erik licked the head and Charles felt his hips jerk up instinctively – felt a pleased hum around his quivering flesh. Fuck. Had that been – oh.

“Get it down your god damned throat,” Charles rasped. “If you want it.”

“ – want it,” Erik repeated, voice muffled. And no wonder, with a mouth full – oh, more than just his mouth full … Charles felt lips brush his own knuckles. Bless Erik’s ambitious self – he was trying to take it all.

He … was. Taking it. Not all of it, but enough to –

“Fuck.” Charles hardly recognized his own voice. “Fuck. Let me –” and he let go of his cock, reached for Erik’s head; held on. And gave in – thrusting up and deep –

He felt Erik’s throat constrict, quivering. But those hands clamped down on his hips, and he soldiered on, even as Charles felt everything draw up, tighten and surge and – “god,” he gasped – “like that – you –”

And he came, moaning as he did. Or: started to come. He felt the hot chuff of Erik’s breath against the cool skin and hair right beneath his belly – or, where his belly had been, before the winter – yes, oh god – he gripped the back of Erik’s skull – yes – and ground up into that mouth, once, twice,
ignoring how he was choking, gagging –

Until Charles heard a high-pitched sound. \textit{Damn} it. Gritting his teeth, he tightened his grip as best he could on soft hair and angles of bone and pulled him off, feeling the jerks of Erik's head as he coughed raggedly.

“Enough,” Charles tried to push him away. “That’s – that’s enough.” His cock had seized up in the sudden chill of the air. He felt come spatter his abdomen – one more and it would all be –

“– want you.”

Everything happened very fast. Fingers tightened and before Charles knew it, Erik had pressed close to him – close enough for him to grind up into his face. He could thrust, and grind, and keep coming, and … that had shot all over Erik’s mouth. His jaw, his cheek. Left side. Hadn’t it?

Charles sucked in as much air as he could. Squinted in the dim light.

Erik looked …

Ruined. Absolutely ruined – and drunk on it. His eyes gleamed and his grin was loopy in the flicker of the fire. Charles shivered - he didn’t know why - as Erik flicked green eyes over to meet his own, and slid the side of his face against hair and a gradually softening -

Then Erik’s grin widened, and he used his elbows on either side of Charles’ body to crawl up the bed and plant a sloppy kiss on Charles’ face.

“Mm,” Charles tried to speak, but fatigue hit him like a wheelbarrow of bricks. And – that was his own come, dripping onto him from Erik’s face. Charming.

Not that he was terribly squeamish or anything. Oxford Casanova, he thought in a daze – he could do anything and everything. No bodily function or fluid beyond the pale … It had just been a while. He supposed.

Which reminded him: positive reinforcement. Praise and petting. Erik was hovering above him, looking anxious.

“Good,” Charles whispered. He leaned up and kissed the thin mouth near his own. “That was so good, dear heart.”

“Was it?”

“Ah, \textit{Geliebter.}” Charles mimicked the other’s voice. “Lover … \textit{my} lover. That was wonderful.”

He could almost see Erik swell at the praise, before the other leaned closer and nuzzled into his neck, sighing. Setting up to sleep, no doubt, but first he really should –

“Go wash.”

A growl. “Why?”

“Remember?” He kissed Erik’s cheekbone. “The night you first returned? When there was the celebration in the stadium …”

Erik kissed him back. His beard scratched Charles’ face; his lips were very warm. “I remember.”

“Remember how much all that come itched the next day?” He tried to control his laughter – but this
close, surely the other could feel it shake his shoulders. “You were scrubbing yourself, and you said …”

“‘Does it always itch like this’?” Erik laughed, too. Then he kissed Charles on the lips. “I do remember. And it did itch.”

“I know. I told you so. And that’s why I’m telling you now …” Charles smiled at him. “You had better go wash.”

A pause. Erik’s breath was hot on Charles’ mouth. “I will.”

“Mmm …” Charles stretched. Everything around him felt warm and soft. “Good.”

“Will you –”

“What’s that?”

“Here?” Erik pointed to his own mouth. “Again - please?”

“Of course.” It took a moment or two – his limbs felt deliciously heavy – but he caught Erik’s neck in the crook of his arm. Charles knew that the rough wool sleeve of his manteau must have scratched, but there was no complaint. He heard only a throaty moan as he drew Erik close and kissed him. Nudged at his lips, waited for the slick slide of tongue …

There. Lovely. Erik’s mouth tasted like come, but Charles didn’t mind.

“Mm.” He eased back onto the pillow with a sigh. “Wash up and come back to bed.”

“You should take off your coat.”

“Maybe later. You go wash now.”

“All right.” Erik didn’t move.

“Whenever is most …” convenient, Charles meant to finish – but he felt his eyelids droop as he yawned. So he shut them.

He sensed Erik’s stare for quite some time.

Eventually, though, the bed creaked and shifted as the other rose from it. Charles heard footsteps padding away. A thump, and the lick of smoke into his nostrils that meant more wood placed on the fire. And then water running in the sink.

Drowsily, Charles turned and shoved his face into the pillow. Might as well sleep. It had been a decent bit of fellatio, all round. What Erik must have thought of his own moaning and panting …

He grimaced. So much for playing the cold fish.

Well. Perhaps, Charles thought, he would wear that costume center stage when Erik returned. From Brussels, or California, or any other place in the world.

For he might be away for quite some time. He might even be killed.

Charles yawned into the pillow. The terror of the Free West, begging to suck his cock and finally getting to do so. That was good. It meant that, were the crazy sod to die in a battle somewhere, sometime soon, at least he’d die happy.
He woke up much later. Charles could tell. There was the faintest glimmer of light on the floor, and the waning moon would not have risen until the new day.

New day, of a new year. “1970,” he mumbled, and debated whether to start humming *Auld Lang Syne*. In Oxford, he would have been raising toasts with his friends, with Raven …

Charles had only meant to stretch. But his left hand bumped hard angles of bone – short hair –

Erik woke with a snort.


There was only silence in reply.

Charles poked the other’s bare shoulder with a finger. “You must be freezing.”

“Fire’s still lit.” And it was. “I thought I would … watch you.”

“Watch me?” He let his hand fall to the bed. “Good lord, man – whatever for?”

“Watch over you.”

“Defend from all the ghouls and ghosts that would attack me in the middle of nowhere, at the stroke of midnight … really?”

The other was quiet for another long moment. Then Charles heard him laugh, softly. “It does sound –”

“More than a little silly, yes. And besides, you fell asleep. Some watchdog you make.”

Erik pressed a warm kiss onto the back of his hand. Charles turned his palm up and curled his fingers around the strong line of chin.

“Come to bed. You have to travel soon enough, and sleeping like that – lying against the side of a bed? On a cold floor? You’ll throw your back out tying your shoes.”

Even as he murmured, drowsy, Charles was pushing at the tangle of covers. “Come on. Up here.” It felt like coaxing a wild animal. “With me.”

“I …”

“Hurry up, you idiot. I’m letting in the cold.”

Erik lay down beside him, breath hitching. Charles tugged the blankets back up and grabbed at one muscled arm. He wriggled close enough to soak up all that splendid body heat – it would only take thirty seconds and he’d be asleep again –

*Wait.*

There was no way the other could see it, even in the dim moonlight. But Charles raised one eyebrow anyway. Just for show. As he pressed forward again with one thigh, and even through the fabric of manteau and trouser, felt –

“My, my. And how long has this been going on, *Herr* Lehnsherr?”
Erik shuddered. Charles felt one hand reach … and then stop in midair, hovering in front of his face.

“May I?”

“Do what?”

“Hold you. Please.”

He gave a mental shrug. “Yes. You may. But –” and he blinked sleepily as the other folded him close to his chest, “you didn’t answer my question.”

“… I didn’t want to wake you.”

“An erection is not an air-raid siren, you know. And you won’t irrevocably traumatize me just by tenting the blankets.”

Erik made no reply. He only brushed his fingers over Charles’ brow.

Charles sighed against the other’s chest. No shirt. And he himself was still wearing his manteau. It would be lovely to strip and nestle up against that lean body, all the planes and angles warm as a furnace. But then the man might …

Well … why not?

Why the hell not – it was the last night he would see him for who knew how long, if ever, and he, Charles, could just roll over and let Erik do all the work. And then he would be sure of an excellent sleep. And sure of his hold over the blighter, mind, body, soul …

A spell, he thought to himself, smirking. Casting an enchantment over the innocent princess … the silly little bint.

“Move your hands, will you?”

“Why?”

“I want to take off the rest of my clothes.”

Charles bit back a laugh when the hands jerked away from his head, as fast as if they had been burned.

“Could you hold onto the collar for me?” He waited until he felt the grip. Then he was able to wriggle free of each sleeve. “Thank you.” He pulled off the manteau and tossed it at the wardrobe; followed it with his hat. “There.” Easing forward, Charles casually draped his arms around Erik’s shoulders. “Much better. Don’t you think?”

Come to think of it himself, though, it was actually much chillier. A shaven head would do that to a person - so the quicker Erik got on with warming him up, the better. Charles pressed close. Though his breathing had quickened, Erik said nothing. Even when Charles leaned closer – aimed a kiss for his mouth –

And blinked as Erik flinched.

“What is it?”

“I don’t want –”
“Don’t want to have sex? You could have fooled me.” Charles reached down and pressed the flat of one hand against the hard line of the other’s cock. It was warm even through the trousers, and jerked against his –

But: no – that had been Erik flinching away again.

“What’s the matter?”

“You said.”

“What?” Charles sighed. “What did I say now? If I called you an animal in my sleep, I really am very sorry.”

“No – earlier. You said,” and Erik took a careful breath, “ ‘Must everything be a bargain with you?’”

“So?” Charles moved his hand, carefully, to stroke the skin at the man’s waist. It was very warm. The other’s voice was halting. “I don’t want – sex – to be a bargain.”

“It’s a little late in the day for that, don’t you think?”

But Erik wasn’t listening to his sarcasm. He only said: “I’m sorry, Rabe.”

“For what?”

“For making you – do these things. With me.”

Charles bit back on his instincts – pride, scorn – and considered the best response. Then he sighed. Truth, perhaps. Or at least a fraction of it.

“To be honest – and as I told you already – I far prefer having sex here than having it on the slab. Like MacMurphy.”

“I didn’t –”

“Oh, dear god, no. I know you wouldn’t –” rape a corpse, his mind stuttered, and Charles felt his gorge rise. He reached out and brushed a hand over the other’s hair to ground himself. “You wouldn’t do that. You’ve learned so much, over the past week or so. Haven’t you?”

He felt the small nod. Almost shy.

“And really, the bargain went both ways. Didn’t it? You protected the children; you cleaned yourself and asked before biting; and you even – left me alone when I wanted. Eventually. Didn’t you?”

When he felt the other nod more vigorously, Charles gritted his teeth. It was difficult to dismiss the trauma in terms so casual … but it would not do to end things on a sour note. He would store up all the griefs – keep the catalogue in his mind and balance the scales later. For now, best to ensure the blighter remained as worshipful as ever.

And best to let said blighter talk, of course.

“But – the other bargain. The last one. You said you’d stay here forever.”

“You need not repeat it. I was there for that little transaction, as you yourself may recall, and I remember perfectly. And you killed MacMurphy painlessly, and now I get to traipse round your
precious manor at night. No chain, remember? That’s your side of it. You convince your lady somehow.”

A damp sigh. “I will. But…”

Charles waited. “What?”

“I don’t want you to feel that you have to do anything. More, I mean.”

How very considerate was sour on the tip of his tongue – but he ladled on the honey instead.

“I don’t feel that.” He coiled his fingers into the man’s waist; tugged at him. “Less talking, more sex. Come on –”

“I want you to do this because you want me.”

Charles’ breath caught.

God damn it. Checkmate. If he stopped now it would be tantamount to admitting: ‘well, no, you crazy sod. I don’t want you.’ And if he kept going … it would mean that he actually …

Except: of course he didn’t. ‘I want you,’ however throaty and fervent, would be a lie. And Charles had lied to others in bed before, with no second thoughts. Well and good. He would just have to remind himself of the lie as things progressed, both this night and any other night.

Might as well get started.

“I do,” he lied, stroking his hand up the hot skin of that abdomen, up and up – he caressed Erik’s collarbone and slid up his neck to touch his chin. Then Charles drew him closer. Close enough to kiss.

So he did.

No tongue; quite chaste. Erik’s breath puffed against his lips. Charles drew the warm air in and let it back out – his whisper skating hot over the other’s mouth, not a hairs-breadth from his own. But not a hiss – never that.

“I want you. I do want you. You’re beautiful …” Which was true, and a good thing, since the best lies had truth mixed in. “You’re so strong, so beautiful … ah, Geliebter – and you’ve given me so many beautiful things.”

His mind flashed to the coffer of jewels, snug and secret in his wardrobe. Charles shivered. Erik must have taken it for cold, or for delight from his touch rather than the delight it was – for he made a shy sound against Charles’ mouth and kissed him again.

Ha. Fool enough to fall for the smallest thing. And if said small things - a shiver, a glance - were such a pleasure, then getting said fool off would take no trouble or time at all.

Charles slid his hands under Erik’s arms; then down his back. Ropes of lean muscle, strong lines of bone … Everything was warm, so the trembling under his palms had to be from his touch. Lovely. And that waist – he smiled against Erik’s mouth as he gripped tighter, feeling steel-coiled muscles tense.

One would think something created to be a killing machine would be a wall of flesh, unstoppable – but this … Charles moved on, and toyed with Erik’s belt. Found the loops, worked his fingers in –
tugged just enough to situate the other between his legs as he parted them. There were bumps in the pockets – probably metal. But those weren’t his focus. Charles smirked to himself, thrust up, and –

Erik tore his mouth away with a strangled sound. “Du –”

“Yes?”

Another kiss, slick with spit – almost frantic. “I want you.”

“I can see that.”

“Feel that,” a grunt, and a kiss – and the Erik thrust against him, grinding. Charles sucked in a breath. But there was nothing to fear, truly, and not only because the Oxford Casanova would never be afraid. The man had been well trained by now … so all Charles had to do was wait for him to ask. If indeed he would.

God damn it, he’d better.

Charles held on tight, focused on the kiss and not how the man was rutting between his legs – and then, thank god, there it was.

“May I – please. May I fuck you? ’

Somewhat incoherent, but it would do. Charles tipped a smile up at the other. “Thank you for asking. And: yes.”

The moonlight gleamed in Erik’s eyes, before he scrambled out of bed and fell to the floor with a thud.

“Do be careful.”

And now he was … searching for the grease, of course. Charles sighed at the ceiling. He took in a deep breath and rolled onto his stomach. The clink of Erik’s belt and the rustle of fabric, less so. But Charles focused on making himself comfortable. He really didn’t care –

A hand touched his shoulder where the bedclothes had slipped; he almost jumped out of his skin. “Oh –”

“Sorry,” Erik rasped.

The bed shifted as the other sat down. Charles nudged with one blanket-covered foot; felt the hardness of muscle – or it could be a hipbone.

“That’s all right. You just surprised me.”

“I found it.” There was the quiet squeak of wood; the container being opened. “How do you want me to …”

Want. Charles blinked rapidly. To maintain the lie, in the face of – this. But he could. He could do it, he knew. Perhaps it would be best to see it as a game. How long could the other be fooled? And with how small an effort on his own part?

“Whichever way you like.” He kept his voice languid. “Just … go slowly? For me?”

Slow, after all, would mean that the other would come sooner rather than later. Best to focus on that,
even as Erik slid one hand down his spine, taking the blankets away. Those calluses caught on the skin of his arse as the other palmed it – and Charles had half a second to register warm breath and a kiss –

He flinched.

“Do you not … oh. I’m sorry. May I?”

“Certainly.” His voice sounded reedy, in his own ears. “You only surprised me again.”

“Mm.” The rumble sent goosebumps prickling up his back. Or it could have been the warm slide of tongue. “I’ll try not to in future.”

“Don’t make it a habit. Do tell me what you want to do –”

“Yes.” Erik’s voice sounded eager. “I want to lick you again.”

Charles felt dizzy. “… All right.”

“And then,” the other said, “do you want to use your fingers, or me to use mine?”

“Cross that bridge when we come to it.” he mumbled into the pillow.

“Bridge.” The blighter sounded – happy. Charles gritted his teeth and gripped the pillow hard, as a warm weight landed on his legs and both hands took hold of his arse. “After California is ours, I’ll take you to see San Francisco’s.”

“I thought the earthquakes,” Charles started. He had to stop, though. Because. Erik’s tongue was –

Oh. He hadn’t really cleaned up from before. So the wet touches darting down further, lapping – must have been chasing the taste of come. Dear god, that did not bear thinking about –

Charles tried for distraction again. “But. San Francisco.”

The wet sounds stopped. And: “The people went to the mountains,” Erik murmured. “But they left their bridge behind.”

Lovely, Charles thought, faint. He bit back a groan.

Different things were lovely in different ways, of course. Best to consider those differences. Catalogue them – keep his mind in order. Calm, and controlled, and unafraid.

But in the end, it came down to stories again. Once the catalogue ground to a halt. Once his mind started – flying to – pieces, god, he couldn’t –

He had tried. Erik had licked him slowly, his breath soft and warm against skin ever more slick … Charles had needed to try. Had retreated deep into his reading room, stared at a tabletop. Catalogued its splinters, even as all of his birds had been beating their wings, and everything had felt overheated … Just as musky and enclosed as his room in reality.

“Turn over.” The murmur had been damp against his arse.

His mouth had been parched. “Why?”

“I want to see you.”
Charles had tried again, digging his gauntlets into the golden chair’s back, sweating and staring in his reading room. Staring at his raven. The jet-black eyes, glittering strangely; the wings quivering. Raven hadn’t been afraid. And he hadn’t been either. Had only felt the slightest bit of panic at things going so quickly – at the goosebumps and the gasps he couldn’t stop, as Erik had greased his fingers – “will you ... move up, Schatz? Your hips? Please?” – and worked him open further, staring down at Charles’ face, his own lips slightly parted.

Charles had squeezed his eyes shut, then, and tried to take his thoughts away. Further than his reading room. There had to be somewhere he could go –

“Stay with me.” Those lips on his, breath hot. “I want to see you.” Erik had kissed him deeply, and twisted his fingers up and in, deeper –

Charles had moaned into his mouth. Then he had clawed at Erik’s back – first the clutch of instinct, then a frantic scrabbling, sharp.

And of course Erik had liked it. The blood, perhaps. Charles had not been gentle.

So there had been that.

And now …

*Once upon a time,* he thought, desperately. *Once.* There was a princess in a tower that had been a virgin, but who was now fucking him: slow enough to bring his blood to a boil, deep enough to make his toes curl. The princess had leaned over, earlier, to nuzzle the sweaty thatch of hair in his armpit. Fucking *hell.*

Charles arched up, panting. He felt his hands twitch against Erik’s back.

“Like that?” Hoarse and hot against his ear. And Erik drew out just enough to make the thrust back in even better than before, every inch a gritty slide that set his nerves on fire – and Charles groaned. Loudly.

“Like that, then.” Erik kissed his cheekbone, and moved down his jaw. Licked at his pulse and adjusted his hold on Charles’ hips – hoisted him the smallest bit, to fuck in deeper. “Your legs –”

“What about them?” Charles ground out. Just enough control left to pitch his voice to cut. Chicken-bone things, but it wasn’t his fault he had been starved. He bit back a sob as he felt his body clench around Erik’s cock – he couldn’t seem to control his –

“Around me.” Callused hands gripped his arse and moved down to his thighs. “Put them up around me.”

“I’ll do you one better.” Because he had control – more than enough to make the sod come. He gritted his teeth, pulled a hand away from Erik’s back, and reached. “Move your arm.”

“Why?”

“Do as I say.” Charles pushed at his right biceps. “Move.”

And when Erik obeyed, Charles drew his knee up close, and grabbed his own ankle before he could have second thoughts. Hoisted, up and *up –*
He heard the pop of his hip. “Fuck. I am going to feel that in the morning.”

Among other things, his mind put in – but Charles focused on Erik’s expression. That face was so close that he could see the bumps and crannies of those molars. Ex-professor, looking up at an ex-virgin princess … slack-jawed and staring down in the dim light.

Charles had to laugh. It was thready, but there – back in control. “Come on.” He nudged the other’s shoulder with his shin. “Hook your arm under my leg, would you?”

Erik obeyed, trembling. Charles almost groaned in relief, but caught himself in time. He could relax now, a bit more at least … even if the angle was different, now that the other leaned back, then surged forward and almost pinned him double – “God.”

“All right?”


 Fucking come, damn it, he thought with all his might. He could try to move his leg up further, of course – over Erik’s shoulder and then bump at the side of his head. If only to see those eyes almost cross, and hear the other slur,

“How do you do that?”

“Never mind.” His chest ached – odd – and the press of that cock deep in him was all he could think about, except for how the new angle gave his own cock more room – and bloody fucking hell, he was hard again. When had that happened? It was too hot, too close – he smelled nothing but smoke, and sweat, and bear grease.

And then Erik grabbed at Charles’ cock, tugging even as he thrust in hard – Charles felt his eyes roll back in his head. “Oh.” He had one hand on the other’s back, still – his palm slipped on sweat, even as he hooked his fingers in and clawed. “Don’t –”

“Do you,” Erik rasped, “need me to stop?”

“God, don’t stop – you idiot.” Charles knew had a free hand too. But he didn’t know what to do with it. He could grab the pillow, maybe … except: no. Erik had told him, whispering – put that beneath your hips, Charles – long before. He could brace himself against the bedframe, then … which he did, and turned his head into his own arm. Stubble scraped. “Don’t stop.”

“I won’t.”

And he didn’t. So. There was that.

Once upon a time. Charles listened to the bedframe rattle. Once. Upon a – Except he was losing track of time. Everything was hot and close and musky. He squeezed his eyes shut. The princess in the tower turned out to be a decent fuck after all. So it was harder and harder to keep from coming – even though the handsome prince didn’t want to. Something about a spell, perhaps. The best stories had magic spells, forbidden castles – enchantments and dragons and –

One sharp thrust – screwing in exactly right, and he heard himself cry out. “God –”

“Open,” Erik gasped.

“I can’t –” He couldn’t open any further – everything was spread wide and aching, and the pounding didn’t let up. He couldn’t –
“Your eyes, Rabe.” The voice was hot on his face. “Please. I want to see you. I want –”

*My eyes, Charles remembered. I’ve been told they’re very beautiful.*

He gave in. Opened his eyes. Maybe …. That would do it. Meet the eyes of the princess. Look deep into them, blinding with the light of his own – making the relentless fuck bloody well *stop.*

Erik’s breath caught. And before Charles knew it, his own mouth was caught, too – he tasted Erik’s tongue and felt nothing but the weight of Erik’s body and the heat and musk, sweat and grease *everywhere* –

The mouth left. Erik shoved his face into the crook of Charles’ neck, pressing close – holding him tight, shuddering.

“Oh.” Charles could hardly speak. Everything was seizing up. He was going to come, Charles realized, bleak – going to come hard on nothing but that cock and the rough pull of Erik's hand on him – his hand. *Oh.* Charles had a free hand, too, and - he could –

Charles moved. He had to squeeze past his own leg and Erik's arm – but he reached. Brushed his hand over sweat-soaked hair.

And he kissed the hollow beneath one cheekbone. “Erik.”

Erik’s breath hitched.

“*Erik,*” Charles murmured, throaty. “Kiss me – please. *Please …*”

“Charles –”

And Erik kissed him, even as he shoved forward hard, like a full-body punch, and came.

Or. *Started to,* Charles thought, disjoint. *Finally.*

The hand on his own cock didn’t stop, though. Nor did that - bloody - princess - bony hips digging into his flesh as Erik ground up into him, pressing as hard and as close as he could, gasping into his mouth. Charles felt the edge of teeth catch his lips. He tried to think about something else. He was almost too dazed to kiss properly. Which was fine. Even as he felt himself come, hot and wet between them, shuddering – his gasp turning into a moan – he thought: *fine.*

Erik would sleep, and not trouble him again that night. They could both sleep. Even if the other was brushing kisses all over his face, down his jawline and throat and back up again … as he eased Charles’ leg down and massaged at his hip.

“Sleep.”

“Mm.” Erik did not stop kissing him.


The irony was too ridiculous. Charles Xavier, coming twice in a night – standard enough in Oxford days. Even unambitious. But this. This had seemed …

Not that different, Charles told himself, groggy. Just …

He didn’t know. Mystery.
But then, irony made a good story. As did a mystery. And a sated princess all too eager to caress an exhausted prince. And if that same bloody princess thought nothing of leaving that cock in him – well, at least there was a pillow placed beneath his head again. After some shifting that had jostled him, sending up an ache in – no. He was not going to think about it.

Charles held to himself warmer thoughts instead: the sheltering blankets pulled over them both, and the feather-light kisses on his lips. And the thought of falling asleep.

No more stories, then.

Charles stared at the fire. Erik had rebuilt it, after waking up. And as discreet as he had tried to be, he had woken up Charles, too. There had been no missing the sensation of that cock getting dragged out from where Erik had so considerately left it. Which was another first, come to think of it, and how had it actually been possible, anyway? Unless it was something about the size - and Charles had cut off that thought, hunching his shoulders, and the other must have felt him move, for:

“I’m sorry.” Erik had dropped a kiss onto his mouth. “Go back to sleep.”

He had tried to stay awake, but had dozed off to the sound of water running.

Then the wardrobe door had opened and shut, and Charles had jerked awake again. He had tracked Erik’s lean form – watched him stoop by the fire for a brief moment, and then move up and away with a lit candle.

The flames blurred red-orange before clearing up as he rubbed his eyes. He could also see the candles guttering on one side of the sink, through the bathroom’s open door. They were set in – he squinted – a candelabrum. One he hadn’t seen before.

Erik must have fashioned himself a straight razor. He was looking into the mirror, carefully drawing a strip of metal over his jawline. Very domestic.

Charles watched him tap the razor on the side of the sink, running water to rinse. And watched him stretch and roll his shoulders, candlelight playing over the scratches on his back.

It was easier to consider those vicious marks from a distance. Charles tucked the blankets tighter under his chin, holding them together in a twist. Perhaps there was blood under his fingernails; perhaps not. He was not about to strain his eyes in the dim light.

He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the metal was floating next to Erik’s head as he washed his hands.

Charles shivered.

He had not summoned his raven from his mind. He had not touched the other with as much as a whisper of power. Charles had assumed, throughout, that the want had been as thick and close in the room as the musky air itself. That the razor could have cut through it.

He curled up on himself, wincing. In the morning, things would hurt –

Except it was morning already. The first of January, 1970.

“Happy New Year,” Charles murmured to himself. He sighed into the blankets’ warmth. Best not to sing. Perhaps he would leave that to his nightingale, when he was alone.
“Charles?”

He blinked and lifted his head to look. “Mm?”

“You’re awake.”

Erik sounded …

Charles sighed. He did not know how the other sounded. Pleased – but wistful, somehow. *Of course.* More sex in the past week than in … what? Twenty years? Of course he would be heartbroken to leave. Poor little monster, all alone –

With a grunt, Charles pulled the blankets over his head. “Go away.”

“Not without saying goodbye, surely?”

The voice was closer. Charles peeked out over the topmost blanket. Erik had dropped to his knees, resting his forearms on the bed.

He was still naked, and he smelled like soap.

Charles gazed at the lion tattoo, the lines of collarbone, and the cut – still raw – slanting across Erik’s chest. Before he knew it, he had reached out to touch it. Erik let him, smiling.

Charles prodded and pressed, but the smile only widened. “Does that hurt?”

“Well.”

“Only a little.”

“It still looks infected. Put some ointment on it,” Charles ordered, “or see a doctor when you get to – wherever you’re going first.”

“Brussels.” Erik must have dropped his trousers at the side of the bed, earlier – he picked them up and fished in a pocket. Charles watched him take out a length of delicate chain. He dropped it over his neck. The crystal in its filigree glinted up at him. A glittering third eye, in the middle of his sternum – Frost’s token. Charles gave it a jaundiced stare.

But the sight helped him remember. “Before Brussels, though … Before your lady. You have to see Jean. Do you understand?”

A nod. Charles repeated it anyway. “You yourself said that Jean would help you conceal memories of us. Of our bargain, of your lessons – of anything that *isn’t* you inflicting pain on me. Now, if you ever want to kiss me again, you have to promise me to see Jean before you do anything else. And certainly before you see your lady. Do you agree?”

Another nod, solemn. Then Erik bent and kissed Charles’ hand where it gripped the blankets.

There was nothing more he could do. So Charles sighed. “Good.”

“Yes.”

Silence stretched. It was not an uncomfortable one, though. Charles listened to the sounds of the fire and let his eyes rest on the other’s face. All those lean angles, focused on a single point. On him.

“Well.” Charles refused to shift under the stare. “Travel safely.”

“Rabe,” the man said gently. “You had agreed to take my token.”
“And I don’t suppose scars and come count, do they? Or a green sweater? Or all those pretty jewels – those can be your tokens.” Charles knew his voice was higher; he didn’t care.

“I want to give you something special.”

Charles held the blankets tighter. Please, please let the sod not get too … creative. The base of his left thumb sent up a twinge. The scar was still there, after all these weeks.

“You’re sure you don’t want these?” Erik held up the dog tags.

He had to have found them by the sink. Charles shook his head fiercely. “No. And besides, you’ll be expected to keep them.”

The other frowned. “Why?”

“A trophy of sorts. In war.” He swallowed hard. “To the victor go the spoils.”

“Then I will give them to my lady,” Erik decided. “She might like them.”

Charles bit back a hysterical laugh. Well indeed she might. And speaking of –

“These are hers.” The diamond choker glittered, spilling from the man’s palm like water. Charles saw the dust clogging it. Erik must have tugged it out from under the bed with his power.

“Exactly. Giving me them would mean nothing. And –” he blinked at the sudden inspiration. “I don’t want anything metal.”

“Not even your watch? Why not?”

“I just – don’t. Please. Indulge me?”

“I will never hurt you again, Rabe.”

“That’s all well and good, but I still have memory. Thus, if you must – how about you leave me my chain?” His voice sounded brittle. “I do associate the happiest memories with that –”

He heard a clank from the bathroom. The man grimaced – and Charles stared as the candelabrum floated over to the bed.

“I’m sorry - I reshaped it. For the candles. I needed more light than just one.”

The metal had twisted in on itself and stretched into its current shape. It gleamed, finely wrought in the firelight. Charles blinked. It looked … quite fetching.

“But if you want it back, I can –”

“Believe me, I was being sarcastic. I’ll keep this,” Charles said, “and that way I can read in bed. Very well. Will that do? A lovely token, just for me.”

Erik reached out a hand; caressed his cheek. “I wanted you to wear it.”

“I can hardly sling a candelabrum round my neck.”

A quiet laugh. “No.”

There was a pause. Charles looked into Erik’s eyes. It seemed as though the other were thinking.
Considering.

Then he smiled and reached for his trouser pocket again. Charles held his breath, watching him take out a small leather pouch.

Oh.

He remembered it from the library — *I want you to have them all. All except the one, my favorite.*

Erik opened the pouch, and shook out something into the palm of his hand. He stared down at it for a long moment.

Then he held it out to Charles. “Here.”

“What is it?”

Teeth flashed in the dim firelight. “I found it by the diamond, *Schatz.* And the first time I saw your eyes, I thought … Well. Look into it.” The palm came close to his face.


“Yes, but – there’s a trick to it. Perhaps one needs the sun. It takes the light and throws it back, like a star. When I first found it,” and Erik’s breath caught, “I thought it the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.”

“Ah.”

“So.” Erik exhaled, and plucked at the gem with his fingers. Held it over Charles’ hand. “Like to like. Will you wear this for me, *Rabe*?”

“If I can have the leather pouch with it.” Charles blinked. “And there’s yarn from my blue sweater, in the wardrobe. I can make a cord.”

“Yes. And I will have something much finer made for it, soon.”

“No metal,” Charles whispered.

Erik gave him a wry smile. “If you would have it so.”

Charles waited.

“And so.” The other raised his eyebrows. “Will you have this as my token?” He paused. ”Charles.”

“Yes.”

It was an easy enough thing to say after all.

“Yes, I will.”

“Thank you,” the other whispered.

And it was easy enough for Charles to focus on the weight of the stone in his sweat-damp palm, even as Erik drew in an unsteady breath, and leaned forward to kiss him.

Charles let the kiss proceed. Just lips again – no tongue. Odd. And the smallest touch of fingers on
his cheek.

Then Erik backed away and stood. Charles closed his hand round the jewel and watched, silent, as the other put on his clothes. Quick and graceful, tugging a black turtleneck down over his head and running one hand through his hair.

It was easy enough to smile up at him. “I forgot to say,” Charles murmured, “but I like you clean-shaven.”

The other smiled in return - shy. “Do you?”

“Yes. It takes years off your face.”

Erik breathed out a laugh. “Years.” He rubbed his chin with one hand. “Yes.”

“Be sure to speak to Jean first,” Charles began, but,

“I will.”

And in a flash Erik knelt again by the bed.

“And you. You, Rabe… Stay warm and safe. And eat everything.” A callused hand cupped his cheek and ghosted over the stubble on his head. “Let this grow back – and. And read books.”

*Be happy,* went unsaid – but Charles saw it in every line of that lean face.

Which was a bit rich. Considering that he would be happiest if this man and his lady let him go.

It was as though Erik read his mind. “You promised me,” he whispered, fierce. “You have my token, and you promised to stay here forever –”

“Shh.” Charles touched the fingers of his empty hand to the other’s mouth. “Be easy. I promise: you’ll see me again.” He brought the fist with the jewel to his own lips. “You owe me a more elegant setting for this, after all.”

“I’ll bring it to you soon,” Erik breathed, kissing him. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” Charles said.

It was easy enough to watch the other uncoil to his feet. Back away to the door and put his boots on. Keeping his eyes on Charles all the while.

Charles sketched a wave with the fingers of one hand.

He saw Erik bite his lower lip - then turn, quickly, and walk out the doorway.

Charles listened for his footsteps going down the hall. He was going in the direction of the library. And then the sound of Erik's boots faded.

His raven, Charles supposed, could watch over the man as he left for good. But Raven was as tired as he.

He unfolded the fingers of his hand again and looked down at the jewel. He could hardly see it in the dark, although he was sure it was lovely.

Taking something sight unseen. Charles sighed. He had done more foolish things in his life, hadn't
Foolish choices. And like so many of the same … perhaps this choice would look better in the morning.

At least, Charles hoped so. He knew he could not be sure.

End of Part II

Chapter End Notes

1) A link to author's notes will be posted here soon.

2) At tumblr, daysofpastjaeger has a voice post on how to pronounce Erik Lehnsherr's name. You may find it here! Sie also has an excellent source on German in fanfiction, which you may find here. Thanks, days!
Charles knew he was dreaming.

He was staring up into the sky. It looked white and opaque, a thick layer of cloud massing before a storm. All was cold and silent.

And the silence was not a comforting one.

Charles wrapped his arms tight around his body. He blinked, looking down. He wasn’t wearing his armor. His shoes were old ones – leather … His teaching shoes. From another life.

“Oh,” he breathed, remembering. “These.”

A tweed jacket Raven had teased him about, beneath his undress gown … and a crumpled shirt. Ordinary trousers; teaching shoes. He had been wearing these clothes when the Takers had come, on September first - so long ago.

Charles leaned against a jutting merlon and stared down from the tower’s height. He remembered an inky sky full of stars, but now he saw only a vast expanse of whiteness. He had run to the top of the tower, his breath coming in desperate gasps. He had spun round, dizzy, searching for something – anything – with his raven.

Too far to fly. Raven had failed.

“But now I know.” He lifted up his chin. “Ithaca, in New York that was. I’ve seen the sunken city; I’ve flown through many minds. And I wish …”

Charles exhaled – and … strange. Even though it was freezing cold in his dream, he could not see his breath.

No matter.

“Raven, Raven, sister mine. If I were a wizard, or a wiser man … If I had power enough, I could fly to you. Fly away from here. I promised never to leave you.”

There was only silence.

“I love you. Can you hear me? I love you.”

Charles stared out at nothing but white and cold.
"You think I'm gone. But I'm here. I've been here, all this time. Only ... there's no way to tell you."

Then he saw a flicker in the whiteness in front of him.

*Oh.*

Charles felt hope pierce him like a blade. He could see the raven soaring through the sky, a black wedge against the unrelenting white glare. Even in the silence and the cold – even with the snow starting to fall …

"*Rabe,*" he whispered, "fly to me. Help me. *Help me* –"

And when he blinked, he was in his reading room.

"What?" Charles turned on his heel, staring. "How did …"

It was dark, not light, but just as cold as the tower had been. Everywhere, he knew, the fires had gone out –

But that made no sense, because, "I never had a fire here. It's a reading room, for pity's sake. I, for one, remember the Library of Alexandria."

There was no answer.

"Well. Not literally, of course."

Silence.

"Raven?" Charles turned where he stood once more. His armor – and it was back to armor now, was it? … The metal felt like ice, hanging heavy on his limbs. His breath plumed out in front of him; thank God for that at least.

"Where are you?"

All the shelves were empty; all his veils had gone. He saw dark mahogany and walnut – one shelf carved of soft white pine … The silver veins of ice threading over them all crackled; the wood groaned in protest.

"Right. I'll start a fire soon, then. A lovely fireplace, I think – worked round in brass. Yes. So, if you don't mind," he glared at the ice creeping up the walls, "this is a bad dream, and I'm going to wake up from it."

And he would.

Any minute now.

"Come on," Charles whispered. "Wake up. *Wake up* – raven, raven, fly away home … Where are you?"

That was the dream, he realized. What if his raven had never flown to his rescue? Had left him to Frost's mercy, when he had been delivered to her bed?

"Mercy." He shivered. "She doesn't know the meaning of the word. But I need ask none for myself. Because you cannot hold me in any dream, cold Lady, and when I count three, I'm going to wake up."
Charles clenched his jaw. “One. Two –”

The cold sharpened –

“ – three.”

And it was just that easy.

Charles gasped for breath in air, shuddering in the chill. He had kicked off the blankets in his sleep, and the fire had gone out. He rolled to one side; made to get out of bed –

“… Fuck.”

So to speak.

“Excellent way to start the New Year.” Charles rose. His knees wobbled. “Shagged so rotten that I can’t stand on my own two feet.”

Except: he could. Charles gritted his teeth and walked to the fireplace. He blinked at the pile of wood in the corner. Had the man left any matches?

Erik, he corrected himself.

And indeed Erik had left matches on the mantel. A new packet; Charles remembered striking the last just the night previous –

Memories came rushing back.

– clawing at Erik’s sweat-slick shoulders; squeezing down hard on his cock; moaning up into his mouth –

Charles pressed his lips together. He tossed kindling beneath a larger chunk of pine and lit it – with hands, he noted, that were perfectly steady.

“I’m not going to think about sex,” he told the empty room, as the fire caught and grew into a blaze, and as he made his way back to bed. “I’ve had it too much on my mind over the past fortnight or so, after all – and I –”

He trailed off as his eyes caught a gleam of … something. Near his pillow.

The jewel Erik had given him. He must have let it fall out of his hand as he lay sleeping. For there it was, casting blue motes of light onto the crumpled corner of the sheet.

He felt strangely blank as he fished the token out of the fabric. It had to be a sapphire – an immense one at that. He held it flat on the palm of his hand, and gaped as light from the arrow windows hit it from directly above. A star pattern glimmered into view, its six rays undulating in and out of sight.

“Asterism,” he breathed. “How beautiful …”

And: Like to like, Charles remembered. He couldn’t say that he felt up to competing with a jewel that could very well buy up a good chunk of Coventry. But the thought was flattering. And for Erik to give him such a gift …

“A token, technically.” It was good to remind himself that the lovely jewel had riding on it – terms, conditions … lifelong imprisonment.
“So,” he told the sapphire, “back to prison with you.”

Charles looked beneath the bed to find the leather pouch. Matter-of-fact, he popped the stone back into it and pulled the drawstrings tight. Then he dug in his wardrobe, pulled a length of blue yarn out of the remnants of his sweater, threaded it through the strings – and placed the makeshift token round his own neck. It was lumpen and clumsy, but it was his.

“And I’m not giving it back. Not even to Erik, however nicely he should ask. Instead, I’ll strip this topmost sheet,” he did, “and fetch breakfast.”

… And he did.

It was so strange, Charles thought to himself, sitting on his bed. His fingers kept drifting back to the jewel in its pouch. He had eaten quickly in the kitchen, and was now sipping tea from a mug with a chipped handle. Erik had taken the thermos with him.

There had been food crammed into the cabinets, and a bowl of fruit on the counter. More food than he had ever seen there before – and he hadn’t even checked the icebox.

Strange, then, to have more to eat than he could possibly manage in a week, let alone a day. And even more strange, to have no schedule, no demands …

No chain.

Charles flexed his toes and considered. What to do, with his newfound time?

Definitely a shower, though he had no idea how long the hot water would last. Perhaps a walk round the parts of the manor he could access, though he had no idea which doors were open to him.

Perhaps … just enjoying some time alone. Though he had no idea how long that would last, either.

Charles shivered. He pressed the ceramic against his cheek. It was still warm. But cold … cold was in his very near future.

How long would it be before Frost came back? For when she did –

“The prisoners.” He grimaced. “I had almost forgotten.”

Or at least, he had wanted to forget.

Erik had said, My lady will have them for her pleasure when she returns. And knowing Frost … What would she –

“No important,” he snapped to himself. “What is important is … what are you going to do about it? About them?”

For sitting here and doing nothing would be the choice of a coward.

Charles drew in a deep breath, called up his raven, and sent it flying into the woods. It reached the lintel of the stable door in the blink of an eye. He smiled, despite everything.

“Perhaps some enforced rest served you well? Or perhaps,” and Charles swallowed, “perhaps you’re just eager, after so long inside …”

Although inside was relative. It wasn’t as though he, Charles, were a prison for his raven. It was
merely a part of him that flew … but … how? Charles frowned where he sat. How on earth could he see the earth in truth, when he was merely sending a thought out into the air?

Raven fluffed its feathers on the lintel and sent up an impatient croak.

“Later, then.” He nodded. “I want to know. We’ll talk over tea in the reading room.”

In the meantime, and in the reality of his bedroom, Charles leaned against one plaster wall and concentrated.

“Which one is Mark?”

He remembered the particular touch of the captain’s mind. Carefully, he steered his raven off the lintel, focused …

– and Charles landed in Moira MacTaggart's mind as gently as a feather falling to the ground.

“That’s right,” he muttered. “Because it’s Moira, not Mark. Miss Moira of the Free West.”

Charles glanced down at his armor and grimaced. It wasn’t the best outfit with which to charm a lady fair –

But his first glimpse of her mind was enough to put his attire out of his head.

He felt as though there he was caught in some dark stairwell, lights glimmering in regular patterns high up its walls. Larger than a stairwell, though. An entrance of sorts – “A staging area,” Charles whispered to his raven as it spiraled upward. “Be careful.”

It was difficult to keep Raven in his sight, since the empty atrium gleamed black as obsidian. It was circled round with a double stairway. Charles could not tell whether the stairs were metal. He was reminded, strangely, of the Hive.

His sword was a reassuring weight in its scabbard as he walked forward; his shield hung heavy off his left arm. The metal of his sabatons clanked, echoing up the atrium. That echo was quite different from the sharp retort of a door closing, in the distance.

Then another sound made him jump and turn. There – behind what looked to be a glass panel at the foot of one of the stairways. The stairway, Charles thought as he paced over, that hovered above his head, suspended from the ceiling by thin chains. Well out of reach.

Perhaps that was a way of making the mind impervious to attack? “Flimsy, though,” he murmured. There were endless doors above, but – to his raven – they did not look locked or chained. A line of defense with the stairs, but nothing further up … Careless.

Charles considered the glass panel. Then he carefully unlatched it and retrieved a capsule.

“Ah.” He twisted off its top. “Pneumatic tube transport – ingenious choice.”

Closing the panel again, he examined the capsule more closely. “Let’s see,” and he fished out a piece of paper. “What have we here?”

He read:

*Get out.*

Charles turned on one foot. Gazed up into the glinting black of the atrium. “There’s no need to be
There was no reply.

“… Hello?” He raised his voice. “Anybody there? I’d prefer to talk to you in person.” He paused.

“Moira.”

The lights from the distant doors all flickered at once.

“Surprise, surprise.” Charles bared his teeth. “Not quite as well-kept a secret as you’d like, hm?”

There was a rattle and hum, and another capsule came flying down the pneumatic tube. Charles set down the empty one at his feet. Retrieved the second.

*Why are you here?*

“I want to talk,” he said to the empty air. “Frost is coming back.” He kept his voice calm as the lights flickered again. “I don’t know how soon, or how long she’ll stay … But you were going to escape, or so you told me in the stable. And I’m offering to help you.”

He didn’t have long to wait before another capsule appeared. Charles pulled it out.

*Bullshit.*

“Realistic, I suppose.” He let the container fall. The prospect of having a conversation line by line, capsule by capsule, was not a pleasant one. “But I told you … I’m a prisoner here, too. And even if you don’t believe me,” and he felt his stomach twist, “I can help you.”

Charles waited for another capsule. None appeared.

Would she turn him away? Would she just accept what was coming? She had seemed so ready to fight. And Charles needed someone to fight a certain Queen - a minor distraction, at least - since he himself needed time to regroup, to plan ...

Unless he could escape with her. MacTaggert. Capable, surely - he remembered the dark gleam of her eyes in the stable - and she wouldn't just let him rot, not after he told her he had been -

*You promised me,* Erik whispered in his memory, and Charles gritted his teeth, hunched his shoulders against the weight of his armor. It was worth a try. What else could he possibly do? Stay, and be fucked every way he could think of? Roll over on his back and mindlessly obey? Jump when Erik said “jump”? *Beg?*

But he would have to speak to her face to face. Surely there could be no persuasion by pneumatic tube alone.

“I would like to negotiate in person, please. Because,” and he swallowed, “you're right. It’s not altruism. You’re not the only one who wants to escape.”

He waited a long moment. Then a fourth capsule came rushing down.

*Come back here tonight.*

“That’s not specific enough. Name a time, please.”

Another rush. Cursing, Charles discarded the capsule in his hands and retrieved the fifth. This had all the makings of a farce –
I lost my watch at your bonfire gauntlet, Xavier. And just to let you know: we have a plan already. We don’t need you for it to work.

I’m watching Lucas die right now. And I watched your lover kill my commander last night. So you had better have a goddamn brilliant argument for why I should even give you the time of day – or you can take all your help and fuck off.

And if you’re lucky I won’t come round to visit and kill you myself.

Charles hardly registered the threat. His mind was still caught on: your lover; his stomach churned. Of course she would think that the case, however laughable an idea it was.

“Fine, then,” he said, voice icy. “I’ll give you my argument in twelve hours’ time. Ten o’clock tonight.

“And you had better hope that the White Queen hasn’t returned by then. Believe me, Captain Moira MacTaggert, that I know what I say when I say: if she’s back? You’re fucked.”

He did not wait for a reply. Instead, a kick to the canisters and a whirl of his raven’s wings was all it took to send him back to his room, cross-legged on his bed – jaw clenched, eyes dry and staring.

He got up with an effort, grasping the sapphire in its pouch. His legs had cramped.

“Right,” Charles finally managed. “Shower, chores; perhaps the library. It would seem,” he told his birds in his mind, “that we have some time to kill.”

But in the end, he passed most of that time in bed.

He stayed wrapped warm in his blankets, leaving only to stoke the fire. And to fetch various items with which to amuse himself.

His blue sweater, for one. Charles had taken the remnants from the wardrobe and had finished unraveling them. He had taken one dreamy half hour to roll the yarn into a passable skein. After all, it was just possible that he could make something else of it. If he could somehow remember how to knit.

“And if I could find wooden needles,” he had murmured, opening the wardrobe door again. Charles had dropped the skein in one corner and snagged the jewel coffer. Had taken the latter back to bed and poured out its contents onto a pillowcase stretched taut in front of him …

And that had been an enthralling way to pass an hour or two. It could have been more. Charles had rather lost track of time.

He had sprawled out on the bed and run his fingers through the heap, over and over again. He had sorted them by color; and then by what he had guessed was type. And lastly Charles had designed some necklaces. Pearls for Ororo, onyx for Angel, rubies for Marie and emeralds for Jean.

For his sister …

“Sapphires,” he decided, arranging them. “And maybe even this.”

He placed the massive blue diamond dead center. It glittered up at him coldly. Charles stared at it from where he lay curled up on his side and wondered, dozing off, whether or not Raven would actually like it. A trifle too gaudy, perhaps …
“What do you think?”

And his raven, perched on the golden chair, hissed like a cat.

“I thought you liked shiny things.” Charles frowned for a moment before dismissing the matter. Whilst napping, as it seemed he was, he might as well work in his mind. He had promised his birds a proper tea after all.

“Let’s see, shall we?”

The bookshelves had grown out of the walls. Even now, one was flexing in on itself and expanding. He had created a rondel to conceal his power with nothing more than a gesture. However, that had involved changing stone into stained glass.

Charles gazed round the room. What to change now?

“There have to be some leftovers, somewhere. Detritus. Discards. There’s a hidden door in Erik’s library; why can’t there be one here?” Charles walked to a space between two shelves. “Right … here.”

He traced an outline as high as he could, then down to the floor on both sides. A knock of one gauntleted fist at waist height, and there was an impression that could become a handle.

Then he stared, feeling somewhat foolish. “I don’t know quite how this should be done. But,” Charles turned, speaking aloud, “my dear aviary has built a shelf for my Russian efforts, so perhaps … some help?”

There was no sound.

“Darlings.” He raised his eyebrows. “That’s your cue.”

And then Charles jumped in his armor, as a series of thumps and crashes echoed from the outline – from the other side of the outline. “Oh really,” he breathed, feeling a laugh bubble up. “You’re joking. Behind the wall?”

He heard squawks and chirps. Then Charles took hold of the new and gleaming door handle, opened it – and laughed in truth as his birds flew out from the new door. The penguin slid to a halt at his feet, on a cascade of –

Cardboard.

“You, my friend, have anticipated me.” Charles bowed. “Thank you. Straw into gold would have been a trifle foolish. But here!” He snatched up a bit of cardboard from the heap. “Have this.”

It only took one flick of his fingers to turn the scrap into a piece of haddock. His penguin danced back and forth on yellow-orange webbed feet until Charles let the fish fall - there. Scales and fin, snapped up in a trice.

“And from that to a proper tea.” Charles gathered up an armful of cardboard. “Let’s see what we can do.”

What he could do, he realized with glee, turned out to be: many things. Some more ridiculous than others.

The windchimes, for example. He had woven together at least a dozen of them, gathering on strings
like bunches of grapes and clanging their way up to the rafters. Charles left off laughing at his
nightingale – the poor thing was singing itself hoarse in competition – and turned the lengths of
wood and metal into breadsticks with a wave of his hands. They fell with a patter to the floor.

“Better?”

His nightingale gave an indignant whistle.

“Just be quiet and eat your bread.”

The other birds were pecking away happily enough. Even his raven had thawed, flying over from its
perch. It was busy shielding sparrow and dove from the penguin’s bulk. The hummingbird hovered
over a teacup full of sugar water, and Charles himself had eaten three cream puffs.

They had tasted airy and insubstantial. He could ask Jean to come for tea; ask her to teach him how
to make them more convincing. She had already showed him something more important, after all …

“It could be,” he murmured, “that more work needs to go into making things solid. Or effective …
Useful.”

Charles held up an opal on a silken cord and smiled, narrowly, at its iridescent glitter. A jewel of
forgetfulness, throwing back the light that filtered through his veils … He had not forgotten the trick
to it, though he had made the first so long ago.

And now that he had more time until his meeting with Moira – six hours left to while away, if the
gold clock told him correctly … Now he could make many more.

He plucked another sheet of heavy paper from the pile on the table. All the supplies had been there,
but draped under a veil. Instinct, maybe. A possible defense from when Frost had fastened her
coldness round his mind during the Battle of Dallas, and on the night of the fourth quarter …

It took even less time to make another opal pendant with a feather his raven had dropped. And there
were more, Charles saw. All sorts of feathers, scattered on the floor amidst the remnants of the bread.
The birds had nestled together to sleep on his chair again, so it couldn’t hurt to see what sort of
jewels could come from their leavings.

All were sleeping, except one. And Raven made no protest as he worked. It watched instead, oddly
intent, as he made a gold casket from cardboard and air and began placing gems on silken cords into
it, one at a time.

It took hours. But finally Charles had a heap of jewels in his mind almost as impressive as that in the
coffer Erik had given him – not three days ago, now.

“Don’t you think?” he whispered to his raven, smoothing his armored hands over the casket. “Do
you like them?”

With a low crrrr it flew to his shoulder. It ran its strong beak through his hair.

“Mm. I’m not sure what they’ll do. Your feather with a bit of my veil, for forgetfulness. But these
…” Charles scooped up jewels glinting red, gold, light and dark. “Who knows? I’ll have to test them.
Perhaps on myself, first. It would not do to duplicate that fiasco with Sean, would it?”

The raven pecked him gently.
“And you warned me against that to begin with, hm?” He reached up to stroke Raven's ruff. “Quite far-sighted of you.”

There was no response. But Charles kept stroking carefully. He could feel the warmth of feathers quivering through the fabric on the palm of his hand.

“And I never thanked you for protecting me from whatever Frost was trying to do, my first night here. I didn’t know. Until yesterday,” his voice caught, “if you can believe it – I didn’t know.”

Charles stared at the motes of light dancing over the mahogany table in front of him. They blurred and then came back into focus.

“What did she want, I wonder? She has me already, to use however she wishes. Psionic battery. Punching bag by proxy.”

Of course, there was one particularly lurid possibility. Charles considered it as dispassionately as he could. Then shook his head. “She can’t be without … companionship. She’s very well-preserved.”

For one hilarious moment, he thought his raven had hiccupped. But no. It had just been the start of a squawk.

“I wonder how old she is, anyway … It would have been rather robbing the cradle if she had – meant to do that.”

He hunched his shoulders. Thought determinedly of something else. Erik.

“Erik’s thirty-seven.” The image was vivid: a lean figure turning from the library window, growling: I’m not old. Sunlight burnishing his red hair …

“Hm. Surely she’s older. She was his tutor,” he muttered, remembering, “at Shuvalov’s estate. But how much older, exactly?”

There was silence.

“And why do I care?” Charles sighed. “It’s more important to ask: what can we do to combat her dear Ladyship? For ourselves; for others. How might we stay alive and become a thorn in her flesh at the same time?”

He thought for a long moment.

“I suppose you could always practice your flying.” He felt the wing flutter. “I was never as surprised in my life as I was when you found the city – although I have wondered,” Charles said softly, “just how you see what you see. Magnifying maps and superimposing their features on your flight – that’s one way to interpret it. But how to explain the stars? Or the sea? I could almost smell the salt above the city. And your view of the Hunter from a tree … It was freezing. I remember that. How could you feel the cold?”

That and cry out to Erik, sitting on a tree stump and looking up at the same constellations. Charles shook free of the memory.

“It’s not as though you can take over the mind of any random bird or bee.”

Although his raven had flown with Angel as guide to the stadium that night. It had skipped from her to the emissary from Eretz Galut, to the Russian … “And then to the open air – how?”
It was maddening. Charles drummed his fingers on the tabletop. The most similar experience he could recall was that of the Finder. Frost used it to communicate over hundreds, if not thousands of miles. At Dallas it had created her vast projection: a bird’s-eye view of the first great battle …

But even before then, Charles had gone from point to strategic point with her, catching sensory impressions of spaces both open and enclosed – without necessarily using others’ minds to do so.

He blinked, remembering. Logan had communicated with him; the girl who could taste through touch had as well – though unintentionally. But those had been the exception rather than the rule.

For when the Free West pilots had been held by Frost, it had been a reaching out on her part – a finding and grabbing – to gather minds already well within the bounds of her ability. As though a grid inanimate beneath their feet had come to life, and warped into a web, curled up and caught them, for the White Queen to suck them dry …

Erik’s voice whispered in his memory: My lady will have them for her pleasure when she returns.

“Right,” Charles muttered to his raven. “We’ll table the question for now. Suffice to say that you,” and he tapped it on its head with one finger, “are a Finder. You see things, you feed me information – you fly far and wide. And with practice, you’ll fly even further. My own personal Finder. Do promise not to electrocute me, won’t you?”

The raven ran its beak through his hair again.

“Good-bye. I’ll see you soon. Until then, try and think of what else I might wear, to speak to this Moira person … Would you mind?”

Charles gestured at his armor. Raven flew from his shoulder and perched on the chair, fluffing its feathers grumpily. Smiling to see it so, Charles waved and started to fly away.

“Because there’s the hero and there’s the charmer – and you know which of the two suits me best.”

In his manor room it was chilly. Charles stretched, feeling as though he had slept for a week. He cheerfully retrieved his knit hat – the cold air was prickling on his scalp – and poured his jewels back into their coffer. Then he left his room and strolled to the library.

It was dark as midnight at bloody seven p.m. Sighing, Charles turned on lights and the thermostat before embarking on his search. Erik had said ‘rooms’, after all. It had been quite some time ago, but Charles remembered it very well. “Secret rooms, plural,” he murmured to himself. “I wonder …”

He raised an eyebrow at the shelf leading to the file room, but did not touch it. It would not do to be imprisoned by accident again. Of all possible fates, surely the cruelest would be to die in a library. And dramatic irony aside … the stench in an enclosed space would be terrible.

Ororo’s maps and his own memory confirmed that the manor had a layout roughly symmetrical. If the library followed suit, then there could very well be another room hidden directly opposite the one he had already found.

So Charles went to another dark corner with a shelf nestled tight against the walls. And then he looked down. Ha. There had been no attempt made to hide the metal knob that triggered the mechanism. Charles promptly pressed it. And grinned as the shelf rotated on its axis.

His grin turned into an outright laugh when he walked inside – careful to prop the door with a book – flicked the switch, and saw …
“Oh. Happy New Year to me, *most* heartily.”

There, shining in with all the glory of fifty-year label and ninety-percent proof, was what looked to be a liquor cabinet.

“Joy. Joy.” Charles sketched a dance step to cross the room. He gleefully opened the cabinet door – and inhaled as a folded piece of paper fell to his feet.

“What have we here?”

It was the matter of two seconds to unfold it.

But it took another minute to stop his heart from hammering, and to reach down once more – to retrieve the note from where it had fallen. Again. It had been the handwriting. The slanting black strokes, instantly recognizable –

Charles focused on the words. His mouth was dry.

“ ‘Geschickter Rabe. If you are reading this, you have found something that will please you’ – bloody hell,” Charles muttered to himself – but he hadn’t made a secret of his proclivities, so it was too late to regret it now.

“ ‘I only ask that you leave me a very little, so that I might –’ ” his breath hitched – ” 'be civilized with you when I return. I write this before I leave. But –’ ”

And Charles’ gut twisted.

“ ‘But I already miss you. *Ich trage Dich bei mir in meinem Herzen.* Erik.’”

Charles crumpled the note and stuffed it into one pocket. "Of course, ‘Erik’. Who the hell else would it be?"

Gritting his teeth, he deliberately chose the largest bottle of Scotch, before leaving the room without a backward glance.

Charles had no intention of going back to the hidden cabinet to find a glass. Nor did he want to retrieve the metal cup from his own room. So instead he brooded as the thermostat worked, and focused on taking sips directly from the bottle.

His vision was starting to blur and warmth was creeping through his gut. Matched by a particular queasiness. Who else would it be, indeed? He didn’t have to label the other with curses anymore – he could call him by name. Erik had given him that dubious privilege. And had heaped other gifts upon him – food and jewels, life and death … and now liquor.

All he asked in return?

“Forever.” Charles shivered. “*Ich trage Dich bei mir in meinem Herzen*” – ‘I carry you with me in my heart.’ Well I carry you as a weight round my neck,” he flipped at the leather pouch with his fingers, then let it fall, “and – you’re heavy, damn it.”

He groggily reached out for the bottle again. It tipped close to the edge of the library table – he winced and caught at it. Safe.

“It would be a shame to spill it on the floor – oh, wait.” Charles gave himself a mock salute with the
Scotch. “It’s been done. And I licked it all up. Remember?” The alcohol stung his mouth as he swallowed; he swiped at his lips with the back of one hand. “And now you’re gone.

“By God, though – if you were here. Erik. I’d have you on your knees, and you would – you.”

Charles swallowed with difficulty. The image hit him full force: Erik tilting his head up for a kiss, but only a quick one, since he would pull away – eager – and start fumbling at the front of Charles’ trousers, fingers trembling. But he would manage to drag Charles’ cock out and take it awkwardly into his mouth, then start licking and panting around it, sucking as hard as he could –

“Fuck,” Charles gasped. He shoved himself up and away from the table and chair.

It wasn’t cold in the library. He wasn’t completely drunk. But he was shuddering uncontrollably.

He needed air. Stumbling past the desk, he took hold of a window latch, undid it and pulled the pane wide open with a grunt of effort. Then he coughed as frigid cold knifed down his throat.

“Much better. I could stand here all night. Take the air,” he half laughed, half sobbed, “and to hell with Frost and MacTaggert and you, Erik. To hell with you.”

Charles stared out into the darkness. The stars were out. He craned his neck – the window was a high one, and glass glinted oddly in the light from inside. The stars were not reflecting. He leaned out to peer down the manor’s side. It was quite a drop, but one that could be navigated with perhaps three bed sheets and blankets tied together –

He choked.

No one was there. Not a single soul except himself. He could lay supplies together and make a run for it tonight.

“How long had he been drinking? He did not know. But he had time to assemble supplies and formulate a plan. Then he could tell Moira, and they could go together. All five of them.

Charles backed away from the window, heart pounding, and shoved it closed. He capped the bottle of Scotch, turned out the lights and sprinted from the library to his room.

“Good thing you don’t jolly well have a door anymore.” Nothing to hold him back as he pelted over the threshold and wrenched the knapsack from his wardrobe. There was nothing left in it; he had eaten everything Erik had brought him from Dallas. But he could get supplies from the kitchen; there was plenty of food there now. Yes.

Charles shook the intertwined metal loops of Jean’s toy off the knapsack and rushed to cram clothes into it. A sweatshirt, sweatpants, socks - Bobby’s especially, he thought, grabbing them. They would be quite warm. He stripped his bed and piled the sheets and blankets in the hallway. Then he ran down to the kitchen.

He piled fruit into the knapsack. An orange rolled from the upturned bowl and hit the floor; Charles seized it and put it with its fellows. There was some sort of jerky in one cupboard – he took it – and in the icebox there were chunks of cheese that would surely keep in the cold, and a note kept from moisture on a piece of aluminum foil –

Charles froze.
“And not,” he said, thinly, “just because the ice is bloody cold – oh God.” He shook out his numbed fingers. “What now?”

His fingers were indeed numb. That was why they had trouble separating paper from foil, unfolding the former and letting the latter fall. Charles watched the words waver on the paper as he read:

“‘Schönster Lehrer.’” Saliva was pooling in his mouth, sour with panic.

“‘If you are reading this, surely you are hungry. I hope you find everything well here. There is some bread in its box, but more outside.’”

Charles took in a deep breath. Focused. Yes, that strong slanting word was … “outside.”

“‘Because it is winter, it can be preserved in a snowbank. It lies at the front door, as you go out, to the left.”

“‘I do not write this lightly, Rabe. I have left the door open for you. You promised me forever, and I will hold you to that promise. If you run from me, then wherever you run in this world: I will find you there and I will hold you.”

“‘I would rather hold you in your bed. I will think of you there always. Ich lasse mein Herz bei Dir, Erik.’”

“I leave my heart with you.” Charles let the paper fall to the kitchen floor. Hysterical laughter was bubbling up in his throat; he throttled it.

What could be said? Nothing. Except, “What did I do?” he whispered fiercely, slinging the knapsack over one shoulder and striding out the door. “What did I do, to deserve this? A monster – well. A madman conceiving an obsession for me, and ‘oh yes, by the bye, Xavier, if you so much as think about escaping I will gut you.’ Was it a previous life? Was it one of my students? Or did I just kick a puppy in my sleep and not bloody well wake up in time to cry a little?”

Charles had reached the front door. He stared at the latch and bars, gleaming in the darkness – then grabbed the handle and pulled hard before he could lose his nerve.

The door swung open.

Although he could hardly see into the darkness, he knew it was starting to snow. Flecks of ice hit his cheeks and nose, brow and neck. The cold spiraling in made his lower teeth ache.

Erik had been telling the truth.

“But …” Charles heard his own voice, wavering in the rustle of winter air. “It could be a trap.”

That much was true. But the door … oh God it was open –

The sudden cold at one foot was the only thing that snapped him out of his daze. Charles looked down; cursed. He was only wearing socks, and snow had soaked through the left the instant he had stepped outside.

Charles forced himself to move backwards. One step. Then another. He pushed the door shut with an effort; made himself walk towards the steps and his room.

“Shoes,” he muttered, and: “It will still be open in an hour. Who’s going to lock it – you?”

The knapsack was a lead weight on his back as he trudged upstairs. Charles shoved the sheets aside...
with one foot and stepped over the threshold.

And blinked at the sight of Jean’s toy, lying in the middle of the floor. The intricate mesh of the interlocking steel rings was delicate enough for it to lie almost flat. The only thing that prevented it from doing so was the iron raven inside.

Charles eased the knapsack off and down as he bent to scoop up the toy. He stared at it in his hands.

If he ran that night, it was possible he would not see Jean again.

But, “No,” Charles said firmly. Escape first. Then he could focus on a rescue effort for the child – the children. For anyone who wanted to leave Frost’s régime. And if he joined forces with the new resistance group in Britain, it was just possible that he could work towards peace. He could even try to persuade Her Majesty to integrate mutants into British society, instead of exporting the best of them, part and parcel with wool and grain.

Charles made his way unsteadily to his bare mattress. And sat. It would work. It had to work. When would he get another chance like this one? He had squandered previous opportunities; it would be the height of stupidity to waste this moment too.

The steel wires glinted. Jean would like Britain, Charles thought. He could teach her reading and maths, just as he had taught Raven. The two of them would get along well, surely … Wouldn’t they?

Dismissing his worry, he opened the knapsack just enough to slip the toy inside. A promise to himself, and a keepsake until he could give it to Jean in person.

There was hardly any light – the fire had died down to coals. Charles wiped the sweat from his brow and settled back on his bare mattress. To his own mind, and to Moira’s – and then afterwards: away.

Charles had not lingered in his reading room. He only stayed long enough to realize: no, the raven had not assembled him a wardrobe worthy of a king. It hadn’t even tried – or so he thought, until he saw how it had knotted one of the veils between its talons.

It took some time to wrest the material loose. It was oddly slippery.

“In reality, these conceal,” Charles lectured an imaginary student as he swept the veil round his shoulders. He had put his shield down on the golden chair. “By working on others’ perceptions, I’m sure. Altering their experience of reality, not reality itself. Pity.”

It was almost enough to make him envy Bobby and John – their elemental power. *Erik* – but he dismissed memory and knotted the cloak in front. Later he would have the time to think of something more elegant to hold it in place. For the moment, Charles took a handful of opals on their silvery threads and wrapped them around one forearm. Forgetfulness: perfect concealment and beautiful to boot.

“Ha.” He turned in place, admiring the cloak’s flaring out mid-shin. “So, my dear,” he spoke to his raven, “just what might this do? Not invisibility, surely – I’d have to wear it on my head and stroll through others’ minds like some glorified teapot and cozy.” He frowned at his reflection. “Are you sure you can’t do anything about – oh.”

His reflection … Charles felt his heart thump once, hard, in reality. In the remove of his reading room, he merely smiled into the new mirror. Someone – his raven alone or all the birds working together – had placed a tall mirror in the wall opposite the new door. And there he was: sword and armor, shining silvery cloak draping down and tokens of forgetfulness wrapped round his forearm.
Brown hair, Charles was pleased to note, of a reasonable length. He might even say it looked dashing. Better than its current stubble; far better than the lank stringiness of his first night with Erik – perfume or no perfume.

He tipped his head and tried a winning smile. “Take me with you, Captain MacTaggert. Please?”

The edges of the armor glinted with an ominous light. If there were a way to give a softer impression … Charles thought back wistfully to one of his favorite courting outfits. A well-fitting coat of a shade between blue and green. Trousers and a fedora of the same color. And an assortment of patterns throughout: a twist round the hat and a tie at his throat – all in all, a picture of the elegant gentleman …

… now gazing back at him from the mirror.

“Good lord.” He looked down at his body – still wearing cloak and armor. In the mirror? Coat and trousers and fedora.

His raven clacked its beak sharply.

“What on earth is the matter?” Charles spun on one foot. He felt like laughing. “I may still be wearing this medieval nonsense to my own eyes, but this is what I look like to others, is it? I think it’s marvelous.”

Raven rang its beak against the metal of the shield, where it rested on the chair. The sound carried.

“I can come back for that, surely?”

An outraged squawk and a flurry of wings – Charles sighed. “Fine. I’ll sling it on my back, though.” He did. “And just to let you know: it spoils the line of this marvelous cloak.”

For it did, somewhat. One corner of the shield poked against the fabric. But thank goodness for small mercies: in the mirror, his blue-green suit coat remained unchanged.

“Thank you for this.” He peeked over his shoulder and gave Raven a smile – even if it was in a temper. “It will be useful. I guarantee it. And just for you,” he stroked its head, “I promise that I will never leave the shield behind. All right?”

A croak. Then the raven glided to his shoulder with one wingbeat.

“Then let’s be off.” He reached for his head; felt nothing but air. A pity that he couldn’t find the fedora, to doff it or tip it or do something more dramatic. “I could put you in charge of hat tricks,” he began – but Raven pecked him sharply and he yelped. “Fine. Just show me the way, and I’ll follow. To Moira’s mind. Go.”

And they went.

The atrium was just as dark and secretive as it had been earlier that day. Now, though, Charles was not in any mood for timidity. He paced the circumference of the ground floor, examining the walls. Nothing. Two hundred seventy degrees of nothing – until his eyes lit upon the slightest seam in the smooth black surface.

“Here.”

He drew his sword. His raven bobbed its head once.
Charles carefully placed the sword’s edge against the wall. He kept his eyes wide open for any disturbance – a flash of light, a burst of noise, or the entire pneumatic communication system going haywire.

All that happened was that a door slid open, silently.

“My day for it, I suppose. Hidden doors.” He knew his smile was one of bared teeth. “And there’s a stairway.” He sheathed the sword. “Shall we?”

The raven flew ahead of him. It spiraled up, weaving through the stairs’ rickety banisters. Its croaks echoed off the walls – pebbly concrete, Charles saw. Not as polished as the outside. Instinct made him turn back to look as he started walking. The door had resealed itself behind him.

Had it been a trap, though, surely his raven would have warned him off. As it was, it seemed to want him to go faster – hovering and swooping down around his head, then rocketing up. Charles paced himself carefully. It looked to be a long climb.

And: “Yes,” he waved a hand at the raven, “I know I could probably fly to follow you. But I want to be sure of things, here. She’s an army captain, and she made the stairs in the main part of her mind inaccessible. There might be traps. So I’ll be safe for now, shall I?”

The only reply was a faster beating of wings.

Soon enough the stairs came to an end. At the top was an unremarkable door, painted grey. More remarkable were the red letters stenciled half a foot high.

*KEEP OUT.*

“Well,” Charles murmured, “You might have told me that earlier …” He turned to his raven, perched on a banister. “What do you think?”

And the bloody bird made no reply – except for flying straight through the door.

“Amazing,” he breathed. “Let me just –”

Which turned out to be a mistake. A *thump* – “Ow!” – and at least, he thought, nobody was around to see him walk smack into the stenciling. It bloody well hurt. Charles grabbed the doorknob and turned it, face smarting. He didn’t think he had a nosebleed. God damn it, if there was trick to it, his raven would have to clue him in before their next little jaunt though –

The door opened onto a hallway lit with flickering fluorescent bulbs. Raven was perched near the end of it, clinging to what looked like a framed diploma.

Charles put aside his frustration. He trailed his fingers along the other documents in their frames, lining the walls. Sudden instinct made him peer closer. There – one at random. *Cpt. Mark MacTaggert, for Valor in the Line of Duty*, cream-colored parchment and blocky black letters … but somehow transparent at the same time. Charles squinted. Through fibre and glass, he could see the atrium floor a dozen stories down.

“These are the lights,” he realized, “that I saw from below. Interesting. Your little pieces of paper, like stars in the night. So important to you, Captain?”

Charles strolled to the end of the hall, nerves on high alert. He kept his voice deliberately casual. “I suppose there’s something greatly symbolic about the whole business. Or perhaps storage for memories – like my books?”
He gathered his courage and touched the handle of the end door. “You’re lucky I’m the only one here, Captain. Don’t you think so, my dear?” Charles looked briefly at his raven. “I do believe Frost would have smashed all of those frames to pieces, and called it a good start.”

He did not wait for a reply. Instead, he opened the door and let his raven fly in ahead of him.

Raven immediately perched on the low-hanging lamp. Charles made careful note of the rickety table, the chair in front of it – and the figure, slim back turned to him, gazing out of a wide window on the far side of the room.

He cleared his throat.

Bloody hell, it sounded like a gunshot. Except: no, Charles thought, even as he got up from his tumbling roll on the floor – the damned gunshot had sounded like a gunshot. Breathing hard, he slung the shield down from behind his back. Something about the cloak made it slither to his left forearm with little effort … even as he drew his sword.

“Who the hell are you?” MacTaggert snarled.

“Charles Xavier.” He got up from the floor; tried to keep it graceful. Oddly enough, his armor hadn’t gotten in the way of his tumble. “We’ve spoken already today –”

She leveled the gun at him again, and fired.

He didn’t have time to dodge the shot. But instinct had made him toss his forearm bearing the shield in front of his face. Charles winced at the impact of the bullets – like someone taking a hammer to metal studs in a wall – but he had been shot at during the Oxford missions, and the shield seemed to outclass standard body armor and then some, holy fuck–

It seemed MacTaggert felt the same way. “Fuck.” The voice skirled high up into disbelief. “Mother fucker. Did he teach you to do that?!”


“Erik the Red. Professor.”

“I haven’t been a professor for quite some while.” Charles deliberately did not smile as he swept his sword out in an arc. “And if you know anything about mutations, you’ll know that they can’t be taught. Good manners, on the other hand …”

And then he let a smile curl his mouth up at the corners. “Captain Moira MacTaggert? I’m Charles Xavier. Pleased to meet you.”

“Wish I could say the same.” Her voice was a rasp. “How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“That –” and he could practically hear the teeth grinding, even from across the room. “That I’m a woman.”

“Oh, that.” Charles let his face fall back to neutral lines. It felt like too much effort to smile, anyway. “Your mind, in the stable – it was front and center there. Your identity; your sense of self. It’s difficult to describe.” He considered. “But it might as well be a signature.

“‘Moira MacTaggert.’ ” He gave in to his curiosity. “How have you stayed in the army this entire
time? It may be instinct telling me,” for it was nudging him, even now, “but I somehow doubt the Free West encourages gender parity in such a context.”

“Good guess, even if you sound like a legal briefing. It’s not permitted. The thing is: the other women in the army – and I – know that that law is bullshit. So we get by.”

“How? Given conditions in the field?” Charles remembered certain demands of the Oxford missions, after all, and surely it would be a challenge to remain unnoticed –

“Discipline. Civilized behavior. Unlike a certain Brotherhood, we have uniforms - and unlike the British, we actually don’t all bed down together every night. You and your Oxford friends, scraping around in the London rubble.” Her lip curled. “Do you miss your little escapades so much that you have to get a rush from peoples’ minds instead? Breaking and entering? Looting?”

“Why, not at all.” He kept his voice cool, even with the insults still thick in the air. *Bitch.* “I miss having cultured conversations like this one. Thus, my visit.”

“Sorry I didn’t have the welcome mat out,” she started … but her voice trailed off. Lack of energy, perhaps, for the next volley.

Charles saw the shadows under her eyes. The same dark hair cropped short; the thin features drawn tight with strain.

Taking a deep breath, he sheathed his sword. And put his shield back up behind him – everything easier with the cloak.

“*Pax*?” He held out a hand.

“I don’t think that’s possible. Let’s say: truce.” MacTaggert walked to meet him in the middle of the room, edging round the table. She shook his hand briefly. Then dropped it as though it were a dead fish, and went back to her window.

Charles raised an eyebrow. “Very kind of you.”

“‘Kind’, nothing. I want answers, Xavier, and I want them now.”

MacTaggert’s jaw was strung taut as a wire. Charles blinked. It looked like Erik’s jawline – the flex of it, the scraped-clean contour of bone beneath skin.

“Will you give them to me?”

Charles covered his hesitation by strolling to the window in turn. The line of MacTaggert’s back stiffened.

He was in a position of power, it would seem. She had not expected him to get this far into her mind undetected. But hadn’t Frost done so? If anyone could break and enter at will, it was the White Queen. *Best not consider that* – or, if he did, he could wheedle the information out of MacTaggert by … being polite. Perhaps.

After all, she had a trump card. Charles wanted to escape. She, apparently, was planning on escaping. How?

“I’ll give you any answers that I can.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”
“Only that …” Charles flicked his gaze to her. “I’ve been kept in the dark for a great deal of my imprisonment, Captain. If not all of it. So, some things I just don’t know.”

Dark eyes glittered in the wan lamplight. Charles saw her pause … before her shoulders straightened.

“Right. Truce it is. You may call me Moira, or MacTaggert. Whichever you prefer.”

He did not have to pretend to smile. “Charles.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Xavier. I’m pleased to meet you.”

The truth shaded with falsehood made an odd clangor in his ears. His raven cried out, low, from its perch on the lamp’s chain. Charles watched Moira carefully. She did not appear to have heard it.

Instead, she turned to face him. “I have hundreds of questions for you, Xavier. How much time do we have?”

“I’m not sure. Probably not much – I haven’t detected anyone returning, but I was told that it would be early in the new year.”


“I think it could be happier for both of us. You’re planning on escaping, so –”

She cut him off. “I don’t want to share the details. If Frost starts pulling them out of your head –”

“She can’t, from a distance.”

“With the device the EBS has?” Moira grimaced. “She can.”

“She has to be back here to use the Finder.” Charles countered. “And I’ve felt her use the Seeker, and believe me, it’s nothing to write home about.”

“The band that she puts on her head. Which one is that?”

“The Seeker.” Charles frowned. “Tell me you’re just playing at being this incompetent.”

“What do you mean, incompe –”

“I only mean that you’ve somehow concealed from your fellows the fact that you’re a woman. Frost had all the Free West soldiers under her control the night of the solstice – I felt it. So, if you’ve kept that little fact concealed from her as well, you either have some defense against telepathy or some vast reserve of competence. And since I am here in your mind …”

He traced a pattern on the window’s glass and waited for her to speak.

When she did, it was a curt: “Clever,” and, “A bit of both.”

It had been a guess, actually. Nothing clever at all; just a venture. But if he was right, it meant that Moira had a chance of getting away. Competence. Except:

“A bit of both?”

“My line of work has given me some prep for telepathic attack. I’ve practiced with – with ours.” She shrugged before continuing. “And there are certain techniques that one can pick up through exposure to the telepath in question. With Frost snowing on us, day in day out at Dallas … Let’s just say her
style became a bit more predictable.”

“She does love precipitation. Of the colder variety.”

“I know.” Moira tried a smile. “She came here, to my mind. And she couldn’t make it past the atrium and the first two floors.

“But she sent ice all the way up here,” she tapped the glass, “and I was sure she was going to find out. About my being – Moira. Not Mark.”

“It’s odd, then, that I found out almost immediately. Isn’t it?”

“Are you fishing for a compliment, Xavier? You can save your breath. I wasn’t expecting you to go fishing in my head – you would have found it more difficult, in the stable, if I had been prepared.”

“As difficult as I found it just now? I did keep to our appointed time, you know.”

Charles watched the hit strike home. He couldn’t resist prying a little deeper. “Or do you flatter yourself? So proud, to have held off Lady Frost –”

“You friends said you could be a prick.” Moira glared at him. “Maybe I should just get you drunk.”

“You –” Charles hissed, hand on the pommel of his sword.

His raven crrrr’d softly from above.

And Charles closed his eyes. Took a deep breath – in and out – and opened them.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have insulted you. Believe me,” and he smiled, “this atrium is admirably defended. It’s just … that I have a few tricks of my own.”

“Like what?”

He shrugged. “Magic sword.”

“The White Knight … Of course.” Moira swept her gaze up and down his form. “I was looking out for that. I thought you would send illusions first, like Braddock – and here you are, looking like Dick Tracy. Very disappointing.”

“Dick Tracy? Who the hell is that?”

“Comic book character from Before.”

“Right.” Charles sighed. All that effort to charm, and for nothing. He undid the knot at his throat and draped the cloak over his arm. “Is this better? Oh,” and he blinked at her. “Sorry.”

For Moira had winced and shielded her eyes. “Could you dial it down a bit?”

“I – I’m sorry, I don’t quite know how yet.”

“Fine. Give me a second.”

Charles felt the skin on the back of his neck prickle as the obsidian walls around him pulsed, strangely. They grew even darker. There was a distant rustling sound –

“What was that?”
“I thought it had been used up by now. Good. I –”

And Moira promptly looked as though she wanted to bite off her tongue.

Charles pounced.

“ ‘Used up’? What? Do you have – oh. You’ve been creating a defense against telepathy, you in the Free West. Hell, that’s brilliant!”

Moira had gone pale. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Charles didn’t have to hear the dissonance of a lie to continue, excited. “Is it an object? Or a chemical of sorts? The former would be prohibitively expensive in bulk, but if that factor steered you towards the latter, how would you manufacture enough of it to –”

“Xavier?”

“Yes?”

“Enough. It’s,” and Moira swallowed hard. “It’s a prototype. Enough of a dose to get you through a month – and it was my turn, mid-December.”

“So that means …”

“That Frost wasn’t able to take anything of value from me.” Moira spread her hands in front of her. “Voilà.”

“Didn’t that make her suspicious, though? To find nothing?”

“That’s one of the techniques we’re taught. I set up enough falsities on the second level for her to think that she had broken in successfully.”

“And she was fooled …”

Everyone can be deceived.

“It would appear so. At least, she didn’t pursue her interrogation of me. Good thing, too.”

“Why is that?”

“Surely you’ve figured it out by now, Xavier?” MacTaggert’s smile was colder. “I’m in Free West Intelligence.”

Charles felt his eyes go wide as dinner plates.

“Ow,” she snarled. “Stop fucking shining like that! It hurts –”

“Sorry. I have to work on control.”

“And I haven’t heard that line since high school. Just – could you give me Dick Tracy again, please? I think it helped mute whatever you have going on there.”

“Right.” Charles slung the cloak around himself again. Tied it in front and focused on the image of his blue-green coat and hat. “Better?”

Moira opened her eyes again. “Much. Thank you.”
“You’re quite welcome.”

“And I like your hat.”

“Flattery, my dear,” Charles grinned, “will get you everywhere. But if you’re thinking of distracting me, think again. So. You threw Frost off the scent, and bully for you – because if she knew that she had an intelligence officer in her group, I daresay she would have made things a great deal more unpleasant for you.”

“I gathered that.”

“But your fellow officers were mind-controlled for hours. I saw them. How did you fool her then?”

“I could hear her commands in my head. They didn’t have the compulsion that accompanies an effective takeover … but I played along, and did what she told me to do. Everyone else was gone and damn well drooling with it, for an entire day and a night. It was horrible, what Chris told me. Rick hasn’t talked about it –”

“Rick is the loud one, yes? You’ll want to keep an eye on him.” Charles knew enough about command dynamics, after all, to recognize insubordination when he saw it.

“What do you think I’ve been trying to do for the past four months? He was foisted on me,” she glared into the atrium, “and he’s passing information on to higher-ups.”

“Information?”


“And you? How did you manage it?”

“My own abilities. And … you could say that Commander MacMurphy is – was – my mentor. So you can see why this entire situation is very personal, to me.”

Charles occasionally despaired of his own mind when it jumped to lewd conclusions. As it was, he felt his eyebrows shoot up before he could stop them. Moira gave him a tired glare.

“Not that personal. Christ. Your friends said so, but I didn’t think your mind was actually that wide and deep a gutter, Professor.”

“My friends.” Charles shivered. “Who have you been talking to? And you knew my name, and that I was from Oxford, earlier in the stable. What have you been doing?”

“Oxford wasn’t a difficult connection to make. It was that or Cambridge –”

“There’s no need to insult me.”

“ – and your being kidnapped, Charles, has created a problem for both the EBS and the Queen of Britain. The latter seems willing to back down and wash her hands of the whole matter, given Frost’s refusal to negotiate. But there’s been indigenous pressure. Some mutant group in-house –”

Charles carefully let his eyes widen. “Really? There was nothing like that when I was there.”

“Things change. So, Party of Purity headquarters was burgled and their records were stolen … and that was just the preamble to an unknown person, or persons, breaking into Whitehall and making off with the Queen’s personal correspondence. Which makes the powers that be in Britain almost frantic
with worry – and which gives us an opportunity to break off an EBS tributary state. One for one.” She grimaced. “Since we’ve lost Mexico.”

“‘Us’ … The Free West, yes?” Charles murmured. His mind was still fixed on the image of someone stealing from Her Majesty. Despite himself, he grinned. The audacity of it –

“What else would I mean? No matter how much leverage your situation gives us, Xavier – no matter how grateful I am for it, and my country with me … My loyalty is to the Free West and to my commander.”

His situation? Just for that, Charles went for the jugular.

“You might need to be more flexible in your allegiance. Since your commander’s dead.”

There was a pause.

“I know. Remember? I saw.”

“… How?”

Her eyes were hollows in her face. “An overdose. Morphine.”

“It was peaceful, then?”

Moira folded her arms across the front of her uniform, closing her eyes. “As peaceful as death can be; yes. Why does it matter to you?”

Charles bit his lower lip. “He … seemed like a brave man, is all.”

“He was.”

Silence rested in the room for one long moment.

He did not wish to break it. But … Charles closed his eyes tightly. He had to.

“Speaking of bravery,” he said, soft. “You plan to escape the EBS?”

Moira focused on him instantly, eyes black as pitch. “Yes.”

“I want to help you. May I? Please?”

“You, Charles Xavier? I can’t imagine you’d do so for nothing. Your friends in Oxford were quite clear on that much. Nothing for nothing –”

“My friends,” he choked, “saw what I wanted them to see. I’ve done things I’m not proud of. But I’ve also done things for others … that nobody knows. That I’ve kept secret. Some because I have to, and some because I choose to.”

“Like what?” Moira asked.

“I …” He felt like he was going to be sick. “Erik. My situation – with Erik.”

Her nostrils flared. “Yes. That.”

“It was a very basic exchange. I asked him to safeguard the children on the battlefield, and in return I promised him sex. Does that revelation thrill your Free West Intelligence heart?”
She bloody well missed the sarcasm.

“Oh.” MacTaggert’s eyes had gone wide. “That’s very interesting. We had noticed the change in their rotations. The underage paired with their senior counterparts in battle, not just for training. And that explains it – and so *simple*. Nobody thought of –”

“– of Erik the Red panting after his precious catamite, hm? You in the Free West,” Charles tsked, “should learn to think outside the box.”

“Until now, we had a pretty damn big box.” Moira’s mouth quirked. “But I’ll pass that memo along.”

“Thank you,” he said, smoothly. “It’s reassuring to see, my dear, that you can be so very much amused by my little predicament. With this from my enemies, who needs friends?”

“I –”

He had caught her wrong-footed. Free West Intelligence – *ha*. Charles felt his lips curl back from his teeth as he watched her flail to find something, anything to say.

“I’m sorry, Xavier. You just seemed rather … well-adjusted. About it all. I won’t say ‘cheerful’ –”

“Please don’t. There’s gallows humor as opposed to regular humor, you know.”

“Yes.”


“Your friends …They said you were the type. To seduce, you know.” Her lips parted. “But Intel had honestly never even *thought* that Erik the Red could be … worked on. In such a way.”

“Oh, believe me,” Charles murmured. “He can be. Or, rather, if there’s one person in this world who can manage it ….” He gave her a cool smile. “You’re looking at him.”

Moira shuddered. “Good luck with that.”

“Yes, but you don’t understand.” And it was his turn to stumble. “I’ve had luck. But I don’t want it anymore. I want to leave. I *need* to leave. May I come with you?”

“What?”

“I can bring supplies. I have maps – I can help you with –”

She was shaking her head.

"But you promised me. In the stable - you promised to let me come with you if I helped you," Charles felt his throat tighten. It made him furious. “*Please*. I never beg, damn it, but I’m begging you.”

“You don’t understand. Rick? The soldier in my group – the pissy one? He already thinks you a willing collaborator with the EBS. Now that he knows you and Magneto are in bed together ... He toes the line hard, does Rick.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means that he now thinks you’re an agent of the devil as well as a collaborator. Sodomy, you
understand.” Moira grimaced. “The Free West Party of Purity has a vast following in Denver; he's a card-carrying member.”

“The Party of Purity … so it is a Free West plant. In Coventry, I mean.” Charles stared. “And also? For fuck’s sake.”

“Exactly.”

“What century does your little Ricky live in?”

“He’s not that bright, and he’s just vicious enough to be unpredictable. The weak link in our chain. Lucas is almost dead, and I’d still place more reliance on him. One excuse, just one, and Rick will try and have me out as leader, and then any escape will fall apart.”

“Then why even bother with him?” Charles snapped. “Why not just leave him here?”

“I don’t leave my people anywhere.”

And how could he argue with that?

Charles stared at her. Distantly, he was aware that he had started to tremble. “Please.”

“I can’t.”

“Then I – I –”

It was on the tip of his tongue. I won’t help you, he would snarl, and fly away with his raven.

Moira was watching him, dark eyes bright.

Charles looked away. He could fly away, in an instant. And in the morning, or whenever Frost and company returned, he would cast out just enough awareness to see the bright final flashes of their deaths; candles being snuffed out.

From above, his raven crrr’d. Soft. And … he had seen enough death already.

“I’m sorry,” Charles managed. “I need to sit down.”

She made no reply. But Charles heard hurried footsteps and the scrape of chair legs on the floor. “Here.”

He sank into the chair, putting his head in his hands.

“Careful for your hat,” she started, but,

“Sod the hat.”

Staring at the floor, he could see her shift from foot to foot.

“I’m sorry, Xavier. Believe me, if there’s anything I can do for you once I reach safety, I’ll do it. But my priority has to be my men.”

“I understand,” he said, dully.

“Is there anything I can do for you? Anything you need your Queen to know? It would take a while to get through diplomatic circles – your friends were less formal, to say the least. But if there’s any
message I can –"

*Any message ...*

“Raven,” he whispered.

“What?”

Quickly enough, he made a choice - and kept his ensuing fear and sorrow on a tight leash. It would be far better to revisit his emotional meltdown when he was alone again. Or possibly keeping company with Scotch.

He was proud that his voice was completely level.

“I need you take a message to a friend. One you probably haven’t seen yet, even with all of your Oxford intrigues. I’ll leave it, and something for her … where shall I leave it? Along with some supplies? I don’t have keys to the stable, although I could try pushing bits and pieces through the window –”

“No,” Moira said. “If any on my team finds out about your helping me, I’d have a mutiny.” She paused. “That, and if someone from the EBS sees your footprints …”

“It’s starting to snow.”

“Oh, shit.”

But Charles was busy thinking. Ororo’s maps … “There are several good hiding places on the grounds. I’ll leave a knapsack for you in one of them, and I’ll send you the directions to it before you go.”

“Make the drop on a path north by northeast. It needs to look like I stumble across it naturally. We’ll be headed for the Syracuse cell.”

Charles filed the information away even as he rolled his eyes. “You had better hope your precious soldiers are somehow delirious, because that’s the flimsiest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Except for *plans involving hashish* – he quashed the memory ruthlessly.

“I’ll take care of the story,” Moira gritted out. “Do you know what the perimeter defenses are this time around?”

Charles stared. “The what?”

“Perimeter defenses. They change, depending on which monster is in residence for the week. Frost favors bear traps –”

“God.”

“– but it’s never consistent. That’s part of the reason there hasn’t been a ground attack here since 1955. And we think it’s why none of our people taken here ever returns.”

Charles tried to smile. “You’ll be the first.”

“It’ll be a feather in my cap, that’s for sure.”

“Right.” He fought for calm. “Fine. I’ll leave a knapsack for you. I can’t help with the perimeter – I
didn’t even know it bloody well existed – but since Erik’s gone and Frost’s not back yet, you might have a narrow window without one. How will you manage the actual break?”

“We’ve worked free of some of the chains.”

“How?”

“Persistence.” She gave him a tight smile. “And Chris is a physicist. Something about the angles.”

“The right angle,” he murmured, “is of utmost importance –”

Moira snorted. “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that. We plan to overpower whoever comes to check on us, first. Chris has all his chains off. He’ll get to the roof storage, where some key copies are kept, while the rest of us hold the mutant. And then we’ll run for it.”

Charles stared. “That’s it?”

“That’s all I’ve got, Xavier. And believe me – we can do it. Whoever comes out to the stable will be expecting us to be dying or dead, and not expecting any attack.”

“You’ll have a better chance if you have advance notice. That’s what I’ll do. I’ll leave supplies, and directions to them – and I’ll keep watch and let you know who’s coming for you. And when.”

“… You can do that?”

He drummed his fingers against one of his temples. “Easily.”

“Right.” There were spots of color high on Moira’s cheekbones. “All right. But you, Xavier … Charles.”

She stooped, reached out, and gripped his wrists hard.

It was the first time someone not Erik had touched him … in what felt like forever. Since Jean. Since Frost, combing out his hair … Charles bit his lip and looked down at her slender fingers.

“What can I do for you, since you’re doing this for me? Name it. Name it and I’ll do it.”

The fingers blurred in his sight. He focused.

“In the knapsack, there will be something for someone in Britain. Something that can be put into a package. All I’m asking is for you to put in in the mail when you get to Albany.”

“Syracuse.”

“And do they happen to have international mail in Syracuse?”

“They hardly have that anywhere, Charles.” Her hands tightened on his wrists. “Not without people checking packages at random. EBS and Free West alike.”

“Oh,” he choked.

“But I’ll make it happen. All right? Whatever you give me – I’ll see to it that it gets to Britain. I swear it.”

“Thank you.”
“Who’s it for?”

“I –”

Charles hesitated.

Moira watched him, her eyes intent.

“You can trust me, Xavier. I promise you. Whatever you give me,“ she tapped her own temple, “will be safe here.”

Giving way – trusting – felt like such a relief.

“It’s for a girl named Mallory Darkholme.” The words left him in a rush. “I was – am – very close to her.”

She released his wrists. “None of your friends mentioned that name.”

Charles felt a wild rush of elation. His friends, tried and true after all. They had closed ranks against whatever foreign agents were slinking through Oxford. They had known to keep his sister safe.

“Well …” He shrugged, elaborate. “It was rather a, um. A matter requiring the utmost discretion.”

“Right.” Moira raised an eyebrow. “I understand. I’ll find her for you, and I’ll deliver your message.”

“Do you have that much leave stored up?”

She snorted gently. “If I get my people out of here, Charles, I can pretty much write my own ticket.”

“Fine.” Charles stood. And even though his own thoughts were clicking along in cool and precise order, he felt a sudden rush of dizziness. Perhaps he had been in another mind too long.

“It will be – a note, and a gift. Put together in a package, and do not open them. I value my privacy, and hers. Promise me that.”

“I promise.”

“By whatever you hold dear –”

“By the memory,” she said, “of my commander.”

“All right then.” Charles gave the room a final glance. “You had best get some sleep whilst you can. Watch out for my message when you wake. It will be a bird, coming to give you directions as soon as Frost and her people return. All right?”

“Agreed.”

Charles extended a hand to her. “Shake on it?”

Moira stared down at it. “Will you answer one last question?”

“I believe I just did.” He let his hand fall, and tried a smile. “But I’m happy to take another.”

“What happened to the commander’s body?”

Charles felt his stomach lurch.
“Your …” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Magneto gave him the morphine and watched until he was dead. Then he took the body away. Where –” and she coughed. Cleared her throat. “Where did he take him?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

Moira stood immobile. Charles watched, then said: “And even if I did know – would you really drag a body along on an escape attempt? A dead weight?”

She flinched.

“You know I’m right.”

“Yes, I know you’re right. Forgive me.” She twisted her mouth in a smile. “Sentiment. But you’re sending a mash note across the Atlantic, so you ought to understand.”

He didn’t disabuse her of the notion. “Indeed.”

“May I ask you, Xavier, to find that body? And to take care of it? Or failing that, find out what happened to it. Please.”

“As best I can.” He nodded. “I promise. And it’s ‘Charles’.”

“Charles … be careful. If a certain someone figures out you’re sending love letters to another –”

“Oh, I’m not worried about him. You’d like it, I think.” He smirked at her. “You and Free West Intelligence. Seeing your terrible nemesis led round by his cock.”

Moira winced. “I could do without that image, thank you –”

“And what kind of name is ‘Magneto,’ anyway?”

“A code name.” She tipped her head to one side. “Professor.”

“I see. Well …”

And Charles swallowed hard. “I suppose this is goodbye.”

She nodded. “Every minute counts now.”

“Safe travels to you, then.”

“Thank you. And thank you for everything, Charles – in advance.”

Moira smiled again. Tired as it was, it seemed genuine to him.

“Perhaps someday we’ll meet again.”

Charles smiled back. “I shall look forward to it.”

And he couldn’t say whether he flew with his raven or fell into the darkness of its wings whirling in front of his eyes. Whichever was the case, one of the last things he saw was the iridescent glitter of the opals wrapped round his forearm. Forgetfulness tied to concealment. He hadn’t had to use a single one.

When he came back to himself, Charles was staring at the stone floor of his manor room. He shifted
on the mattress, feeling strangely blank.

They fell on the lump of knapsack in front of him. The blankets piled in the hallway, and the sheets.

How could he have been so foolish? He blinked hard against a sudden sting in his eyes. To think that anything would change, that escape would indeed be possible ... And now he was stuck helping others instead of himself. Pathetic.

“But they can get something to Raven,” Charles told himself. He squared his shoulder. “That’s the important thing.”

He would let her know that he was all right; send her something reassuring as could be ... just to keep her from endangering herself. Charles knew Raven well; her temper as well as her brilliance - ever since she had given herself claws and fangs the day after she turned seven, the better to shred her first maths book. Headstrong and reckless ... She had been vocal about the Takers and their schemes even after the incident at Cambridge six years ago. Heaven knew what she would do if she found out about this resistance. He had to keep her safe. Protecting her had been the most important aspect of his life since he had turned seventeen.

“I don’t have much time.” It was starting to snow, he knew. And he had been in Moira’s mind for at least an hour … Perhaps he should have taken back his father’s watch after all, when Erik had offered.

Charles struggled into extra trousers and shirts, pulling on more socks before his boots. It was hard to believe that he had done this with Erik just yesterday. His legs still throbbed from their long hike. He carefully steered his thoughts away from his body. Easy, since there was absolutely no residual ache from the previous night’s sex. And he kept his mind clear, since he was absolutely not thinking of Frost’s return.

Gloves, manteau, scarves and second hat. Charles stood above the supplies and started flicking through his mental maps. Far better to know where he was going from the start, given the darkness and the cold.

“The smokehouse.”

It was perfect. Logan had skinned the animals from their second hunt in the stable, but had then jogged due east to show him the ruined house with its half a chimney. It had been well within reach, and – he placed it in the context of yesterday’s excursion – just north of the turning of West King Road.

Most importantly: he could find it easily tonight. A fifteen-minute run. Twenty, with the snow.

Which left a choice: library window or the front door?

“I hardly believe I’m asking it,” Charles murmured – but then he gnawed his lip. Something about the front door … didn’t feel right. It seemed almost too audacious. And Moira had mentioned bear traps. What if some remained? What if Erik had been the one to keep him safe from them?

Then there would be just as much danger in the woods, of course, but: “Fuck,” he breathed, “just pick one already.”

He wrested the wardrobe open. Thank God it never locked – and the front door could always be locked in future, come to think of it. “There. Question answered.”

He would go out the window. It would be excellent practice – and if he failed, this time, he could
always come back in the front door.

Now all that remained was Raven’s note. And a gift. He reached down for the jewel coffer –

- and fell to his knees, gasping, as a wallop of cold hit his mind.

“No, no,” Charles snarled, and: it wasn’t a punch or slap as much as a wave. The familiar ice of Frost’s roll call, a deluge poured on himself and the five children every morning – before the four had been taken away. “You bitch. Try this one on for size, won’t you?”

And he sent his raven flying straight back along the current of power, as though it were following a river. Flying as fast as it could, until it hit what felt like a wall of ice – Frost – with a screech.

“Ow. Fuck.” He gasped and clutched his temples. “Which is to say: good evening to you too, sweet Lady. How do I find you?”

Very well, thank you.

Charles choked.

He felt a ripple of amusement.

I hope you are in better spirits than you sound. And this is your raven – I have not seen her in so long. Is it not?

It was true, Charles realized. He had hidden the raven from Frost during the Battle of Dallas. And then in the hallway with Vogelzang, before at the bonfire for finding Sean … Smaller than a billiard ball, you-can’t-see-me-in-the-night –

And grown stronger too. How lovely.

Frost had not seen Raven. Except … And he broke into a cold sweat. Except the night he had arrived at the manor. Erik had told him so.

“Please … Forgive my rudeness, Lady. I had not expected you to hear me. I apologize.”

Accepted. And you … How do I find you, my dear boy?

Shuddering, Charles focused on the veils swathing his thoughts. He could think then, frantic but shielded – how would she want to find him?

Petrified. Traumatized. Sitting in a corner, flinching at every word, each touch. Fine. He could do that.

He let a memory ooze from behind the veils like pus from a blister. Erik, growling in his ear, forcing Charles flat against the bed as he fucked into him relentlessly – The morning before the shower. And the language was Russian, which Frost would understand if she –

Something delicate dipped into the ooze – a tendril of ice. And – fuck – there he was, gasping and panting – Put your hand on me –

My goodness. Who would have thought it?

Charles did not have to pretend to flinch. He let another memory well up. Himself, sent flying into the wall with the force of Erik’s punch. Fingers flexing in his hair, the taste of blood in his mouth and Well, Professor? Let’s have you lick my cock –
Oh, dear. Was my Prince … somewhat uncouth with you? I do apologize. He seems to have enjoyed himself most heartily.

“What do you want?”

I would like to speak with you, please. When would be convenient for you?

“It seems I have all the time in the world, Lady,” he said, teeth clenched. “When in turn might I expect you?”

Her amusement coiled around his raven. Threads of glittering ice.

Tomorrow, Charles.

He felt his skin crawl. “Very well. I will wait for you in my room at –”

Ah, no. The library, please. I will expect you there at twelve noon.

“Is that …” He fumbled for words. “That’s – all right with you, then?”

Certainly.

“But my chain –”

Is not round your ankle anymore. Do not lie to me.

“I won’t.”

My lady.

“Yes, my lady. I won’t, my lady.” Yes, my lady; no, my lady; three bags full, my lady, he added savagely – but she didn’t hear that bit. Just as well.

Very good. Until tomorrow, then. Charles.

And an icy whirlwind sent his raven screeching back to him, the connection broken.

“Where was she?” Charles gasped.

The maps in his memory made a kaleidoscope, until a white light glowed around –

“Albany,” he breathed. “Fuck.”

That meant that they were three hours away by cavalcade. A split second, by teleporter – but if Azazel was there, or his son, and getting ready to move all the company to the manor … then he was fucked anyway.

So, Charles thought, scrabbling at the coffer – if he was fucked, he might as well go out with a flourish.

He searched the coffer until he found the massive blue diamond. Charles punted any remnants of greed to the side – it would be for Raven, damn it, and with it she could buy her way to safety, to a better life … A fortune, to take care of her forever.

Charles stuffed the diamond into a sock, wedged with its mate - a heavy knit, enough to keep the stone hidden - and tied it secure and tight with blue yarn from the skein. He picked up all the supplies
in the hallway and sprinted to the library.

It was easy to throw open the window and to knot sheets together. The light would tip off anyone returning – coming up the drive even now, perhaps – but if he was fucked, it didn’t matter. Charles fastened the first sheet round the table’s thick central post. He held the knapsack out the window, carefully aiming for a snowdrift, and let it fall. The apples might get bruised – but somehow he doubted Moira and her followers would mind.

The diamond in its sock he shoved deep into his pocket. Charles pulled on the sheets to test them.

“All right. Here we go. Raven, wish me luck – oh.”

The note. He had bloody well forgotten. Charles bit his lip, anguished. He could run back to his room – a page from the Shakespeare, the pencil in its spine – but there was no time, he had no time.

His eyes landed on the desk. Erik’s.

“Please be open,” Charles whispered. “Come on. Please.”

He tugged at the topmost drawer, wide and shallow. And his heart leapt up into his mouth – “Yes –” as it glided out with nary a hitch. There were sheets of heavy paper to one side. Scraps of metal; a few coins. What looked, bizarrely, like a few grey pebbles. A carved seal, and red sealing wax.

And there was a steel nib. Charles grabbed it; fumbled for a reservoir. Yes. It would work; it had to work. He had used this sort of pen in Oxford – all he had to worry about were blots, given his rush. And there was a green felt blotter on top of the desk.

Reaching for it, his fingers brushed something folded –

“Fuck.”

He jerked his hand back. Glared at the note lying, innocuous, on the dark wood. If paper could stare, it would be doing so. Right at him.

“What now?” He ripped the paper open. “I’ll read this one, but any more of these – I find any more and I’m throwing them in the fire.

“ ‘Liebster Rabe,’ ” he read. “ ‘If you are reading this, you are nosing through my desk. I will think of you working here, and I hope it is of use to you. Please do not use the needles.

" 'I have left you other gifts but only two other notes. Perhaps you will find them? But the day is breaking, and I must leave now.' ”

“ – Ah. I can’t.” Charles felt dizzy. There was Russian there. He couldn’t string the words together, although he sensed his mind trying. He took in the structure of the letters; their lines and curves. He could decipher them later.

" 'Везде, везде он предо мной, Образ желанный, дорогой! Везде, везде он предо мною!'

" 'Rabe, I will not rest until I see you again. In my dreams, you are by my side.

" 'Until you are there again in truth, in Träumen immer bei Dir, Erik.’ ”

Charles’ eyes were dry as he looked over his shoulder - there were the fireplace, the chairs, the table and chess set. He couldn't settle on anything. The paper was rattling. His hands were trembling, but Erik was gone - still gone, thank fuck. No written word, however passionate, would bring him back.
Without thinking twice Charles tore the note in thirds. The paper had not all been used, so he took the blank piece. He shook the pen viciously to get the ink running.

Then, almost without thinking, he drew a raven - the wide wingspan, the strong beak, the wedge of its tail.

“Raven.” He blinked back tears. “For you.”

Something secret .... The note could be intercepted, after all. And she needed to be safe. “I’m so sorry,” Charles mumbled at the desk. A drop hit one of the discarded pieces; Erik’s words smeared.

He rubbed at his eyes. “I love you.”

And – “Oh. Of course.”

A raven for Raven. And the rhyme she taught the children.

Charles bent over the scrap. He concentrated on filling out the raven – making it black and solid against the paper’s pale weight.

Then beneath it, he wrote two lines.

9 11 10

Be safe. Charles

“She’ll know.” Charles let the pen fall, then folded the note in half. “She’ll know. Nine eleven ten.”

Did Erik the Red keep envelopes in his desk? He tried another drawer. Sure enough, Erik the Red did. Conqueror of nations, possessor of envelopes. He tucked the note inside and licked the flap –

No luck. Of course – there was sealing wax there for a reason. Charles looked at it, eyes wild. He had no candle flame and no bloody time.

Moira had said he could trust her. It looked as though he would have to do just that.

Charles shoved the envelope in his pocket and went for the knotted sheets. His blood was up, seething with adrenaline from – of all things – the last letter … No. From Frost’s lovely little communiqué. That adrenaline sent him practically flying down the sheets and sprinting down the road.

“Raven,” he chanted under his breath, willing away his experience of the awful cold. “Show me the way.”

His raven did. Luckily, the ruts in the road were only half-filled with snow, and the flurries descending did not impede him. He did have to slow to a careful walk to pass through the utter darkness of the woods. Raven watched over his every step.

“My own Finder,” Charles mumbled. For the details were from Ororo’s map – but Raven could see branches at eye level, and roots at his feet. A Finder to fly … the only explanation that he had. And all he could say to it was: “Thank you.”

And there was the black wreck of a house in front of him. Charles brushed the snow from a corner and put the knapsack down. Covered it with what felt like a damp plank of wood.

“Corner to the left of the door, beneath the plank,” he told himself, and: “Easy to find. Easy to
remember – *damn.*"

Fucking adrenaline, making him careless, making him stupid. Charles shoved the plank aside and took out the wrapped diamond. He folded the envelope, wedging it beneath pieces of the yarn wrapped round the heavy pair of socks. And then he undid the bag’s drawstrings, to place both envelope and socks inside …

There was Jean’s toy, glimmering on top of a dull sweatshirt. Charles gasped and snatched it back. He shoved pair of socks in deep, not thinking about it anymore, and tied the knapsack shut again.

He replaced the plank before he could grow too – sentimental, or stupid, or whatever the mad rush was doing to his mind. Bad enough that his hand was trembling where it clutched Jean’s toy. Charles shoved it deep into his pocket for safekeeping – if he trusted a diamond to stay there, surely he could do the same for steel and iron.

He had to run back to the manor, heart thudding at the thought of the sheets hanging down its wall, practically a banner for anyone who cared to look. And who could see in the dark.

Of the mutants who might return … he knew very well that some could do just that.

It was difficult to climb back into the library. But he had not yet regained a quarter of the weight he had lost during the Dallas campaign. So Charles scaled the wall and tugged the sheets back up after him. Shut the window, staggered backward –

– until he practically fell into the fireplace.

“And … that’s that.”

Charles gave in to his trembling as the adrenaline rush evaporated. His legs folded beneath him; he sank to the floor and clutched the sheets and blankets to himself.

What next?

There were things he could do. Remake his bed. Tidy Erik’s desk. Comb his hair – shite. Rub his scalp for luck, maybe, and brush his teeth. Set some thought-fires at the turning of West King Road, at different doors and thresholds, to wake him the instant anyone returned.

Because he ought to try sleeping a little. Maybe.

For a brief moment, though, Charles stared at the three windows – now all securely shut. He had done it. Succeeded. Now all that remained was for Moira to succeed … and at least Raven would know. Weeks down the road, maybe, depending on how long it took the letter to reach her.

A drawing of a raven, and: 9 11 10.

‘You’ll stay a secret. I love you. I’m so sorry.’

‘Be safe. Charles.’

Closing his eyes, he rested his head on his knees. He had things to do. New plans to make, other plans to see through to completion. And before another day would pass, he would speak to Frost. And surely he would see whether or not Erik had succeeded in his own plan. Perhaps he had, with Jean’s help.

Charles took off his gloves and let them fall. He took the steel wire toy out of his pocket, and tugged
at it until it was a sphere. Within it, the iron raven lay heavy and still. Charles sighed. He would see Jean again – that was some small comfort. She would smile at the toy; learn to use it quickly. Her power would do what his could not. Concealment and disguise, maps and veils ... none of them could break the bars of a cage.

He let himself stroke the little iron raven with one index finger. Then Charles cupped the fingers opposite as best as he could, curling round the steel wires. For if he could not help the bird to fly away ... at least he could hold it for a while. Safe in the palm of his hand.
Chapter 36

So, if you're still reading ... ;) Thanks for staying with me thus far. We're going to be plotty/world-buildy for a while, rather than smutty; fair warning.

All my squee to the reviewers and to those who have made moar!art for this fic. I really can't thank you enough. My special thanks to those who wrote with encouragement and e-hugs over the past several months - they've been rather rough, but hopefully Dame Fortune will be kinder in the months to come. (*warily offers DF a Box of Chocolates*)

Finally, my most fervent thanks to those without whom this wouldn't be here now: Eti, Spicy, Tahariel, I., and W.M. The beta-ing, the brainstorming, and the occasional ass-kicking mean so, so much to me. Thank you, and all my love.

All right - onward. Uh, this may have a bit of a - um ... *wince* ... cliffhanger? PLEASE DON'T KILL ME. You'll see why at the end.

The next morning Charles woke up late. His limbs felt heavy as he pulled on another layer of clothes and tugged the knit hat down to his ears. The sunlight on the flagstones looked pale and weak as he walked down to the kitchen.

He tried to stay calm and feel rested; he tried to eat and feel full – but all he could do, in the end, was stare at his plate and feel nothing but dread.

Charles kept his eyes fixed on the tea in his mug. Red-brown and steaming, warming his hands where they were wrapped round each other, his knuckles white as the ceramic. How much longer?

“I should have taken back my watch,” he muttered to himself. “But if wishes were horses …”

His stomach twisted. If wishes were horses, Charles thought bleakly, he could ride away on one. As it was, he was engaged in a horrible round of second thoughts – or by this time: fifth, sixth, seventh thoughts, all whispering: why had he stayed, why had he hesitated, why the bloody hell hadn’t he snatched the opportunity the night before, and fled?

Self-preservation, perhaps.

His fingers were not trembling, Charles told himself. It was the morning chill. And the strain of … everything.

The sapphire in its leather bag weighed heavy on his chest. It had thumped against him as he had slid down to rest on the library floor, after his dash out to the smokehouse and back. He had needed to sit for quite some time.

Even the memory of his labored breathing made him shiver. Had he run that night, fueled by nothing more than the day’s food and adrenaline, he could very well have ended up freezing to death – even with sweaters and sweatshirts and his manteau and – Albany? He wouldn’t have even made it to
Syracuse.

Or maybe he would have.

… *Maybe. Maybe not. But now you’ll never know.*

Charles forced his attention back to his power. His raven was used to coasting through the air, trailing a net as thin as gossamer – iridescent, silver …

“Come off it,” Charles hissed to himself, searching roads and woods with his mind, “it’s *my* bloody power – it’s not a net, it’s me.” *I am my own Finder.* “Do I need a bloody picture book? Did I ever?”

There was a distant cry from his raven. Charles took another sip of tea. If he pared away the nonessentials – and he was sure he could – most of the birds would go. And did he want that? They were quite clever, whisking through the manor and its environs – *you can’t see me* – but it didn’t matter if Frost did see them, did it? She knew now. She hadn’t just found out about his birds with the crystal hawk; she had known about the raven since his first night at the manor.

Perhaps he could have done with fancy *and* with hiding, in one fell swoop.

Bitterness made Charles push more power into the silver net. It rippled round the trees – found the stable and touched the sparks of the prisoners’ minds. Not for long, though. It would not do for little Ricky to find him out.

Perhaps that had been the reason he had not fled. “The fight with Moira.” He spoke to the tea; touched the sapphire in its bag. “Exhaustion, maybe.”

Neither fatigue nor resentment had kept him from helping her further, though. The previous night, Charles had sent his owl flying from where he had panted on the library floor. The bird had taken three ribbons and a compass and had found Moira’s mind with no difficulty. Nor had there been any challenge in penetrating it – the owl had flitted through the shifting blocks of concrete in the atrium’s outer walls. Those blocks had been new. *Really,* Charles had thought, vexed. *What are you playing at, Captain?*

The owl had dropped the compass and the other ribbons without a sound. The compass fixed on the smokehouse; the messages, painted silver-gold on red silk, read:

*In Oxford – Mallory Darkholme*

*In smokehouse – knapsack*

*In sock – message – don’t let anyone find it*

He had not waited for any reply.

In the kitchen, Charles bit his lip. *Don’t let anyone find it* … If Moira’s fellows, Rick especially, got their grubby hands on the note to Raven, even if it was a code … nothing good could follow. To say nothing of them nicking the diamond …

And what if the prisoners were re-captured by the EBS? Then someone from the manor would search the knapsack, and he would be found out –

Charles tried for optimism. “Moira’s an intelligence officer. She can think things through.”
But just how capable should he want her to be? *I'm in Free West Intelligence.* Why wish her well, when she supported the Free West’s mission of –

Charles finished his tea, trying not to remember Free West official announcements, scattered through the files Erik had let him read. Stryker looking calm yet concerned in the 1960s, above the slogan: *Retrieval, Resettlement, Re-education.* Then the more strident brochures, the poisonous language of paranoia – and all of it veiling what had really happened. The *experiments* –

“But she’s masquerading as a man, at great personal risk. That, if anything, indicates her struggle against injustice, surely?”

She wouldn’t approve of the Free West’s atrocities at Dallas, at St. Louis and Atlanta, at Minneapolis. She wouldn’t countenance what they had done to Logan at Alkali Lake … … would she?

“Surely not,” Charles began.

But memory intruded. *My loyalty is to the Free West and to my commander* –

“MacMurphy’s gone,” he said to an imaginary Moira, “and your precious Free West will be going with him if the White Queen has her way. Bloody hell, where is she?”

Why were they taking so long?

In the blink of an eye, Charles set a thought-fire at the turning of West King Road. *Smaller than a billiard ball* – “Sod it,” he hissed, and sent enough power into the fire to burn down the Rose in Bloom. He was still only using a small portion of his total ability; the rondel in his mind was still holding.

It hardly mattered, though, since Frost still did not come.

He could only wash a mug so many times. Far better to get up, go to the hallway and pace. He resolved to work through the aches from the climbing, the running – *from Erik,* his mind whispered – Charles slapped the thought aside. Everything had settled down into a dull throb.

Perhaps that was why he hadn’t run, he thought, pacing. A dramatic dash for freedom cut short by something as banal as cramps? No. He, Charles, would require more than that to subdue him.

Eventually.


The last was to the door set square and imposing at the end of the hallway, past Hank’s lab. Charles plucked at his token as he stared at the massive locks and bolts. What did that door hide? Perhaps something like the kitchen … but perhaps something else, something more important. It lay directly below the library, after all.

“Who cares?!” He turned to pace back. It took an effort of will to keep from opening the front door. Charles clutched the token in its bag as he walked, and gritted his teeth. Erik had left the door unlocked, trusting him … *Damn* it.

Nothing from thought-fire or net. Nothing in front of him except the same hallway, the same kitchen, the same table and benches – all the dishes tidied away, all the counters clean – he had done
everything but sweep the floor. Charles stooped to pick up a scrap of paper.

Then, blinking, he unfolded it.

A scrap, with that strong slanting handwriting: *I have left the door open for you. You promised me forever* –

“Shite.” Charles threw the note inside the stove. It curled up and burned.

“Someone would have found you most interesting,” Charles said, watching the flames, “but that same someone will have to be disappointed. And serves her right.”

Except: there had been more notes than the one turned ash. From the liquor cabinet – Charles shoved his hands into his trouser pockets. There was Jean’s toy and there was a piece of paper folded up tight.

“Off with you.” He tossed it onto the fire, waited for it to burn through, then tried to remember.

“That’s right, one more on the *desk* –”

He had torn off part of that paper to write Raven’s message. Charles made his way to the stairs, and winced at the flare of the thought-fire at the turning.

“Of course it would be now,” he hissed to himself, breaking into a jog. His power picked up sparks of minds moving in quick tandem – which surely meant bodies seated in vehicles. He had to cover all of his tracks, before everyone descended and distracted and found him out.

*Everyone.* Other people; not Erik. “Joy.”

Pausing in the library, Charles touched his knit hat. His hair …

Well. If they teased, he could always tease back.

He found the two remaining pieces of Erik’s last note, white on the dark wood of the desk, and he tossed them onto the embers in the library fireplace without a second thought.

The edges of one scrap started to curl.

“*Ich lasse mein Herz bei Dir* – ‘I leave my heart with you’. Even if it were *not* completely illogical, given that you said you were carrying *me* in your bloody heart – well, I’d hate for your passion to grow cold.” Charles felt his lips draw back from his teeth. “Enjoy the fire.”

He backed away from the fireplace and went to the window. There was the bottle of Scotch on the table – Charles considered it, distant. Only a third gone. He was losing his touch.

He checked to make sure the cap was tight; made a mental note to take the bottle to his room. Frost would be in the library soon, after all.

Charles looked out the window. The thought-fire had not lied; there were several trucks coming up the drive. And the thin net of his power felt …

He saw his palm smack the glass before he felt his hand move.

“Oh my god.”

His power had caught the spark of a single mind, angling away from several others at the road’s turning. “Heading towards the stable,” Charles said. “Fuck.”
Because if his power had a sense of smell, the mind would have reeked of blood. Victor Creed.

“No time for ribbons; sod the fancy – *Raven,*” he said, and then, “No time for you either. Just go –
go –”

– *Moira!* –

He made his call as loud as he could and aimed it at the walled-off mind. His voice pierced the
fortifications with ease. – *Moira!* –

If he had projected himself inside, whether as a knight or as that Richard Tracy person, Charles
supposed he would have seen the atrium and heard the rush of capsules through pneumatic tubes. As
it was, he only caught:

– ? –

– *He’s coming for you* – Charles sent. – *The mutant. It’s Victor Creed.* –

He winced at the sudden forceful jangle: *Sabretooth Wolverine Colossus Sunfire Northstar* –

*What the hell?* “I don’t know the code name, or whatever tripe you lot have come up with – fuck.”

– *This one* – He sent an image on the heels of his words: Victor, massive at the bonfire on the night
of victory, arms crossed over his chest. Black eyes reflecting the flames.

He felt a surge of terror from Moira’s mind.

“Buck up, Captain,” Charles spat. “You told me you had a plan – well, have another detail for it.
Here.”

– *Here* –

He didn’t stop to think about whether or not it would be possible. He had just sent an image, after all,
even if it had been from a distance – and Frost had sent memories from *Albany* of him getting fucked
through the mattress and flung into a wall. Charles twisted a message round the memory – *Jean’s
frame,* he remembered – and sent the whole to Moira as strongly as he could.

– *Go for the eyes* –

Vivid as an oil painting: Victor Creed, leaning in to whisper in the man’s ear – *Erik’s* ear. Charles
kept the name from Moira and focused on details. Long blond hair catching on a knit cap. A cigarette
falling to the snow. The man bending gracefully to retrieve it and beckoning and then the orange-red
tip gone as he stabbed the cigarette into Victor’s eye

– the scream and *the eyes* –

Jean framed things. Charles supposed his own power worked somewhat differently, for – *the eyes* –
swept over the image like a wave of varnish and then forced it into Moira’s mind. If he were there,
perhaps he would see the painting hitting the atrium’s walls at full speed and jabbing in like ten
thousand colored darts.

As it was, all he felt was a hot surge of pain.

Charles blinked. Stared at the window. “Oh.” He wiped his damp hand off on the green sweater.
“Sorry. I didn’t know it was going to do that. Moira?”
He sent – Are you all right? –

There was no response from the atrium.

Damn it. If he had accidentally knocked her out, with Victor minutes away – “I didn’t mean it,” Charles heard his voice squeak. “Really.”

There were bright pinpricks clustered around the front door, below him and to the right. Then closer – to the right and behind – then directly below him …

“Someone opened that door.” Curiosity surged. But he really should try to reach her one last time.

“Moira …” He touched her mind again, carefully.

The concrete blocks were back in place.

Charles was sure he could brush them aside with ease. “Best not to distract her, though,” he said to the window. “Well, Captain MacTaggert. Good luck.”

Good luck, he thought, as took the Scotch and walked to the library door. Good luck, to an agent of the Free West? Enough to wish her that much – he had done what he could.

Except …

Charles paused on the threshold of his room.

If whatever he had done with that painting had worked on someone with the ability – however slight – to block a telepath …

Perhaps he could have knocked out Victor Creed.

He shook his head. Who knew? Whatever defense against telepathy Moira had received could have been used up in their fight the night before.

Charles left the Scotch in his room and left off biting his lip. He straightened his sweater, made sure the token was well concealed, and forced his legs to move. He had second-guessed himself enough for one morning; he had done what he could – more than you should, part of him whispered – and Moira would have to do the rest.

There were people in the kitchen: good cheer practically pulsing through the door. Charles laid his fingertips on the handle. He supposed he could stretch out with his power, detect who it was ….

Perhaps it was the adrenaline rush from helping Moira. Or the sick dread now gripping his gut. “No more,” Charles said, and called all his power back. He didn’t want to know what was happening at the stable. And he didn’t care about Frost.

Did he care about what the others would think? Of his gaunt face, of his hair? “Or lack thereof,” he whispered to the door.

He wished he could say that he did not. But it had been so long since he had seen other people – it felt like years of being alone, being with Erik.

“Except it was only ten days.”

He sighed. Long enough to change a life? Erik’s, perhaps, the moonstruck sod. Not long enough to
change himself, or his own courage. He’d never back down, with or without witnesses.

Charles strode into the kitchen. Just an ordinary morning; nothing new, except for two people crammed in between the table and the door, and one spinning round to say:

“Happy New Year!” Alex let the words ring as he drank something – he had made a toast – but then he choked and spluttered. “Mr. Xavier?!”

“The same.” Charles raised an eyebrow. “How have you been, Alex? Would you like some coffee?”

“More like coffee and a – an all-you-can-eat buffet. Wow.”

Alex was tan, his blond hair bleached almost white. His grin had frozen on his face. Distantly, Charles noted a drop of orange juice pearling at the bottom of his chin.

There were other things in the room – the catalogue went to work. Crumbs on the counter; the remnants of a loaf of bread. The carafe of orange juice, now half empty. Charles felt a savage twist in his gut. During the first few weeks of December, not one crumb would have been wasted and he would have killed for orange juice.

But he kept his voice light. “‘Wow’ what?”

“Oh. ‘Wow,’ I almost didn’t know it was you.” Alex shook his head. “Wasn’t joking about the buffet, Mr. Xavier … Professor. You don’t look so good.”

“Free West propaganda says you guys don’t have enough to feed a cat,” a new voice drawled. “Let alone some all-you-can-eat setup.”

“Hey, ‘you guys’ are now your guys. So watch it,” Alex said with a smile.

The new man’s mouth thinned. Charles stared at him. New voice, new face …. He had dark skin and hair. Perhaps he hailed from further south? Except from what he remembered of American cinema, the accent was all wrong.

“Take a picture, Prof. It’ll last longer.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You’re staring.”

“Oh.” Charles checked on the water in the macchinetta. “Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Alex grabbed the newcomer’s arm. Charles made careful note of his flinch, and didn’t break eye contact.

“This,” Alex said, “is Armando Muñoz, fresh from Dallas, just sworn –” and indeed, there were the necklace, bracelet, ring, “And your new partner in crime, Professor.”

“What crimes will I commit, I wonder? And why are you calling me Professor – let alone ‘Prof’?” He extended a hand. “A pleasure to meet you, ah, Señor Muñoz.”

“‘Señor?’ Don’t make me laugh.” A bony hand took his, shook once, and then let go quickly. “It’s Armando.”

“Very well, Armando. Would you care for some coffee?”
Armando returned his politeness with a flat stare. “No.”

“Tea, then? Orange juice? What do they drink, where you’re from? I can’t imagine you’d be sworn if you were Free West –”

The stare turned poisonous. Alex chose that moment to jump in. “He hates the Free West as much as anybody. But Professor –”

“Mr. Xavier, I said. Really, Alex.” Charles sighed. “Why the enthusiasm?”

That manic grin, the energy vibrating from him …. Charles had certainly seen such behavior before, at Oxford, but that didn’t make it any less inappropriate. And he might have asked, Charles thought suddenly, what had happened back on the lovely home front, whilst Alex had been wreaking merry havoc in Dallas and its environs …

It seemed he had recovered from his trauma, and fast. Charles stared at him moodily. Alex had been bright as a beacon in the Finder on the battle’s first day, after weeping in the stable only the night before. Perhaps Archangel’s blood had shaved off a few I.Q. points.

“So, you’ve met Armando,” Alex said, “but now I want you to meet someone else.”

He stepped to one side, revealing a small figure on the bench behind him.

“Mr. Xavier – this is my kid brother Scott. Scott,” and Alex gently touched the child’s shoulder, “the new guy with the funny accent is Mr. Xavier.”

“I’ve never heard it called ‘funny’ before.”

“It’s not as strong as it used to be. Go on, Scott: say ‘hi’.”

Charles extended his hand again automatically. “Pleased to meet you, Scott.”

The catalogue was just as automatic. Small, slight, brown hair –

Scott did not take his hand. Charles was puzzled, until his eyes caught up with his mind and he saw the blindfold.

“Very pleased indeed.” He covered the hitch smoothly enough by moving to get mugs from the cupboard. “The only other of your age I’ve met here is Jean, but it’s always nice to have new faces, older and younger alike. Don’t you think?”

Scott must have whispered something. Alex bent his head to listen. Then:

“Yeah,” he said. “Jean’s six, so a little younger than you. Scott’s seven, almost eight,” he told Charles, “but they ought to get along all right. Scott’s polite – aren’t you, Scott??”

An amiable cuff to the head. Charles smiled faintly. Brothers …. Although, if this was the brother Alex had been so worried about back in October, why was he pleased to have him here?

Alex was still talking. “Scott has my deal with the plasma blasts, but through his eyes – so that’s why he’s got the blindfold. Right?”

A tiny nod.

“They decided to start him early anyway. And the blindfold’s only for a little while, because I told him that I got my special channel here. This.” He touched the disk on his chest. “So Scott’ll get a
special mask or goggles or something. I’m sure of it.”

One of Scott’s hands crept up to touch the disk too. It was now displayed prominently, Charles realized. Alex must have worn it beneath his sweatshirt the whole time he had acted as Monitor.

Charles watched small fingers trace the concentric circles.

“– so he gets to go to school here, with new friends and some good teachers. Maybe some can be both.” Alex elbowed Armando, who had been silent through it all. And while the former kept talking, the latter fixed Charles with another glare.

Charles raised an eyebrow.

“– he’s good at mental math, and he likes chocolate. I said he could take over for Sean, asking for it –”

“How is Sean, by the way?” Charles cut in.

“Oh.” Alex blinked. “He’s fine. Still training with Angel – not sworn yet, but I’m pretty sure he will be soon. It’s rough on him, being the only one left out of his cohort.”

“Ororo and Bobby and John …”

Alex waited for Charles’ voice to trail off. Then he smiled, unexpectedly kind. “They’re fine, Mr. Xavier. And they all say ‘hello’.”

Charles forced a smile in turn. “Jolly good.” He resisted the urge to grab the token, heavy on his neck. He placed the mugs on the table and looked down at Scott instead. “Mental math, hm?”

A small nod.

“So. If I ask you to multiply both thirty and thirty-one by two, and then add them, and then add another day – how fast could you do so? If I promised you some chocolate?”

“That’s easy,” Scott whispered.

“Well then – how fast?”

“It’s the same as thirty times four, plus three. That’s one hundred twenty-three, Mr. Xavier.”

“Very good,” Charles said.

One hundred twenty-three days, he had been here. How long for this poor child?

“Do I get some chocolate now?”

“Um.” If Erik had given him chocolate, where would he have put it? The icebox, perhaps. Charles checked it – nothing. Another cupboard? He opened one. There was a bag of sugar, a box of tea – Royal Ceylon, lovely. And there was a canister of Dutch cocoa. It seemed the drowned Netherlands, its people dispersed to Indonesia and Suriname, was still good for something.

“I could make you some hot chocolate. Would you like that?”

“Yes!”

“The way to his heart,” Alex said, smiling. “Right, Scott?”
“No, that’s –”

“Comics, yeah. For one series, his favorite, Jessie helped me make some recordings to send home when I got the chance. Special sound effects and everything.”

Scott smiled back up at his brother. Then he pointed his index fingers and made what Charles assumed was meant to be the sound of machine-gun fire.

“Dick Tracy, perhaps?”

Scott’s lip curled. “That’s Free West.”

Charles left that subject. “But did I misunderstand you, Alex? You mentioned a school – and unless you meant something different by it, I’d like to remind you that this place is a training ground, and a dangerous one at that.”

He turned to take the bottle of milk from the icebox, and so almost missed the look Armando gave him – a glare again. Really. Charles glared back. What was the difficulty? Had this Muñoz character an animus against a British accent?

Alex had bent to listen to his brother’s urgent whisper. Charles had filled the saucepan with milk halfway before the bleach-blond head came back up.

“I meant ‘school,’ Mr. Xavier. You know. Good teachers. I’m glad he’ll have you here.”

Charles blinked at the tone. And realized, belatedly, that the intense good cheer was a cover for something else.

Armando cleared his throat.

“And you, yeah. Sorry man. And you too, Logan?”

Alex had aimed that last question at the door.

Damn it.

Charles remained still, staring at the milk. All of his ability muted, so he hadn’t heard a footstep. He was having difficulty processing it: he was standing at the stove where Logan had been left to bleed out … just a week ago.

But there was Logan’s voice, calm enough. “Me being here to teach depends on a few things, kid.”

“Like New Mexico.” Alex’s voice brightened.

“Like hell on earth – oh, sorry. Like Oklahoma!” Armando mocked him.

“Keep your pants on, both of you,” Logan said. “Could be sunny Cali.”

“You’re kidding me.”

Charles turned to glance at Armando; saw how his face had tightened. “Tell me they’re not going for L.A.”

“That depends, too.” Logan’s voice was level. “Y’know what? A lot of shit depends. Except for this shit: Xavier?”
Charles had to turn back at that tone.

Logan’s eyes on his were dark.

“A word with you.”

A deep breath helped. Charles didn’t look away – Logan’s face was calm and set, and he seemed in perfect health. Or even better: tan and relatively clean, and his hair was bushier than ever.

Logan turned to leave, but shot a glance at Alex. “Hey kid, don’t –”

“ – set the place on fire, yeah, yeah.”

“No. Don’t let that milk scorch.” He cocked an eyebrow at Armando. “We don’t waste things here.”

Alex nodded, but Armando smiled thinly instead. “Except my time, Wolverine. Except my time …”

“Cute,” Logan growled as he left.

“The coffee’s finished, Alex,” Charles said, before turning to follow.

In the hallway, he stared at Logan’s back. Then Logan’s hands digging through the pockets of the leather jacket – for a cigar, presumably, Charles remembered that much – finding nothing, and shaking off grit and lint with a low curse.

Alive, he told himself, near shaking with relief. Logan was alive and well. But then: how could he ever have doubted it? Logan had treated a bullet to the brain like a mosquito bite. And here he was now, without a mark on him, leading the way to McCoy’s lab, opening the door and gesturing for Charles to go inside first.

Charles heard the door click shut, and hunched his shoulders. Logan was a friend. So perhaps he should inquire after his health. That could break the ice.

Logan had walked over to the tall lab windows; then turned to face him, brows drawn together in a fierce scowl. “Xavier –”

Charles winced. “I’m sorry.”

“ – I need to … wait. Wait. What?”

Logan was staring. Charles stared back, feeling his gut churn. God. The snap of broken bones, the smell of blood ….

He could have appeased Erik. Obeyed him and told Logan …. But he hadn’t. Charles swallowed hard. “I said that I’m –”

“I heard you.” It was a rasp. “And – no.”

Silence.

Logan shook his head doggedly. “No. You don’t say that, bub. You just – you. Aw, shit.”

And before Charles could jerk away, Logan had taken two steps forward and wrapped him in a rib-crushing hug.
“Um,” Charles said, to the jacket collar pressed against his nose. Leather. It smelled like cigars.

“Shut up,” Logan growled. “You don’t say ‘sorry’ for anything, you get me?”

“Not really. Why shouldn’t I apologize? I put you in grave danger, and only for the sake of my pride.”

“You,” a squeeze, “have nothing,” another, “absolutely nothing to be sorry about, X man.”

The name made Charles’ throat close up.

“You know why? ’Cause I can take a beat-down any day of the week. And I most emphatically do not give a shit about the loonies giving it to me.” He kept his hands clamped on Charles’ upper arms, and leaned back to stare at him. “I do give a shit about my friends. Xavier ….” His stare intensified. “What the hell happened?”

“I ….”

Charles couldn’t help it. The unrelenting grip, the glare – surely Logan didn’t mean it, but it was too similar. “Could you let go of me, please?”

Logan jerked his hands away. “Shit. Sorry. Here I am all Touchy McSqueeze, and I forgot that …. I’m sorry, Charles.”

Charles stared. Logan looked almost … lost. Or it could have been something else in his eyes; dark and haunted.

The expression did not suit him. Nor did the softer tone of: “Are you all right?”

“Don’t you dare feel sorry for me, Logan.”

“I’m not that kind of sorry. I’m sorry for what happened.”

“I’m pretty sure those are the same kind –”

“Well I’m pretty sure they’re different.”

“And did you receive a dictionary for Fourth Quarter Gift? Here I thought you hadn’t mastered the alphabet yet.”

Logan’s shoulders tightened. Charles could practically see his mind working: considering the reaction, putting it away. Damn it. Even in late October, that sarcasm would have gotten him a friendly punch.

Charles swallowed. “Don’t treat me differently now. Please.”

In silence, Logan stared at him. “You sure you’re O.K., though, X?”

“I doubt either one of us is ‘O.K.’, but I made choices for myself, and I am not a delicate, now-despoiled British flower. So please don’t treat me any differently than you did before.”

“Yeah? You sure?”

“I’ll make you a deal. If I ever want tea and sympathy, I’ll ask you for your whiskey and sympathy. In the meantime, I’ve done my very best to change the subject by insulting your intelligence. Please don’t make me actually believe you so very dull.”
“Nice speech.”

For a moment, it seemed as though Logan was about to fling back sarcasm of his own. But then he fell silent again.

_Come on_, Charles thought. _Back to normal. Please._

Sympathy. _Pity_. One more hug and he just might fall apart.

He heard a long sigh. “Fine.” Logan jammed his hands into his pockets. And there was the usual attitude back, put on like another leather jacket. “Just get one thing straight, X. I don’t need any goddammned dictionary to ameliorate,” he enunciated carefully, “my vocabulary.”

Charles pursed his lips and started a slow clap.

“Fuck you, Xavier – shit, I mean –”

“Up your arse. Not a fragile flower here.”

“Never said you were. Well.” Logan cleared his throat. “So. Long time no see.”

“Indeed.” Charles tried smiling. “Thank you for the would-be Christmas present.”

“De nada. It’s a crying shame it got left in the kitchen. I got teleported back to Texas and I’m pretty sure that Lover Boy grabbed it and got his crazy ass drunk as a skunk – hey …” Logan frowned at Charles’ flinch. “You said, ‘no different than before.’ So. Jokes in bad taste still O.K., or not?”

“It’s fine.” And it _was_ Charles thought, gritting his teeth. “You just surprised me with that particular epithet.”


“I’m suddenly grateful for ‘X man.’”

“There’s still ‘Chuck.’”

“No.”

“Chuckles?”

“No – damn,” Charles sighed, “can we just leave well enough alone for now?”

“I guess, although it’s fun to see you twitch a bit, Charlie boy –” Logan’s head whipped round before he could finish his thought. “Shit.” His nostrils flared. “Hank’s coming.”

“He doesn’t know of my, ah, situation, does he?”

“Not unless Frost told him.”

“What? When would she have done that?”

“Long story. Short of it is: I’ve got a bit of a bone to pick with our mutual friend.”

“What do you mean?”

The door swung open, and McCoy stepped inside. “Mr. Xavier! I was just about to look for you. I
hadn’t thought to find you here …”

He trailed off when faced with Logan’s glare. “Frosty’s back, then?”

“Our lady waits in the library.” McCoy turned stiffly to Charles. “And she wants to speak with
you.”

“She did tell me noon. I hadn’t intended to be late. I –”

“It’s all right. She just asked if you could come more quickly.”

Charles looked carefully at McCoy, then at Logan again. Neither seemed to have picked up on the
double entendre. A joke, then, but ….

The room had a strange charge – as though the Finder were hovering over it, cold and malevolent.
He spared a quick flicker of power to check. The Finder was dormant. But the spark flitted against
the icy facets of another presence in the library; brought him up short – shite. Charles yanked his
power back to himself in the blink of an eye.

*Oh god.* He hadn’t even felt her return. His raven hadn’t felt it, which meant –

Charles took a calming breath. The only reason he had not felt Frost’s presence was that he had not
been keeping watch with his power; otherwise he would have detected her for certain. And Frost had
not reacted to his mental touch, just now. Perhaps she was content to watch him sweat.

He could not feel her observing him, though …. Had she simply not noticed?

“Sure he can come.” Logan stepped into McCoy’s space. “No trouble at all. But I’ll bring him – and
you go on up, bub, and tell her Frostiness that he’ll be there in a sec.”

“I have to bring him, Logan.”

“Well, then I get to come along. In the meantime, what do you think? You think you can spare a
minute or two to ask him how he’s doing? ‘Hi, Mr. Xavier.’ ‘Oh, *hello*, Mr. McCoy – fancy a spot
of tea?’”

Charles’ lips twitched at his clumsy accent.

“‘I just happen to have a special blend brought all the way from Oxford.’ ‘Really?’ ‘Yes! It’s a
combination of ‘Nice to See You’ and ‘Even Though You Don’t Give a Shit.’’”

“May we just go?” McCoy’s voice was faint. “Please?”

“Of course. Tea break later, perhaps.” Charles raised an eyebrow at Logan, who scowled. “Come
on. You too, Wolverine.”

“Now who told you that, *Professor*?”

Logan jibed at him the entire walk to the library. All too soon they were at the door. And if he
thought the other two had walked off their disagreement, he was disabused by Logan’s mock-
cheerful voice.

“So, Hank, you go in and *announce* us. Bow’n’scrape – it’s what you’re best at, right?”

McCoy flinched, but opened the door and stepped through.
“Logan,” Charles said, “what on earth –”

A strong grip took his upper arm. “Shut up and listen, double-quick.”

He stared. Logan’s features had tightened strangely. Focused on him.

“Be careful. Be so fucking careful in there, X man. She could go either way, and I want you to come out of it with a teaching gig, not a full frontal lobotomy.”

“I –”

“Listen.” Dark eyes burned. “Jean told me to tell you: don’t worry.”

Charles’ breath caught.

“Don’t know what she’s talking about, but I think you should worry. Worry about her turning your brain to mush, because Charles …. I needed to tell you. I felt it.” Logan leaned in close, his voice hot in Charles’ ear. “You’re stronger than she is.”

“Than Jean?”

“No. Than Frost.”

Charles stared.

“Believe me,” Logan growled. “I know it.”

“How?”

“Just believe me – yeah, still here and waiting,” he said over Charles’ shoulder. “Red carpet all rolled out?”

Charles turned slowly. There was McCoy, easing out around the massive door of oak and iron, looking as nervous as he himself felt.

“Mr. Xavier.” Shoulders hunched. “Our lady will see you now.”

“Very well,” Charles said, and didn’t dare look back at Logan as he left him in the hallway. He stared down instead.

Only then did he remember: the token was a visible lump beneath his sweater.

He whisked it off and tucked it into his pocket – his fingers brushed Jean’s toy – without McCoy noticing, and with only a second to spare. For as the door opened, Frost turned her face towards them. And smiled.

Hank closed the door, leaving them alone together.

The one good thing about his work with the Finder, Charles thought … and one positive result of ten days spent wrangling Erik … was that he did not even have to remind himself to veil anymore. It was ingrained. No further need for ritual words.

It was one of a piece with the realization that he could call his power just that: power. Birds, though pretty, were just symbols. Just like the image of an iridescent veil. Lovely to look at; not completely necessary ….
He heard a distant clack of beak from his raven. Charles forced calm on himself and met Frost’s cool stare with a carefully blank look of his own.

“Good morning, Mr. Xavier.”

“Good morning, my lady.”

Her smile deepened.

Had that been wrong? Charles thought quickly – but: no. She had asked him to use the honorific just the night previous. No. It would seem she was just …

… Happy? That he had used it?

He felt a wave of dizziness. Frost looked the same as she ever had. Lovelier, if anything. Her hair still gleamed white-blonde. Her lips looked soft and pink. And she was wearing a pristine white skirt. A short one.

The diamonds stitched onto her slippers winked in the light. Charles dragged his eyes away from them: up and away from her silk stockings, a pale contrast to the chair’s upholstery and carved teak legs; up and away from where the stockings vanished beneath the skirt’s hem –

Charles gave himself a mental shake. Ten days of bearing the brunt of Erik’s desire – of course it meant that he would see sex everywhere. With enough time to dull the memories he would be back to normal, surely?

The library was rather uncomfortably warm. Frost had tossed a cape edged in fur on the low couch – the white formed a lovely contrast with the red velvet. Since the fire had burned to ash, the thermostat had to be on. Small details. Frost’s fingernails were polished, and her hands were still.

What the hell did she want?

_Humiliation_, his mind whispered. Post-traumatic stress, tears, perhaps even begging. Charles supposed he could oblige, if only to make everything convincing – not that difficult, since she would start gloating next, surely. Predictable as she was.

“And you, Mr. Xavier? Do I find you well? Probably not fully recovered,” Frost lingered on the word. “Otherwise you would remove your hat in a lady’s presence. Such a shame, to have forgotten your Oxonian courtesy.”

_No_ – the shame was that he was giving courtesy to a sadist who merited none. Charles reached up and tugged off his knit hat. For all the room’s warmth, the air was chilly on his scalp.

“Oh …”

A quiet sound. Sympathy? _Satisfaction_? Whatever the hell it was, it made his skin crawl.

“Oh, Charles. What happened?”

“I wanted a change.”

“But such a drastic one, my dear. And after we had arranged it so beautifully.”

Charles kept his face blank. “I didn’t like it.”

“Ah.”
Silence stretched.

*Here it comes,* his mind whispered. Charles kept his breathing even. Surely she would not want to wait longer. Too impatient to see his pain –

And sure enough: he felt an icy touch brush his mind. He flinched.

“Charles. Show me some additional courtesy, please. I have something for you.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Oh, I insist. Open your thoughts to mine. I promise I will not come in. Just please: take this lovely memory from me. I would not keep it all to myself.”

Lovely memory? If the cold, pulsing clot of a thought hovering at the edge of his mind were lovely, then he, Charles, was the King of Britain.

“Why do I sense that I have this memory already?”

“Because you do have it. But not from this perspective.”

The cold was intensifying. *Fine.* Let her think that he had given way. Shivering, Charles deliberately created an opening in the shields – felt ice cluster round it and something warmer ooze through –

– the salt of sweat on his lips, the delicious ache in his biceps and legs – and his right hip sending up a sharp stab of pain as he shoved forward *hard* into an unimaginably tight heat and rasped – *say you want me to come in* you –

“Oh, god.”

Charles clapped a hand over his mouth. Theatrics, certainly, but perhaps a fraction of genuine surprise – for it was Erik’s memory. No surprise, then: the *want* seething through it at full boil.

His knees genuinely felt watery, so it was no hardship to sink to the floor and pretend to be choking back sickness. Especially as the memory gave him the sensation of clawing through sweaty strands of hair – thrust and *yank* and a different flavor of sweat as he bit down hard on the nape of neck at his mouth –

“Fuck,” he mumbled into his palm.

“Precisely,” Frost purred. “To think of you cutting off your hair …. My prince was so taken with it. He would be terribly disappointed to see it as it is now.”

Charles flung a spark of power towards her touch. Not too much – just enough to make her withdraw the memory. *Good.* Because with her only looking at him, smiling coldly, Charles had the privacy to realize, before hiding the thought …

She had not seen the memory of his haircut. And that was a good thing.

Still on his knees, he let Frost see his shoulders quivering. Let her think that she had won, the *bitch.* Even when she –

“Wait.” His skin prickled. “What are you –”

“Do you see it?”
“No.”

“Don’t fight me.” A similar cold clot, bumping against where she had previously slipped through the veils. “Just relax.”

“God, why?”

“I feel as though I know you rather more intimately now, Charles. I should like to share that feeling with you. Let me in. Relax …. And watch.”

Charles watched.

It was horribly disorienting to see his own face swim into view. Pale and …

– schön – du bist schön –

And ‘beautiful,’ it seemed.

Charles swallowed hard. The memory was framed by the mental whisper: schön – cheekbones jutting, hair damp with sweat at the temples and falling in long strands past shoulders glimmering white in the dark ….

Erik’s senses again, obviously – including what he had felt. Sweat trickling down his chest, heart pounding too fast, and … the hot clutch at his cock so new. And more of what Erik had seen: Charles’ head falling forward, a glimpse of lower lip bitten red, and – of all things – long eyelashes sticking in wet tags to his skin. Touch, sight – taste. Erik leaning just slightly into one of the hands cupping his jaw, licking at the wrist –

Charles realized it was his own wrist, bone clearly visible beneath skin. He hadn’t felt that lick. He had been focused on the hurt and the smothering heat – on other things …

But Erik had been focused on – taste. One lick. Then another. Salt. And then a wave of dizziness: the heat clenched round his cock tightening somehow, and surely he would faint, fall over and die – gasping for air, and everywhere the gorgeous scent of roses …

“No –” Charles hit out at Frost again. Not very strongly, which was just as well. His could not speak for his fine control. It was only when Erik’s memory had evaporated that he felt he could form words again. “Stop.”

“Ah, but did you sense that? Infatuation, Charles – don’t you find it flattering? One more.”

He looked up at her from his position on the floor, head swimming. She had the same slight smile – but an avid expression in her eyes, now. Cruelty.

But she hadn’t seen something crucial in the memory, Charles realized. Namely: that he had not been wearing the diamond choker. Or the chain.

“Here, my dear boy.”

“Please, don’t –”

Let her think him broken. It wasn’t that difficult to shudder and let a tear fall. In a way, it was a relief.

“Shh. Here.”
The third memory felt different, instantly. His own face again – but red lips parted, blue eyes shining. The fall of his hair, Oxford-length, dark and beautiful against folds of white cloth edged with lace. And then the image rippling as though in a heat wave, and the sudden fullness, everything slick, that he remembered so well from his last night with Erik. He felt a thrust up inside him – but it was himself, below. What the hell was –

A new image slammed down quickly enough to give him whiplash.

Himself, tears tracking through blood on his face, hands caught high above his body and bound with metal, and firelight edging all the different shades of red in gold. The viewpoint had to be Erik’s again. Panting for breath, and then snarling as he started to thrust hard and fast. That same heat on his cock, the same sweat on his lips – heart racing and lust in him like a drug – everything slippery, easy –

“That’s wrong,” Charles croaked.

“I’m so terribly sorry. With all that chivalry rattling round in his head, I thought he might eventually be more polite – oh my.”

For in the memory, the diamond choker was brushing the underside of Charles’ jaw as it tipped back. And it tipped because Erik had changed the angle: manhandling bony legs to lift them, thrusting faster. Watching Charles writhe, face twisted into a white rictus – caught between metal and Erik’s cock –

But none of that had happened.

Wrong, Charles thought again – secretly. He had never worn that choker during sex. Unless one counted Erik trying to suck him off, which Charles didn’t. For that matter, Erik had never fucked him in front of the fireplace. Hadn’t touched him, after Charles had named the impending rape for what it was.

Which meant that it had to be a fantasy.

That didn’t make it any easier to experience. Erik had wanted this – had wanted to pin Charles with metal and plough him until he screamed – because in the fantasy he was doing just that.

“Chivalry? He seems to have missed a few key points. But then, I always assumed that you gave him his lessons, lady, and that you would say whatever was most convenient for your purposes.”

“How rude, to assume such a thing.”

A far-off part of his mind catalogued: she was staring into the fire, her face smooth as porcelain.

“I believe it is Archangel who tells him all the stories …. Which makes sense, given the amount of time my dear prince spends in the medical tent during campaigns ….”

Frost stopped, and drew in a careful breath. Charles didn’t know why.

Then he realized: in the fantasy, one of Erik’s hands hovered over the choker. Slender fingers flexed, and the diamonds on their wires uncoiled from their place round Charles’ thin neck. Another gesture sent them slithering down his bony chest.

And there they made patterns in the blood.

“So that’s when he took it off,” Frost murmured. “I had wondered.”
Charles swallowed a dry heave. “Please stop.”

There was a pause.

“Very well.”

The fantasy dissolved, and Charles was left staring at the White Queen’s slippers. Did she know the difference between Erik’s true memories and fantasy? Possibly she didn’t know. She wouldn’t look so satisfied if she knew. Would she?

“Would you like to see more, Charles?”

“No.”

“No, my lady,” she corrected in a gentle voice.

“No, my lady.”

_Humiliation_. He felt the sting of it, but then remembered … _You’re stronger than she is_. Logan’s words; not his own vanity. Were they thus more likely to be true?

He saw, as though from a distance, Frost stretching out a hand towards him.

“Poor thing …”

Charles flinched at the cool touch of fingers on his scalp.

“Poor Charles. Have you learned your lesson, I wonder?”

“You never told me what my lesson bloody well was. So how can I say I’ve learned it?”

“An excellent question, Mr. Xavier. You have been quite a recalcitrant student thus far. Imagine my frustration.”

The fingers left. Cautiously, Charles looked up. Frost shifted, reached into the chair’s shadow and picked up a scarlet dossier - one he remembered. He watched her fingers undoing the string binding, loop after loop; then the grace of each slight movement as she opened the dossier and took out papers – rather more of them than had been there in September.

Frost started flicking through them, and then paused to crook one finger. “Come closer.”

Charles shifted his weight, brought up one foot –

“Ah, ah. On your knees.”

_Bloody fucking hell…_ Charles glared at the floor, and obeyed. He stopped at the side of the chair. Focused on its carved feet, on the carpet, on anything but –

“Good,” Frost murmured, touching him again. She stroked the stubble of his hair with her palm; then flipped her hand to run her manicured nails along the same path. The sensation crept down his spine like a spider. So many touches over the past ten days. Erik’s strong hands and curiously slender fingers. The tension of corded muscle pressed against Charles’ back; the wet urgency of Erik’s mouth; the heat of his cock –

But Logan had been the last to touch him. Charles brought all his focus to that fact. A hug. Nothing sexual; nothing … against his will.
Frost ran a thumb over his brow. Charles gritted his teeth.


Charles blinked. There hadn’t been any backmatter in September. *Shite.*

“Does somebody wish to know something?”

“Appendix B – what’s in it? And what’s in A?”

Frost tapped a finger.

Charles said through clenched teeth: “My lady.”

“How interesting that you should ask, Charles.”

She turned over page after page with her free hand, keeping the other resting on his head. “This is a miscellany. Our I.Q. tests; Hank’s reports matched against the surveillance transcripts; Logan’s reports; oh, goodness. This,” she held up a flimsy sheet of paper, “should not be here. I have a separate folder for Finder readouts.”

“And that,” Charles said, “is all appendix, is it? Lady?”

“Hardly. Everyone’s record is always expanding.” Frost turned over the rest of the paper. “Ah. Here.”

She held up a heavy piece of stationary: colored light cream, with a raised seal at the top. Charles squinted at it, but it was none he recognized. The paper was covered in lovely copperplate.

“Appendix A is always a personal record of mine. Yours begins on September first, of course, but more relevant to our discussion is: ‘13 September 1969. Hostile contact upon removal from solitary confinement. Sustained for four minutes.’ … And then some more that you don’t need to know. Let me see. ‘15 September, morning. Excision – Alex Summers’ memory, approximately sixty seconds. Detected at afternoon behavioral session; see A.S. Appendix F.’”

“Behavioral session?”

“Never mind that. On 23 September, you broke curfew to go to the library. And after receiving your Quarter Gift as well – *tsk.* I understand that my prince injured you severely.”

It made sense, Charles thought, frantically. She would have wanted to know why he had been taken to the infirmary the next day. “Have you so little control over him, then?”

“This library is his domain.” She was reading the rest of the list with mild interest. “He’s rather attached to it. You didn’t touch the chess set, did you?” Frost tipped her chin at the metal board and pieces. “He hates it when strangers do that.”

“Why?”

“So many questions. I do not rightly know – he made it as a gift for me, our first winter here. Sentiment, perhaps.” An easy shrug. “On 5 October, of course –”

“I have a question, please.” Charles kept his voice quiet. Oxonian courtesy? He’d ladle it on like treacle. “Lady Frost.”
“Continue.”

“Is there anything besides your catalogue of my offenses in Appendix A?”

“No.” One finely plucked eyebrow went up. “Am I boring you, Charles?”

“Not at all, your ladyship.”

“Goodness. There’s courtesy and then there’s archaic tripe. Dispense with the latter, please, however naturally it may come to you.”

She was one to talk, with all the nonsense of courtly love she had drilled into Erik’s head – except she hadn’t, it seemed. Archangel? He almost smiled, despite everything, at the image of a wide-eyed Erik receiving purple blood and purple prose from the same source.

“You might find Appendix B more interesting. It is a record of our interactions,” Frost flicked out another paper, “with Elizabeth and her court. The frequency increased in mid-December. I had little time to deal with them then, but rather more while I was in Mexico.”

Elizabeth? Who was – and then Charles realized in shock: Britain’s Queen. It appeared the two were on a first-name basis.

“Interactions?” He focused on the positives. Frost hadn’t seen Erik’s memory of the library, the apples and papers … the letter. “Of – what sort? My lady.”

“They find your recruitment a violation of the treaty they have with us – a clause restricting me to obtaining those twenty-one and younger. And they had to choose this time to fuss about it.”

“… This time?”

“Yes. You would not have heard of the incident – one Christopher Maddox, three years ago. He was twenty-four, and his mutation manifested in a surprising way. Though his village seemed happy enough with its compensation, I gather that Elizabeth found out about it eventually.” Frost shrugged. “There were no ensuing complications that time.”

“Christopher Maddox,” Charles forced out.

“You have met him before, I think. His ability, though limited, makes him an excellent technician for the Finder. A sensitivity to different types of electrical current; nothing strong enough to be used in the field –”

As she kept talking. Charles tried to remember. His lips felt numb. Christopher – would it have been a Chris? A surprising mutation? And: there – a flash of memory: Christopher will show you to the showers - a technician; feathers all over his face.

Someone else from Britain, he thought, grinding his teeth. Watching him get put through the god damned wringer, even if he watched with one yellow eye and one brown. Why the hell hadn’t that Christopher said anything? Had he even cared?

“ – and then of course Elizabeth Braddock, but that was at Cambridge and rather earlier. So you see, Charles, you have caused me a good deal of trouble. Directly,” she touched the first heavy sheet of paper, “and indirectly,” she touched the second. “Nothing I could not deal with, of course, but it has taken up valuable time. More than that … it saddened me.”

Charles stared at her.
"I prefer subtlety in my methods of discipline. But your repeated intransigence forced me to a drastic solution."

She held up a third paper with her free hand.

"Appendix C. The record of that solution. The gift of my Prince – Fourth Quarter, 1969."

Matter-of-fact, she placed the paper back in the dossier, and set the whole on the table next to her. Red leather brushed the silver and black of the chess set. Charles stared in a daze. It reminded him of something –

"Now, while the general thrust of that gift cannot have been that difficult to grasp, Charles, its implications for the future may have passed you by."

He fought not to choke. "For the future, my lady?"

"The most important lesson; the foundation on which we shall build. Namely: you must not disobey your Queen."

Charles stared at her. Did she really think –

"I am that queen now. Elizabeth Regina; nonsense. She’s growing thick in the middle and thicker in the head with every passing year. I make a far better queen for you. Don’t I?"

Charles reined in his hysterical snicker. "My lady, that is debatable."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I only mean to say, that. That any reigning monarch surely has the good of her subjects at heart. And I cannot see any good in your – giving me to a rapist, and then picking out the choicest memories of that rapist, and then –" Charles’ voice cracked – "showing me – god –"

There were some tears. *What to do?*

She would want to see them, of course. Charles felt one run down his face. Then another, and another.

And sure enough: Charles saw Frost’s eyes glow and her lips part, before he buried his face in his hands.

She must have leaned closer, for her breath was warm on his brow; warmer than her hand on his head. He heard her make a small noise in the back of her throat.

"Poor Professor. Poor Charles … There, there."

Frost started … *god*. She was petting him: soothing strokes, tracing the contours of his skull.

"In the first place: your Elizabeth gives all of her mutants to me. She claims it is for the good of her subjects – and thus, you see, she considers her subjects to be only the humans under her rule. Inexcusable. But I am happy to offer any of our kind a home."

"I had a home –"

"Where you taught, and taught well – and now you’ve had a lesson, Charles.” Her voice was gentle. "You must not disobey your Queen. Every time you disobey, she has to punish you – and every time, more and more thoroughly. Do I make myself clear?"
“Yes.”

“My lady.”

“Yes, my lady,” he gulped, “forgive me. It’s – new, is all.”

“As you were new to my prince … Ah, Charles …”

Her hand left his head. Charles dared look up.

Frost had leaned back in her chair, with a soft smile. “Charles … He was so taken with you. Is taken with you. Look here.”

She reached into her suit jacket, took something out of a pocket, and held it out to him between two manicured fingernails.

It was scrap of paper.

Fear choked him, hot and nauseating. For there was a long line of blocky Russian script on the paper, seared round three edges and heavily charred on the fourth. So the rest of that third of the note had burned up, but still –

“What is it, my lady?”

“It’s a quotation from Pushkin - or, at least, from Tchaikovsky or some toady butchering Pushkin for sugarplum music. *Eugene Onegin*. ‘Vezde, vezde on predo mnoj, obraz zhelannyj, dorogoj - vezde, vezde on predo mnoju.’ Which is to say: ‘Everywhere, everywhere I look I see that beloved, desired image - everywhere, everywhere I see her.’ One side of her smile curled higher. “Or ‘him’, in this case.”

“But who wrote –”

“My prince, of course. Would you believe that he once enjoyed opera, Charles? He must still have a copy of that libretto somewhere here …” She gazed round the library. Then her eyes slid back to him, glittering. ”And then he began a love letter and could not see it through, the poor dear. The poor, nameless dear. Should you like to know his name?”

*Thank god.* She hadn’t seen that he knew it already. That Erik had given a name for – himself. – *You must promise to stay here forever* –

“No,” he whispered. “I don’t want to know his name.”

“Anonymous, he is no less real, Charles. You can put him on a shelf with the rest of your carnal exploits or you can try to deny that it ever happened, for all I care. That does not change the fact that Erik Lehnsherr – my own dear son – was the one to make love to you this long while.” A pause. “In his fashion.”

“Erik Lehnsherr.”

“Yes. Or Max Eisenhardt, but I preferred Erik. Closer to my own name.”

“Erika?”

A low laugh. “Such cheek.” Frost – fucking *patted* his. Not much flesh; just a cheekbone – too much to hope she would cut herself, the bitch –
“Is he really your son, Lady Frost?”

“Goodness. How old do you think I am?”

“I never dared guess.”

“Hm.” Frost considered. “In the biological sense? No, he is not. Erik is three years and seven months younger than I. But I feel that I am his guardian by now, Charles, after so many years together. A guardian and a guide.”

“Perhaps you could have guided him in sexual matters yourself. Lady.”

“Oh, I had better things to do. It was enough to give you both my blessing and be on my way. What an adorable pair of children, the two of you by the fire …”

“Children?” I was raped – do you arrange for other children to be –”

“I punished you the way I did when I saw that nothing else could penetrate that stupidity of yours. All you had to do was obey me, Charles. And you did not.”

“Perhaps,” he spat, “if I had known that you would give me to your precious – Erik – I would have. Obeyed you. I didn’t know.” It was easy enough to let his voice skirl upwards. “If I had known – if. I don’t – I can’t –”

He couldn’t breathe. She gave him no time to recover.

“Charles …” The White Queen bent forward. “Now you do know. How I thought to punish you, and how I will punish you in future.”

It was also easy to stare at her as though petrified. “What?”

“All I have to do, Charles, is say the word. He will guard dear Jean in Brussels, and then I shall send him back to the war. But all I have to do is give him permission … and he will take you away from here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Such naivety ill becomes you, Professor Xavier. What do you think I mean? Persist in this defiance – disobey or deceive me again, and I shall truss you up and give you to Erik. And he shall take you to wherever my army is encamped, and every single individual in that army will hear, every night, just how much he delights in your lovely,” a finger landed on his jaw, “lovely flesh.”

She pushed his face to the side. Charles felt the sting of a fingernail cutting him.

“I shall have to make sure you eat well. He seemed concerned about that, of all things. How did you persuade him to heal you, after your little tryst in front of the fireplace?”

“I sucked him off,” he lied.

“With a broken jaw?”

“It was only bruised.”

“Mm.” Frost shifted in her seat. “These men and their vanity …. Take my own dear Sebastian. He claimed it as a proper homage to his greatness. Rest in peace. Did Erik tell you about Sebastian, Charles?”
“Who?”

“Good. Now, the question remains: how were you healed?”

“Archangel’s blood,” he croaked. Another part of the truth. “He – Erik had some. And he let me have it –”

“Yes, indeed. He wants you kept safe, my dear. He wants you healthy and somewhat more whole … just so he can fuck you again. And again, and again. Some happy day.”

Time to play the part to the hilt.

“Please,” he whispered.

Frost cocked her head. “‘Please’ what?”

“My lady. Please don’t do this.”


Charles lurched forward on his knees, and grabbed at one of her ankles. “Don’t let him - don’t let him hurt me again. Please. I’m begging you.” Now for more tears. Easy enough. “Don’t let him touch me.”

“Poor Charles. Poor, dear Charles. He enjoyed it so. That first night, you –”

“He hurt me.”

“He does seem to have acquired a taste for it.”

“Please,” Charles could only whisper. “Please. I’ll do anything.”

A pause.

Then: “Really?”

His chin fell to his chest. Hopefully she would consider it a nod.

“My dear boy – I didn’t hear you.”


Take the bait.

Silence stretched. Charles bit the inside of his cheek, hard. Had he projected that thought by accident? Would Frost see through the deception, through the tears – straight down to his unwillingness, ever, to give in?

“Really, Charles …”

Oh god –

“… I’m so pleased to hear that.”

– Yes.

He had to stay calm. In control – she can’t see she can’t – even though his breath was whistling in
his throat and his pulse sloshing in his ears. Erik would feel his blood, were he there. But he wasn’t. And now none other than the White Queen had lost the touch of the truth – had no idea he was still deceiving her …

… had she?

He looked up. Frost was still staring down at him. Charles tried a loud, wet sniff, and scrubbed at his eyes.

A flick of her fingers, and a lacy handkerchief was dabbing at his tears.

“I knew you could be reasonable, Charles.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Just as I can be reasonable. Truthfully, it pained me to see you reduced to a child … and then to chattel. Such a waste of your remarkable abilities.” She kept wiping his face in gentle strokes. “I would have you give your gifts to our cause, Charles – not relinquish them through force alone. Do you think it pleases me, to watch the Finder maul you? Agony in the mind …. That was what I experienced when first put to it.” She pressed the handkerchief down into one of his hands. “I know how painful it is.”

Truth. Charles carefully lined up pain and overwhelming fear, and let them start trickling past his defenses. He would flavor the outmost part of his mind with them; with any luck, Frost would take one glance and think –

“There’s no need to fear anything. As long as you do as I command. Always. Charles: do you agree?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Think it through,” she urged him, kindly, placing a hand on his head again. “I would not have you deciding anything rash on such short notice.”

“No, my lady. Please don’t let him. Don’t let. Him.”

“I won’t. Hush, now. Shh …”

For a long moment, she was silent. The only sound in the room was the slight rasp of her palm caressing his scalp.

Then she spoke again.

“You can be so much more to me, Charles, than a source for the Finder. I could not offer you anything before, since I could not trust you. But now that you know what the consequences are, should you fail to obey, what would you say to more responsibility? Duties that appeal to your interests, and that use the best of your abilities?”

“My lady. I would say: as my lady wishes.”

He held up the handkerchief. She patted his head. “Keep it.”

Obediently, Charles shoved the scrap of fabric into a pocket. His fingers brushed Erik’s token; he shivered.

“Goodness.” Another gentle pat. “You may need to lie down soon, Charles. Or calm yourself
“somehow. Ah – why don’t you give me my cape?”

Charles fumbled for it, not rising from his knees. The satin and fur, trailing slippery and heavy off the couch, made an awkward handful. But he gave it to Frost – and then watched in a daze as she winked at him and fished a flask out of a hidden pocket.

“Here. Have a drink.”

“What is it?” He took it from her outstretched hand. “My lady.”

A tsk. “It is my first order of the year, Charles. Drink up.”

In for a penny. Charles obeyed, and immediately started coughing. It was an exceptionally strong vodka.

“Very good. My turn.”

And there was a sight any Free West propagandist would love to see: the White Queen taking a hearty swig of vodka without batting an eyelash. She wrinkled her nose and cleared her throat delicately. “Bozhye moy. Lovely, don’t you think?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Have some more.”

Frost pressed the flask on him, then watched intently as he drank again. Charles studied the intricate designs on the flask, not meeting her eyes. The gold inlay on silver could have been Scythian … Stylized trees; running deer. Bizarre monsters pulling down a lion in a hunt, in a strange reversal of fortune.

Anyone else would have let a third pull of vodka go straight to his head. Charles only felt slightly dizzy. Still cognizant enough to realize, for example, that the metalwork was none of Erik’s making. He could not say how he knew …. Instinct, perhaps.

“Feeling better?”

There was a strange undercurrent to Frost’s voice. She probably hoped to get him drunk enough to be off his guard. Or to agree to anything she said.

Charles shook his head slightly; made to return the flask. “Quite.”

“Oh, I don’t need any more. You enjoy it.” She tilted her head to one side – a lock of her hair brushed down the graceful line of her neck. “Now. More responsibility. Additional duties making better use of your talents; even a tutoring session or two – or more – with me, Charles. What do you say to that?”

“To learn to use my ability? Lady?”

“Indeed. But only if I can be certain that I may trust you. It will take some time to prove yourself in that sense, although I’m sure you will be on your best behavior, given that the punishment is my Prince. Hm?”

Charles jerked his head in a nod.

“And as for other duties – the new Monitor will be able to restrain you for me.”
“Would that be Armando Muñoz, Lady Frost?”

“The same. You’ve met?”

“In the kitchen.” Charles tried to tip his head in that direction; almost lost his balance. “Just now.”

And really – that sullen young man, fit to restrain him? Charles Xavier? Ha. He would like to see him try.

But that could wait. Rebellion; escape –

His dizziness increased. Charles fought not to remember missed chances, foiled attempts. Did not even consider the surge of tired contempt that enveloped his mind. He checked. Not from Frost. From himself, about himself. All of his cleverness, all of his plans – and all they did was land him in Erik’s lap …

But their last bargain …

Charles carefully put that thought away.

“Are you listening to me?”

Charles hiccupped. God, that vodka had been strong. “Forgive me – I was – ah. Thinking.”

“And thus missing the first of your new duties. Dear me.” Frost leaned back into her chair, relaxing. “But you certainly won’t be inebriated tomorrow morning. When you will be …”

“What?”

“Not quite a Monitor, I’m afraid. You are not yet Sworn, Charles.” She touched the steel ring on the middle finger of her right hand. The same as the bracelet and necklace – diamonds glinting from all of them.

“Why wear those?” he said, before he could stop himself.

“Pardon me?”

“The man – Erik.” Charles pretended to force the name out. “Surely those are for him to be able to … track people, and to hurt them. So why do you wear them, when you’re the one holding the leash?”

“Surely you have seen that my prince has my token, Charles,” Frost murmured. “I thought it only courteous to wear his. It helped that he was considerate enough to place these jewels in them for me.” She held out her hands and smiled, admiring the light playing over diamonds and steel. “Why not wear them, if doing so makes him happy? The little dear.”

He could not hold back his snort. It turned into a cough, and brought with it the acrid bite of vodka.

Frost’s smile turned arch. “Or – not so little. What say you?”

“I say: how very elegant, my lady.” Charles took another drink of vodka – finished it, damn. He watched his hands tremble as he put the cap back on the flask. “I have not heard such wit since I left off teaching the first form.”

“Now, now. I will permit sarcasm from you occasionally, Charles, but only when we are in private. Do you understand?”
He nodded.

“Good. As for your duties: I will you instruct you in the use of your power, when I can best spare the time. Your work with the Finder will continue as needed. But your main responsibility, Charles, will be the children.”

Charles blinked. “The children?”

“I know that Ororo and Bobby, John and Sean think very highly of you. And Jean thinks you hung the moon in the sky, of course. So I thought, Charles, to assign you to tutor Jean, and Scott, and Kurt.”

Jean he knew, of course. And Scott. But – who was Kurt?

“They will give you considerable challenges. You may be surprised to hear that Jean behaved shockingly badly when I fetched her from Dallas to Brussels yesterday. She will return in two, perhaps three weeks. Scott, as you have seen, must remain blindfolded until my dear Dr. McCoy can come up with a means of control for his ability.”

Something about that last sentence clanged in his mind. Charles filed it away for later consideration.

“Kurt could very well prove the most challenging of all, given his teleportation. You might have to give way to Mr. Muñoz, to keep him in line.”


Frost focused on him in an instant. “How did you learn his name?”

“Whose?” Charles stalled.

“Azazel’s.”

A mad scramble through his memory; he said the only safe part of the truth: “Logan told me once, when we were discussing strategy – you know. Blue group, Black group –”

“Ah.” Frost relaxed. “Yes – Azazel and his dear Kurt. You have met them both before. Remember? Remember the hallway, Charles?”

The escape attempt with Dr. Vogelzang – almost successful. Charles remembered it very well.

“The dear Doctor. I will not be inviting her back to the Manor, just to let you know.”

In one smooth motion, Frost leaned forward. Charles flinched. There was a cold touch to his veils, where he had let her slip in before.

“You almost escaped me, then – you were prepared to use Kurt to do so. A child, and to Albany …. Really, Charles, did you think you would have managed to get any further? Even if you had outstripped Azazel, who would have disemboweled you for using his son so, did you think to elude my power, in the Finder?”

“I wasn’t thinking, my lady. Not clearly.”

“No, you weren’t.”

“I was – god. I was afraid. I realized … with the VD test –”
“Yes …” The cold pressure on his mind ratcheted up. “Put yourself in my position, Charles. I had only just found out that my prince had seen you the night before. He revealed to me that you, of all people, had managed to get him to bathe. No small accomplishment – for when his mind is set to war, only Archangel can manage to clean him thoroughly. And only that when dear Erik is laid low by injury. How on earth did you persuade him?”

Perhaps a fraction of the truth, uncivilized as it was. “I let him smell me.”

Frost laughed. It did not sound pleasant. “I shall have to tell Archangel so. How fortunate that it was not another kiss, Charles. I worry about your fillings.”

"I don’t have any left.”

“And that will suffice.”

The icy touch of her mind, and the vodka, were making his head pound. “Suffice for what, my Lady?”

“For a threat and promise, both.”

And Charles felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. Her hands were flat on her knees, and her eyes – her eyes …

“Charles. You may think me foolish, I am sure, for giving a teleporter and a telepath into your hands for safekeeping. You may hug your cleverness to yourself, and plan another escape as soon as I have moved on to other things. You may think and scheme and lie over and over again to me …

“But you will never succeed.”

The cold around his thoughts constricted. Charles winced.

“Because you will keep in mind, my dear boy, just what awaits you if you try. Wheedling my dear Jean into choosing you over me? Think of what I can do to you, with all the power of the Finder. Using Kurt to escape? Picture what Azazel will do to you when he catches up to you. And running in the first place? Ever? Do you remember what I have promised you, then?”

“Erik,” he said thickly.

“Yes, Erik. I will make him free of you, and how he will enjoy himself. Ah, Charles.”

A stab of cold – he gasped and strengthened his outermost shields. He kept his voice hoarse. “Stop. It hurts –”

“It is nothing, compared to the world of pain I will inflict on you if you ever, ever try to run again. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, my lady,” he whispered.

“Good.” The White Queen focused on him – a great and terrible blaze. “Now, let me in.”

Charles’ mind went still.
“Your thoughts, Charles. Open them to me.” She reached out and flicked one manicured finger against his brow. “Let me in, and there you will swear your final loyalty to me. In your lovely little reading room. Do it now.”

All the books … How could he prevent her from taking one? Reading, and seeing – Erik’s promises, Erik’s gifts, the light in Erik’s eyes – fuck. *Fuck.* He had told Erik to find Jean, to conceal his incriminating memories – he had not thought of how to conceal his own.

And now there was nothing he could do. If he refused, she would smell a rat instantly. Charles stared at Frost in a panic.

“Now, Charles.”

Could he bluff his way through it all? Prepare a strike against her, in his thoughts, if she so much as *touched* a book? But with his head swimming from the alcohol and fear –

“Charles …” Her teeth were bared, glittering and perfect, and her hands were coming up to frame his face. “Open to your Queen.”

Her hands were perfectly smooth. No calluses.

He couldn’t breathe.

“Open.”

And just as the cold slammed hard against his veils –

– there was a knock at the door.

Frost snatched her hands away, but not before Charles had felt the ice fracture into *fury*.

“Who is it?!”

Charles heard the library door open – but it was rather muffled. Perhaps, he thought, because he had folded over where he knelt, and could only see bits of dust caught in the fringe of the carpet.

A voice mumbled, and Frost hissed: “What is so urgent that it couldn’t wait?”

“Great lady –” No voice he knew would quaver so. “It’s an emergency.”

“Then explain it now.”

“Victor Creed, lady. With the prisoners –”

“Stop.”

Frost had found calm again. And Charles gasped as a hand closed around his neck and pulled. “You: stand up.”

He heard the flask fall to the carpet; a muffled clatter. Bloody *hell*, the woman was strong. How on earth –

“Mr. Xavier, it’s time to return to the kitchen and get to know one of your new students. Scott should still be there; Mr. Muñoz as well. We will speak again soon.”
His skin crawled. Frost’s voice was sweet but her eyes were flat. And then her words froze on his veils.

_Tonight. I will come to you, in your mind. Be ready for me, Charles. Be open. I will expect to see everything._

The last word forced its way into his thoughts like a knife.

Charles had no chance to send a reply – _yes_ or _no_ – before she let go of him and pushed him towards the door. He stumbled before picking up his knit hat. Then he must have walked too slowly, because a pair of hands took hold of his upper arms and steered him out of the library.

The door closed behind them.

“Mr. Xavier, is it?” Another person he did not know. Charles stared at her. Brown hair, brown eyes. A brush to her mind told him: _human._ Her face was white. She looked just as terrified as he felt.

“Let’s get you back downstairs. Come on.”

He was escorted to the kitchen. The woman pushed him inside – he only just caught Armando Muñoz sketching a wave with his fingers before she left.

And then Charles almost fell down onto the bench.

“Hey.” Muñoz – _no, Armando_ – spoke quietly. “You all right?”

“I …” Charles tried to focus as he pulled his hat back on. Perhaps it was the shock of Frost’s mind wrenching away so quickly? Like the Finder being ripped out of his consciousness; the mental equivalent of the bends. “I really couldn’t say.”

“Well, you look a bit off. Like he ran into a wall, Scott.” Armando nudged him with one elbow. “All dazed and confused.”

Scott smiled. He had traces of chocolate round his mouth. Milk would leave a gummy residue on the saucepan, Charles remembered. “Did you wash up?”

“Yeah. Right before the Wolverine came running in, and Havok and Doc McCoy went running out with him. Is it always this exciting around here, Xavier?”


“Free West code name – your side’s picked them up for fun. Wolverine for the claws and the whole tear-you-to-bits thing; Lady Deathstrike for some of the same – though I told her it was a better name than Wolverina.” Armando drummed his hands on the table. “She almost diced me for that one, Scott.”

“Logan as a wolverine makes sense – but who’s Lady Deathstrike? And how do you know them both?”

Idle chatter. He needed to keep his mouth moving, because he was telling his mind –

_Help me._

Distantly, Charles knew his raven had to be listening. He could only repeat it over and over again. _Help me._
"I will expect to see everything," Frost had just told him. And: "I can’t hide," Charles sent to his raven. "Not by myself."

But the raven … not twenty-four hours ago, it had helped him make dozens of jewels in his mind; it had built a storage closet and a magic mirror; it had given him a cloak and shown him the way past all of MacTaggert’s defenses …

"Hide what needs hiding," Charles pleaded, as hard as he could. "Keep it safe. Keep me safe. So I can keep others —"

But keeping others safe had landed him here in the first place. Sex with Erik for the children – Charles pressed his lips together tightly – all well and good; that had worked. And himself taking Raven’s place in September …

His sister had to be protected; there was no other option. He had sent her a message, and the diamond - would it be enough to keep her secret, and safe?

Priorities, now. If Frost uncovered his secrets, all of his work for Raven would have been for nothing.

"Help me. Save me."

"Hello?"

Armando was waving a hand in front of his face.

Charles blinked. "Yes?"

"You wanted to know about them, right?"

"About … who?"

"Wolverine and Lady Deathstrike."

"Oh. Yes, please."

An incredulous stare. "I’ve been telling you for the past two minutes."

"Have you?" Charles forced a smile. "Then you will have to excuse me. I have been – that is, Lady Frost makes use of my mind, occasionally, and I have a good many headaches as a result. I’m afraid I was concentrating on not vomiting all over you."

Armando’s expression changed. "Oh." Then: "Sorry," he said.

"No problem." It had been a flimsy excuse, but true enough. Or at least, it had been – at Dallas’ end, Charles remembered, dully, and when Erik had first gotten his paws on him.

"Lieber Professor," rasped hot against his mouth, and, "Schöner Lehrer …"

It already felt as though it had happened to someone else.

Perhaps, Charles thought, this distance was his mind’s way of dealing with … trauma. Frost forcing more memories on him – he could almost feel his catalogue filing them away. Efficient, that.

"Logan and Yuriko were the first in at Dallas camp. The introductions were a bit of a blur, more blood than anything else. I was front and center in the main lab when the whole thing went down."
Fun times.”

“Really?”

“Actually not, Professor Charles Xavier. I was being a little sarcastic.”

“Ah.”

Reflex attempts at conversation – but it was getting harder to concentrate. An ache had started at the base of his skull.

Charles bit the inside of his mouth. Every instinct was telling him: he had to let his raven be for now. He had until nightfall to make a strong defense – a hidden one.

Keep going, he sent into the depths of his mind. Then he focused back on the kitchen.

Scott had turned his head toward them both. Though he surely could not hear Armando’s lips curl back from his teeth, perhaps he heard the slight rustle of a dark glass bottle coming out of a pocket. Armando unscrewed the top and poured a measure of liquid into it; tossed it back without blinking.

“Is that alcoholic? God knows I could use a drink.”

“You don’t want this one – whatever you think your headaches are, I think I’ve got them beat. Opiate.” Armando rolled his shoulders. “Special prescription.”

“Oh.”

They were quiet for a little while. Back at Oxford, Charles thought, he would have heard the kitchen clock ticking. Or even his father’s watch.

He wondered if Erik still had it.

Scott had tipped his head downward; if he could be said to stare, he’d be staring at the tabletop. Charles had to glance twice at him before he saw the faintest marks of tears on his cheeks. His face looked completely dry now, but –

He must have cried at Alex’s going away.

“I’m sure he’ll be back soon,” Charles said gently.

“Who?”

“Alex Summers. Blond, rather manic, energy-channeling device on his chest. You may remember him from, oh, an hour ago?”

“I do sarcasm better, Professor. I told you: he ran out with the others.”

Havok, then. Charles put the name aside; he’d return to it later. “I wonder what’s happening.”

“Your guess is as good as mine. Something serious. Not a lot can get the Wolverine so worked up.”

“I think he prefers Logan, Armando.”

“Fine.” Armando rested one sharp cheekbone on his hand. “Thanks for telling me.”

Charles considered him for a long moment. Armando’s skin was as dark as that of the Ethiopian
migrants he used to see down Cowleyside, racing their hounds in the old stadium. And … what could his power be? To keep his own telepathy in check – and to stop this Kurt from teleporting away whenever fancy took it – it would have to be impressive.

A sniffle from Scott cut across his woolgathering. How to distract him? Perhaps a change of scenery – even if it was a sort he would have to touch and smell rather than see.

“Well!” He slapped his hands together. “I say we get Scott some winter clothes.” For the worn shoes and threadbare trousers would not be sufficient against the cold. “What do you say, Armando?”

“Why not?” Armando pushed up from the table. “We’ve been waiting for the grand tour.”

“I see. Come on, Scott – up you go.”

He touched one thin shoulder. Scott scrambled from his seat on the bench and took careful hold of Charles’ sweater.

“Permit me to escort you, Mr. Summers. Stay close; keep a tight hold.”

Let his raven do its work; fill the time with polite nothing. Although … if he could find out what had happened with the prisoners –

Charles dismissed the thought and made his voice grand. “As you may have noticed, that was the kitchen. Gentlemen, we are now proceeding down the hallway – watch the flagstones, they’re uneven – and then up the stairs.”

He allowed Scott to tug him to the side, just slightly, until he could touch fingers to the wall. Then a slow pace, and whispering … of course. Scott was counting footsteps. He could remember doing so himself – when he, Charles, had been walked to the Hive and back blindfolded.

It was entirely possible that Frost would insist on his being blindfolded again – would she chain him again? No. He would insist on walking wherever he pleased; seeing whatever he pleased. He would make it non-negotiable as they went forward.

Negotiations … Logan’s rough voice on Christmas Eve: I am getting a great big ‘no’ from a certain somebody out here, and it’s the pissiest ‘no’ since Frost sent Stryker’s VP packing this morning –

So there had been diplomatic contact with the Free West since Dallas – about the hostages, perhaps? Queen Frost resplendent and smug, with plenty of time to dally whilst MacMurphy and Moira and company had been freezing in the stable. Time enough to talk to Queen Elizabeth – to deal with her, nonsense – but Frost had been quite the traveler in recent weeks: Mexico and Brussels and back.

To what ends?

Charles shook off the darker thoughts and smiled at Armando, who was trailing behind them. No smile in return. The long, gaunt face looked oddly closed.

“And here are the steps. They’re rather shallow, so be careful.”

He had just stumbled, himself.

But that was because of the ferocious burst of power he had felt from the Finder.

Hell. She knew, now – and if Frost was using the Finder, it meant that Moira and her men had succeeded in overpowering Victor Creed, and that Frost couldn’t find them –
Charles swallowed hard. “Upstairs is the main dormitory. I’m not sure which room will be yours.”

Opening and closing doors cleared up the matter. Sean’s room was still a jumble of clothes, although the chocolate had disappeared. An empty one was next – it had been Ororo’s – and then Jean’s. Charles took a peek. Everything seemed in perfect order: the bed neatly made, the glittering marbles and plastic horses all in their proper places.

Across from Jean’s, his own room was still missing a door.

“This is mine. And I can assure you, Scott, that my door is always open to you.” Charles stepped over the threshold and back. Then again, tugging Scott after him. Scott smiled. “All right? Stop by whenever you wish.”

“Right,” Scott said, and Armando muttered: “Why the hell don’t you have a door?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Charles muttered back. “Jean’s room is across from mine,” he said to Scott, “and Sean is two doors down from her, if indeed he returns here in future. You can have the room in between them, or either of the two left on my side.”

“Jean, who’s six?”

“Yes - and she is a very nice girl, I assure you. She has red hair and grey eyes. She’s shorter than you are, which stands to reason, since she’s six and you’re nine.”

“Almost nine,” Scott said. “My birthday’s on February eight.”

“How nice! We’ll have to have a party.”

“A party?” It came out as a squeak. “Really?”

“Why on earth not? A birthday’s an excellent reason to have one.”

“I’ve never had a party –”

“Hey, I want a party,” Armando drawled. He had folded his arms across his chest, leaning against the wall in between Jean and Ororo’s rooms. His voice was – slurring? “I deserve one.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll be invited to Scott’s.” Charles gave him a reproving stare – how strong had that opiate been? Armando grimaced and pushed back up off the wall. “Scott? Pick a room.”

Scott trailed his fingers over stone and wood, and opened the remaining doors on Charles’ side of the hallway. Charles saw him wrinkle his nose. “I’ll have the one next to Jean’s,” he declared.

Probably because boys would be boys, and adolescent boys would smell. Charles smiled and brought him to Ororo’s old door. “Here you are. Take a walk inside.”

Scott did. Charles peered after him. There were blankets on the bed, and a towel folded on the small table next to it. A toothbrush lay on top of the towel.

There was nothing else.

“Do you have a suitcase, Scott?”

Scott shook his head. He had found the toothbrush, and was rubbing a thumb up and down the bristles.
“Well,” Charles said, “let’s go find you some winter clothes, and perhaps some regular clothes too, while we’re at it. And some soap, and some toilet paper, and your very own elephant.”

“An elephant?”

“Oh, fiddlesticks, I think we’re actually fresh out. Besides, woolly mammoths would do better up here, since it can get quite chilly. Are you warm enough now, Scott?”

“I’m a little cold.”

“Me too,” Armando put in. “We don’t dress for this down south.”

“I wouldn’t think so. Well,” Charles said, “that means next on our tour is storage, due west. And speaking of which – the West Wing is through the library. I understand you’re Sworn, Armando, so I’m sure you’re permitted entry to it.”

“That’s great, Xavier, but I have no keys, and no idea where it is you’re talking about.”

“We’ll knock, then. Take hold of Mr. Muñoz, Scott,” Charles ordered, “and follow me.”

He couldn’t quite trust his own footing, since they were walking in the direction of the Finder, sending its power crashing every which way.

Charles felt dizzy. Frost was in a temper, and though he knew exactly why, he also knew the effect her magnified power could have on other minds. He strengthened his shields and spared a moment of worry for the other two.

That god damned roll call each morning – preparing the children for the same every day in the EBS army. Of course. But at least Ororo and Bobby and John would be spared it a little while longer, in between campaigns – if indeed another one was starting soon. If Sean came back, though, then he, Charles, have to worry about more than just this Armando Muñoz and little Scott –

Worry? Fucking hell – not three hours back in the company of other people, and here he was, back to fretting like a fool.

What was the other option, though? Stop all thought of connection – any and all warmth and sympathy? He was only human –

But where had bloody human sympathy gotten him? Not escaping with Moira, that was certain.

Charles angrily swiped a hand over his hat, then turned to look back at Armando and Scott as he opened the library door. It was strange. Armando seemed perfectly composed – if sleepy-eyed.

Scott, though ....

He stood on the library threshold, arms wrapped round his body. He looked very small.

“I’m cold,” he said quietly.

It was weak. It was so fucking weak of him, god damn it all, but Charles felt his throat close up.

“Come on,” he managed to say. “Just a little further and you’ll have a nice coat.”

Charles focused, and held out a hand. Just in front of you, he sent, on impulse – along with the image of his palm and fingers. But no need to say anything, hm? And if he sent a pulse of warmth along with the message, to shield Scott from the Finder, that was his own business.
Scott reached up to take his hand.

“Good guess, Scott,” Armando drawled.

Charles led the way across floorboards and carpet, skin prickling. There had been something in Armando’s voice that he had not liked. Hopefully Hank would be a distraction – if he was there, if he would hear them knock, if, if, if –

Of all things, a simple knock actually worked. McCoy opened the West Wing door. His eyes looked wild behind his glasses; his hair was askew.

“Goodness, Hank. Is everything all right?”

“I was just – looking to. Find you.” He laughed – a sudden hysterical burst. Scott flinched. Armando looked nonplussed.

Charles raised an eyebrow. “Pull yourself together, man. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” McCoy said. “What can I do for you, Mr. Xavier?”

“You can take us through to storage, please. Scott needs to pick out some winter clothes.”

“Clothes? There’s no point – he has to keep that blindfold on. How’s he going to pick if he can’t see?”

“Really, Hank. Smell? Touch? These are other senses just as strong as sight. And besides –” he turned down towards Scott. “I must admit I’m curious. Why can’t you just take a quick look?”

“I burn things down, Mr. Xavier.” Scott’s shoulders hunched. “Or I make them explode. I can’t help it.”

“Hm. We’ll have to work on that,” Charles said. “In the meantime … Hank? Take us through to storage. Now.”

McCoy meekly obeyed. The long halls unwound in their patterns; the four of them passed door after door. Charles did not need to check his inner map, what with the Finder pulsing from the right – then the left – and right again … always down below, one level removed.

Charles did not stretch out his own power to search for Moira. The die was cast; she was on her own. Well – alone, with her fellows. Besides, he had to give everything to his aviary, to their frantic work on a defense … Surely that was what the throb of a headache signified.

“Here,” McCoy said, and opened a door. The four of them trooped inside.

Concrete floors; fluorescent lights – nothing had changed since Logan and Marie had taken him there last October. Charles led them to the largest compartment.

“Coats are on hooks,” he said, “and gloves and mittens are in the plastic containers. Armando, will you help Scott find some things that will suit? I need to speak to Hank.”

He didn’t wait for a reply, merely took hold of McCoy’s arm and hustled him away.

“Mr. Xavier –”

“Mr. McCoy, I hadn’t thought you the type to dismiss someone because of something he can’t help. ‘He can’t see, just leave him here’ – really? He’s in a new place, he’s frightened – he’s a child,
Hank. What’s gotten into you?”

“I’m sorry.” McCoy sounded miserable.

“You should be.” Charles turned to face McCoy, crossing his arms. “Now: what’s wrong?”

“I was sent to find you just now.”

“Really? Why?”

“T-to keep you away from the Finder.”

“To be found, but not to Find – do you hear me regretting anything? I’m perfectly happy to have an additional respite, thank you very much.” Then his mind caught up. “Why would Frost want me away, though? Now?”

“There’s been an escape.”


“I can’t say. You know, Mr. Xavier, I wondered about you when I was in Dallas. Whether or not you had enough to eat, I mean.”

Charles rolled his eyes inwardly at the change of subject. Then he let McCoy babble, looking away over his shoulder and down along the dividing bench. This place had been a locker room, once – hadn’t he drawn that conclusion the first time he had seen it? Because of the layout – not just because of the smell of sweat … though that same smell wasn’t nearly as strong as he remembered.

Not as strong as when he had smelled …

Charles saw something glitter out of the corner of his eye.

He dragged his attention back to McCoy. “Hank? Will you please go help Armando and Scott?”

“I’m not supposed to let you out of my sight, Mr. Xavier.”

“You can trust me. As, it seems, I cannot trust you.”

Instinct had told him to say it; Charles saw McCoy flinch, and pursued his advantage. “‘What’s wrong, Hank?’ I ask, and you tell me stories about Dallas. I didn’t ask for those. And – you know, Lady Frost called you ‘my dear Dr. McCoy.’” Instinct again, but the whites of Hank’s eyes told him to press on. “Why would she do that?”

Hank did not reply.

“Is that why Logan’s angry with you? Did Frost – do something that he didn’t like? What did she do?”

“I don’t want to talk about it now, Mr. Xavier.”

“Call me Charles, all right?”

“All right. Charles. Maybe we can talk about it later?” He looked drained. “Please?”

“Of course.” Charles squeezed his shoulder. “Go and help the others. I promise I won’t sneak away.”
Which was true, he thought, watching Hank’s back retreat. He wouldn’t.

Instead, he turned and walked to the side of the dividing bench. Kept it pressed to his calf, as he passed one compartment, then another …

And there was all the metal, gleaming.

*Erik.*

Charles stared. It felt as though he were breathing hot soup. The smell — it had to be the scent. Scent, *not* smell, since that word only brought tangled blankets to the front of his mind, the stench of sweat and come unfurling almost visibly from the whole, and Erik clinging to him with all his warm limbs, whispering against his lips — *Rabe* —

It was ridiculous to stare so at the boxes and canisters — the crowbars together in a heap. And at the knives glittering, hanging from their hooks.

Charles stepped forward and leaned against the chain-link metal that set the compartment apart. It gave, slightly, under his weight.

*Erik.*

*God.* He was hard. Why was he hard? Charles swallowed. Probably because of all the sex. A week and a half of that scent in his nostrils, and Charles Xavier himself was primed to start humping anything within reach as soon as he caught another whiff.

He shook his head. He was stronger than the smell of sweat, than memory …. He would just lean back and walk away.

Any minute now.

The coat was gone. As was …. Charles blinked. As was the pair of swords. The hooks that had held them all looked quite lonesome. A stupid fancy, but ….

Charles tugged the knit hat off his head, and twisted it between his fingers. It was Erik’s — it belonged on the hook right there, where the coat had been — bloody *hell*, his mouth was watering.

“Enough.” He pushed himself up off the chain links. He would go fetch the others and they would all go outside. For if he was able to have such ridiculous fantasies with the Finder’s chill rippling across his mind, perhaps actual snow and cold would put paid to them.

Or he could always take matters in hand himself, he supposed. So to speak. Later that night. Except …

*Hell.* Charles snorted. He didn’t need euphemisms, but he did need a door if he was going to wank in peace. So much for that solution. Charles gave the chain links one last shove, pulled the hat back over his ears - and walked away.

“See what you’ve done, Erik Lehnsherr?”

He did not turn to watch the glint of weapons wink out of sight. He didn’t think of metal, he didn’t think of sex, and he certainly didn’t think of Erik. “I hope you’re happy.”

Scott had found a coat that was too big, and wrestled with it as he followed the sound of their footsteps to the door. “He’ll grow into it,” Armando said, “as long as you have enough food here.”
“We do now.” Charles had taken another coat himself, since he hadn’t wanted to drop back by his room. Not with his – needing fresh air. “Everything all right, Scott?”

“It’s bright out, Mr. Xavier. I can tell.”

“Mm-hm.”

It was true: the snow was almost painfully bright in the sun. Charles shaded his eyes with one gloved hand. “Nothing to run into in sight, Scott – if you feel like a dash, now’s the time to do it. Faster than a speeding bullet; go on!”

And it seemed Scott could take a hint, because he tore off into the snow, whooping, his coat sleeves unrolling and flapping over his mittens.

“Nice one, Prof.”

“I told you to call me Charles. And you never answered my question,” Charles told Armando. “Why ‘Prof’?”

“It’s the Free West name for you. The Professor,” Armando smirked, “working for the White Queen. I was in solitary when they showed the latest vid, you know, but I think you had a cameo.”

“What?” Charles knew his mouth had fallen open; he didn’t care. “What on earth? What vid?”

“Free West propaganda – and this one was pretty good. You’d think they’d spend their money on different things these days. I suppose the people like their entertainment.”

“Give them bread and circuses,” Hank muttered.

“It would appear so.” Charles shook his head. “A vid – bloody hell. I hope I looked dashing in it, at least.”

Armando snorted. Then the three stood side-by-side, watching Scott run up and down the path his boots had made in the snow. It was cold as ever outside, but the sun made it less numbing, somehow.

Charles shivered when he felt the Finder’s touch vanish. He glanced to his right, then his left. Armando hadn’t moved. Hank, though … Hank was staring back at the manor.

Then he whipped his head round, to stare at the road – and Charles heard the distant sound of an engine. “Damn,” he said, and then shouted: “Scott! Stop – there’s a car coming.”

Scott kept running, though. “Guess he didn’t hear you,” Armando said.

“He will now.” Charles reached out with his power. *Scott – hold still a moment, please. There’s a car coming and I want you to be safe. Move only when I tell you.*

The three of them watched the car – no, a truck – make its lumbering way up the road. Scott was stock-still. He had turned in the direction of the sound.

Charles could hear laughter. And cheers.

The truck turned off the main road. And if it had found another road, it was one Charles hadn’t noticed before. He felt ill. *Moira …* Was it over, then, already? Had the prisoners been caught? How could he find out?
Something moving caught his eye. “That’s how,” he muttered. Logan was striding out of the treeline.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” Charles turned to Armando. “I’ll just go send Scott back with you. And – Logan and I might hunt someday soon, so we have to scout the area. It’s all right, Hank,” he told McCoy, seeing his mouth open. “Logan will keep me from anything untoward.”

He didn’t wait for any reply. Just jogged away, and clapped Scott on the shoulder when he reached him. “Everything all right?”

“Yes. You were in my head, Mr. Xavier, like before!”

“I hope you didn’t mind. I’ll give you more warning next time.”

“It’s O.K. – it just felt weird. But nicer than Miss Frost, you know?”

Charles had some idea.

“Can I tell other people about it, Mr. Xavier? I know you said to be quiet, but –”

“You had better not.” Charles nodded to Logan as he joined them. “And you’ll want to call her Lady Frost here, Scott. She places a great value on the respect you show her, so be sure to be polite. Understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Xavier.”

“Then you go back inside with Armando and Dr. McCoy. You’ll need to dry out your boots; I’ll bet you have snow in them now. If you put them by the stove they’ll dry faster.”

Charles waited for Logan to chime in with his favorite line. But nothing happened.

“All right. Go on, then.” He nudged Scott in the shoulder. “Run back. You’ve done splendidly so far.”

“Bye!”

Charles felt for him, and the other two, with a flicker of his power – traced them as they walked back into the manor. But he didn’t take his eyes off Logan.

Logan, who looked … tired.

“Is everything all right?”

“No, X man. Everything is not all right. But c’mon and take a walk anyway, yeah? It’s over now.”

The Finder switching off, and the cheers from the truck … Charles stared wordlessly, until Logan turned and started walking. Then he followed.

Chapter End Notes

Next part coming in a week - mostly because I figured this is enough to chew on for
ETA, 18 March: thanks, Tatiana, for bringing some wonkiness about this version of *Eugene Onegin* to my attention. :) For more on the libretto (by Tchaikovsky, his brother, and a chap named Shilovsky), please see this handy website. The relevant quotation is from Onegin's impassioned monologue about his love, Tatyana, towards the end of the opera - and that in itself is a reference to the young Tatyana's thoughts about him (though calling him a "fatal tempter" instead of "beloved image") towards the opera's beginning. That was before, though, she knew he would be cruelly indifferent to her ... at least, for the moment. The later words, after Onegin gets hit with the cluebat, fit better here. :P
The forest was just as cold as it had been when he walked with the man not two days ago. *Erik,* he had walked with *Erik.* Charles cast his eyes up at the distant rustling branches. The sun was bright enough at midday, but the trees loomed large and oppressive nonetheless.

His present company made all the difference. He hadn’t been able to relax with *Erik,* truly; their dancing had been a fluke. Before, he had been hyperaware of every step crunching in the snow – but now Charles felt calm enough to breathe deeply, exhale easily, as *Logan* stomped by his side.

“*Hell,*” a grunt, and *Logan* hopped on one foot. “The weatherproofing wore off.”

“What do you use?”

“Some gunk I get from the Haida. I didn’t bother touching them up before *Dallas,* and I guess I was there too long, ‘cause now …” He pulled a face at his boots. “*Sont chiés.*”

It was freezing cold. Watching his friend, though, Charles felt warmer. Especially as *Logan* kept up a steady stream of profanity whilst searching for a path in the woods. It seemed he found it, for he plucked a cigar from his pocket and stuck it in his mouth as he bent to look at some broken twigs.

“I thought you didn’t have any left.”

“Any what?”

“Cigars.”

Another grunt. “Found this one in the truck.”

“About that truck, *Logan* …”

*Logan* straightened abruptly and started walking again. Charles fell into step beside him. “You said ‘it’s over now’ – what’s over?”

“Escape attempt.”

“*Escape*?” Charles feigned surprise. “Who? And why not run away on the road back from *Albany*?”

“Cause they weren’t *on* the road back from *Albany,* *X.*” *Logan* kept watching the path carefully as they walked. “They were imprisoned here.”
“Here? In those holding cells, by the Hive? And – and when did they run away? You won’t hurt them like Sean and Alex, will you?”

“I never did any of that. And – and it’s not that; damn.”

“But I don’t –”

“Do me a favor, X man?”

“What’s that?”

“Shut up for second.”

Charles made a show of closing his mouth.

It didn’t distract Logan. He was …. Charles felt his stomach clench as he watched. Logan was sniffing the air, just as Creed had at the bonfire, so long ago. Victor Creed. That name could do to distract Logan; the two had not seemed on good terms. “May I talk now, please?”

“Go ahead.”

“When I left Lady Frost,” Charles felt another twist of anxiety when he noticed they were headed straight for the smokehouse, “the person there to retrieve me mentioned something about Victor Creed. You know – blond, bestial, built like a brick wall.”

“I believe the correct expression, Professor, is: ‘built like a brick shithouse.’”


“You plan on using that all time, now?” Logan’s claws came out with their peculiar shink. Without breaking stride, he punched a tree. Charles yelped and ducked as splinters went flying.

“You’ve seen it all before, but not too shabby, hey bub? The cherry on the shit sundae. They give me the metal for these babies out in Alkali Lake, I get out and go to get back at them, slice and dice a bit – and so the last thing they ever give me is the name: Wolverine.” Logan shook his hair; bared his teeth. “Hear me roar.”

“Very persuasive, but I believe wolverines growl.”

“Whatever.” Logan stabbed the cigar where it was lying on the snow, and brought it back to his mouth. Then he whirled for another punch, this time at a low-hanging branch. “I’ve been playing court jester for Jean this whole week, poor kid. And poor me – the only break I got from was when I took a Christmas trip back here,” Logan flashed him a look, “and got returned with my skeleton in several more pieces than your standard set. Some assembly required; batteries not fucking included.”

“And what’s a battery for you?”

Logan retracted one set of claws, tucked the cigar behind his ear, and pulled out his flask. He opened it one-handed - then gave him a mock salute and took a long drink.

“That’s the stuff. You want?”

Logan, Armando, and Frost – all plying him with substances. Was it some ridiculous resolution for the New Year? Still, Charles was only tempted for a moment, what with his headache. Logan waited until he shook his head; then shrugged and turned to the smokehouse in front of them.
Charles cleared his throat. “What’s here?”

“Good question. Why come here?” Logan considered the door; held out the three claws still unsheathed. He nudged at the wood. “Why make a detour, and run here, when the clock’s ticking?”

“Who?”

Logan didn’t answer. Instead, he pushed the smokehouse door gently. It creaked open.

Charles’ gut roiled as Logan walked inside. He hurried after and did his best to make some noise, since Logan was being surprisingly quiet.

“Settle down, X, damn. Do I have to dump you back inside with the kids?”

“And Armando.”

“Yeah, Muñoz.” Logan stared at a plank in one corner. “Real charmer, him.”

“Look who’s talking.”

The sarcasm was on autopilot, because – oh _shite_ the plank was the one that had hidden the knapsack. Could Logan sense – could he _smell_ –

Charles flinched again as the plank shattered with one strike of six claws. Logan, punching out and then back round – like the breaststroke, his brain gibbered. Only fatal.

He could hardly stand to look in the corner – but he _had_ to, Charles told himself, he had to, so he worked up his courage and peered around Logan’s shoulder.

Where the plank had rested, there was now a dry spot. Snow had blown in through cracks in the walls, covering the floor – but the corner was dry, and empty.

_Thank god._

Charles exhaled, shakily – and almost swallowed his tongue as Logan looked back at him. “Something wrong?”

“It’s just.” He licked his lips. “That dry spot, there. I think it’s bigger than the plank – was.”

“Huh.” Logan tipped his head to one side. “Yeah. I think you may be right – so that means,” he picked up one large piece of plank, “so that could mean,” he picked up another – and he tried to put them back together. “How wide …”

Then Logan stared at the shards littering the snowy floor. “God damn it.”

“Ask questions first, hit later, hm?”

“Thanks so much.” Logan dropped to his knees and shoved his face into the corner. It would look vaguely humorous, were he not so intent on sniffing the floor.

_Distract him._ “Why are you doing this, anyway?” Charles leaned forward. “I thought you said the escape attempt was over.”

“It is. But it can never hurt to figure out why someone did something weird. Off. Why come here,
He sniffed again. Charles’ eyes lit on the flask, wedged tightly into the back pocket of Logan’s jeans. *Desperate measures*, he told himself – and took hold of the metal and pulled. What he wouldn’t give for a fraction of Erik’s ability –

“What?” Charles skipped back a step, holding the flask. “I want some.”

“Yeah, but you could *warn* a guy before you grab his ass!”

“No one grabs my ass, Charlie. No one,” Logan growled, “except Marie. And Lady Frost,” he waggled his eyebrows, and then – oh *lord* – still on his hands and knees, he waggled his arse, “but only when I’ve been a very, very bad boy.”

“No one grabs my ass, Charlie. No one,” Logan growled, “except Marie. And Lady Frost,” he waggled his eyebrows, and then – oh *lord* – still on his hands and knees, he waggled his arse, “but only when I’ve been a very, very bad boy.”

“Well?”

“Nah.” Logan jumped to his feet. “She wouldn’t grab it. She’d smack it.”

“That can’t be possible.”

A sigh. “No shit. I’m not gonna go in for recreational paddling with my fearless leader. Not unless it involves a boat that looks like a duck – and even then, Marie’s got dibs.”

Charles tried to process the words.

“X?”

“Yes?”

“All that was a joke.”

“Oh.”

It had been a while since someone had joked at him. Charles leaned against one wall of the smokehouse and stared down at the flask. He didn’t count Armando, or Alex – or Erik’s attempts at wit – as joking. Maybe his own life – bit of a joke, there.

“You gonna drink that or what, Charles?” Logan’s voice was gentle.

“I’ve – changed my mind.” He held out the flask. “Here.”

“All that time and you just wanted to grab my ass.” A rustle as the metal was tucked away; then Logan leaned beside him, against the wall, and nudged him with one elbow. “You O.K.?"

“Fine. Did you smell anything?”

“Yeah. I smelled something.”

“Mm.”

Charles couldn’t see Logan’s face; he had bent to light his cigar. And there was no focusing on
Logan’s tone, Charles thought: not when his brain felt like it was sloshing around in his skull. Overall, though, it wasn’t that he felt sick. He was just – trying to process things. Trying to move past the isolation – get back to having … friends, and nearby to boot … And trying to work round the headache of whatever defense was being built for him –

"Frost give you the talk, then?"

"How could you tell?"

A shrug. "You look like refried death."

“We … talked, yes.” Which reminded him of all the other questions he wanted to ask Logan – but it would not do, just to charge in willy-nilly. “You were right. She wants me to tutor Jean and Scott … and Kurt. So. New work.”

His voice must have cracked, because Logan growled. Cigar smoke puffed out in front of them – Charles waved it away, watching it obscure the wreckage in the standing half of the smokehouse. The ruin of the other half was still visible: the stone walls, the fireplace …

“You told me you were O.K. this morning, X. And here you’re still – Damn it. You look like hell, and you smell scared. Karma, you say? Well, I want to go find that motherfucker and karma his ass into next year – and yes, I know it’s early in this one, but nothing says I can't take my sweet time about it.”

“Are you going to Brussels, then? Frost said he would be there.”

“That’s not what I fucking meant, Xavier. I –”

“Your profanity and posturing get tiresome, Logan. I’m fine.”

“Keep telling me that.” A vicious swipe of claws at the wall behind them – metal scraped and clattered on stone. “I need to hear it. It’s like – you know, it’s like somebody getting hold of Marie and doing shit to her, except they can’t because she’d kill them double-quick – but you know what I mean?”

“Oh, this is so sudden.” Charles grinned at Logan’s glare. “Will you tell Marie, or shall I?”

A deep drag off the cigar. Then a blue-grey gust. “Shut up.”

“Mm. I would, but I have to admit that I’m curious. And I’m most curious about … what you said earlier. Why did you tell me: ‘you’re more powerful than she is’?”

Even repeating the phrase was difficult.

Charles felt Logan shrug. “’Cause it’s true.”

He waited for an explanation. None came.

“How do you know, Logan?”

“Dallas.”

Logan held out the cigar and tapped its ash into the corner – right on the area the plank had covered, Charles realized, frowning. Why? For he did it again, carefully, and moved to crush the ash into the stone with one boot before returning to Charles’ side.
I’ve been fighting this war for a while, and I’ve felt the Finder quite a damned bit, if I say so myself. It’s a rare battle day Frosty doesn’t use it. Lover Boy busted me out of Alkali Lake fourteen years ago last week, but she didn’t use the Finder then. I figure she didn’t care whether or not it went tits-up.”

“You knew them when they first came here?”

“Queen Frost and Captain Batshit, her right-hand man. Yeah, I’ve known ’em a while; and stayed through thick and thin. It was pretty damn thin at the beginning – just Jean-Paul and me, and only after Mags got me out of Alkali late ’55. Then Victor and his group, and Yoshida, but he was too damn young to do much. Frost brought Quested with her. She’s got some hold on Azazel – don’t know what – but I didn’t think she was quite as sure about Lover Boy. You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t know. What exactly do you mean?”

“I wasn’t here at first, but Jean-Paul told me and he’d tell you: all fall of ’55, the two of them were fighting like a cat and dog in a sack.”

“Lehnsherr and Frost? About what?”

“I never asked. It kept going through the new year. We did the run on all the Free West nukes in the middle of it. She tried using the Finder for battle then; Mags hated the damned thing. I went and scouted out D.C., and when I got back ...” Logan pressed his lips together. “The Battle of D.C. That was a nasty one.”

Charles fought to concentrate. “I’d like to talk to you about these fights in more detail, some day.”

“Sure. And that’s what I was trying to say all this while, Xavier; damn. I’ve been at all the big-scale fights, not just your domestics. She used the Finder in most of them – not D.C., cause she was there in person, and not St. Louis, seven years ago about now – but I have no idea why not then, because it was a massive clusterfuck. I get nightmares thinking about it.”

“What about it?”

“The casualties, for one thing. Big part of what the Finder does: keeps us from killing each other by accident. St. Louis was when we lost Sinclair and Gibney, most of the rest of Victor’s people. He was torn up about it for a while. Not,” Logan grunted, “that I give a shit about him.”

“I see. So, barring one incident in early 1956, and one,” Charles calculated, “in January 1963, the Finder has been used for every battle with the Free West. What does this have to do with Frost and me? So she uses the Finder day in, day out – is it addicting? Does it sap her power or something along those lines?”

His own experience indicated the opposite, after all. Frost in the Finder … her eyes and her crown … she was a terrifying sight, and every inch in perfect control.

“No, Charles. What I mean to say is: I’ve felt the Finder for almost fifteen years. And I’ve never felt its power like I did that first day at Dallas.”

Charles fell silent.

He turned to look at Logan. His friend was in profile; Charles saw his lips twist in a grimace.

“Forever the Finder …. Gives everyone a fucking headache but them’s the breaks. Consider it, X man: if it came down to a numbers game, we’d lose. Hell, we’d have lost already. Free West just has
more goddamn bodies, even if they don’t let the ladies fight – and we know it, and they know it. Which means that we have to bring anything extra we can, just to break even. You saw it in Dallas, didn’t you?”

His voice kept going, but Charles had stopped listening. *They don’t let the ladies fight.* Moira. God. What had happened to the Free West escapees? He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek. He had *tried* to help, but now – had she hidden the knapsack? Would he have to scour the woods for an incriminating note atop a heap of clothes; for a diamond masquerading as an egg? Bloody hell –

“– like you and Jean.”

He shook himself; focused. “Beg pardon?”

“You and Jean sound pretty similar, X. Frost I can hear through the Finder, yeah, but you two have more reverb.” Logan’s face was intent. “I’d put you on the same level, maybe, but I’m not a telepath.”

“My goodness. Jean, as strong as an adult. Small wonder MacMurphy took the bait at Dallas. I wonder very much, though, that Frost should let her go into danger.”

“Try any argument for kids stayin’ kids, with Frost, and you’ll get the Stalingrad spiel. She figures: she can do it? Jean can do it.”

But Charles wasn’t listening. “‘Kids staying kids.’ An eloquent way to sum it up.” He stared at the snow packed into the cracks of the floor. “I didn’t argue that with her. I did with Lehnsherr, though.

Logan had gone still before Charles spoke; now he turned to face him fully. “Yeah? How’d that work out?”

Charles smiled with no warmth at all. “Can you keep a secret?”

“If I get another sparkly from Jean. But you know I can, X.”

“Our little bargain, his and mine – it was for protection for the children. Bobby and John, Sean and Ororo,” he waved a hand, airily, “and such. It seems to have worked.”

A hiss from Logan cut him off. “I knew it. I fucking knew it. I knew he had to be offering you the moon on a platter or some shit like that –”

“Really, Logan…”

“You know I’m right. I’ve never, *ever* seen anyone give that crazy cat a kiss, let alone a god damned sex marathon.”

“*Logan.*” Charles felt his face flush, even with the cold.

“*Charles,*” he mocked. “I have a nose, yeah? I can smell.”

“You’re just jealous.”

“Yeah? That I didn’t get a piece of that? Well I think a certain something of mine had a front-row seat, X, because I also smelled something that rhymes with ‘bear grease.’”

Charles winced. Logan saw him do it, and groaned. “Fuck me, that was about a quarter bluff – but you used it, didn’t you? And now I’m going to think about it every time I look at Maggie on the battlefield. *Tu crisse de cave.*”
“What did you just call me?”

“You dumbass.”

Charles smirked at him. Back to normal, then. Finally.

Logan returned the smirk with interest. “So, all this time of me trying to change the rotations – all these years of bitching to the higher-ups … and all I had to do to make it happen was sashay into Lover Boy’s tent and drop trou?”

“Drop it.”

“Exactly. First time we met I thought he was interested. Could’ve been all my brand new shiny bits,” he unsheathed an inch of his claws and clicked all six together. “Big Red drooling like a dog at a rack of ribs. Course, I did like him better with long hair, so who knows what might have –”

“Logan?”

“Hai?”

“By ‘drop it,’ I meant: stop talking.”

“Fine.”

And Logan stopped talking.

Part of Charles expected him to fidget. Logan didn’t, though. He just stared at the ruined half of the smokehouse. Charles looked too. Light filtered down from the holes in the roof and painted pale stripes over the floor in front of them, but no roof kept the sun from shining on the fireplace and the crumbling walls across.

“I give it another year.”

Logan stirred. “Hm?”

“This part of the roof.” Charles tipped his head back, stared at the few remaining rafters. “I’m surprised it hasn’t collapsed already.”

“I know.” Logan sighed. “We’ll have to find another place.”

“For smoking meat?”

“Cold storage too – and you know what? These walls are fragile; you see that. So tell me you two didn’t.”

Charles blinked at the non sequitur. “Beg pardon?”

Logan hit the back of his head against the wall. “Tell me you guys didn’t have sex here.”

“What?!” He spluttered. “Of – of all the ideas. Of course not. Even if it weren’t cold enough to freeze everything important, this is hardly a romantic setting.”

“Romantic? Fuck me, I just threw up in my mouth.”

“You know what I mean.”

“But – what gave you that idea?”

“The smell.” He tipped his head towards the corner. “You, right there. None of Lover Boy, but – both of you, in the air or something, I can’t put my finger on it. It didn’t hit me til I got here, though. So it’s not on you,” he sniffed at Charles, “because you’ve taken a few good showers, yeah?”

Charles nodded, not trusting his voice. The smell of both of them – oh god, had it been on a sweatshirt? One that he had stuffed into the knapsack – and had Logan detected it? What would he do, if pressed? What could he say?

“It hit me in the face when I came a-fucking-wassailing. And it’s here …” Logan pushed off the wall and paced forward – in front of the fireplace?

“Hm.” Logan tapped one boot on the buckling floor.

Charles felt his brow knit. What the hell?

“Maybe that’s it,” Logan was talking to himself, “he beats up on them, and he smells like sex, and so they smell like it – like, days later? After hours in the snow? Shit.”

He kicked at –

Charles focused on it in an instant.

– something rusty.

Something rusty – a handle – and the snow was trampled all around a square which he thought the sun had melted, even though it was cold. And Logan bent to take hold of the handle and tug.

A trapdoor opened, with a creak of rusted hinge.

Logan looked up at him from his crouch. “Cold storage. I’ll just be one minute – no harm in double-checking.”

“Double-checking what?” Charles hurried over to him.

“Hey, stay over there. You don’t need to see this, bub. Not,” Logan growled, “that you can see it anyway.” He fished out his lighter; gave it a flick. “But that smell’s stronger down here. I gotta check it out.”

“I’m coming down with you.”

“Xavier –”

“Really, Logan, you can’t open a bloody hidden trapdoor and expect me to stay here. That’s not fair.”

“Life’s not fair, Chuck. And curiosity killed the cat.” He took a careful step down, lighter held in front of him.

Charles heard a gusty sigh. “Killed the cat, and dropped it off in cold storage; damn.”

“… Do you mean …”
“Yeah.”

Logan’s head disappeared. Charles heard scraping footsteps. He peered after the glimmer of light.

“Our four escapees. I knew the others were taking them to storage, and – well. Stable doesn’t have a basement. I took the one I found back there first; could’ve saved myself a trip.”

There was a quiet scuffling. Then: “Looks like the other two put up a good fight. I hadn’t seen ’em before.”

An idea came to him. A cold one. Perhaps it suited the atmosphere, Charles thought, but before he could second-guess himself, he made his voice quaver. “Is this what Frost will do, now? Kill those who run away?”

“Wait, what?” Logan’s head popped up from the opening, just like a Jack-in-the-box. Charles had to cover his smile with one hand. He made it look like nausea. And Logan bought it, for:

“No, Charles,” he said. “Those prisoners – they were Free West. See for yourself; c’mon.”

It was just that simple.

Logan ducked back out of sight, so he didn’t see the cold smile in truth. Charles followed him. He lowered himself into the cellar – the steps of the ladder were half rotted, but it was easy enough with Logan’s help.

The flame from the lighter was not the strongest, but he could still see the four bodies laid out on a tarp, past the ladder. Back in the direction of the front door, Charles thought distantly – and surely there could be some ritual significance, piling corpses beneath what amounted to a place of animal sacrifice.

“I didn’t think you took prisoners, Logan. You told me so when we were discussing strategy.”

Logan said nothing.

“I remember, even if you don’t.”

“Wasn’t me, Xavier. Dragging them back here? I thought it was a dumbfuck idea from the start.”

“You mean dragging the bodies back here?” Charles flicked a look at him.


“And here they are.”

Charles walked forward. He had steeled himself as he descended; he knew he would not weep, or gasp, or give anything away.

It was horrible, even so.

Four bodies. Two had grievous wounds in their torsos, their arms – it looked as though they had been mauled. One of those two had a large bloodstain on his abdomen though, and blood in flecks on his lips and chin.

Lucas. He had been near death anyway, Charles remembered. And with the gurgle to his voice – a stomach wound would make sense …
“Victor got those two real good, I guess. Found one at the stable.” Logan hooked a thumb at Lucas.
“But we followed a blood trail through the snow, which turned out to be him.” He tipped his chin at – *Chris*, Charles remembered.

“They split up; I had his trail. Found him going to the west, then south. Went in the creek a bit; big mistake, slowed him down too much. He bled out on Elmira Road.”

Brave, then. Charles swallowed. He had only had a glimpse of his face, but Moira had said – *Chris has all his chains off*. Victor must have thrown off Moira and – *Rick* – faster than they had thought he could, and gone after Chris, who had run to get the keys …

Moira and Rick. Charles looked briefly at the two remaining faces – Moira, who had such a strong defense in her mind –

Moira. Who wasn’t on the floor.

Charles’ heart stood still.

“The last two got holed up in the main library, and we got them in a shootout.”

“There’s a library?” Charles said, glib. *Keep him talking.*

Logan snorted. “Wreck of one – Cornell’s biggest. You get migrants going through there; lots of books for fuel. Anyway, they barricaded themselves on the top floor – took the others forever to get them, they told me, even after Jean-Paul sniped one from above.”

“From above?”

“Yeah. You expect shots from below, you know? Specially if you stick yourself in a stairwell. But parts of the roof fell in long ago.”

Charles stared. Moira wasn’t in front of him. Neither was Rick, though.

“Did Jean-Paul kill him?”

A grimace. “Sometimes the flyers get mean. Maybe it’s the bird-of-prey thing; I don’t know. I guess he aimed for the legs.”

“Angel’s not mean.”

“You haven't seen her lose her temper yet.”

Except he had, Charles remembered. In her mind. Perhaps it would be best not to mention that.

"Jean-Paul has his moments. But Archangel, now – that’s one mean motherfucker. Keep out of his way if he stops by, all right?”

“All right,” Charles said faintly.

“So. Shootout.” Logan tapped one temple. “Clean enough.”

The third and fourth corpses had gunshot wounds to the head, complete with spatter – but there was only one neat hole to the shin of the third. Which meant, perhaps, that it had been made after death …

Charles breathed through his mouth. Had Logan noticed? Both third and fourth wore Free West
Charles looked closer. The fourth’s mouth was ajar. He could see rotted molars. It all fell into place.

Moira had found bodies in the library after setting up the barricade. Charles refused to believe she had killed them. She and Slade had switched clothes with them – after Slade had been shot in the leg, though, which must have warned them of how little time they had left. Then ….

They had kept running. And having found two bodies in uniform, the searchers had concluded the hunt.


“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

Why hadn’t Logan noticed? Charles wheeled on one foot and looked at his back –

_Oh._ Logan was crouched over what looked like another body, sniffing. It was wrapped in a stained red sheet.

“What’s that,” he said. Not asked. “Logan.”

Even though knew what it was – who it had been. His stomach churned. And now two knew, for Logan flipped back the red material covering the corpse’s face – and recoiled. “God damn it, Lehnsherr, you sick fuck –”

“What’s wrong?”

Logan shivered as he drew the sheet up over the corpse’s face, and stood.

Charles pretended to have caught a glimpse. “That’s MacMurphy, isn’t it?”

“No one should have that happen – fucking wires – Jesus.”

“Isn’t it, Logan?”

“Yeah. And with your bedsheets for a shroud, and that was what I smelled. Merry Fucking Christmas.”

Not the knapsack then, thank _god_ – and: “How?” Charles said. “Everything’s frozen. Lehnsherr changed the sheets on the bed on,” he gulped back saliva, “on Christmas Day.”

He wasn’t going to think about the fact that Erik had _kept_ them … and, apparently, kept them unwashed.

“See this?” Logan kicked at the ground. “Oil. One of ours gets the lantern from our truck. All the better to see, to arrange,” his teeth were bared, “those guys there.” He jerked his head at the corpses. “Standard procedure when we do a pyre; it doesn’t work when everything’s in a jumble. So, lantern heats the sheet, I smell what I smell, and that explains that. _Romantic._”

“Surely you’ve smelled worse in your time, Logan. And a pyre?” Charles forced a smile. “There’s no convection down here.”
“Maybe they think it’s time to torch this place, X man; I don’t know.”

Logan stared at the ladder. Even in the tiny flicker of light, Charles saw that his eyes were bleak.

“Not so good for our hunts,” Charles murmured. “If we don’t have a smokehouse.”

A sigh. “No. It’s not.”

*Hunts.*

Charles considered, calculating as calmly as possible. Moira and Rick had now had an extra hour. They would be heading for the Free West cell in Syracuse. Moira had told him so. With Rick injured … would they have reached safety yet?

If one of them still had a tracking device … perhaps.

Charles removed his emotions from the equation. If the two had already found safety, the Free West would trumpet the escape far and wide. A propaganda victory.

By that time, the corpses at his feet would have been consumed by a pyre ….

He bit his lip. With no evidence to prove Moira’s trick, Frost’s suspicion could fall on all parties currently present. Including himself.

And this would be a way to gain trust …

And Moira would have more time, wouldn’t she? Another search party would take at least fifteen minutes to deploy, considering the confusion that would ensue when the trick was revealed. And the EBS would have further to run, or drive … or fly. If Moira hadn’t the resources to use her newfound advantage, then perhaps the EBS deserved to have the victory in this little skirmish.

Damn it. He needed Frost to trust him. *Frost can be fooled – everyone can be deceived* – but he had to test that hypothesis, surely, since he hadn’t had outstanding success thus far.

Charles put Jean-Paul and the sniper rifle firmly out of his mind, took a deep breath, and made his choice.

“Logan?”

A grunt. “What?”

“There’s something wrong here.”

“A commander of the Free West wrapped up with some holiday comesicles, yeah. That’s very wrong. You know, X, I –”


The uniform sleeves had fallen over the hands of the third and fourth corpses. Instinct told Charles to push them up. He did.

And he heard Logan inhale.

“Look.” Charles held up the fourth’s right hand. “Three fingers gone, and I’m betting they were lost to frostbite.”
“Wait,” Logan breathed.

“Frostbite doesn’t take your fingers in two hours, Logan.”

“And Lehnsherr left the heat on …. Wait. Let me see something.”

It was disconcerting, to see Logan stumble. But he did, and he fell to his knees at Charles’ side. He shoved the lighter at Charles, who took it. “Let me …”

Broad hands trembled as he pushed the uniform trouser up. He prodded the gunshot wound on the shin.

“Fuck. That was made with a Colt.”

“So what?”

“Victor’s revolver,” Logan snarled, “they brained him, they took it and they ran – they had six bullets, and Jean-Paul said only he heard three in the shootout, and I wondered why – how could I have been so stupid? How could they have been so - Fuck. Fuck.”

“Why only three, then?”

Logan spat. “One,” he pointed to the leg, and then to the heads, “two, three. This is a fake.”

“They look pretty dead to me.”

“Jean-Paul’s rifle would’ve blown that guy’s leg to hell – why didn’t I see it; why?” Logan catapulted to his feet and ran for the ladder. Before Charles had time to blink, he was gone.

“Oi!” he cried after him. “Wait!”

“Can’t, X man – we gotta go, come on!”

A hand reached down into the cellar; Charles tossed the lighter up, took the hand, and gasped as he was hoisted and dumped onto the smokehouse floor. “Catch your breath; then we have to run and run fast – you get me?”

“I don’t get you, Logan,” he croaked.

“They killed two drifters in the library and switched clothes, Charles.” Logan’s eyes were wild. “God damn it – I should have smelled it in a second. And now this means they’ve got an hour jump on us, and if they make it away –”

“Then what? They’ll make a stupid vid and have a party; who cares?”

A bark of a laugh; it sounded horrible. “They’ll make a vid, sure. And they’ll step up the sabotage in our backyard ‘til they kill the kids or die trying. Run back with me – come on!”

“No!”

“What do you mean –”

“I mean,” Charles gritted out, “let me find Her Majesty.”

He touched his fingers to his temple. Understanding flashed over Logan’s face, but Charles didn’t keep his eyes open to see it – he sent a bolt of power southwest as fast as he could.
There was Frost.

*Lady!*  
*Ah, Charles.* It was a purr – if a voice in his head could sound like a purr. *I told you, tonight. At the moment I am –*  

Charles didn’t send another word. Instead, he gathered up all the images of Logan’s discovery and unleashed them over the wall of ice like –  

– a flock of birds? *No.* He didn’t need those images, not anymore. Raven and the others were busy, he remembered as he felt Frost grasp the images and freeze them – he didn’t need birds to convey that he was telling her – telling her –  

He fell to the floor with a choked cry. Next to him, Logan had doubled over as well, clutching at his head.  

Frost had not touched his own mind further, though. Charles stood up; reached out to Logan.  
**“Right,”** Logan wheezed. “Party time. Again.”  
**“Again?”**  
**“Yeah. The chase.”** A heavy hand clapped his shoulder. “Thanks, X. You saved me one sprint. Wish me luck.”  
**“Good luck. Do I go with you, or –”**  

Frost had not told him what to do, and he didn't know if a protocol existed.  

Logan shook his head. “The Finder. She’s powering it up again,” he coughed, “fucking *run,* X man. She’ll need you there.”  

So Charles ran.  

The Finder’s thrum was louder in his mind than even his boots, first in the snow and then clattering on the slate. There was no sign of the others. Charles slammed the main door shut and pelted past the kitchen; up the stairs and down the dormitory hallway, then another turn and straight into the library –  

His hand was on the West Wing door handle when the Finder lashed out.  
**“Oh -”**  

Cold crashed through him and around him. There had been no message from Frost - but he felt the power ricochet through his skull. And now his teeth hurt. That in addition to his headache, which was worse -  

He opened the door and made his way to the Hive. No one stopped him - not that it mattered, since walking towards the Finder was like fighting an undertow.  

Charles kept his grim satisfaction all to himself as he entered the main workroom. Even with his aviary working to construct some sort of defense … the same level of power in early December might have put him on his knees. Not so now.
He laid his hands on the railing and stared down into the lowest part of the Hive. At the crystal
crown glowing white on Frost’s brow.

She stood immobile, her hands on the Finder’s rail. And since it could not be her knuckles visible
from such a distance, however tight they were, perhaps it was her rings or her bracelets that glittered
there.

Charles dragged his eyes from them and glanced round the room. There was Hank, head turned over
his shoulder to look at Frost. There were technicians – some he knew, others unfamiliar – all staring
at Frost.

He cautiously turned back in place, to look at Frost himself.

*What did I tell you.*

Odd, how it was not a question. Charles felt a drop of sweat roll down his spine.

It could be the Finder, making Frost’s voice echo like that, around his mind – but he wasn’t hooked
up to it, no, he was *safe* …. It was only – frightening. Somewhat. The light from the strange crown
reflecting oddly off the metal of the room, making her eyes glitter.

*Charles.*

Sod it, he wasn’t frightened.

*My lady? I thought I was to help you.*

*What*, and her voice was louder – he winced – *did I tell you.*

*Tonight, Charles sent. But Logan –*

*Tonight. Now, go from here.*

Nothing about her moved. And except for the beeps and clicks of machinery, the Hive was
completely silent.

*I do not need you here. Go.*

There was just enough force in the last word to make him shudder. He walked backwards toward the
door, but then he bumped against a table, and the rattle of metal sounded very loud –

Nobody moved.

“Right,” he said under his breath. “Going. Going, right now – I’ll just,” and he found the door
handle, turned it, “go read in my room. Yes.”

He did not run back down the hallway, because he would never run from Frost. He just walked
quickly.

The Finder’s power was still pulsing. Charles had the sudden wild thought: if he looked out of the
corner of his eye, he would *see* it: following him through the twists of the West Wing – freezing on
the walls and crackling with every turn he took.

He went straight through the library, shutting doors behind him without thinking. And there was his
room, its door wide open. *Doorway,* rather.
“Nothing there.” Charles laughed. It sounded harsh to his own ears. “No doors, no privacy, no way to keep her out.”

Except whatever his raven had made, where he stood to lose the most. His mind ...

Charles flung himself onto his bed, rolled a blanket round his shoulders and stared up at the ceiling. At least it was warm. Someone had rebuilt his fire – Logan, perhaps, before the first chase. Of all things, he could see cracks in the plaster, vanishing into the soot leavings from the smoke that had turned the east side of the ceiling dirty. He could feel his breath rattling in his chest.

“Enough.” He flattened the palms of his hands on his eyes. His skull hurt. “Go on in and help.”

It was chilly in his reading room – but not with the biting edge of Frost’s power. Like his favorite working area at the Bodleian instead, the few times he had managed to open a window. Charles turned on one heel, his cloak flaring out behind him. His raven was nowhere to be seen.

There was the new door, through which all the cardboard had fallen; there was the new mirror, in which he could see his cloak and armor gleaming silver. There were tables and benches, the golden chair and the immense glass window – the silent flutter of the veils that served as curtains, the fireplace …

“Well. That’s new.”

Charles went to look closer. The fireplace was cold and clean: its surround worked brass, polished to a high shine. There was no fire.

“Why not? That would be the ideal defense, wouldn’t it?” He gritted his teeth; fought the urge to kick an andiron with one heavy sabaton. “And I don’t suppose I can will a fire into existence?”

A wild racket cut him off. Charles turned and saw his birds careening out of –

– an empty corner.

“What on earth?” He walked towards it. “How did you manage that?”

Behind him the storage door tumbled open; cardboard tumbled out. Each bird snatched a piece and flew back, Raven in the lead. Charles blinked at the sight of them slicing through the wall in front of his nose. Feathers flashed through plaster with no further sign of them. Except …. He looked round, searching for the penguin. It couldn’t fly. Surely it would be barreling past his feet, trying to keep up – but he couldn’t find it …

“Oi.” He raised his voice. “What are you all doing?”

The corner rippled.

Charles bent closer. Most of his power was locked away beneath stained glass and a finely threaded carpet, but it stood to reason that more things could be hidden – even if only in a shadowy corner. Much like the corners in Erik’s library, come to think of it. “Of course,” he breathed. Here, without any rotating bookshelf or other concealment. Nothing but white paint and dust.

And not the most comfortable location either. One armored elbow clipped the bookshelf behind him. Charles considered it, then elbowed the corner. Then he tried pressing the flat edge of his sword against it. Nothing happened. He tried placing one hand against it – nothing happened.
Frowning, he looked down for a knob at his feet. There was nothing there.

“What, then?”

He extended all ten fingers and pressed each into a wall – five on one, five on the perpendicular.

A jolt of power made him jump.

“With all at once,” he said under his breath, “so maybe … if I …”

Instinct told him it was correct. He tugged at his gauntlets, fumbling to take them off. They fell to the floor with a clatter, and Charles pressed his fingers into the corner again, then held his breath as he pressed each palm flat against the walls –

– and promptly fell straight through.

“My god.”

It looked like Moira’s atrium – except it was his …. Charles stared, heart pounding into his throat, giddy. Moira’s atrium had been an immense cylinder. So was his. But just as hers had been dark, with pinpoint lights – his was bright as day.

And set dead center, rising out of the floor, was a pillar of books.

He stared down, then swallowed hard. He was perched on a white stone rim with no floor in front of him – only a stark drop. But somehow the pillar ran through the floor as well as above, and he could see the ceiling’s distant windows reflected far, far below.

He crouched, reached out and touched what should have been open air. It was a hard surface.

“A mirror?”

It should show him his birds, then. He stared up, shivering. Surely they would be flying up and around? But he only saw one, graceful even though stubby, moving faster and faster – until it started the plunge back down, and flattened its flippers to its sides.

“Wait,” he murmured. “You’re not flying. You’re –”

The penguin’s head popped into view at the bottom of the pillar. It filled its beak with cardboard from the pile next to – an opening, Charles realized, in the mirrored floor.

“A two-way mirror, then? Or just … glass …”

Glass, he realized, shielding the memories deep down, and projecting the illusion of them above. Not ice, for he would have nothing of Frost’s fancying in his own mind. But like ice fishing in Banbury … one opening for a single line, and the rest sealed over and secure …

“Oh, my dears,” he said, awestruck, “and all for my memories. How have you even done this?”

The penguin flipped out of the water, grabbed more cardboard, and disappeared again.

Carefully, Charles set one armored foot on the floor. It held. He walked to the pillar in the center, and reached out with one bare hand.

The pillar was glass as well. The images of books, etched in black and stained different colors, looked vivid – but they were still an illusion. That which was real, was submerged …
The penguin heaved itself out of the opening again and stood, swiveling its flippers. Charles saw the air around it flicker.

“So you’ve been taking everything deep down, have you? Because you wanted to help?”

A honk from the bird; it shifted from foot to foot. Charles smiled at it; touched it gently on the head. “Thank you. Thank you so much –”

With another flurry and cries rebounding off the glass walls, the others swooped in from behind. They flew around Charles in a spiral and dropped pieces of cardboard from above. Charles shielded his head with a laugh. “And thanks to you all, too. How long have you – this must have taken –”

It was difficult to find the words. He watched the penguin dive again, then stooped and peered into the hole in the glass. The entirety of the atrium and pillar above, mirrored – except when Charles cautiously reached in, his entire hand came back numb.

Not from cold, though. “Electricity,” he whispered, “power, fire …. ” None of those was right. How to explain what he felt? If the air could turn liquid and cling to his fingers, that would be the exact sensation. “Melted into air, into thin air’ …. Except our revels are just beginning – are they not, my dears?”

The glass made his voice echo strangely – but it did not matter, since none of his birds could hear him. Charles straightened, and dried his hand on his cloak.

“Like to like, then – if you like,” he said to the silvery material. He felt his own breath catch; his knew his smile had turned giddy. “I like, very much.” Charles walked backwards over the glass, staring up at the pillar, at where it faded away into the ceiling’s light. “And since I like so much, it stands to reason I should help even more.”

He had done something similar in Angel’s mind, Charles remembered: sending silver and mercury lashing round and round to make things right. This time he focused his efforts on the storage closet, and directed a stream of cardboard and dust into the hidden corner. Prosaic substance for such a final product, but he would not complain.

When Charles could spare a moment, he looked into the volumes remaining on the reading room’s shelves. Memories of lazy mornings and quiet nights, of staring out the window on rainy days, of teaching and storytelling and the Oxford dances …. There was an entire shelf devoted to his memories of reading books – which, Charles thought gleefully, created a fascinating problem of infinitude. Perhaps it was the most fascinating thing that remained in a reading room now full of nothing but the mild and mundane.

Dust puffed up from the book of the river Cherwell as he snapped the cover shut in his hand. Nothing revealing – just the way he wanted it.

Time passed. He had no idea of the speed at which the atrium was being constructed; Charles told himself to consider it later. But after a very long while indeed, the first sign he had of things coming to a close was the way his birds went to the golden chair and coasted, climbed, or flopped into it.

Then Charles looked for the golden clock. He found it on its shelf, still heavy in his hand. “Half eight.” Or: twenty hundred and thirty … but he could think about time, and different conceptions of it, while sitting and waiting for Frost. Charles sat on a bench by one of the long tables. He gazed at the gold casket in front of him – the jewels – and rose to push it to safety through the corner … very slowly indeed. He picked up his gauntlets there, and put them back on. When he sat again, he
considered: dull books, an empty and clean fireplace; the carpet covering the rondel intact …. He was as ready, perhaps, as he would ever be.

“Although there’s no knowing until she knocks.”

His raven croaked at him.

“You’re right. She probably won’t. Let me know when she’s on the doorstep, though.” Charles felt woozy. “I just might – sit and be quiet, here. For a little while at least.”

His eyes fell on cardboard scraps and clots of dust in front of the closet. With a sigh, he sent them whisking up to the vast window, its glass now darkening. “Do something interesting.”

Then he shook his head; rested his brow on the heels of both hands. The sharp points of his armor bit into his flesh. “That’s right,” he murmured to himself. “What should I wear?”

Not his courting outfit, certainly. The implication was not one he wanted. And not his armor – Frost had dressed up the White Knight to be raped for Christmas, though he had given so much to her cause. She didn’t deserve to see a single spur of his sabaton, not anymore.

What, then?

Charles rubbed one cheekbone against his cloak, considering. Frost had swanned in from Brussels resplendent in furs and diamonds. There must have been parties for the New Year, there; perhaps even a ball …. He had only once or twice worn something so fine – but then, he had never pretended to rule anyone or anything.

Perhaps the suit he had worn to Anna Weiss’ wedding? Black tie, dinner jacket pressed to a point and shoes polished until they gleamed. He had been trying to make her look twice, even over a celebratory table awash with Glühwein. What had she been doing, anyway, marrying that dry-as-dust attaché? Fresh from court at Coventry, yes, but without a drop of royal blood. Choosing someone like that, when she could have had –

“Be honest, old man,” Charles sighed. “You’d have thrown her over like the rest.”

But only after she had enjoyed herself most thoroughly – he was at least that much of a gentleman.

He pushed himself up from the bench, and walked over to look into the mirror. Armor, shining silver – not what he wanted. Charles lifted his chin and concentrated.

There.

He gave his reflection, dressed to the nines, a tight smile. “Just as well you have hair here.” It shone in the dimming light, and his eyes glinted blue. Bowtie adjusted, hands smoothing down the jacket’s front in the mirror…. His throat worked as he swallowed hard.

A glance down showed him armor. “I’ll never get used to that,” Charles told his raven.

There was no sound in reply.

“Hello?”

He turned to look. The birds were gathered close around the golden chair – all standing. His owl spread its wings in silence, and then, without so much as a flutter, it glided up and vanished into the darkness in the corner.
With rustling feathers and the slap of webbed feet, the other birds followed suit.

All except Raven. Shadows were climbing up the walls and the shelves; the bird looked all of a piece with the darkness. It mantled its wings and croaked at him.

“Sounds like a death rattle,” Charles forced a smile. “If she’s coming, you had better go. Stay with the others. Keep them safe, won’t you? For me?”

Raven obeyed. Surely, Charles thought, it would require no effort to disappear. Just a spring up and one beat of wings to fly into the dark, and the reading room was empty.

Charles backed up, until his shoulders touched the mirror with a scrape of armor and slide of cloak. “Should I light some candles, perhaps? Or will darkness and doom set the scene sufficiently?”

No candles, he decided. For one thing, he couldn’t quite manage to will any fire into being. Charles concentrated on the fireplace. “Burn.” He bit his lip and thought: Burn. Come on –

Nothing happened.

It gave him something else to think about, though, as the glass of his window started glowing. The clear panes were now etched with designs, the details of which he could not see – set off by a few glints of color. The leftover cardboard and dust had done it all.

If it were illuminated by anything other than the White Queen’s power, he would call it beautiful.

He watched Frost pass through the window as gentle as breath, floating down to set her diamond slippers on the floor. Having landed, she stood still for a long moment, and then, slow and steady, turned in a full circle.

She looked just as she had in the Finder’s projection at Dallas. The sleeves of her gown left trails of crystal dust in the air; her pale shoulders and forearms shone in the dark. Her crown was nowhere near as blinding as it had been in the Finder, though. Now that he could, Charles stared. It looked to be nothing more than a delicate arrangement of twigs and leaves, studded with ice.

_Not so fearsome after all._

Or was she? Charles fought not to blink. What was she planning? A surprise attack?

Frost brushed her hands down her bodice. Then she tilted her head to one side, still looking round. And – had that been a _shrug_? Charles bit back a hiss as she adjusted her sleeves, touched one hand to her hair, and then walked over to a shelf.

She peered at one shelf in particular, directly in front of her eyes. Trailed a hand over the cracked spines, and then drummed her fingers.

_Were those –_ sparks?

Frost took the volume from the shelf, matter-of-fact, and flipped it open. _Shite._ It looked as though the pages were emitting electricity – how the bloody _hell_ was that happening?

Before he could think twice, Charles stepped away from the wall and cleared his throat.

The White Queen jumped. Only slightly, and she masked it with a turn in place and a smug smile – but it was a jump all the same. Charles kept his satisfaction to himself, and his voice respectful.

“Why touch those books, my lady?”
“Why not, my Charles? You don’t have anything to hide from me, do you?”

_Your Charles, my bony British arse._ Charles shook his head.

“Well. We’ll see.”

He refused to take the bait. The _bitch_, playing at being enigmatic – he plunged in. “What happened, lady? That you had to use the Finder, I mean.”

“What happened, Charles … is nothing for you. It is for me to consider and for me to counter. If I require your contributions, I will ask for them. Am I quite clear?”

“Crystal.”

Frost stared in his direction, eyes narrowed.

“Come closer,” she said. “Let me look at you.”

Charles obeyed, blinking as the window reflected light into his eyes.

And he saw Frost’s lips part.

Whatever she was playing at now, he wouldn’t back down. Charles stopped in the middle of the room and raised his eyebrows. “Are you quite well, lady?”

“Better now, given such a welcome.”

She walked forward with a quiet rustle from her gown and laid the open book on the golden chair. Charles heard the snap of static.

“I prefer your hair this way. It suits you. As does this …” Frost reached out to brush her fingers over his shoulders. “Very striking. So much more elegant than any armor.”

She saw what the cloak showed her, then. Just like Moira. _Interesting_ –

“Thank you,” Charles said.

“You’re quite welcome.” She turned away, in what looked like a step from a dance. “But your lovely reading room has grown rather more gloomy, Charles.”

He said nothing.

“How much was my prince to blame, I wonder? You’ve seen how dour his castle is. Perhaps it’s catching.” She looked back at him over her shoulder; her eyes gleamed in the dark. “Were you impressed by the castle, Charles? I did make it – very big.”

His jaw felt wooden. “My lady is generous.”

“I could teach how to do that, you know. You could have such a palace as would make this room an _oubliette_.” Frost picked up the book from the chair – it sparked, and Charles flinched. She flipped one cover back and forth, watching electricity crackle.

“Please be careful,” Charles said. “If – if you wouldn’t mind.”

Frost shut the book.
“You do care for these, then – don’t you? All of them. Even those that aren’t yours.”

She was watching for his reaction. Charles did not know which to give. Perhaps confusion was the correct one, for she looked satisfied. Then Frost waved a hand at the shelf behind her. “There are some from my prince, you see, that I shared with you earlier.”

“What?” Charles hurried over to the shelf. “I didn’t feel –”

“Mere copies; thus their nature.”

Sure enough – there were three books there with cracked and tattered bindings. Charles poked at one spine with a finger. It cracked further.

“This,” Frost held out the sparking book to him, “is not yours either.”

Charles turned at her tone, and now looked at the maroon cover. Something about it made him wince.

A tap of her fingers, and more sparks fell to the floor. “This belongs to Alex, Charles. And you did not go into his mind and conceal or copy it there – no. You sliced it out directly. Early on in your time here, too, which impressed me very much.”

Charles swallowed. He would feel guilty later. For now: “From within or from without – the two methods are that different, lady?”

“Indeed. Something made obscure within a mind – for the sake of peace, let us say – can be recovered, although with considerable effort. It is far easier to obscure it in the first place. You did so, with the stingrays in Cassidy’s little fishbowl. Do you remember?”

“Yes.”

Frost hummed. “This, though …” She trailed the book through the air, watching the sparks fall. “It’s not a copy, is it? So even if you wished to, there would be no returning it. Very sad.”

Charles was glad his raven was hiding. Were it here .... He would have sent it at the White Queen’s eyes, and *fuck* the consequences. Not her heart – he knew she didn’t have one.

“As I said, the cut was very clean. I hardly believe you had not tried it before.”

“I hadn’t.”

“And you’re not trying to conceal anything from me now, Charles …. Are you?”

“No.”

“Then where are your birds?”

It was difficult to speak. “They’re sleeping.”

“Sleeping … where?”

“I – I don’t know.”

“Hm.” She tossed Alex’s memory onto the chair and dusted off her hands. “An interesting development. Your birds sleep while you sleep. Lullabies all around,” Frost gazed up into the dark, “and no raven in sight.”
Of course. She remembered his strike against her when she had tried to kiss him – Charles shuddered while her back was turned. “Am I sleeping then, my lady?”

“Yes. The dreaming mind is a relaxed and open mind, Charles. This you will see for yourself in time.”

“In time – when?”

Frost walked back to him. Her diamond slippers chimed on the floor. She stopped when she was very close. “When I teach you.” A tilt of her head. “Though it seems I shall have to teach you patience, too.”

Charles held his ground. “I know what it is to be patient, lady.”

“Then that makes two of us. And I can be kind as well. Warmth and kindness … they can be yours. As long as you obey me.”

He hardly heard the last. For kind had touched his ears like glass on a chalkboard.

Frost stared at him for one long moment.

Then she lifted her hand.

Her touch on his face was cold. Just like her projection, in the Finder, Charles thought, dazed – although she had not touched him then. Not like this: trailing her fingers over his cheek.

“Will you obey me, Charles?”

“Yes.”

“Then swear it to me.”

“I swear it,” he rasped.

“No –” and she moved her hand down to his shoulder. It felt like a lead weight. “Kneel.”

Charles knelt. He could see his armor reflecting nothing but white. He placed his hands between cuisse and greave, and dug his fingers in.

“Very good.” Her hand drifted to rest on his head – ice clotting in his hair. “Now swear.”

“I swear to you, Lady Frost – I. I will obey you in all things.”

“You will do whatever I ask, whenever I ask it.”

“Within reason.”

“Within reason …” The folds of her crystal gown rustled closer, burning where they brushed his face. “With all your reason, then, and with your lovely little raven. You will do my will.”

He could not see through his gauntlets. If he could, Charles knew he would see his hands bleached white from the cold.

“Yes,” he said. “I will – my Queen.”

“Yes,” Frost echoed. “I am your Queen. Erik is my right hand – prove yourself, Charles, and you
will be my left. And together we will accomplish great things."

"Then let the right hand not know what the left is doing, please."

Only her soft laugh made him realize how loud her voice had been. "He will not be pleased, to lose your touch."

She was silent for a moment, before a softer whisper: "And to think I had neglected to ask .... How did you persuade him to take off your chain, Charles?"

It was growing very cold. His eyelashes had started to catch on each other and his lips felt numb.

"I kissed him," he lied.

"But you won't do that again, will you, my white knight? And he will not touch you. Obey me, and you need fear nothing."

"Yes." Charles felt dead. "Thank you."

Frost seemed content to stand there, quiet and still, her hand on his hair. Until:

"Please," Charles said.

"Yes?"

She brought her other hand up to his face, and pressed.

He tried to jerk away, but his skin had been warm enough to adhere, it seemed, because he could not move.

"It’s too cold – it’s –"

"Don’t worry, Charles."

Frost caressed his hair. "You’ll get used to it."

Something else shook his shoulder, hard – and Charles jolted awake with a gasp.

"Sorry Mr. Xavier!"

Scott stood at the side of the bed, wringing his hands. "Mr. Logan said to wake you up for dinner, and you were really asleep."

"Yes," Charles managed to say, "I was. Thank you – for waking me, I mean. I’m sorry to have startled you."

He stared into space. The same bedroom, the same sheets and blankets. There were the coals of a fire, glowing orange; there was the door to the bathroom, its paint flaking at the hinges. Everything the same. But his mind –

Shuddering, Charles thought of – Oxford.

There was no pain, no darkness. Just memories of teaching, and grading, and rounds of drinks with friends. And all the terrible memories too, he realized. Everything was still there. For Oxford, at
least.

Although would she have had any reason to take any of that? Testing, he thought of Erik. And hunched his shoulders as all their rounds of sex surfaced – Erik kissing him and pawing at him and – and licking his arse, oh –

“Everything still there,” he said. “That’s good. I suppose.”

“What’s good?”

He had forgotten Scott. Shite. “Nothing, dear. I was just talking to myself.”

“Why do you talk to yourself? Alex would say ‘That’s weird.’”

From the drawn-out sound of the word, Charles would wager that elder brother had said it to younger more than once.

“Do you always agree with Alex, Scott?”

“… No.”

“Right.” Charles rubbed his eyes. “Where’s Mr. Muñoz?”

“He went to bed. He said he had a headache.”

“Mm.” It was difficult not to shiver, even though …. Charles grimaced, looking down at himself. He hadn’t even taken off his boots.

“Are you cold, Mr. Xavier? Let me get you a sweater.”

“Really, Scott, I’m wearing a sweater already.” Erik’s, he thought. The green one. “And a coat. See?”

He held out an arm. “Right in front of you.”

Scott ran a hand up and down his sleeve. “I see. You could give me directions with your thoughts again, you know.”

“I know.” Charles got out of bed and stood on shaky legs. “But we’d better not do that unless it’s an emergency, all right?”

“All right. C’mon.” Scott took his hand. “Mr. Logan made hamburgers.”

“I thought something smelled good.”

“With cheese and mushrooms on them, and then he said ‘Go wake up Mr. Xavier and tell him I’ll drag his sorry ass down here if I have to –’”

“Scott?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t say ‘ass.’”

“O.K.”

“So Mr. Logan sent you up here by yourself, did he?”
“He said he knew I could. I counted the steps the morning, and I still remember.”

“Of course you do.”

Charles’ knees felt weak, but: normal, *normal*, he had to deflect any of Logan’s worry and focus on finding out – what had happened to Moira. The switched bodies, Frost’s rage … but she had seemed so calm in his mind.

She had seemed … happy.

Even though the kitchen was warm and welcoming, Charles shivered. Logan didn’t see; he was staring at the frying pan and only turned to grunt at Scott. “Good job.”

“Can I help with anything more, Mr. Logan?”

“Nope. And you know what, Scotty?”

“Yeah?”

“Bed’s calling, go on.”

“What do I *have* to?”

“Yep.”

“All right, I guess.”

“Oh,” Charles blinked, “but – he needs a fire, and to brush his teeth –”

“I can brush my *own* teeth –”

“ – And I built him a fire already. Beat it, kid.”

“Night, Mr. Xavier!”

“… Sleep well,” Charles said.

He sat down at the table. Stared at Logan’s back, and listened to the snap and sizzle of grease.

“That one won’t give you any trouble.” Logan pushed the meat around with the claws of one hand. “And ordinarily I’d say Jean wouldn’t, but I told you, didn’t I, that she threw the mother of all temper tantrums when she found out you wouldn’t be at Brussels. And Frosty had to threaten her with – dance deprivation, to make her behave herself. I wouldn’t knuckle under for a bunch of bone-ass tight tights, no matter how good they looked.”

The words made little sense. Charles struggled out of his coat and drew off his hat, slowly. He pressed his hands to his temples.

Logan was still talking. And he felt so tired …. *Go*, he tried sending to his raven. *Start – thawing things.* Perhaps that was it. Perhaps his mind was frozen.

“ – hey. Xavier? *Charles*."

Charles blinked. “What?”

His friend’s lips were pressed tight. Then Logan bared his teeth. “Nice haircut.”
“Like you’re one to talk.”

"Point." Logan let a plate drop in front of him on the table. Charles saw bread, mustard – even a few slices of tomato, as a piece of meat slid off metal claws and landed with a wet thud on a piece of lettuce. “Eat up.”

“I don’t know if I can manage all this at once.”

“I believe in you. So you better try, or I’ll have to start cheerleading – and I left my pom-poms in the trenches.”

Charles laughed. “Nothing can beat that image.” He pressed the assortment of ingredients together, and reached for knife and fork.

“The fuck? Look, bub: you pick up the hamburger,” Logan mimed, “you look at the hamburger,” he let his eyes go wide, “and you shove it in your mouth. No silverware allowed.”

“Really, Logan. That could end up quite messy.”

“I think you’re allowed to make a mess. Give it your best shot.”

So Charles did.

Logan watched him for a moment, frowning, and then turned. When he turned back, he was holding a mug – which he put it down with a thwack. Charles took a sip. It was hot chocolate.

“Thank you.”

“No prob.”

He ate in silence for a while. Then he tried: “This is really quite good, Logan. How did you ever learn how to cook? Although with those claws,” he tipped his head towards the burly hands dwarfing another mug, “you could save some lucky chef both knives and time.”

“I prefer the great outdoors. Cooked for lumberjacks, for a while.”

“Oh.”

Charles stayed quiet as he finished his food. Soon enough, he was pushing bread over the plate to soak up all the grease.

“Get it all, Xavier. I’ve passed the word to Muñoz: our secondary mission in life is now to get you looking less like a stick.”

“And the primary mission is?”

“To defeat the Free West. Don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we don’t like them very much.”

“Why should you hate them so ….” Charles mused. “Besides,” he added, hasty, as Logan glowered, “their putting metal in your body without your consent, their ideology, their treatment of women, minorities, and mutants – and I think I answered my own question.”

“Questions.” Logan brooded. “You sure have a lot of them.”

“Anyone normal would, with so much needless mystery. Remember when Lehnsherr put me in the infirmary the first time? How much of that would have been avoided, had you only told me where
the West Wing was, and why I couldn’t go there?”

“The first time? There was another time?”

“Never mind.”

He would stay the enigmatic one for once, and serve Logan right.

Except for the cleverness lurking beneath the grizzled exterior, for Logan glared again. “It was the tooth, wasn’t it?”

“I said ‘never mind.’ Thank you for the food, though.”

He wondered if Erik was eating. Except – no, it was well past midnight in Brussels. Charles flicked his glance back to Logan, who had told him the message from Jean, who had told him not to worry … Wherever Erik was, and whether or not he had eaten, it seemed the memories were safe for now.

“When do you go back to United Europe, Logan?”

“Soon.”

“How soon?”

“God damn it.” Logan slapped the table with both hands. The dishes rattled. “You and your questions, Chuck. ‘Why’ this, ‘when’ that. You know what, though? I think it’s strange. I think it’s very strange that you haven’t asked me what happened with the prisoners and the Finder. I’d think you’d be real curious about that one.”

What on earth had set him off? Charles felt his skin prickle. He bought time with a sip of hot chocolate. “I assumed you would say: ‘need-to-know basis.’”

“Right.”

“But now that you’ve brought it up: what did happen?”

A muscle jumped in Logan’s jaw. “Lehnsherr was supposed to kill them, you know. And Victor only managed to open his eyes and talk after we’d started the second search – and my guess was right. They got the drop on him, knocked him out, grabbed his gun and ran.”

“How on earth did they hurt him? He seems indestructible.” Charles raised the mug in a toast. “Like you.”

“Cyanide.”

Charles blinked. “… How did they manage –”

“Ampoule to the eyeball. One of them had it sewn into the uniform or something – and before you ask, strip searches are the Free West’s deal, not ours. And that explains the biggest thing –”

“The other bodies?”

“Nope. Figure those were drifters with worse luck than usual. No. Guess what Victor said when he woke up, X man.”

“‘My eye hurts’?”
“Ha, ha. He said: ‘I want the woman.’”

“... Woman? One of the drifters was a woman?”

Logan hissed between his teeth. “You’re not stupid, X. When would he have had the chance to smell those poor bastards alive? No. One of those Westies was a woman. Is a woman. She and her pal – the two that made the switch …. They got away.”


“Visual of a copter picking them up halfway to Syracuse. We got a farmer who saw it all – shot the bird up a bit, at least.”

“And that’s why the Finder stopped?”

“Yeah. Frost got just enough to know they were gone, I guess.”

“But the Finder can reach from here to bloody Dallas and take over peoples’ minds, Logan. Why didn’t she just crash the helicopter? Two aneurysms would account for pilot and co-pilot – and don’t tell me the Finder isn’t capable, because I’ve felt it.”

“She couldn’t find the copter, Xavier. You see the problem? Frost didn’t catch that a certain Captain Mark MacTaggert was a chick, even though she had them all locked down by feast night. And today she couldn’t find four minds going due west, all together and fast as hell. What does that tell you?” Logan’s eyes looked empty. “Strategically?”

“That – they’ve come up with a way …. Oh.”

“Yeah. They’ve gone and figured out a way to block a telepath. A way that works.”

Moira’s prototype, Charles remembered. They must have had more on the helicopter, and the pilots already dosed ….

“That’s very serious.”

“No shit.”

Logan got up to clear the table. It would be best to strategize with him further, Charles decided. Chivvy him out of his dark mood.

“And Victor hadn’t … smelled her, before? I gather there was an event at the stadium, the night,” Charles swallowed, “that Lehnsherr came back. Couldn’t Victor have picked up on the difference there?”

“I asked the same question. We’re good at it, Vic and I.” Logan took an exaggerated sniff of one of his own hands. “Get this, X. He said he did smell her at the stadium. Just a bit. But —”

“‘But’?”

“But he thought that Frost had a plan.”

“Some plan.”

“You’re still not getting it, bub. He assumed Frost knew, and was letting it pass, for her own reasons. Because, and I quote: ‘How could the Queen not know?’”
Charles winced. “I can’t imagine she was happy with that.”

“She wasn’t.”

There was silence for a while, broken only by the sound of Logan washing dishes. Then plates landed on a towel with a clank, and Logan said, “She’s hit back for it now, though.”

“Frost?”

“Ouais.” He sat again, heavily. “Not completely, ‘cause it’s bad, X. We just let two POWs show our underbelly to anyone and everyone. So yeah, Frost was pissed – and guess what she did.”

“I have no idea.” Charles’ heart sank. “But – it’s not going to be pretty, is it?”

“No deaths that we know of, but yeah: MacTaggert’s pretty damn done. A shame - I always liked fighting her team. They’re a bunch of tricky bastards.”

Charles waited.

Logan cracked his knuckles; stared at Charles over them. “So. MacTaggert and Slade – the other one – get away. And Frost gets on the horn to all our cities, Vancouver to the Maritime. She sounds the alarm: look out for two saboteurs. They’re wearing Free West uniforms, they’ve got a working gun, and one of them is a woman in disguise.”

It came into horrible focus. “And the Free West will –”

“Intercept it, yeah. Probably did already. And since they’ve got rules for the ladies, MacTaggert’s done.”

Charles bit down hard on the inside of his mouth. He had imagined a chase and blood. But this …

“What’s wrong, X man?”

He tried to shrug. It was difficult. “Do they …. Will the Free West shoot her for it, do you think?”

“They hang ‘em or fry ‘em out there – but I can’t imagine they’d do either to her. I mean, high up in the army and busting out of our own backyard? That forgives a lot of sins. They’ll probably just stick her back in a girdle and treat her to some re-education.” Logan ran a finger over the knuckles opposite; then placed his hands on the table. “Re-finishing school. Smile pretty, cut the cake and pour the coffee, speak when you’re spoken to, all that shit. Marie had to do it once. Took it out on me afterwards, which was fun - but she said: never again. Cause she hated it.”

He studied the backs of his hands. “We all have to do things we hate, once in a while.”

Charles looked at the tabletop. Erik’s fingers had been there not forty-eight hours ago. They were long and slender, while Logan’s looked like weathered wood.

“Time for me to cheerlead, I suppose.” Charles sighed. “I remind you that I’ve already done something I hated.”

“Done someone you hated, bub. ‘Who I Did Over My Christmas Vacation,’ by Charles Xavier.”

“Very funny.”

“I’m a funny guy, and damn if I don’t have some funny questions. Like: how’d you get Big Red to take a bath?”
“You don’t want to know.”

“O.K. Why’d you have to give Jean that book? She’s been pushing it on everyone, and thinking ‘read to me’ like a hammer to the head.”

Charles smiled. “I’m glad she likes it so. And I gave it to her for the pictures, of course.”

“Of course.” Logan smiled back. “And why’s one of those dead drifters wearing Bobby’s socks?”

Charles’ head jerked up.

It wasn’t that the question didn’t follow – it was that – Bobby’s socks, the hand knit, knobbly and oversized socks that he had used to conceal the diamond and the note, fuck, fuck –

His heart was pounding as he kept his smile bland. Focus, come up with a lie, and quickly –

“Phew.”

Logan waved a hand through the air between them. “I can almost taste that, X. Fight or flight? How about neither? How about you just answer, and tell me the truth – cause I can smell a lie.”

He reached into a pocket of his jacket, draped over the bench, and flipped the socks onto the table.


“Charles. The truth.”

“I …”

He stared at the knit. It blurred, and cleared as he blinked. Why would Moira – but then it hit him. Message received. It could be her attempt to tell him that she had taken the note and the jewel. That she would see them delivered to Raven, no matter what.

Why do so in such a bloody incriminating way, though? Unless she had no idea the socks were anything out of the ordinary.

… Unless, like Charles, she made her help a double-edged sword.

Clever, then.

Charles dragged his eyes away from the socks. Looked at Logan.

“Are you going to tell me, X man?”

“I can’t.”

“‘Can’t’, or ‘won’t’?”

“I won’t, I suppose.” He tried a ghost of a smile. “Sorry.”

“‘Sorry’ doesn’t cut it. If you helped them …”

Charles refused to look away. He would never be a coward – even if he had betrayed a friend. No, not betrayal: disappointment, perhaps, for that was what was in Logan’s expression.

“We’ve done you wrong, Charles – I know that, you know that. But you can’t get your own back by helping out people who want to kill everyone like you, wipe you off the planet – can you? You want
Armando back in a lab? You want Alex and Scott shoved into some power plant somewhere? You – do you want baby Jean to get her back broken, get stuck in a tank, get wired up to take Stryker’s place?"

“Stryker?” Charles stammered. “I thought – he’s the bloody president, isn’t he?”

“His son.” Logan’s eyes were shadowed. “He did that to his own son, X man. You on his side, or on ours?”

“It – it can’t be that simple. There’s places in the middle. There have to be. There have been such, through human history, Logan –”

“We don’t have that luxury now. I told you in the smokehouse – we’re playing the numbers game. We have to bring all our people to the table; we can’t afford any mistakes. And this was a big one for us. They’ll be coming after the kids, here, even if their ops fail again and again. Cause someone got away this one time.”

“Well, I’m sorry,” Charles said, savage, “but I am not going to torture and kill because of some Manichaean construct you’ve set up for yourselves –”

“I don’t need you to be sorry.” Logan looked grim. “I need you to know: some day, maybe soon, you’re going to have to make a choice. Between us and them, I mean. And you’d better have a good long think about which way you’re going to go.”

“I’ll think, then.”

“You do that.”

The silence was oppressive. Charles felt like shaking, all over; he controlled it, and the sting in his eyes. His friend – that Logan should think him so cold, so careless of the children, when he had given himself to Erik just to see them all safe …

“What sort of friend,” he said to the tabletop. Then he shut his mouth.

Perhaps it was Frost’s little visit, making him shudder – causing his thoughts to fire randomly, trying to think of a way out – a way to make things just as they were before –

“A good friend,” Logan said, calm. “I covered for you at the smokehouse - there’s enough cigar stink above, now, to throw off Victor. And I haven’t told anyone, X. Not cause it’s unimportant – but I wanted to hear what you had to say, first.”

“And now – what will you tell them?”

“Don’t know.” Logan scratched at a splinter in the table with one blunt fingernail. “Need-to-know basis goes both ways, maybe.”

“Not even Her Majesty?” Charles said. “She’ll whisk it out of your mind quick as a wink.”

“Yeah, that could be trouble. And I’m nowhere near Jean – and talking of minds, Xavier,” a frown up at him, “she got an open invite, now?”

“What do you mean?”

“You came in here twitching like you’d run into a live cattle fence. I’ve seen the look, when she gets done with different folks. At least you didn’t drool. She cut a deal with you, Charles? Cause then
you’d better get to Jean fast, too.”

“I’m to serve her – just like you. And she offered to teach me …”

Charles trailed off.

To teach him – she had already mentioned something. The difference between obscuring a memory from within –
– and cutting it away. From without.

“Logan,” he said.

“What?”

Charles touched the socks. He rolled them back and forth; Logan watched. “Have you told anyone else about these?”

“Nope. I mean,” and Logan glanced up, “what would I –”

A distant thought came to him: of how interesting it was … to see the stubble on Logan’s chin turn black as ink instead of dark brown. As the blood drained out of his face.

“Charles -”

But Charles had already called his hummingbird, had given it tokens of forgetfulness and a beak as sharp as Logan’s claws – and had whipped it into his friend’s mind, lightning-quick.

He flinched at the flurry of images, flying past and cutting at his face like razors. But there – a thread of yarn from the socks, and the bird sliced with its beak – sliced as Charles took hold of it from the outside and yanked.

Logan fell forward with one choked cry.

Charles himself felt a throb of pain behind his eyes – “God” – and blinked, dazed. One of his hands flat on the table; the other ….

He had placed two fingers at his temple, digging in. Why?

… Who knew?

Logan’s shoulders were shaking. Charles himself did not feel much steadier. Calm enough, though, to stumble to his friend, find the flask in a pocket of his jacket and spill whiskey over the table between them. He took a gulp. It burned.

“Fucking A.”

Broad hands pushing up off the table, and a long sniff at the alcohol – “Fuck. Some party.”

“Rest is yours,” Charles slurred, and held out the flask.

“Thanks.”

The pain at his eyes was fading. He watched Logan, heart in his mouth.

“Damn, X.” Dark eyes blinked, then focused. “You better keep that burger down. I worked hard on
“If it didn’t come up when you told me about cyanide to the eye, it won’t after a bit of alcohol.”

“Right. Some shit, huh? I mean, I hate Victor plenty, but I still get the willies just thinking about it. MacTaggert better hope he never catches up to her. Did I tell you she was the one to set up that deadfall? Try ’n take out Big Red, last day at Dallas?”

“… No. You didn’t.”

“Well, she did. Bit of a damper on a victory march, if you can’t even walk. Good thing he had this fucker here; helped carry him to the hill – tear down the last wall. Fun times, huh?”

Logan had tipped his head at the door, Charles realized. Skin prickling, he turned to look.

There was the red-skinned man he knew – a devil? but devils don't exist – arms crossed. Leaning against the doorframe.

“Azazel,” Charles said. That was his name. “Hello.”

A grunt. And: “Have you told him yet?” – directed at Logan. His accent was very heavy.

“Haven’t gotten round to it.”

“You’re drunk,” Azazel hissed.

Charles stared. He had almost forgotten: that Azazel individual had a tail – it was fascinating. It was also slashing through the air, like that of a furious cat.

“You’re one to talk. So,” and Logan straightened, “Charles: you keep an eye on Kurt, and don’t let him come to any harm, or this guy here will have your guts for garters. And that is straight from the horse’s mouth. A red Russian horse, sober for once –”

“Come on.” Azazel grabbed Logan’s arm. “Let’s go.”

“Already? An' how'd you get Kurt to leave off crying?”

“How do you think?”

"Shit. 's past her bedtime. An' Frosty's gonna blow her top when she sees her -”

"Emma went already. Now we all go - except you, Charles Xavier. Is it quite clear, about my son?"

His eyes were disconcertingly pale. Perhaps it was the contrast with his lurid skin - but what had he said? It was clear as mud.

“You tried to use him once, our lady tells me? Try again, and I will come after you, and I alone will come back.” Azazel inclined his head. “Do svidaniya.”

The two of them went to the door.

He had to test it. Charles pushed back from the table, grabbed the socks. “Logan?”

“Yeah?”

“You – forgot these.”
Logan squinted. “Those are yours, bub. Bobby’s Sworn stuff, right? You got ’em now, so stick ’em on your feet and stay warm.”

“Of course.” Charles clutched the heavy knit in both hands. “Travel safely, won’t you?”

“One second, Azazel.”

Logan lurched free, and wrapped Charles in a hug. “You need anything, you let me know. All right?”

“… All right.”

“And put a hat on. Christ. You look like a plucked chicken – doesn’t he?”

Azazel herded Logan out the door. “I’ve seen worse.”

“You have not. An’ cheer up, man. He’ll be fine.”

"Shut up," a snarl somehow Russian in timbre, and then the sound of a scuffle. "Are you going to be like this the whole way? Because I will make a special stop, and drop you into the Channel from the cliffs …”

Their voices faded.

Charles looked at the empty hallway. Of all things, he felt the sip of his own breath.

“Time for bed,” he told the socks.

He took his coat and hat, aimed for the door, and then watched his feet move. Was he ill? No. He didn’t have to vomit, and he wasn’t even cold. Until he reached his room – at which point he realized: the fire had died down.

Charles rebuilt it, and crawled beneath the blankets. He had done it. Frost wouldn’t find out - the tokens of forgetfulness would cover any scar in Logan's mind, erasing any mark .... That was a good thing. So why did he feel so ....

He watched the flames for a while. Then he pulled a blanket over his head.

“I didn’t mean it,” he told the darkness.

His own voice sounded raspy. It caught on something strange, as he said again: “I didn’t – but I had to. I had to –”

_We all have to do things we hate, once in a while._

Logan’s words; not his own. Were they thus any excuse? He felt his throat close up. _Oh._ It seemed he was crying.

Charles had not done so – not truthfully – for some time. So he had some excuse for its awkwardness. Even for being unable to stop.

Nothing helped, though. He was smothered in humid darkness – but then he was staring at the empty fireplace in his reading room, and he still couldn’t stop.

“I didn’t mean to.” He pressed one gauntlet against his mouth. Everything about him felt cold and sick. “But I had to. What else could I have done?”
He turned from the cold brass and stared at his bookshelves. So many incriminating memories hidden away – yet there was the shelf with those that were not his, and there was a new volume on it, next to Alex’s.

Charles did not want to go look. So he didn’t.

At the bottom of the shelf, shapes were emerging from a shadow. The shadow in the corner, he realized – and there were his birds, pressed against the lowest books, and staring at him.

“I –”

He tried to speak. Could he explain? Did he have to?

Did it matter? For the only thing that clawed its way out of him, in the end, was: “I’m sorry.”

Charles fell into the chair. He felt as if strings had been holding him up, and now they were cut. And everything felt numb, even as he wept. Perhaps that was because of the cold, he thought – the frost on the shelves and the curtains, turning the wood silver and the veils heavy. He had dreamed about this only the day before. Was it because it would come true? Even his birds flying to nestle close could not warm him. Flying - or moving, *trying* to move, but his penguin stumbled to a stop halfway to the chair, keening ... going quiet as its head sank to its breast.

Leaning forward where he sat, Charles covered his face with his hands. His armor felt cold. Everything colder, and colder - his birds tried to move their wings but fell from him in trying, fell in slow arcs through the air to the floor, where they lay still.

And afterwards, he would realize: he had no idea how long it took for him to hear the smallest sound, like a distant bell. To look up, to squint, even with the tears frozen on his face, at the strange light flickering on the hearth ... and to realize: it was a tiny flame. A tea light.

Where there was a fireplace, Charles thought, doing his best to get to his feet, his whole body rigid and unbending - there had to be a chimney – *fuck*, he hadn’t put any defenses in place for something that could come through and attack him there –

*Mr. Xavier?*

Charles lurched where he stood, and turned – shield on his arm and sword in hand.

*Mr. Xavier? Are you there?*

“Jean?” He sheathed his sword, caught at his cloak and scrubbed at his eyes. “Is – is that you?”

*Yes. May I come in?*

“Oh, my dear –”

Charles looked round, dizzy. Frost everywhere and feathers from his birds; those same birds limp and unmoving where they had fallen - what would she think?

“Yes,” he choked, “you may. But I had intended to make a tea party for you, and – oh, Jean. I have cardboard and air, and all of it – iced. And not the good ice, I mean.” He tried to laugh, despite everything, as the tea light started burning brighter and brighter. “Not like ice cream.”

*That’s O.K.*

The mental voice came from behind him. He had almost forgotten how vivid it could be.
Charles turned and saw Jean sitting in his chair.

She smiled up at him. *Too much ice cream makes my head hurt.*

“That’s – only if you eat it too fast, I think.” He bit his lip. “Hello.”

*Hello, Mr. Xavier.* She tipped her head. *I miss you.*

“I –”

And here came the waterworks again, damn it. He swiped at his face. “I miss you too.”

*What’s wrong?* She looked upset. *I sat down in your room, but you were hiding in the blankets.*

"Perhaps I fell asleep, dear - I'm rather tired."

*No. I think you're in between.*

"... In between?"

*Not quite awake, but not asleep yet. You know.*

"Ah."

Charles gazed at her. Jean was wearing the same white robe she had worn in her own mind. The phoenix embroidered on the front was vivid as ever – but not nearly as bright as the actual bird that poked its head around the chair.

Her eyes widened. *Sorry – I forgot to ask if he could come too.*

“Of course. Welcome.” Charles jerked his head at the bird – *ridiculous,* he thought for a moment, but then it arched its neck and bowed to him in return, before fixing him with a fiery glare.

*I forgot …. Jean placed a hand on the bird’s head. He didn’t really like you when you came to visit. I thought he would be better now, but –*

“That’s all right.” His own birds were moving again, making small sounds in fits and starts. Stiffly, Charles bent to pick up the tea light, brought it over to Jean and held it out. “This is yours, I assume. And if your firebird does not care for me – well. I might have … done something, just now … that I’m not happy with, Jean.”

Her eyes were solemn. *What did you do?*

“I …”

It couldn’t be helped. And he couldn’t even bring up part of the cloak in time. “I didn’t ask, my dear. And I took something.” His voice cracked. “I didn’t even ask –”

His birds fluttered to the edge of the carpet. Away from the phoenix, Charles saw through his tears. Perhaps they were afraid. All except Raven, who perched at Jean’s right hand.

*Mr. Xavier – please don’t cry.* She patted the raven on its ruff; the bird bobbed its head. And Jean looked on the verge of tears herself. *See? She doesn’t want you to cry.*

“You don’t understand – I did this to a friend.”
Then you can say sorry. I’m sure he’ll understand.

“How do you know it’s a ‘he’?”

Jean pointed at the bookshelf. There’s Alex and Logan and Sean. And -

Charles shivered, as Erik’s image flickered in front of his eyes. Smiling, and turning the pages of a book.

Frost's gift to him, of Erik's fantasies. Dear god, he hoped Jean couldn't see through their covers. Not bedtime reading for anyone, and certainly not fit at all for a child.

He cast round for a change of subject. “Don’t you have a name for him, Jean?”

She was quiet for a long moment. Then she lifted one shoulder. It's a secret.

"Well." Charles did his best to resist his curiosity. "You're allowed to have secrets. Goodness knows I have plenty. When did you last see him?"

Another image. Then another – and a flurry of them, ending with Erik somber and watchful and bending his head, so a small hand could reach to touch his temple.

“Oh god. When did that happen?”

Yesterday.

“So you helped him?” Charles stumbled over the words. “To hide the memories he asked you to hide, I mean.”

She nodded.

And he could say nothing but: “Thank you.”

You're welcome. Jean sat up straighter. Why did you need them hidden?

Charles smiled, shaking his head. His neck felt rubbery. He saw the phoenix rest its head on Jean’s hand, with a low warble.

Sorry. He says: don't be nosy.

“That’s quite all right.”

She looked up at him again. It’s cold in here.

“I know.”

Would you like a fire, Mr. Xavier? Jean’s face brightened. I can make one for you.

“... Would I?”

Charles stared at the phoenix. It stared back at him. Smoke trickled out of its beak.

“I – would, Jean. You made me a token once, and this would be just as great a favor. But …. I don’t think your friend approves.”

Jean considered, then reached out to stroke one of the phoenix’s gorgeous wings. Maybe not. But he doesn’t want you to be cold.
“I see. Then – tell it. Him. Tell him ‘thank you.’”

There was the fern-curl smile he had missed. Charles smiled back – and had to blink hard, and thus almost missed the bird whisking past him, feathers flickering, and nestling down in the fireplace.

“Um.” He turned to look. “How will he –”

When the phoenix caught fire, Charles leaped back. Behind him, Jean giggled.

“Well – that was just a surprise, Jean dear.” After almost tripping on his cloak, Charles looked round and tossed his shield on the table with his gauntlets. Then he tugged a bench to the chair’s side, and sat next to Jean. “Look at him go.”

The flames were leaping higher and higher in the fireplace. Jean kicked her feet where they dangled off the chair. *I always think it’s pretty.*

“Yes. Very pretty.”

And very warm. Charles heard something crackle. He peered back over his shoulder – and saw the frost on the shelves melting away into thin air. “Look at that.”

He almost laughed. *Sod it* – he would laugh, and he did. “Thank you. I – don’t think I realized how cold it really was.”

*You can keep the fire, then.* She held out the tea light. *Here.*

Charles took it and placed it on the table. He watched the flame glimmer over the planes and angles of his shield; orange-red on silver. “Thank you. It means – more to me than I can say.”

*You’re welcome.*

They sat in silence for a while, watching the phoenix burn. It was coiling round and round in the flames, like a feathered snake. Charles saw his own birds fluttering closer, drawn by the warmth. Or perhaps, he thought, looking at the penguin – drawn by the light.

His raven was quiet on the armrest. Jean’s right; his own left. Charles sighed. Suddenly, he felt very tired.

“I feel as though I can rest now, child.” The flames danced in his sight. “… It’s a good feeling.”

*I’m glad. You look tired.*

“Whereas you look quite refreshed.” He smiled at her. “Have you been enjoying Brussels?”

Jean shrugged with one shoulder. *I haven’t been there long. Nobody would read to me – except –* Erik’s image, again – a hand Charles recognized, turning a page, and a low voice speaking English, and then translating into German. Well. More - rumbling into German, really.

*I like that book. It was my favorite present. See?*

Jean reached down and pulled up a volume from the right sight of the chair. Out of his sight, Charles realized – perhaps her phoenix had been sitting on it. “You’ve brought it here? How flattering.”

There was the cover, and Jean’s small hands opening it. “Do you have a favorite story?”

*We haven’t read them all yet.*
“Ah.”

I looked, though, and the ballet story isn’t in the book.

“Ballet story?” Charles leaned his head against the side of the chair. He could look down over Jean’s shoulder, and watch the pages flick by, their illustrations taking on life and dancing over the paper until folded away. Normal enough, for dreams. He let it pass. “What was it about?”

Here. I’ll show you.

Charles gasped.

He was still seated at Jean’s side. But she was in a red velvet chair, now – the chair wedged into a niche, and Charles wedged alongside, a red velvet curtain in front of his nose. He tilted his head away from it, and tried to make sense of …

Of the vision? Image? What was it?

“Is this a memory, Jean?”

Yes.

She slipped off the chair and took his hand. They pushed the curtain aside and walked forward – only a few steps down a narrow red hallway, and in the direction of the music.

Beautiful music, Charles thought, and blinked as Jean pushed another curtain out of the way. They stepped into an opera box.

“How lovely …” he whispered, staring.

The stage was set as a forest framing a lake; dark blue reflecting a midnight sky. And there were dancers crossing back and forth, clothed in diaphanous white, keeping perfect time to the music.

“It’s ‘Swan Lake’ – splendid. Even if I’ve seen it already.”

In Edinburgh, so long ago … He had been on academic exchange for the one of the last terms of his studies, and a troupe had been on tour from France. This looked far more spectacular, though. It must have been a special performance, for the opening of the peace conference.

Charles watched the prima ballerina cross the stage, refined and restrained, dancing - almost floating ... showing no effort at all. Then she launched into entrechats, her arms flying up and down through the air.

“Amazing. You have to be a ferocious athlete to do that.”

Jean made no reply. She was looking – Charles blinked – at herself. Seated in another red velvet chair, dressed in white satin with lace gloves, and holding a tiny purse in her lap. Her hair had a large bow in it.

“So you can see yourself in a memory; of course.” Charles smiled. “Did you enjoy the ballet?”

The living, breathing Jean looked up at him, and squeezed his hand. It’s sad.

“The story can be tragic; that I do know.” He squeezed her hand back. “But I’m sorry if it upset you.”
'Upset' isn't right. Jean’s brow furrowed. It's a heavy feeling – here.

She pressed a hand over her heart.

“Well.” Charles tipped his head to one side. “I hope you won’t have to worry about a broken heart for many years.”

Jean smiled. He smiled back, and gazed at the stage again. The dark backdrop made the dancers ethereal, their shadows flickering and their costumes tinged with blue. They had all stopped in a tableau; the prima ballerina gazing down from where the male lead was holding her in the air.

“Is this your favorite part, then?”

I liked when the prince said he’d love the swan forever.

"Right now?"

Soon.

The music had changed from flamboyant to melancholy – Charles recognized the main theme. He watched the prince grip the swan maiden's waist. His hands were very large. He had, Charles noted, a rather spectacular arse.

He flicked his eyes away. Jean could very well sense his attention – best not to corrupt the young …

When his gaze landed on Erik, though, he flinched.

What is it?

“I didn’t know he was there, is all.”

His skin was prickling, all over. A shock, he told himself – and understandable, since it was so dark in the box and since Erik knelt in shadow, silhouetted against the pale glimmer of Frost’s dress.

“My lady,” Charles whispered. "Enjoying yourself .... Why am I not surprised?"

What?

“Lady Frost was there, of course. And – him.”

Erik’s head was pressed against her thigh. Charles felt his gorge rise. “’In Träumen immer bei Dir’ – always with you in my dreams .... So much for that.”

What's wrong, Mr. Xavier?

“Nothing.”

Here's my favorite part.

He looked back at the stage. The prince, resplendent in dark silks and silver brocade, was swearing eternal loyalty to the painted sky. The swan maiden flitted back to him; took his hand with a tilt to her fragile neck that suggested ... love, perhaps. Charles sighed. It was very well done.

He dismissed thoughts of Erik and focused on the corps de ballet, now picking up speed in a near-silent spiral: circling round and round and disappearing offstage. They reminded him of nothing more than white feathers vanishing in dark water.
"It's beautiful," he said.

Jean rested her chin on her arms, peering over the box’s edge. They watched the prima ballerina droop and sway, and finally bend low in an arabesque to bestow a kiss on the prince.

*It’s sad*, Jean sent, as the music grew louder, as the evil sorcerer gestured from his perch stage right. *She doesn’t want to go.*

“Sometimes we have to do what we don’t want to do, hm? I don’t suppose you wanted to wear that bow, did you?”

Jean made a face. Charles patted her shoulder. Then he looked again - damn his curiosity, but he couldn't help it.

Erik’s head was bent low. Frost’s hand was pressed flat against one of his stark cheekbones; her thumb digging into his temple. Charles looked up at her. She was beautiful, and regal, and watching the ballet with nothing on her face but serenity.

The final chords swelled. Charles looked up in time to see the swan maiden glide offstage. He had missed the transformation; *damn*. That had been an especially striking moment in the Edinburgh production; it would have been interesting to see it differently here. He would have to content himself with the noble hero in the dark, repeating his oath with one hand held high.

“You see, Jean? That’s a prince. This one,” and Charles jerked his head back in Erik's direction, “should really be paying better attention.”

*I don't understand.*

"Never mind," Charles sighed.

When the applause started, he heard Frost clapping behind him. He kept his eyes fixed. He did not want to see if Erik had managed to stay upright, or had fallen, after she taken her hand away.

“This was very pretty, my dear. But we should probably go now. Azazel has to bring Logan back, and since you sneaked along, you need to go with them too.”

Jean sighed, and held up one hand. They switched back to the reading room in the blink of an eye.

Charles smiled, incredulous.

*I don't want to leave you, Mr. Xavier. You don't have a door anymore. What if something comes to get you?*

"Whatever would give you that idea, Jean?"

*Logan told me about the wendigo once. I'm glad it's not in my book - but what if it -

"Surely those don't exist." Charles winked at her. “I don’t mind, Jean; truly. And thank you so very much for the fire. It feels wonderful in here now. See? My friends think so too.”

The birds were snug in a heap on the hearth. The phoenix was watching them from its nest of fire, its eyes half-closed.

“You had better take him and go back – with all of my thanks.”

For if he didn’t say goodbye now, while in control, Charles knew he would feel all the worse later.
Jean hesitated. Then she beckoned, and the phoenix shimmered across the room and whirled onto her shoulder.

“Careful –”

*It’s all right.* She bit her lip. *You be careful too, Mr. Xavier.*

“I don’t think I have anything to fear, now that I have such a lovely fire.” He touched the tea light, on the table. “It’s the best present I’ve ever received. And – oh. I have a present for you too, dear – not from me. From, ah. Erik.”

He sent her the image of the wire toy. Jean smiled from ear to ear.

“Something to look forward to, when you come home again. There will be some new students here as well.”

*Did he make that?*

Charles didn’t need to ask who she meant. He grimaced. “Yes.”

*I’ll tell him ‘thank you’, then.*

“Do.”

A good part of him wanted it over and done with, carrying around that creation of Erik’s. "I could give it to you now, Jean - just let me wake up a moment, and -"

*No, Mr. Xavier - you're sleeping now. You don't need to wake up. I'm glad you're getting rest.*

What could he say to that?

Charles sighed. Carrying around Erik's things .... The toy was in one pocket, he knew. Erik's token was in the other, and he'd have to keep hold of it in case the man himself popped back for a peep, damn it. Given the wave of tired resignation that he felt, Charles was truly surprised when he heard himself say:

“Is he all right? With – after Lady Frost … did that. At the ballet, I mean. Have you seen him since?"

*This morning we walked to the park. I went on the swing.*

“And you're sure you gave him defense enough, in his mind? Lady Frost didn’t find the memories?”

*No. I made a room for them, and put fire around the door. Nobody can see it now.*

“Good,” Charles exhaled. “That’s good. I’m sorry you had to go into his mind, though. It’s a very scary place.”

Jean shook her head, as she stared up at him. *It's sad.*

“… What?”

*He’s sad. In there, I mean.*

“As long as he didn’t hurt you, there, I don’t care what –”
He wants you to kiss him.

Charles gaped.

Then his stomach lurched, and he placed a hand over his mouth.

Frost had showed him – filthy sex, rutting and sweat, Erik’s most lurid fantasies – oh god. What had Jean seen? Nothing a child should ever see, he was sure of it –

“Jean.” He wrenched his hand away, and fell to his knees so he could look her in the eye. “I want you to promise me something.”

What should I promise?

“Promise me never to go back in there. It’s dangerous. It’s – there are things there that are not …. There are things in his mind that could hurt you very badly. So promise me.”

But what if he –

“Please, child.” Charles took her hands in his. “I want you to be safe. Promise me.”

For a long moment, Jean looked at him. Her grey eyes were very clear. Then she nodded.

I promise.

“Thank you.”

Charles got to his feet and bent to kiss her brow. “And now, it’s off to bed with you. Sleep well.”

It will be morning when I get back, Mr. Xavier.

“Then you had better hurry and find Azazel and Logan.” He tried a smile. “You don’t want to miss your trans-Atlantic teleportation.”

Jean smiled a wistful smile in return. Then she plucked at the phoenix’s wing, where it perched on her shoulder.

She waved. And both of them shimmered, and disappeared.

The chair was empty, now. Charles checked it for soot, found none, and sat.

He let his eyes flit round the room. All the frost and cold had gone. The tea light was flickering over his shield and gauntlets. All his birds were safe and warm ….

Charles frowned. All his birds, except the raven on the armrest. It had tucked its head away to sleep. And except the hummingbird. He couldn’t see it. Charles turned in his chair to look - cloth-of-gold and carved wood sent up a creak.

“Well.” He swallowed. “Tomorrow. Find the truant, and start to teach. Things to do.”

The start of something new. He couldn’t say he was looking forward to it, exactly; not after a day as exhausting as the one he had just survived.

“It was good to see Jean, though,” he told Raven.

The bird shifted in its sleep. Charles felt glad, suddenly, to be able to watch over it for once. He
would have to make amends to Logan; he would have to puzzle out what had happened to Hank ….
He would hope that Raven would receive his message, and that Moira – even Moira – would be all right.

If he hoped for Moira, he supposed he could hope that Erik would be well, too. But: “Lehnsherr’s tough,” he told his raven. “Like us. He’ll be fine.”

And in the warmth of Jean’s fire, finally able to rest, Charles could very well believe his own words to be true.

Chapter End Notes

The version of "Swan Lake" that Jean sees is surely very similar to the Kirov production filmed in 1990. In the youtube posting below, the music and image are unfortunately just a bit out of sync. (As a comment points out, the sound is about .7 sec. behind the action.)

The scene Jean and Charles watch can be found here, starting at 56:50, to the end of the act.
Chapter 38

Charles knew as soon as he woke that his hummingbird was gone.

He could not say how, precisely. He had not dreamed of it, nor spent any conscious time in his reading room, searching, and he took for granted the ritual: calling up one of the aviary, seeing the flashes of *hello – love* – and following them with his mind as they flew away.

But now, when he called up his hummingbird … he felt nothing.

Charles heard his own shallow breath as he stared at the ceiling. There was a distant whistle of a storm outside. Logan hadn’t said a word of it. No warning whatsoever.

“Though perhaps he had intended to say something. Before you …”

Before he had cut away part of Logan’s memory.

Charles tugged the blanket up to his chin and bit down hard on his lower lip. There was no pain. There was no difference in his power.
“It’s happened before.” Frost had taken the tiny brooch bird and turned it into a raptor. “And nothing changed after that; not really. So I don’t need to – worry.”

Not that Charles was worrying. He just felt …

*Upset*, perhaps.

“You?” His voice cracked; he licked his lips and tried again. “Why does it matter?”

It could be because his hummingbird had been the first he had created. Too small to fly far – but still, the first. From an orange-red marble.

Before he had come to the Brotherhood – “the EBS: it wouldn’t do to forget the Sistren, now, would it?” – he had only ever pictured his thoughts flying: feathers and wings. “Because things don’t fly without wings, and it would be too silly to send out a sugar glider.”

His eyes stung – he dragged his thoughts away from the idea of a thought-mammal: ridiculous. Birds were far more striking, especially if made of diamond … but Frost had taken that one for her own. And even earlier …

Charles cast his memory back. *Alex*. He had sent a bright-eyed, clever magpie into his mind and sliced away a fragment of conversation –

“Nothing as long as that chat about the sock.”

Certainly nothing as long as that, but enough to make the magpie vanish before he had even known it was … his. It had something to do, then, with cutting memories away from without.

“Eureka,” Charles said to the empty room. “Such a genius.”

He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyelids. Swollen and hot; he must have cried in his sleep …

“And you the adult here.”

He kicked off the blankets and rolled out of bed. No aches or pains – he stretched towards the ceiling – and nothing annoying save his itchy scalp. The hat on bare skin didn’t help, but he had to stay warm somehow.

Charles tossed more wood on his fire and put on another layer of clothes as mechanically as he could. He tucked Erik’s token beneath his sweater. Time to get going. Frost had said he would teach the children – he didn’t know when, and there was no telling the time from the dim light.

“After all, who knows where my watch is now? Gone off to Brussels, taken a jaunt to California. Mexico City or Kyoto or Qūfù or – bloody Albuquerque, for god’s sake –”

“Mr. Xavier?”

Charles gasped, spun round, and saw Scott standing in the doorway.

“Oh. Scott! Good morning. Good –” he gulped in a breath, “and how are you?”

“I’m fine. I woke up a while ago, and then I heard you start talking.” The blindfold was tied neatly, though Scott’s hair was askew. He tipped his head to one side. “Why do you talk to yourself so much?”
He made a mental note to set thought-fires every night. For one little boy to sneak up on him like that – Charles bit down hard on his anger. Self-reproach, more like – “Erik leaves,” he muttered, “and you let every single precaution go on bloody holiday –”

“Mr. Xavier.”

“Yes? I – sorry?”

“Why,” Scott said clearly, “do you talk to yourself so much? Are you crazy?”

Charles stared.

Frost’s invasion of his mind, and Erik’s demands and token, and his theft from Logan, and everything that had happened in the last forty-eight hours took hold of his thoughts and shook them and screamed –

But Scott was there, and it wouldn’t do to frighten a child. Far better to fall back on memories of … Oxford, and dealing with upstart students.

“No. I am not – crazy, and really, young man, there are specific types of disorders with specific names, and ‘crazy’ is as imprecise as it is pejorative.”

“What’s pejorative?”

“Come in, why don’t you?” For Scott stood on the threshold, shivering as he did. “Stand by the fire and get warm.”

“Thanks. Mine went out.”

Charles pushed away all worry about his hummingbird, and watched Scott carefully walk towards the heat. Then he cleared his throat.

“Stop right there. Now reach up with your hand – you feel the mantelpiece? That sticks out only a bit further than the fire, so try not to go any further.”

“I won’t burn myself. I’m not stupid.”

“I know you’re not. And that word is a pejorative. ‘Stupid’ may define a level of intelligence, to some, but it is nonetheless inappropriate since it conveys contempt. Do you understand?”

“I think so.”

“Good.”

Charles bent to tie his shoes. Starting in September he had heard Angel and Alex and their different boots walk down the hall, waking all and sundry. Not four months later, and the entire routine had – He paused.

“How did you get out of your room, Scott?”

“The door was open.”

“That’s odd. When I was a student here, we were always locked inside for the night. Did Alex tell you about that?”
Scott shook his head. “He didn’t write much about school.”

“Who read his letters to you?” Charles took Scott by the hand and made for the hall; peered back and forth to try and guess at Armando’s room.

“Nobody read them. He’s friends with Jessie, remember? She helps him make tapes for me.”

“I wonder how they would be censored.” Jean’s room across, Scott’s now next to hers, Sean on the end if he were to return …. “Hm. Listen at the middle door on this side, Scott – what do you hear?”

Charles walked to the end of the corridor and pressed his ear to the wood of the last door. Sure enough, there was the faint sound of snoring. “Mr. Armando Muñoz – late riser, I see.”

“Somebody’s crying, Mr. Xavier.”

Charles blinked. “Oh. Then,” and he tapped on Armando’s door, “we better wake Mr. Muñoz, hadn’t we?”

It took rather longer than he expected. But then there was a groan, and shuffling steps.

The door creaked open – and, despite himself, Charles jumped.

“What?”

“You’re very – um.” He managed not to stare too blatantly. “Furry. Is that your ability?”

“No,” Armando grunted. “It’s just cold.”

“And you somehow grew fur overnight?”

For he had. Charles did his best to keep a straight face. Dark fur had sprouted on Armando’s face and hands; he was wearing a sweatshirt and trousers, so there was no way of seeing if it covered him entirely. Perhaps, perhaps not – if it had grown this fast, surely he would not have had time for a trim –

Armando jolted away from him, bringing up a hand.


There was a returning smile. “Really, Prof? Fuck you.”

“*Really,* Scott’s right down the hall, Mr. Muñoz, and I don’t know what your problem is with me, but…”

“You don’t touch me, you understand?” Armando’s sweatshirt had a faded *CORNELL* on the front; the letters disappeared as he crossed his arms over his chest. “Soon as I put a shiv together, one finger on me is one finger off you.”

“… I wasn’t going to touch you.”

“Good.”

“In any case, I came to wake you. Day’s starting, time’s wasting, et cetera. Scott’s up already.” He tipped his head down the hallway. “There’s a routine.”
“To do what?”

“Work.” Charles felt blank. “Either Hank or Logan will come to tell us, surely. There were differences this morning, but perhaps as soon as someone gives you – or me, or both of us – the keys, then we’ll be back to normal. Although I don’t know what Lady Frost has told you. If anything.”

“We talked.”

Charles waited. “And?”

“And I know why I’m here.”

“Why is that?”


Charles waited some more. Then, nettled, said, “Really, the suspense is too much.”

“Kurt’s up.” An exhale. “So here goes. She said it’d be different than when he was asleep.”

“Kurt? Azazel’s Kurt? For god’s sake,” and Charles felt his temper slip its leash, “I had quite enough of being kept in the dark last year, so I’ll be damned if some newcomer is going to pull the same ‘need-to-know basis’ tripe that –”

Armando shut his eyes. “Whoa.”

“… What?”

“Oh, oh hey.” A hand went to his head. “That’s kinda strong. But if it’s all he can do, then –”

And there was an ear-splitting screech from the room next door.

“Mr. Xavier! I hear something!”

“I’m fairly sure we all do,” Charles shouted back. He turned to Armando, stepping back to make way from him. “What on earth’s the matter?”

“It’s what she thought would happen.” Armando said as he paced to the middle door. “Morning, Scott.”

“Good morning, Mr. Muñoz.” Scott sounded slightly panicked. “Is there a monster inside? Mr. Logan told me about the one in the woods, but if monsters come in here too –”

“You don’t want to be calling him that.” Then Armando exhaled, squared his shoulders, and knocked on the door. “Kurt?”

The screeching had turned loud enough to rattle Charles’ teeth in his skull. “Bit like an air-raid siren,” he said, but nobody seemed to hear him.

“Kurt?” Armando said. “My name’s Armando. Can you stop, please?”

The noise got even louder. Charles tried to remember. Kurt – Azazel’s son – who could teleport.

He turned to look at Armando. “Are you …”
He was ignored. “Kurt? Do you want to come outside?”

“Papa!”

“I think he wants his father,” Charles said.

“But he can’t have him, can he?” Armando knit his brow, raised his voice. “Do you want something to eat?”

“PAPA!”

“I’m starting to sense a pattern, here –”

“Look, Xavier, I’m sure you’re very funny. Now how about you go and get something edible, and bring it back here while I try calming him down?”

Charles had not meant to be amusing, precisely. In fact … he didn’t know why he had joked in the first place.

He started as he felt a small, cold hand take his own.

“Ah, Scott. Let’s go make some breakfast, shall we?”

Scott’s voice was quiet. “O.K.”

The sound of Kurt’s crying followed them all the way to the kitchen. It helped to focus on minutiae: rebuilding the fire and setting Scott to peeling oranges; cutting slices of bread and finding cheese. Charles was hardly hungry – Logan’s dinner had more than filled a still-shrunken stomach, and thank god he wasn’t sick with it – but in one split second he decided to be wasteful. To fling about butter as if he had pounds at hand, and to pull down a plate for each of them.

“And there we are.” He put the skillet in the sink and twined his fingers round the plates. “I’ll carry these. There’s plenty for you and Kurt – but put the oranges in this bowl,” he set one down in front of Scott, loudly enough to catch his notice, “and take them upstairs with me, will you?”

“Sure.”

They walked in the direction of Kurt’s sobbing: quieter now, but still unmistakable. Armando looked up as they reached the head of the stairs. He was sitting, leaning his back against Kurt’s door – and his eyes flicked to the plates in Charles’ hands.

“Here.” Charles held one out to him.

The steel bracelet winked in the dim light as he took the plate. “Thanks.”

“Oh, I forgot silverware.”

“Not a problem – there’s enough bread here to make a sandwich.”

Armando watched Charles sit, watched him lead Scott to sit beside him, watched him separate the sections of orange. “This quarter is yours,” Charles told Scott, “and this is mine. Don’t eat so fast you choke.”

“O.K. Thanks, Mr. Xavier.”

“Thanks, Mr. Xavier,” Armando echoed, in a drawl.
“You’re welcome.”

It was awkward to eat when a child was still crying. As if, Charles thought, uncomfortable, his heart had been broken. “Any luck?”

“If I had, he’d be out here. Kurt?” Armando spoke over his shoulder. “Do you want some breakfast?”

“There’s oranges!”

The sobs hitched.

“I think he heard me.” Scott scrambled to his feet; Armando scrambled out of his way. “Hey, Kurt! I met your dad, once – he came to take me and Alex to Albany.”

“Alex and me,” Charles said.

“Give it a rest, Xavier.”

“It’s Charles.” He fixed Armando with a flat look. “You gave me your first name; consider mine as having been given to you. You’re welcome.”

He ignored the narrowed eyes and watched Scott tap on the door, and say: “Won’t you come out? We can’t eat it all ourselves.”

Charles was pretty sure he bloody well could, and Armando too. He lowered his voice. “Aren’t you going to eat your sandwich?”

“I don’t need a lot of food.” Armando shrugged. “I’ll save it for Kurt.”

Which was bragging, Charles was sure, and he put his own food back down on his plate. “Scott, why don’t you –”

The door creaked open, and they froze.

Well, Charles saw, he and Armando did. Scott put both hands behind his back and rocked on his feet. “Hi.”

The small child was sucking on his tail. And though Charles knew it was Kurt, knew it, he was as completely unprepared as he had been the first time for the blue skin – except, now even closer, he saw that it was particularly fine fur. Then there were the bizarre hands, the pointed ears and the tail … and Kurt using it as a dummy when surely he was far too old to do so.

He took it out of his mouth to whisper, “‘Lo.”

“Hello. My name’s Scott, and I just got here. Are you hungry for breakfast?”

Charles remembered Kurt’s eyes as yellow. At the present moment, they looked bizarrely … orange. Perhaps because he had been crying.

As if on cue, Kurt sniffled loudly. “You know Papa?”

Perhaps he was younger than Charles had thought. Jean had never wailed for her parents like this – at least, not that he knew of.

“Well, kind of. I can’t open my eyes without blowing things up, but I’ve heard him talk, and I
smelled that weird teleporter smell. Kind of like burning things? I don’t know.”

Kurt squeezed his own eyes shut. Bit his lip – with fangs, Charles saw. His image shimmered once.

“Hey,” Armando said. “Stop that.”

And Kurt burst into tears again. “I’m broken!”

“What? You’re not broken,” Scott said, voice cracking. “At least, I don’t think so – does he look O.K., Mr. Xavier?”

“He’s fine. But Armando here is doing something to suppress his teleporting ability – aren’t you?” He ignored Armando’s glare. “How interesting. So your own power isn’t just fur in the cold – it allows you influence over the powers of others as well?”

“I want my papa!”

“Do you want some orange? You can have some of mine.”

“What a good idea. Come here, Kurt, and dry those eyes.” Charles tried to sound as kind as he could. “There, there. Thank you for sharing, Scott.”

He left the children to it and got to his feet. Armando followed him two steps, three – then stopped in his tracks and lifted his chin.

“You want to have this discussion here?” Charles hissed.

“What discussion?”

“This one. I don’t know what you’ve done, or what’s happened to you, but I want to make one thing very clear. There were children here when I – was Taken.” He swallowed hard. “Back in September. Since then, I have made a great many personal sacrifices to keep them all as _safe_ as possible, so I am not going to sit in place and watch you hurt a child under my nose.”

“I’m not hurting him! I’m just keeping him here.” Armando looked back over his shoulder. “And I’m not sure how far I can go from him before the effect dissipates. I’ve never tried anything like it before.”

“So he’s crying so much due to his father being gone, and that alone?”

“Kid like that? _Papi_ with him all day every day until now? Probably.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Ask him then.” Armando’s eyes flashed. “Though you could introduce yourself first, yeah?”

Charles turned to do just that – and blinked at the sight of Hank, hovering at the head of the stairs.

“Hi Charles.” Hank twitched a nod at him. “Mr. Muñoz.”

A sigh. “Call me Armando. And listen, Xavier –”

“Charles.”

“Charles. I’m – sorry. Even if you were the one snapping at me. I didn’t know you’d assume from just looking,” another grimace, “that I’d hurt a kid. I wouldn’t. I’m here to recover from Dallas, and
I’m here to keep Kurt from taking off and getting misdirected, and ending up in Denver, in the ocean, or in the earth’s core. All right?"

Charles blinked. How remarkably … candid.

“All right?” Hank began.

His miserable tone caught at Charles’ instincts. Bloody hell, what was the good doctor upset about now? Hank had promised to tell him what had happened with Logan; it was too soon to press for a confidence, but if there was ever a case of the sooner the better, this was it.

“I’ve brought you something to help keep Kurt here.”

And Hank held up what looked like –

“Is that rope?” Charles said.

Armando said nothing. Just stared.

It was more of a cord, really – thin and silvery. Charles stared too. Hank had looped the cord round and round in a figure eight; his knuckles were white where he gripped it.

“That is rope,” Armando said. “So. You think I’m going to put a kid on a leash? Is that it?”

“Well…”

Charles took the plunge. “I’d wager that you don’t want to put a child on a leash, Armando? Because I certainly wouldn’t.”

“Exactly.”

“But with your power still reacting to the experiments,” Hank said, earnest, “Lady Frost told me that she told you that you couldn’t be sure of how far your reach could –”

“How about you let me think about my power, let Charles here sweet-talk Kurt into behaving himself, and – you take that leash and put it on your own damn self if you feel like it.” Armando snorted. “On a kid. Lady Frost doesn’t pay me enough for that shit.”

Charles had prepared a retort – sweet-talking, really – but at those words he did a double-take.

“She – pays you?”

“Yeah.” Armando looked at them both. “She says I’ll get fifty bucks a day, for hanging on to Kurt. That’s fifty dollars,” he said to Charles, defiant, “Eastern.”

“Um.”

“About a hundred British pounds,” Hank said.

“I see. But saying so and actually paying so are two very different things. Still, the promise of fifty dollars Eastern, daily, is very nice – but rather odd. Don’t you think, Hank?” He nudged him with an elbow. “Have you heard of anyone else getting paid for the immense privilege of being imprisoned here?”

“You’re making fun of me?” Armando said. “I don’t care. I didn’t have to come here, and I can leave whenever I want.”
“You’re Sworn –” Hank said, tiredly, and:

“You have some steel jewelry that says differently, Armando,” Charles said. “I know one member of the EBS in particular who can take your head off with that necklace. After giving it an edge, you understand.”

Armando fixed them both with a look. Then, matter-of-fact, he lifted his hand, took his bracelet with index finger and thumb of the other hand, and pinched. The metal turned red-hot. Then white. And then it snapped.

“You see?” He took off the bracelet and tossed it between his hands. “I’d like to see Erik the Red try it.”

Charles gaped. His only comfort was that he knew Hank was gaping too.

With one tight smile, Armando turned. “Hey, Scott. Any of that orange left?”

“Um. Kurt found the other plate and …. I’m sorry.”

Charles found his voice. “Why don’t you come here? Both of you. And bring the plates.”

It took a moment for them to gather everything up, but they did. Scott hesitated only briefly before walking down the middle of the hallway; Kurt tagged along behind him.

“All done?”

“We shared the oranges actually, Mr. Xavier.”

Charles had to smile at the upturned face, even though Scott could not see him. “No need to fib – it was kind of you to let him have them. Now, Kurt.” He dropped to his haunches. “Did you like the oranges?”

Kurt nodded. He was sucking on the tip of his tail again.

“Do you think you can take that out of your mouth, child?”

He obeyed – but his lower lip started to wobble.

“Shhh. We’re all your friends here. My name is Mr. Xavier. These are Mr. Muñoz and Dr. McCoy.”

“ – no ‘im.”

“Beg pardon?”

“I know him.” Kurt pointed up at Hank.

“Ah! So you must. Dr. McCoy, do you remember Kurt?”

“Uh-huh,” Hank mumbled.

Charles noted how he had put the rope behind his back.

“As I said, we’re all friends. Some older friends, and some brand-new. Would you like to be friends with us, Kurt? And with Scott?”

There was a pause. Then Kurt nodded.
“Well, that’s good. You see – we have to share all the treats with someone.”

“Treats?”

“Mm-hm. Oranges, and chocolates, and …”

“And what?” Scott said.

“Well, more delicious things than I can imagine, certainly. And, Kurt – just as long as you stay here with us, and don’t go off to find your father.”

A whimper. Hell, it was like walking on quicksand. Just when he thought he had made it to firm ground –

“He knows you’re here. So if you go away,” Hank pushed his glasses up on his nose, “um – he might not be able to find you again, and he would be frightened, and you don’t want that to happen –”

“Papa isn’t frightened of anything. And he always finds me.”

“Right,” Charles said. “But you wouldn’t want to miss him coming to see you, hm?”

After another pause, Kurt shook his head.

“Of course not. So what I propose is this: Mr. Muñoz here will help you remember not to teleport. That’s all he’s been doing already. And for other times, you have a choice.” Charles looked solemn. “You can choose not to teleport, or you can wear this rope around your waist and stay tied to one of us at all times.” He plucked at the end of the cord where it dangled at Hank’s heels. “Which will you choose?”

A scowl. “No rope.”

“No, indeed. So will you promise to stay here? That way we can keep you safe. And that way you can be friends with Scott – and with Jean, when she comes back.”

The change was remarkable: Kurt’s tail flicked through the air, and his pointed ears quivered. “Jean will come back?”

“Oh! Yes.” Charles darted a glance up at Hank, who nodded quickly. “Yes, she will. Not right now – she’s in Brussels with Lady Frost. But she’ll come back soon.”

“Then I’ll stay and be friends,” Kurt declared, and took Scott’s hand.

“Excellent.” He managed to straighten up with only one push. “Well, then. Shall we repair to the kitchen, gentlemen?”

“Why not?” Armando walked off in front of them.

Charles made sure the children went next – Kurt tugging Scott along – before he hissed into Hank’s ear: “What were you thinking?”

“Wasn’t my idea,” Hank mumbled.

“Frost’s then, I suppose.”

“Yeah.” A sigh. “I could have told her Kurt would hate a rope.”
“And surely she knows that Azazel would be furious to hear of his son treated in such a way. For that matter, why did he leave him here? If they’ve been together Kurt’s whole life?”

Hank did not speak again until they had reached the kitchen door. “I guess he wanted him to be safe.”

“Azazel?”

“Yes.”

“Why would Kurt be in danger now, if not before?”

It would have been comical in any other light, to see Hank darting his eyes back and forth, as he said: “Logan talked to me when he was making dinner last night. He said he was going to talk to you about – something the Free West did.”

They had made up already? Interesting. “The Free West has done quite a bit recently. Really, Hank. You know by now that you can trust me.”

“You’ve told me that, Mr. Xavier, but –”

“Charles, for the thousandth time. Please trust me. Call it a resolution for the new year – tell yourself whatever you like, but let’s please start this year in mutual confidence, rather than in hiding things from each other. And I’ll say that to Logan, to Alex and Angel – to anyone and everyone.”

“I’m just.” Hank swallowed hard. “I’m afraid.”

“Maybe so, but I know you’re not a coward. I think there’s a key difference. The one is how we feel, and the other is what we choose to become.”

“But that’s the thing – I’m not just afraid for me. I’m afraid for my friends and my family.”

Charles was silent. How could he argue with that? Except to say to himself, coldly, that such tactics proved Frost terribly … practical. And terrible.

“So you see how it is.”

“I see.” He pushed thoughts of Frost away. “Here, then. I’ll relate what I heard and you can confirm; no independent volunteering of information necessary. The Free West has somehow invented a defense against telepathy, Logan tells me – correct?”

Hank nodded.

“And this has something to do with Azazel …. So he’s engaging in practices that could endanger a minor, is he?”

“I’ve haven’t been told this – I’m just guessing. I bet he’s gone to find out where the Free West invented that defense against telepathy. And where they’re planning on manufacturing it on a larger scale.”

“But you don’t know for sure?”

Hank shook his head. “He could just be in Brussels – he has to take people back and forth practically every day as it is. But if that were the case, he could have kept Kurt with him.”
“Quite a work-horse. He ferries Logan, Jean, and Frost, does he?”

For maybe, Charles thought to himself, if he connived or flattered or outright bribed his way into Azazel’s good graces, he could get back to Oxford in less time than it would take to boil water for tea. A long shot, certainly. But worth a try.

“Never Jean. Mostly Lady Frost.”

It took Charles a moment to put the answer to the question. “And she comes back practically every day in order to take care of – lord. Who’s she attacking now?”

“The war’s been at a pause since United Europe put together the talks. So she doesn’t have to come back every day. She just has to check in with the city councils and relay messages with the Finder,” Hank said. “She can’t take it with her, you know.”

“And the Seeker isn’t enough?”

“She uses that for – I mean. No.” Hank blinked. “Not across the Atlantic.”

“Well.”

Charles had to pause, to take it all in. He considered his friend. Hank looked even worse than he had the previous day: pale bordering on pasty, eyes ringed with shadows ….

“Thank you for being so forthcoming, Hank. I do appreciate it. But what about you?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yesterday, I asked you what Frost had done,” Charles said, simply. “To make you so afraid – and to drive a wedge between you and Logan.”

“Oh, that. Logan and I are fine now.” Hank’s eyes darted everywhere. “He told me everything about the Free West escape. You know. The switch, and the helicopter. The telepathy blocker – like he told you.”

“And you just – made up? As though nothing happened in Dallas, or Mexico City, or wherever?”

“Nothing did happen, Mr. Xavier. Nothing important.”

“You’d be surprised at what’s important and what’s not, Hank.”

There was no reply.

Armando opened the kitchen door. The fur had gone from his skin. “You guys done, or do the kids need to do the dishes again?”

Another resolution, Charles thought, blank-faced: start wrapping veils around every single private conversation he had. Of all the bloody cheek – not twenty-four hours in the manor, and already eavesdropping.

“And McCoy –” A tip of the head. “I just figured it out. You ever going to sleep?”

Hank’s shoulders slumped beneath the white coat. “How did you know?”

“Lucky guess. But if you’ve had more than an hour in the past thirty-six, I’ll fork over my first day’s pay.”
“Don’t make me laugh.” Hank sounded on the verge of it.

“I’m right, aren’t I? Go get some sleep.”

Charles spluttered. “Wait – no. Hank, this conversation is very important.”

“Listen, Charles, I’ll be back to bring you some supplements. You never did take the ones for iron.”

“What did Frost do to –”

But Hank turned and practically sprinted away.

“Damn it!” He turned to glare at Armando. “I wasn’t finished with him.”

“That important, was it?”

Charles was caught. He hesitated –

– only to bristle at Armando’s smile. “New place, same story, huh?”

“It may have escaped your notice, but I was not storytelling.” Charles swept past him into the kitchen.

“I just mean the gossip.” Armando’s smile curved up over one side of his thin face. Far too thin – really, Charles thought, he wasn’t the only one who should be eating twice his weight. “Something happened at Dallas with McCoy and the Wolverine, and –”

“It’s none of your business.”

“– and they only got to be buddy-buddy again after meeting in the library last night. This Hank, and Logan, and the White Queen herself – I saw them.”

Charles gritted his teeth. To give in to curiosity now would be to cede Armando the point. Damn it.

“Speaking of the library – Scott, Kurt, that’s where we’ll be spending our day. Come along. You too, Armando; whenever it’s convenient for you.”

The children dashed ahead, Kurt towing Scott. Armando did not hurry to catch up.

They walked to the library in silence. Charles focused on the dust motes winking in the dim light, on the chill of the flagstones penetrating the soles of his shoes, on the itch of his hat against his scalp. He gave in, irritably, and scratched. And there was the library door – solid oak and iron scrollwork, dark and foreboding –

And unlocked. Charles kept all his tired anger at bay as he ushered the children in, and closed the door behind them.

“Pick a nice book,” he told Kurt. He turned the thermostat up with a vicious twist. “A balance between pictures and words.”

“Mr. Xavier?” Scott said, timidly –

“I’ll read aloud. It’s all right. Keep hold of Kurt, please.”

The two of them made their way to a shelf. Scott started running his fingers over the book spines; Kurt –
Bloody hell. Kurt scuttled \textit{up} the shelf as easy as breathing, and launched himself at the upper railing with a delighted squeak.

“Be careful!” Charles called. Then he turned to Armando, who had stretched out on the low couch. “What if he teleports from there?”

“I’m getting used to it.” Fingers laced behind Armando’s head. “Guess I just had to wake up all the way.”

“So your tether, or whatever it is, stretches that far already?”

“It’s more ….” He pointed to his temple, then sketched a spiral in the air. “I’m thinking of it as a gravity well. Pull at him enough to keep him here.”

“You’ve studied physics?”

“That hard for you to believe? There were some books at Dallas camp.” A flat look. “One talked about black holes – and save the joke.”

Charles felt his brow knit. “About – what?”

Armando was quiet. Then he grunted. “Nothing.”

The children sounded very loud. At least, Kurt did.

“He seems to have cheered up quickly.”

“Give him time,” Armando said. “New friend, no rope that he can see – he’s excited now. Come night he’ll miss \textit{papi} again and scream the house down.”

“You don’t know that.”

“If he’s like any kids I’ve seen in a new place.”

“At – the camp at Dallas? Small wonder. Children at Oxford, on the other hand, cry only as long as people leave them lonely and uninformed.”

“I guess if it works, you don’t break it.”

“It’s worked very well for Frost. That is rather her \textit{modus operandi} – pluck children from their lives, drop them off with little food and less warmth in this place, and keep them in the dark as regards their eventual fate. Oh, and brutalize them if they attempt to escape.”

“She doesn’t seem the type to get her hands dirty.”

“She delegates.”

“So … we’re delegates?”

Charles stared at the chairs in front of the cold fireplace – at the table between them, and the chess set. On impulse, he walked there. Touched a finger to the white knight, and looked back at Armando. “Do you play?”

Armando shook his head. “And you didn’t answer my question.”

Hilarious, to hear his own prying words in another’s mouth. “It looks very much as though that is the
case. Except: you are Sworn – trusted – and I’m not.”

“But you know your way around the place, and I don’t.”

“Well, you’re the one that’s going to get the keys, I assume.”

“Because it’s so smart to lock kids into rooms with fires going? Every night?”

Charles shrugged.

“I was being sarcastic.” Armando sat up from his sprawl. “That’s actually pretty stupid, and I think you know it. What if one of them gets hurt? I have to go running and call whoever has the key, and let the kid roast, or bleed out, or whatever?”

“Well,” and Charles cleared his throat. “That’s assuming you’re not locked in at night, too.”

Armando’s nostrils flared. “Like hell. Nobody’s locking me anywhere.”

“We’re locked in this manor.”

“Excuse me, but I can open any door. I’ll prove it to you, if I need to.”

“That won’t be necessary. But …” Charles struggled for a moment, before he paced over to the couch and sat. “Why stay here, then?”

“Because I only just got here. I’m curious – and I want at least two thousand bucks, Eastern, before I split.” A hand came up to forestall his splutter. “And I’m still getting over being Stryker’s second-favorite experiment, and I’d rather do it here than in Dallas proper.”

Charles stared.

“And there’s a snowstorm outside.” Armando jerked his head toward the windows, even as he drew his feet up to sit cross-legged on the couch. “Don’t know if you noticed.”

“You saw Stryker? In the Dallas camp?”

With a long sigh, Armando leaned back into the corner of the couch. His eyes, fixed on Charles, looked like chips of obsidian.

“Just twice that I could be sure of. Sometimes it was hard to concentrate.”

“Mr. Xavier!”

He jerked his head to one side. “Yes, Scott?”

“Can I go upstairs with Kurt?”

Scott had made his way to the bottom of the spiral staircase. He was feeling along one of its rails.

The memory clutched at him with full nauseating force: the clang of feet on steel – Erik storming up to choke the life from him –

“Fine.” He swallowed hard. “Just watch your step.”

The noise Scott made, ascending the stairs, was different than … the other sound. *Erik.* Charles let his eyes fall shut, even with Armando watching him. He didn’t care. And he didn’t really care about
the memory anymore, not really – except that he hadn’t thought of Erik yet that morning, and to remember now that he had bent over and let something that had tried to kill him fuck him instead –

Armando cleared his throat. “You all right?”

Charles shrugged. “Is any one of us, really? Just don’t go into this library without me, please. I don’t care how excellent your deflecting or negating abilities are –”

“Adapting.”

“– you wouldn’t fare well against all the metal here.”

Part of him, Charles knew, wanted to press Armando more about his mutation. Adaptation; it sounded fascinating. But a more wary part of him decided to keep his mouth shut.

It was enough to wait for Armando to stretch and smirk. “All the metal here can try. Survival of the fittest,” he hooked a thumb at his chest, “you know?”

“Survival of the most discreet, in this place.”

“You hide a lot, Professor? That Free West vid showed you holed up inside what … I think they meant to be this place. Doing experiments.”

Charles stared. Then he laughed. “Back before I got hooked into the Finder, I did most of Hank’s typing for him. Is that malevolent enough for the Free West, I wonder?”

The smirk turned into a smile. “Probably not.”

“No.”

They listened to the children careen about the upper floor. It appeared to be a game of hide-and-go-seek at speed. Kurt kept up a constant stream of chatter, so Scott was finding him quickly enough, hands outstretched. And avoiding the stairwell. Good.

“Do you really think he’ll cry again tonight? He sounds better now.” Charles did not mean to sound naïve – but with Kurt this cheerful, it seemed a valid question. Besides, children were easily distracted from missing their parents. He himself had been fine within a month, a little month. And he had never heard Jean complain.

“Yeah. Frost said they’d never been apart before.”

“I see.”

“So is she the one to give us keys? If we’re to lock kids in their rooms at night?”

“I have no idea – I’ve never had any keys, here, and I was locked in for four months.”

“I see your four months and raise you four years.”

“I don’t enjoy poker,” Charles sighed. “Let’s just proceed on the assumption that neither of us wants things to go back to the way they were, and that each will look out for his own interests.”

“Now that it’s in the open …. Sure.” Armando’s smile hadn’t changed. His eyes, though, were watchful. “My one problem is I don’t know if I can keep hold of Kurt in my sleep. So what if he goes off at night and decides to find papi then?”
“That’s at least the third time – do you speak Spanish?”

“Muñoz sound like a Free West name to you?”

“… Right. And about Kurt … hm. I have a few tricks I could use. At night I can keep a few thoughts – it’s difficult to explain – right inside his door. A guard of sorts that would wake me if he decides to leave, and then I could wake you in turn.”

“Then you’d better get used to how I handle telepathy.” Armando grinned at him. “Go on. Try it.”

“I thought you didn’t like people touching you.”

“Good one. But you should try it.”

So Charles did. One tendril of thought, focused, was easy enough to send winding towards the flicker of Armando’s mind –
– until he hit something hard.

“Huh.” Charles tried again. This time he winced as he felt … something like static shock from a doorknob – except snapping at his thoughts and not his fingers.

“See? First Frost, now you. Not so powerful now, all your telepathy; I bet that’s a bit of a disappointment.”

For that matter, it was difficult to get an impression of Armando’s mind in the first place. Frowning, he called up his raven. Better – but still odd: a tangle constantly moving. Not like Erik’s metal cloud. That at least sawed clockwise. This …

Testing, he sent Raven to Armando’s mind, flying … he concentrated. Flying at an angle that changed as fast as he could make it change. One quick pass –

Armando gasped and caught at the arm of the couch.

“Oh.” Charles blinked at him. “Sorry. But you did say ‘try it’.”

“Yeah.” He was staring. “How’d you do that?”

“Do what?”

“… Touch me.”

The stare didn’t let up. Charles had the sudden vivid impression of two cats squaring off, ready to battle – he glanced down – for the best spot on the couch. He tried a smile. “Perhaps it was just luck.”

“Perhaps I am going to practice, and you are going to leave off touching me.”

“You did ask. And what if Kurt gets out during the night? Wasn’t that the whole point of this exercise?”

Armando swung his legs off the couch and stood. “That’ll be the one exception.”

“What about other emergencies?”

“Don’t push it, all right?”
“All right.” Charles kept his voice calm. “All right.”

He deliberately stared up at where Kurt was trying to stretch between shelves. Scott was sitting cross-legged on the steel grating, holding a book and tracing a finger over the embossed cover.

“So I take it,” Armando said, “we’re not asking for any keys.”

Charles didn’t look at him. “Best not, don’t you think?”

“I think that counts as a secret from Frost.”

“Well.” Calm, calm. “I won’t tell her if you won’t.”

A long pause.

“Fine,” Armando said.

“Good.” And however curious he got, Charles resolved never to ask Armando if his adapting ability extended to lock picking. For then he might cry himself up as the greatest escape artist in the land, and get them all shut up again. No, he would not ask. Starting now. Charles got up and dusted off his jeans. “Scott, Kurt! Come down from there. It’s time to read a book.”

“Secrets from Frost and only Frost.” It was a mutter. “I see how it works.”

“No,” Charles said. “I don’t think you do. But if you have any questions, do ask, and I will do my best to answer them.”

He wasn’t lying – but did Armando’s power extend to finding out truth and falsehood? Charles spared him a glance and a smile. He had no idea; not yet.

He praised the children for working together to pick a book; mentally tabled the question of Hank, and Logan, and what had happened just last night. Then Armando went to look out the window at the storm, and he settled down on the couch with the children, to read ...

“Blimey.”

“What?” Armando said.

Charles lifted the book with a grimace. “How does one make a story out of an atlas?”

A shrug.

“Start at the beginning,” Scott said. Kurt touched the gilded letters on the cover. And Armando turned back to the window.

The day went by quickly, Charles thought. Whether he had meant his words or not, Hank did not return. Kurt had chattered through the afternoon, had grown more and more quiet as the evening approached … then Charles had built a fire for him with some of his own supply of wood and Armando had told him to go to sleep.

“Perhaps a little honey, next time,” Charles had muttered, as Kurt’s wails rebounded into the hallway.

Armando had glared. “Good night.”
Charles had tried to read in the dim light of his room – John’s candles were sputtering low in the candelabrum Erik had made. Still, they came in handy the first time his thought-fires flared, the first time he stepped into the hallway to find Kurt staring into the dark, weeping. And the second time, and the third.

Perhaps there was something to the idea of locking a child in, Charles thought, the fourth time he closed the door on Kurt’s crying. Rather than that, though, the fifth time he decided to sit on the hearth in Kurt’s room, and watch yellow eyes peer at him from the darkness beneath a mound of blankets. He watched them gradually blink shut.

So then he had gone back to his room and put out the candles. It was Saturday, he realized. “Shabbat shalom, Erik – or what does one say, at its end?”

Charles really had no idea. He gazed at his own fire, mind blank. Then, carefully, he called up his hummingbird …

… or tried. There was nothing there.

“I suppose that means it’s gone for good.”

No pain, no problems – the little bird had just been a little bit of imagination, after all. Charles ran a hand over his face, considering. It was normal to feel lonely, as friends like Logan and Hank were gone or distant, and new acquaintances were a grim Armando or an hysterical Kurt. Scott … he shrugged to himself. Scott was well-behaved, so far. Housebroken.

No Frost; that was a blessing.

No Erik.

“But you don’t need him.” It was cozy under the covers – perhaps he would be able to sleep after all.

He went to his reading room in the wink of an eye. It was blessedly warm and dark. There were glimmering coals in the brass fireplace, and Jean’s tea light burning next to the golden clock.

“By the books?” Charles clicked his tongue behind his teeth and moved the tea light to one of the long tables. All of his materials for making jewels were hidden away, so there was no risk of fire there.

He looked round again. Everything was quiet. His birds – Charles smiled, pained. They were not fluttering, traumatized, calling for their missing friend. Leaning against the chair, the penguin was making a wheezing noise almost like a snore.

“Too fat.”

Charles sat on a workbench. Everything was hidden that had to be hidden. He would not think of Frost or Erik, punishments or promises. It was enough to know that Jean had given him the gift of fire for the new year, and that outside of his mind, he would have routine to get him through the next few days. He would think of plans, he would see whether or not Armando really could take on any lock … . Perhaps he would rest.

He laid his head on his crossed arms, closing his eyes. His armor felt comfortable, welcoming; the cloak smoothed over any sharp points. It was comfortable, it was *safe*, and Charles let himself relax into it after all.
Of course, then Kurt woke him before dawn the next morning.

Charles stared into the darkness, befuddled, before shivering his way into clothes and walking to the next room. He had no idea why the sobbing should be louder than the previous morning. Except …

“Bloody hell,” he groaned.

That was one good thing about it being so cold: heat or humidity would have intensified the smell. As it was, Charles sighed and bent to put more logs on Kurt’s fire. Children were children, in Oxford or Ithaca, and young children did tend to wet the bed.

He gnawed his lower lip, looking into the fireplace. They would need more wood soon.

“Here, get warm. Wait –” for Kurt was tangled in his bedclothes, sniffling – “first you have to get cleaned off. Leave the sheets there; take a blanket if you need to.”

Charles went to turn the bathtub taps.

“Oh … damn it.”

“Dam’ it?”

“No need to repeat that,” he tossed over his shoulder. Kurt was peering at him, trailing quilts like a walking clothesline. “I suppose the pipes have frozen – see? There’s hardly any water.”

Kurt bent over the tub, stuck out a hand towards the trickle from the faucet, and yanked it back. “It’s cold!”

“That’s right – now come along.”

Let Armando wake in his own time. He led Kurt to the kitchen, checked the stove – the fire had gone out, dammit – and tested the sink taps. “It looks as though we’ll have to melt some snow.”

“Why?”

“Because you might get a rash, and you can’t walk around smelly all day. Now hold this,” he gave Kurt a saucepan, taking a larger one for himself, “and come along.”

He heard Kurt’s feet pad behind him down the hallway, and his chirrups: “Smelly, smelly –”

“Kurt, how old are you?”

“Five!”

“Well, five is a little old to wet the bed. Let’s try not to have it happen again, shall we?”

“… Sorry.”

For that matter, Charles thought as he eyed the front door, five was a little old to be talking like a toddler. “What do you think of this door, Kurt?”

“It’s big.”

“What do you think of it, in a longer sentence?”

The blue brow had puckered. “I …”
“Come on. Use some more words – I’m sure you have them.”

Then yellow eyes gleamed up at him. “Ne mogli by vy otkryt’ dver’, mister Ksav’e? Ona shishkom tyazhelaya dlya menya.”

“All … right?” Charles tried to translate. There had been a ‘door’ in there. Dver’. His catalogue wrenched Crime and Punishment out of his memory:

– кто-то неприметно стоял у самого замка и точно так же, как он здесь, снаружи, прислушивался, притаясь изнутри и, кажется, тоже приложа ухо к двери –

– someone was standing stealthily close to the lock and just as he was doing on the outside was secretly listening within, and seemed to have her ear to the door –

Dveri, then? The effort felt like eating too much ice at once. He massaged the bridge of his nose.

“You win. But let’s practice your English, shall we?” Inspiration hit. “And you can help me with my Russian. That will be wonderful.”

Kurt beamed, showing a startling mouthful of fangs. “Zamečatel’no!”

“Sometime later, perhaps.” Charles tugged at the bolts and latch. “First we need to find some water to clean you, since it would be too much to take a bath in –”

The door creaked open, and snow cascaded into the hallway.

“– milk.”

Kurt dashed into the snow on the floor, then out. Then again, giggling, leaving double-toed footprints and dusting the hems of his blankets. Charles stared at the remains of the drift, waist-high in the doorframe. The entire scene would have been amusing had it not been so bloody cold.

“Stop that.” He tried to shove the door shut. “Fill your pan with the snow there – now, please –”

“What happened?”

He turned to see Armando walking up the hall, and saying, “Be careful,” to Scott, trailing behind. “There’s snow all over the floor.”

“What happened was that the pipes have frozen,” Charles pushed at the door, “so there’s no water, and you may have noticed the morning’s happenings in Kurt’s room.”

“Yeah, got a whiff. So you’re going to heat up snow? Fire’s out in the stove, first. And after that – give him a bath in what, the sink?”

“With a cloth. I don’t know!”

Armando drew nearer. “I know you’d better wake me up before you walk anywhere with him, next time. He was only just in my range when I woke up – any further and he could have –”

“You can’t be with him every waking hour of the day,” Charles snapped. “You’re going to have to trust me, Armando, as I’ve told you – Kurt, don’t!”

It was too late. Kurt had stuffed snow down Scott’s shirt and set off a cacophony. Scott pushed him – “Don’t!” – and Kurt turned a somersault, quilts whirling, before launching himself into the snow again, laughing shrilly.
Boys! Stop it, please –
He started it!
He’s fun!
Armando sighed. “How are we going to –”
The children’s shriek should have told him what was wrong, first. Inexcusable, Charles later thought, that he had not been wary – though perhaps she had been searching for Scott and Kurt, specifically, and left the two adults as an afterthought.

As it was, the jab of knife-sharp ice from the Finder was blunted on his shields, and Armando only grimaced – but the children went from laughing to crying in seconds.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Xavier!”

“Oh god, Scott, I didn’t do that. It was Lady Frost, who apparently wants to see if we’re all here this morning. Now, do get back up, Kurt. Dry those eyes – it’s all right.” For Kurt had landed on the floor, sobbing, limbs and tail sticking out of his quilts. “Come on.” Charles went over and scooped him up. A mistake, since Kurt latched onto him like an octopus – one that smelled like urine. “All right,” he managed. “Better?”

A furry face mashed into his neck. “Yes.”

“Then get down.”

“No!”

“I –” Charles turned to Armando. He must have looked wild-eyed, for Armando had the courtesy not to smirk.

Instead, he reached over to take Kurt and the quilts, and settled all in his arms. “Let’s go pay a visit to the Queen, shall we? Get Scott.”

“Wait – what?”

Armando had reached the stairs. “I told you last night: I don’t get paid enough for this shit.”

Charles followed him, taking Scott by the hand. “You don’t understand. This sort of – ridiculousness, this privation – it’s the way things work.”

“And you’ve never wanted to change it?”

“I tried to change it.” They were in the middle of the dormitory hallway. “And I was chained to my bed for three months out of four as a result.”

“I was locked up in Dallas for years, so I get you – believe me. But I talked to Frost the night before last, about the Finder, and she said she’d ‘take it into mind.’ Surely I can talk to her about other things, too.”

“Take it into mind’ – of course. That doesn’t mean she wouldn’t put it right out of her mind thirty seconds later. And what about the Finder?”

Armando opened the library door. The thermostat was still running; Charles heard Scott’s sigh of relief at the warmth.
“It was when she cranked it two days ago.”

“When the Free West prisoners escaped, yes.”

Armando knocked on the door to the West Wing. “And when they did, the Finder gave me one hell of a headache, so I went to find Frost using it and I asked her to dial it down. It can’t be good for her, either – it’s a weird-looking thing if you ask me, and I’ve seen some weird shit in Dallas.”

Charles sucked in a breath as he saw Armando touch the keyhole, for somehow, incredibly, some of his fingers … melted and merged, and the flesh slithered inside – and there was a crunching sound.

“That’s —”

“Disgusting? It gets the job done, doesn’t it?”

“I was going to say ‘amazing.’”

“Right.”

Charles kept tight hold of Scott’s hand. Kurt’s face peered at him over Armando’s shoulder. He tried to smile at the blue fur; it didn’t make him feel any better. Charging right into Frost’s domain, even if Armando was arrogant in his own abilities –

“Wait.” Charles called up his raven. “Let me try something. We’re not … actively attempting to sneak up on her, are we?”

“Wasn’t planning on it, but if you want to make the morning a real shitstorm, then —”

“That’s the second time he said ‘shit’, Mr. Xavier.”

“Yes, thank you, Scott.” Charles focused on his raven’s beating wings, on its eagerness to fly. “Go,” he whispered, and it shot ahead of them, fast and then faster, until it spiraled down into the Hive like a black marble in a funnel.

Lady?

He felt in return a chilly … caress? He shivered. What had that been? More of a stroke than a touch; conveying in one wave of goosebumps that Frost felt … pleased about something.

Good morning, Charles, she sent.

“Good morning,” he whispered.

So subdued, this fine morning? How do you feel?

What the fuck was she on about? - but Charles covered his reaction. If docility was what she wanted, docility she would get. "I’m fine."

“You’re talking to yourself again, Mr. Xavier —”

“No.” He squeezed Scott’s hand. “I’m talking to the Queen. Shall I relay any message for you, Armando?”

“Tell her we want to talk to her.”

My lady, Charles sent. Armando wishes to speak to you.
Does he?

Yes, please. He watched his raven circle, gliding without a sound. Frost’s attention seemed caught by it. Surely it was not ornate enough for her; there was not a diamond in sight.

*Your little bird seems quite well, Charles.*

"It ... is." Why wouldn't it be?

*Hm. Then: Do attend me. I am at the Finder.*

Yes – we felt it.

Frost sent a pulse of amusement. *Hank shall meet you at the West Wing door.*

Charles made no verbal reply. Instead, he projected the image of Armando in front of him, walking down through the stark-white labyrinth of halls to the Hive.

He felt a flash of displeasure.

“What was that?” Armando said.

“I don’t think she likes that you went through the door without permission.”

“I did it just last night.”

What, then – but Frost sent another cold caress to his veils, and Charles clenched his teeth.

*Now you won’t be getting any clever ideas from Mr. Muñoz showing off, will you, Charles? You remember what I will do to you, if –*

“Of course I remember. I won’t do a thing,” he said. “Besides, there’s snow waist-high at the front door.”

*Is there? How lovely. I will see you in a moment.*

Charles took the hint and pulled his raven back. Then he focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

“You O.K.?”

“Fine. Why do you ask?”

“Because,” Armando said, “I felt that, which is saying a lot. I usually change things up so it’s just a bit of cold. That’s why I had to talk to her about the Finder – too much at once.”


A shrug. “I’ll get stronger as I recover.”

There was no more time for words before Armando opened the door to the topmost level of the Hive. Charles followed him through, keeping his body between Scott and Frost, even though she was standing on the Finder platform and thus two levels below.

Kurt had started sucking on his tail again.

They walked down the elegant hanging stairways, slowly, and came within earshot.
“A little to the left?”

Charles craned his neck to see. There was a cluster of techs, moving –
– he blinked. Moving a large vidscreen along the wall.

“More – there. Perfect!” And there was the White Queen, clapping her hands. “A toast!”

She poured what looked like a clear liquor into shot glasses on a tray, held by –

Held by Christopher Maddox, the mutant with feathers who had strapped him down so many times,
when he was powering the Finder. Another Briton.

Charles tried to catch his eyes. No luck – and now they had reached Frost, so he had to be on better
guard, _damn_ it.

“Mr. Muñoz, and Mr. Xavier – and my two little dears.” Frost leaned over the Finder’s rail to touch
Kurt’s cheek. “_Moi malchik._ We were just celebrating a lovely gift from our new allies in Mexico.
Would you care to join in the toast?”

“A little early, isn’t it?” Armando said.

Frost’s smile glinted. “Some of us are on Brussels time. Ladies, gentlemen: _Budem_ – long life – and
a happy New Year to us all.”

The circle of techs echoed her; some whistled and drummed their feet. She downed her shot and set
the glass down on the tray with a sharp clack – the rest followed suit. Christopher Maddox kept the
tray level with an effort, grinning.

He met Charles’ eye.

_Help me_, Charles mouthed at him.

Only to see that same smile vanish, and feathers ripple as Maddox turned away.

“So!” Frost stepped down from the platform, found her shoes, and slipped her feet back into them.
“Welcome once more to the Finder, Mr. Muñoz – our throne room, of sorts.” Frost dipped her head
at Armando. “I’d curtsy, but it’s difficult in a pantsuit.”

“Pretty!” Kurt squeaked.

“Thank you, darling, but … oh dear.” She wrinkled her nose, still smiling. “I smell something not so
pretty.”

“Exactly,” Armando said. “There has to be a laundry room here somewhere – the pipes have frozen
by our rooms, so getting everything clean is going to be impossible.”

“In winters past, all the children just resigned themselves to pungency. My little brother, rest in
peace, did so in Solovki, though I chose otherwise. I should tell you more about Solovki some day,
Mr. Muñoz. We have a great deal in common, you and I.”

Looking at them, Charles could almost snort. Armando’s skin was very black, Frost’s so white it
could glow in the dark. And a recent prisoner on one hand, and a queen on the other –

“Maybe someday soon.”
Charles stared. Armando was … god help him, he was smiling. And Frost was smiling back.

“Then I don’t see a problem with your wanting to wash. Jessie!”

A tech detached herself from the group. “Yes, my lady?”

“Please encode an I.D. card for access to the laundry room. I’m sure papa would want you to be clean!” She tweaked Kurt’s nose. “And give Mr. Muñoz a key to the West Wing.”

“Right away.” Jessie left.

It seemed it was as simple as that. Charles felt his gorge rise.

“Yes, my lady?”

Some of the techs were talking; Charles could hear them over the buzz in his ears. Other voices, though, had stopped.

“I’m a little cold,” he mumbled.

“Of course, with that haircut.” She tossed the hat to the floor. “What do you say, Maddox? Will you lend our dear Xavier some feathers, to keep him warm?”

“No, my lady.” A voice with an Irish lilt echoed through the room. “I like my feathers where they are.”

Frost laughed. Half a beat later, the techs laughed with her, jarringly loud, and Charles felt his ears burn. He bent to pick up his cap, and heard footsteps, a murmur – and then Frost said:

“Voilà – your card and key. I’m glad you’re here, Muñoz.”

“Thanks, Lady Frost. Come on, Xavier.” Armando took his elbow in a strong grip. Charles found himself towing Scott in turn as they went through a pair of double doors and made their way down another hallway.

“Right.” The touch on his arm vanished. “Now that we’re out of there, where am I going?”

“Mr. Xavier?” Scott said. “Are you O.K.? Your breathing is funny.”

He was right. Charles heard his own wheeze rattling in his chest. The whole group, laughing at him – he could either stand in a corner and panic or join the joke and laugh at himself. And the Irish lilt … Christopher Maddox, damn his mismatched eyes, had sounded like Geoffrey. Geoffrey, of all people. His eyes stung.


He blinked at Armando.

“I told you to breathe in – do it slowly.”

So Charles did. Then he coughed.
“Good. Last thing I need is my guide passing out. Now which way to the laundry room?”

“I have no idea. Maybe it’s somewhere by the showers. I’ve been there.”

“But you’ve never been to the laundry room.”

“No.”

Charles ignored his stare; focused on getting his breath back under control. Armando was the first to break the silence. “So what might your best guess be, on how to get there?”

“Well, this is a panopticon.”

“So…”

“All of these hallways are … spokes of a wheel. I’ve only been down two of them – but if we reach the Hive again, we know we have to continue round the wheel instead of branching – you know?”

“Not really. But: walk until we find it – that I can do.”

Charles could not say, afterwards, how long it took. It was quite the change, he thought to himself – not a month ago, he would have counted his footsteps and catalogued with all his might, the better to fill out his mental map. Now, all he was interested in was finding a place to sit.

_Behold_, and even his thoughts were full of tired contempt. _The broken man._

But it was not so: Jean had given him a fire, hadn’t she?

Charles put his hat back on with one hand, keeping hold of Scott with the other. That and he had … Erik. Charles felt the back of his neck prickle. Didn’t he have him, truly? What would Erik do, if he saw Charles in the middle of a room, being made into a joke?

Erik could prowl into the group and bare his teeth at all and sundry; he could yank Charles away from the others and into the circle of his own warmth. His body, his eyes – the glow of that besotted belief that Charles could do no wrong. Such a fire –

Charles snorted at the image. Such a fire? He could roast sausages on it for all the good it did him now.

“Here,” Armando said, and flicked some switches.

Then Charles sat on a plastic chair and watched as Armando tested the taps at the wash basin, ran some warm water, and – matter of fact – placed Kurt in it. He handed him a bar of soap. “Keep hold of that.”

Of course Kurt dropped the soap, and splashed round and round to catch it, giggling.

“You go stand by Kurt, Scott,” Charles said. “Make sure he doesn’t slip and hit his head on anything.”

“Yes, Mr. Xavier.”

“You know how to use a washing machine, Charles?”

He focused. Armando was drumming his fingers on the lid of … Charles tilted his head. “I haven’t had much of an opportunity, no. I would usually send the laundry out. At home, I mean.”
Since Raven had been little, he remembered: a practice born of necessity and turned habit from … laziness, perhaps. Or from being disinclined to roughen his hands. The price of Oxford laundry was negligible once he had recovered what remained of his estate.

“All right then, Professor: watch and learn.”

Charles shuffled over to the machine. It was one of many, all in a row.

“Detergent, detergent – here. Quilts will need a cold wash and rinse, and heavy material setting. First you check that no kid’s sneaked in to hide. Then you empty a box of detergent into this recess, and …”

“Why are you showing me this?”

Armando grunted as he manhandled the quilt into the machine. “What do you mean?”

“You’re the one with the key and the card. I can’t …. I don’t have them. Didn’t you hear Frost?”

“I heard her. And do I look like your own personal maid, Charles?”

“Um.” Charles blinked. “No.”

Armando slammed the lid down. “Good, cause I’m not. We’re going to split laundry duty – especially if Kurt does this again.”

The machine rumbled into life. Scott came to press his palms against it. “Cool!”

“Yes; very.” Charles watched long fingers twist a dial. “Thanks for the laundry lesson.”

“Whatever. I told you: I’m nobody’s maid.” A flash of a smile disappeared before Charles could register it completely. “We’ll wait for this to finish and then get the rest. This time, you keep an eye out so you know how to get back here by yourself.”

To get back by himself, and with a key – Charles knew he would have been excited on any other day. Perhaps he would be again, and sooner than he thought.

They sat in the chairs. Kurt continued to chase the soap, his tail whipping up the water behind him, so Charles heard rumbles on one side of the room and splashes on the other.

“I couldn’t help but notice …. What did you do to get on Frost’s bad side? She doesn’t knock the hats off her friends, does she?”

“Very astute.”

“Well?”

“It’s a long story.”

“And here I thought I overheard you saying something about trust.”

Overheard? Charles let the irony pass. “It’s not a question of trust. We’ve known each other a whole forty-eight hours, after all – some declare undying love in that amount of time or less.”

“I’ll let you down easy: you’re not my type.”

"I assumed that anyway, given -"
"And before you get all Party of Purity on me, I’ll tell you that we did whatever we wanted to do, any chance we could get, in Dallas camp."

“So, it’s not a question of the fairer sex?”

“What do you care?”

“I hate being told ‘no.’ So. Women. Yes, or no?”

“Not really, no.”

“You might wish to reconsider.” Charles tried a sly smile. “The Queen is quite taken with you.”

“She can take it somewhere else.” A snort. “I know her type, and I wouldn’t go there for all the fruit in California.”

“You’re talking about the ruler of half a continent, you know.”

“A fourth, I think. Mexico nominally belongs to Almaz, and a big chunk of Canada’s under ice. And really – I saw Kelly a few times too. You know, Stryker’s VP? There were portraits of them in the education rooms, and when Kelly visited, he always looked at himself, and smiled. That’s the type: people who like the sight of their own face and the sound of their own voice.”

“So … you think Frost is that type, do you?”

“So far. Didn’t you see her looking at her reflection in the vid screen?”

“No,” Charles half-laughed. “I didn’t. Shame on me.”

“Yeah, well. That’s my opinion and I’m sticking to it. But what about you?”

“… What?”

“You never answered my original question.”

Give the man a prize, Charles thought, for persistence. “Only because … it’s foolish, in retrospect. To make a long story short: I was taken here against my will, I rebelled and tried to escape, and I was punished for it. The method of that punishment is irrelevant, at least for now. The whole point is that I’ve learned my lesson and I won’t be trying it again.”

After a pause, Armando shrugged. “Pretty sure I know your type, too. Probably best to get back to fighting weight before the next try.”

“Those tries do tend to take a lot out of a person.”

“I’m sure. And just so you know,” Armando said, softly, “I’m not here for the EBS, or for any kids, and I’m certainly not here for you. I’m going to be looking out for myself. Is that clear, Charles?”

He had made the hint so obscure as to be almost invisible. But there could be no disappointment if something – Armando’s support, here, he supposed – had not existed in the first place.

“Quite clear.”

Besides, he knew he had time enough to bring Armando to his point of view. Irresistible force and immovable object – Charles glanced at him again. One of them, surely, and after enough time, would give.
Over the next few days, they developed a routine.

Kurt eventually stopped crying his way out of bed at night, but the wetting persisted. Truthfully, Charles was glad of it – he had gotten to go to the laundry room twice, alone, even if he was carrying armfuls of fusty sheets there, and dripping sheets back again.

Armando took it upon himself to dig through the snow in search of firewood. The first time he tried, he came back ill-tempered, with only one armful for two hours’ effort. So Charles recommended he use a sheet to haul next time.

Frost did not return. Charles assumed she was still in Brussels – with Jean, with Logan. … With Erik.

“What did you ask her?” he said to Armando, one evening as they were washing the dishes. Scott and Kurt were arm-wrestling over the kitchen table. “The first night you were here, I mean. You said that you had gone to ask her something, and had seen Hank and Logan there – together.”

“Now you want to know?” Armando took another plate to dry. “It’s no secret. I figure I can change to block the Finder, but my first day here it gave me a hell of a headache when she fired it up. It was the second time that day – remember? The first time it was manageable. I guess I wasn’t quite prepared for it again so soon.”

“Ah. I shield myself, and I could shield you too if you like, when she comes back and does roll-call again. I’m going to do the same for the children – I could include you with very little effort.”

“I won’t get better if I don’t practice. But anyway – she told Hank to help Jessie get the announcement over all the frequencies. You know: that the one Free West officer was a woman.”

“Right.”

“So he looked like a kicked dog when she did, and she watched him leave and told Wolverine, ‘At least he’s good for that much.’ And the Wolverine did not like that one bit. Then I asked to speak to her, and he left too.”

“Odd. I wonder what she meant.”

Armando draped the dishtowel over the sink. “I suppose Logan figured, with friends like that …”

“Who needs enemies?” Charles finished. “But I had no idea the two of them were ever – friendly.”

Hank had gone to Dallas, hadn’t he? Frost had … wiped his mind there, of Charles’ medical report. And her cat-with-cream smile, and – My dear Dr. McCoy – bubbled up from his memory like methane from a swamp.

“Gross! Mr. Xavier, Kurt’s being gross!”

“Stop being a tattle-tale, Scott, and – good Lord.” He grabbed the dishtowel and waved it through the air. “We surrender, Kurt. Lay off the biological weapons.”

“Or take them to Albuquerque,” Armando said – and Charles supposed it was inappropriate to laugh at that, but he did anyway.

Some nights he tried his best to sleep as soon as possible. What with the aftereffects of malnutrition,
running after Kurt, and trying to give Scott equal attention, he grew tired very quickly.

Other nights Charles lay awake as long as he could, counting the days he had been with the EBS, the days since he had seen Raven. He could not remember what he had done on most of them; others, for obvious reasons, stuck in his memory like rusty nails in wood. Ororo and Bobby, John and Sean – he hoped they were well. Logan too. And Erik –

– the night he had sucked Erik in the library, the night after Dallas he had wrangled him into submission, panting and lust-wrecked – an animal –

*May I bite you?*

The memory of Erik’s breath hot on his face – and his teeth …. Charles shuddered, clapping a hand over his left shoulder. Then he rolled onto his stomach, yanked the blankets up over his head, bit the pillow rather than make a noise, and did not, would *not* touch himself. He was stronger than any animal urges brought back to the fore by Erik’s enthusiastic fucking – over and over, insatiable –

Charles knew he was stronger than that – he would take steps to be strong. Kurt’s sheets weren’t the only things he had washed. The bed no longer smelled like Erik at all.

Halfway through January, Charles was ready to give up teaching the children out of sheer frustration. “Well, not quite give up completely, but what can we do?”

“Don’t know,” Armando muttered into his cup of coffee.

“Have you thought of teaching him Braille?” Hank said.

He had joined them for dinner – another difference from previous days, Charles had thought with satisfaction. That was before Hank had proved to be as shy of any substantial conversation as he had ever been.

Still, Kurt was asleep on Charles’ lap, which was comforting. Scott had been sent to bed early for throwing books across the library. The tantrum had been as brief as it was unexpected; Charles suspected his own shocked disapproval had done much to defuse it.

“I don’t know how useful that would be. I hardly know it myself – and how many books in Braille do we have in this manor?”

“The two of them like the atlas,” Armando said. “You’ve been doing well with that.”

It was true. Frost had mentioned someplace called Solovki, so Charles had looked it up in the index. They had no luck - although Solovetsky had been close enough in sound for him to set Kurt on its trail, through the pages detailing the White Sea. And ... if they were one and the same, Frost was either lying or mad – the idea of children living there, even before the post-war resurgence of Arctic ice …

He shook off such thoughts. “I can’t tell stories about every country in the world – my voice will give out. It would be a start to have something with raised topography. A globe, even. Hank, do you know if there’s anything educational in storage?”

Hank gave him a look, and Charles bristled. “It was worth asking!”

“I can ask the next person to go to Albany to look for a raised globe. But couldn’t you do something with your telepathy to teach Scott, while Kurt’s taking his nap?”
“Good idea.” Armando took more cooked carrots.

“I don’t know.” Charles rested his chin on Kurt’s head. “I’d have to ask Frost. Last time she caught me going into someone else’s mind . . .”

She had given him the chain for his ankle, of course. Perhaps Hank’s thoughts were along the same lines; he was staring at the tabletop.

At least, Charles thought, Erik had made the chain into something beautiful. His own candelabrum, even if he had no candles for it. Another thing to add to a shopping list: candles, toilet paper, toothpaste, a globe, shoes for Kurt’s peculiar feet –

*Making something*. Hadn’t Hank already . . .

“You could make something for his eyes,” Charles said, “since he channels the plasma through them. Didn’t you do the same for Alex?”

“Yes – but Forge helped me. These days he goes between Durham and Dallas.” Hank saw the confusion, and hastened on. “His abilities lie in tech. And since there’s a lot to work on with Dr. Feynman – he was my teacher – and a lot to uncover at that part of the front . . . . Anyway. He’s busy, is all.”

“But surely you can come up with a few ideas, Hank. Sketch some blueprints. You don’t have any particular projects, do you?”

Hank looked away. “Nothing that important, no.”

The sound of a lie scraped through his mind like fork tines on a plate. Charles sighed; reached up to scratch beneath his cap. Hank was trying, surely – but perhaps some old habits of deception were hard to break.

Then he would be honest enough for both of them: forthcoming with the Queen. “I’ll speak to Frost when she next pays us a visit.”

“That’s tomorrow, Charles.”

Armando and Charles looked at Hank. He met their eyes, then went back to staring at the table. “She’ll be here tomorrow evening.”

That meant that Charles was prepared for the Finder. He set a tiny thought-fire on the platform, and when Frost paced through it – *stocking feet, interesting* – Charles sprang into action. He shielded Scott and Kurt, and alerted Armando – even though *that* felt like poking a bloody porcupine.

“Joy,” he said to Armando, where they stood in the library.


“Could you take me to see her, though? I need to ask about Scott’s lessons.”

“Call Hank,” Armando said to him, walking off with the children.

With one huff, Charles did just that. No need for his raven or any fuss – he reached out, touched Hank’s mind, and waited.

Hank’s thoughts were rotating: a blue fractal, branching, folding in on itself. *Charles*?
Yes. Could you please let me into the West Wing?

I … sure. Fine. I’m on my way.

There: problem solved. Except Charles supposed he should not surprise the Queen. And he supposed the lingering stroke of Frost’s thoughts – the languid curiosity there – was something he could get used to, so he sent her the request for entry as well, “Just to be polite,” Charles gritted out, staring at the West Wing door. He took off Erik’s token and put it in his pocket.

And he almost jumped at her icy jab. So warm today. Curious.

What? His mind had no meteorology; what the hell was she on about - and would that he had an ability like Armando’s; growing fur in case of cold .... He shook off the distraction; sent a subdued: Lady.

What have you been doing, Charles?

There was no way she could know of his conversations with Armando, inconsequential as they had been ... no way she could know the truth about Erik .... Other than that, what had he been doing? "Nothing," Charles hissed to himself, but he kept calm as he sent her the most tentative: ?

Never mind.

He repeated the image: the West Wing door, opened.

She sent an annoyed affirmative. Dr. McCoy is headed that way – he can let you in. I will give you fifteen minutes; I have many things to do today.

It took some doing, but Charles had painted a cowed expression on his face by the time he reached the bottom of the Hive. He did not look up to meet Frost’s eyes.

“Well, Charles?” Her stocking feet stepped off the Finder’s platform. “What was it you needed to ask me?”

“There’s a problem with the tutoring.”

"Look at me, please; proper submission and good manners are not mutually exclusive."

So Charles lifted his head. "There's a problem, Lady, with the tutoring."

Frost raised her eyebrows.

“With Scott, I mean. The tutoring you asked me to do.”

“Ah, yes. Walk with me.”

He waited for her to slide her feet back into her shoes and then fell into step beside her. Had she bloody well forgotten? It was possible, Charles realized – of course it was. Before he knew it, they had walked up the metal staircase to her office, and Frost led him inside. She did not turn on any light.

“Sit.”

Charles sat.

There were files spread over Frost’s desk; a pen and several pencils next to different colored slips of
paper. It reminded him .... Charles swallowed. It looked like his own desk back in Oxford, strewn with research notes to sort and papers to mark.

“What is it?”

“You’re preparing for something.” He peered at the files. “It looks extensive.”

“Quite.” Frost sat, gracefully, and folded her hands on the desk. “I’ll be making a speech tomorrow to the assembled heads of nations, and all I have left to do is come up with turns of phrase fit to make Stryker choke.”

“In Brussels.”

“Of course, in Brussels. Is the cold here affecting your mind, Charles?” She smiled. “Shall I bring you a fur hat from my Russian friends?”

“No, thank you.”

“What is the problem with Scott, then?”

“Due to his blindfold he can’t read, or practice writing, or look at pictures. He’s becoming frustrated, hearing Kurt do the things he isn’t able to do.”

Frost was silent, listening.

“I’ve asked Hank to work on something to channel his …. Alex told me that Scott’s ability is creating plasma bursts via his eyes, somehow?”

She nodded.

“So. I thought Hank could make him special glasses, or something …” It sounded foolish in the dim chill of the office. Charles shook his head and took the plunge. “But since that project may take some while, another way he could learn in the meantime would be to sit in my mind and read there. I have many books – you’ve seen how many. And I’m sure I could control any mental manifestations of his power.”

Frost looked at him, eyes hooded, for a long time. “So sure, are you?”

Charles looked down at the files. “I thought so.”

“You did well to ask me, Charles.” Her voice turned gentle. “Especially with a misunderstanding so basic. Those books are memories, not the written word – and I would think that some of them would hardly be educational in the right sense for a child.”

Charles was silent.

“You can see, surely, that it would be dangerous for you to take children into your mind when you are still so untutored in your own power … can’t you?”

“I thought our agreement was that you would tutor me, lady.”

“Soon.”

Soon? Try never. “Having Scott in my mind could be practice, then. You were there yourself, Lady, without incident.”
“Without my supervision, I shall permit no such thing. Not,” she continued, “until Jean returns.”

"She can come to my mind?"

"Heavens, no; she's such a softhearted creature. No. Perhaps you can go to her mind - then you and Scott could sit with her to your hearts' content - except,” Frost sighed, "that little clearing is so small ..."

Charles smelled a rat. Frost wanted him to admit he had already been to Jean's mind, perhaps, by correcting her on the scale of the vast forest. He did his best to look stupid instead. “But when will Jean return?"

“Oh, I don’t know. Not until the end of January, since I want to spend more time with her. I’ve been so damned busy. Tomorrow, I make the case for worldwide acknowledgement of the EBS as sovereign in our own territory. Then I have to deal with the fallout.” Her lips curled into a strange smile. “For the time being Jean does well with my prince.”

Charles started in surprise. A good thing; she had expected it.

“He takes excellent care of her – quite fortunate, since he’s a resounding failure on other fronts. Heads of state … they don’t seem to like him.” Her smile widened. “He hasn’t caught them all in a dark alleyway, so I can’t imagine the reason. Can you, Charles? We could have a lesson now, if you like – some memory sharing. I have a few recent incidents that –”

“No.”

“There, now – of course not, if you do not wish it. I do have some courtesy.” She propped her chin in one hand. “Everyone in Brussels has been quite courteous, with the exception of the Free West. I haven’t had a single Western Senator or Representative on my dance card. Foolish of them, don’t you think?”

He nodded.

“So enthused,” she said, dry. “Well. They’ll have time to come around. In the meantime, shut Scott in his room and soon enough he’ll beg to behave himself.”

“… You can’t mean that.”

The fall of Frost’s hair looked especially soft in the low light; the line of her cheekbone cut across it so cleanly as to seem unreal, when she said: “Why can’t I?”

“He’s a child,” Charles croaked. “It’s inhumane.”

“Spare me.” Frost rose from her seat. “Whatever you choose to do, keep out of his mind and keep him out of yours. I’ll be checking when I next see you.”

“Yes, my lady.”

She took him by the arm. Every time, Charles thought, he forgot how strong she was.

“Out.”

“Yes, my lady.” Charles looked round the Hive – his eyes snagged on the immense new vid screen. “Oh. Could we …”

“Could you what?”
“I could give Scott all my attention if Kurt were occupied. There’s another vid screen,” he said, “in a room on the lowest level. I saw Stryker’s speech there on Thanksgiving. Is there anything suitable for children on the airwaves? And would you permit Kurt to watch it?”

“Dumping him in front a vid?” Frost laughed. “A little inhumane, don’t you think? But then, who’s human these days? That’s the Free West’s latest little talking point, recycled from 1955: no room for the EBS on a human continent."

“My lady …” Charles looked her square in the eyes. “Give me this, and I will wish you the best of luck with your speech.”

“You should do that anyway.” Frost opened the door and gestured toward the hallway. “But Armando will have a card for the vid room. Tell him to expect it from McCoy soon.”

Not ‘my dear Mr. McCoy’, Charles noticed. He adjusted his cap.

“Do shave, if you can figure out how. You look like a ragamuffin. Good day, Charles.”

It would be pointless to ask her how, seeing as she had never permitted him a razor. And, Charles remembered, since Bobby’s razor was dull and useless after his ill-advised haircut.

So all Charles did was mutter, “Good day,” to the closed door.

That night, he thought of the few times he had managed to shave, courtesy of Logan. What was he doing now? Logan had taken care of Jean at Dallas, and surely Frost couldn’t have Erik on child duty – god help them all – the entire time. Perhaps Logan alternated days with him. Big Red, a faint echo, drooling like a dog at a rack of ribs –

Charles shook off the image. Maybe it was Azazel who took care of Jean when Erik was – otherwise occupied …

With what?

Charles tried to think of other things. Showing vid specials to Kurt; getting a chance to talk to Scott uninterrupted …. Hank’s work; Armando’s surliness on the days he had headaches …

He gave up, and thought of Erik. Unpopular with heads of state – He can’t have caught them all in a dark alleyway –

Charles gulped. Did that mean that Erik had caught … some?

Surely not. Diplomacy was diplomacy, and being socially maladroit did not translate to murder. Did it?

Rubbing his face against his pillow, Charles stared into the dark. Would Erik have managed to dance yet? He had seemed quite happy at the prospect, if somewhat naively so.

For who would ask him? And whom … would he ask?

– in a dark alleyway -

Brussels had many alleyways, Charles remembered, shivering. He had been there. Oh, god – what was Erik doing?

He didn’t mean to imagine it; the image just slithered into his mind. A shadow in a dark alleyway, all
angles, taking on shape and speed until it pounced and pinned someone to the cobblestones … and looked down, sliding a knife out of its sleeve, smiling with gleaming teeth.

“Who’s afraid of the big, bad wolf?” Charles punched his pillow. “Not I.”

He turned onto his stomach, huffing. If Frost were sending her precious prince to assassinate political enemies, it was no skin off his neck. It would be idiotic of them to be in a dark alleyway in the first place, for surely that was now the sovereign land of all the whores in United Europe. He had told Erik to watch out for them. *Exchange of goods,* he had smirked, for *information* – Or for money, perhaps. Hadn’t he said that Erik could buy enough sex to wreck a laundry’s worth of sheets?

Charles’ mouth went dry.

For his mind had obligingly removed the victim on the cobblestones, turned Erik in place – still in shadow, still a shadow himself – and let him lean up against a trembling prostitute, painted lips quivering as she – or god help him, it could be a ‘he’ – as he scrabbled for purchase, crushed against the wall.

*You’re Erik the Red,* such an individual would squeak – and perhaps Erik would smile, all teeth again, his breath curling white into the cold air, licking up over both their profiles –

– and as the whore would turn away and squeeze his eyes shut, Erik would growl, maybe, and one of his large hands would close round – something, Charles didn’t care what – and he would lean in closer, and slowly run his tongue over - something else, something on the face, smearing powder down to the shell of an ear … and he would lap there like a dog before whispering, *May I bite you?*

“If,” Charles snarled, “he remembers his manners. Fucking hell.”

He flipped onto his back and closed his eyes, determined to sleep. He wouldn’t touch himself. He was stronger than any figment of his imagination, and he didn’t care about anything happening in Brussels.

“*This is it?*” Armando said.

Hank nodded.

Charles peered at the vid screen controls. Last December he had figured it out quickly enough – ah. He pressed a button. Static filled the screen, and the children covered their ears.

“That thing has to be at least ten years old,” Armando muttered.

Hank snorted. “Are you such a tech expert?”

Armando walked over to study the dials. “Some of us in Dallas camp got to work on assembly lines. They had a vid studio down there, and they needed replacement parts.”

“Any ideas of what they can watch?”

“Jessie left a list.” Hank unfolded a scrap of paper. “Albany Community Culture specials run on channel two. She says keep the kids off channel three, since it’s whatever gets piped in from United Europe; ditto channel four, since it’s what our satellite picks up from the Free West.”

Charles blinked. "That might create trouble for you."

"It's not like we broadcast it. Then there’s the Farmer’s Almanac and *New Day Dawning.* How
about channel seven? That’s *Tree Time*, mostly.”

“What’s that about?”

“The children on it get to hear stories, and learn letters and numbers. Each show ends with them planting trees,” Hank said. “It’s educational.”

“Well, then, fire it up,” Charles said, and Armando did.

Cheerful music plinked into the room as the screen crackled once before displaying an image. Kurt’s eyes went round.

“ – the letter ‘P.’ ‘P’ is for Pennsylvania!” someone in a bear suit sang. Or was it meant to be a yeti? Whatever it was, it was holding a rectangle and putting it in place on a large map.

“Pennsylvania!” came the chorus. The colors were bright; all the children looked happy enough. They were sitting in a circle, watching the bear.

“Oh.” Kurt brought his tail to his mouth and sat down on the floor.

“No, they said ‘P’,” Scott said. “Move over.” He sat down too.

“Well, Scott, I thought we could talk about what you might like to learn by yourself. This program will do well for Kurt to practice his English,” Charles said, “but why don’t you come and talk to me here?”

“No.”

Charles raised an eyebrow. Scott’s jaw had set, and even with the blindfold, his brow was furrowed. “I want to watch *Tree Time*.”

“Come on, be a good boy,” he said. “You’ve been upset about Kurt making noise before, remember?” Charles darted a glance at Kurt, but he was absorbed in the letter ‘V’ for ‘Virginia.’ “So now we can talk about whatever you like in peace.”

“No.” It was louder; Scott’s lower lip wobbled. “My grandma always let me watch it, before I had to wear my blindfold. Please, Mr. Xavier?”

“But you wouldn’t be able to –” Hank broke off in a hiss as Armando elbowed him hard.

“Fine, Scott. I’m sure the songs are very nice – and you can quiz Kurt on what was taught, afterwards. Would you like that?”

“Sure!”

The two children settled against each other, faces tipped up towards the screen. Charles shared a long look with Armando and Hank – and before long, under the cover of a happy song about the original thirteen colonies, Armando said: “Really, McCoy?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Hank …” Charles sighed. “They seems to be a habit of yours, these remarks, but even if people have certain physical differences they can appreciate the things you can, hm?”

“Write that up for the show, Prof – we could do with some more clichés in our lives.”
“It seems a nice program. There’s nothing like it in Oxford.” Charles let their idle chat cover up Hank’s mortified silence. “Education for children is usually done at the hearth. We’re still close to the pit, I suppose, even this far out from the third war.”

“I know the feeling. When I was a kid, my parents got on one of the last boats from Puerto Rico - but Florida wasn’t so much better. The weekend entertainment was alligator wrestling.”

Hank made no reply and left soon after, muttering about work. Armando drifted to one of the rickety plastic chairs and sat. Charles made a circuit of the room, humming - then poked his head into a tiny bathroom to one side. “Brilliant,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“There are facilities here, and I bet the pipes aren’t frozen. We could let them watch this program all day – we wouldn’t have to move.”

“That’s great, Xavier,” Armando said. “Except I thought you were going to be their tutor.”

“Yes, well.” Charles sighed, walking to a chair. He sat down. “I’ll try to balance vid time with books. It’s just – this is a bit of a welcome reprieve, you know? I haven’t wrangled children this young in quite a while.”

He wondered, suddenly, how Raven was managing with it.

They sat side-by-side, watching the children through two full hours of Tree Time. Charles considered analyzing whatever propaganda was at work, but drowsed instead.

Near five o’clock, Armando elbowed him. “Let’s go make dinner. And we’d better think about who to ask for more food.”

Nothing could have woken him faster. “We’re running out?”

“Just a few things: eggs, dairy. Hey. Breathe, all right?”

“Sorry,” Charles said. “I don’t know what came over me.”

He would have continued, but Jessie opened the door and smiled at them all. The steel necklace at her throat gleamed. “Up you go, kids, I have to record the news. Sorry,” she told the two of them, “but it’s Lady Frost’s orders.”

“Not at all. Come on Kurt, Scott. Go help Mr. Muñoz make dinner.”

Armando quirked his brow at him but left without protest.

“Hm?”

Jessie was pressing buttons in a panel that Charles had assumed was useless. “Ah,” he started. “I’m very interested in updates on the peace conference, Jessie. Could I watch the news with you?”

“Oh, I just program it to stop recording an hour later. But come to think of it –” she dusted off her hands, “today was the day of the speech. Let’s see what happened.”

She changed the channel.

Charles did not know what to expect. The grainy quality to the transmission was similar to newscasts shown at the Rose in Bloom – the silence was new, though.
“Damn it.” Jessie thumped the screen. “Albany’s end, this time. When the audio fizzes I can’t do much about it unless I’m within a mile of the source.”

“That’s right. Your ability involves –”

“Amplification, transmission, the Doppler Effect on command …” She smiled at him again. “Fun with sound waves.”

Tentatively, Charles smiled back.

A change in the shot caught his eye. There was Frost herself, standing, fixed on camera in three-quarters profile. Well … active, not fixed. There was a clean grace to the sweep of her arm as she held out one hand.

“I wish we could hear her.”

“Cross your fingers – ah! I felt that. We’ll have it in three, two, one –”

“ – and our *casus belli* the nuclear attacks, low-grade they may have been, of late 1955. We have not gone further than due recompense; we have not committed crimes against humanity; nor will the Eastern Brethren and Sistren ever retaliate in kind with nuclear weaponry. As it was in 1955, so it is now: we seek a land in which we might live free of the persecution of those with extraordinary abilities.”

Charles held his breath, watching. Frost’s voice was as clear as a bell.

“I say to you, gathered here, that even to acknowledge the words of President William Stryker is to accept by proxy those of the West who imprison and kill children in their midst who show these abilities; who name the Weathermaker, Bringer of Peace, as one who should be hanged from a tree; who go so far as to deny the death of millions of Jews in the *Shoah* of the second great war, only because those humans were other, and thus lesser, than themselves –”

As someone shouted from the audience, there was a cut away – to Jean, Charles realized, his stomach lurching. Jean, perched on a chair behind Frost – next to … Kitty, the one with messy, dark hair – now tightly pulled back. And Jean-Paul, the flyer.

Which made sense. Both looked as physically human as himself, and unobjectionable to the Free West, in terms of dress. Though perhaps Jean-Paul’s white hair was too long.

Charles wondered, suddenly, if Moira MacTaggert were watching a broadcast similar to this one … wherever she had ended up. Not three weeks ago, Jean-Paul had been the one to shoot at her with a sniper rifle.

“ – and her remarks were instantly attacked in a counter-address, delivered on the steps of the *Palais de Justice* by the newly elected Vice President of the Free West, Richard Slade. Though himself a standard bearer for the Party of Purity, Slade indicated that the Party’s long policy of denial of the –”

“*Slade*? Did Frost know that he replaced – Kelly, is it?”

“*Was it.*” Jessie looked grim. “Yes, she knew. They sent him to greet her right before she gave her speech. Maybe they thought to unsettle her; I for one know it’d take more than that. Still –”

“How will it affect negotiations going forward?”

“I’d like to know that myself, Mr. Xavier.”
“Do call me Charles.”

“Charles, then, and you know I’m Jessie. Come on – I’ll walk you back to your wing.” Jessie stabbed at the control panel; the vid screen flickered off. Charles bit back a protest. “Slade’s vaulted that high just for being the darling of the media. *Escape from the East* ….” Her voice sounded bitter. “It’ll make for a great vid, won’t it? I told her that keeping prisoners here was a huge mistake, even if Zhōngguó had enough of them in their holding cells.”

“What do you think she should have done with them?”

“That’s not my area.”

Charles let it go. “So, Slade in place of Kelly. Quite a quick change.”

“One that’s good for Stryker’s popularity. Kelly couldn’t get any promise of negotiation from Frost after Dallas, among other missteps, so he’s been increasingly seen as ineffectual. United Europe steps in with a conference, Stryker replaces Kelly with Slade, and public opinion redshifts.” She paused. “What? I vet all the news for her briefings – it’s not my own particular obsession. It’s public knowledge.”

“Stryker replaces Kelly outright …. Wouldn’t Slade have to be elected? They said that, just now: ‘newly elected.’”

“That’s the good thing about being Stryker. Give them bread and circuses, tell them it’s a democracy, and you don’t have to worry about pesky little things like the logistics of a midwinter election.”

“I see.” They had reached the long hallway. “I know my way from here.” Charles held up a hand to forestall her protest. “Surely you can trust me to walk ten yards to the library?”

“Right.” She gave him a rueful smile. “It’s nothing personal, Charles. I’ll see you around.”

“And maybe we could talk politics again sometime.”

“I keep pretty busy.” After a quick glance up and down, Jessie’s eyes softened. “You could record the news for me once or twice, if you happen to be there with the kids at five.”

“I’m happy to save you any work whatsoever. And I’d take off my hat to you, but –”

“No need for that. Say hi to the kids, and have a good night.”

“Thank you.”

The opportunity to watch more news did not come any time soon. As another week began, all Armando and Charles did was compile a careful list of supply requests and shepherd the children from kitchen to library to *Tree Time* and back. And the days dragged by, Charles thought of what he would do to alleviate his present boredom. He was not quite to the point of wishing for Erik’s return, no … though some sex would not go amiss. But there were other pastimes to consider.

If he ever felt inclined to wade through snow again, for example, he’d design a second travois to take wood-gathering alongside Armando. Hank had thrown together the first in the face of another blizzard bearing down on them. That second storm’s aftereffects were still a wearying nuisance: frigid air and frozen pipes. Charles had nearly run out of toothpaste; the dormitory smelled faintly of sewage. He was taking both children to the laundry room basin for baths, now, and so far had foiled all Kurt’s attempts to sneak into one of the machines.
Something had to be done about the living conditions, even if they were not yet outright deplorable. They had their list – but there had to be supplies around, somewhere. Necessities. Hank had left for the Research Triangle soon after designing the travois, and Charles had not thought to ask him before.

And now he was watching *Tree Time* again and trying not to fall asleep. It did not help that Scott and Kurt had started to sing along to a song about ladybugs, quietly.

*Fly away home.* Charles remembered the same tune with Raven singing. She was quite good, really ... her voice low and sweet ...

He jerked awake when his thought-fires surrounding the Hive flared. It was Armando, Charles realized, frowning – walking to the center and pausing in front of –

Charles touched the gleaming facets, with power smaller than that bloody billiard ball *you-can’t-see-me-in-the-night* –

“Enough of that,” he sighed, and took comfort in his veils. Surely the cold would have caved his head in without them; as it was, he hardly noticed it. “Welcome back, Lady.” He made a quick mental tally: it was Saturday the twenty-fourth. Eight days without her. “Not nearly long enough.”

The children paid no attention to his talking to thin air. Charles frowned. He should have felt Frost enter the Hive; perhaps Azazel had just dropped her off in the middle of it. In fact – yes, there he was.

It was on the tip of his tongue: *Would you like to see your papa, Kurt?*

Charles could not say what made him keep quiet. And then Azazel was gone, so the point was moot.

He kept a careful touch on Armando’s mind, changing the angle, the pressure – *whichever* – just slightly, whenever the static buildup became too much. And there: Armando was walking closer, and closer –

“Hey,” Armando said from the door.

Charles pretended to wake up again. He yawned. “Oh – hello.”

“How are you?”

“Fine.”

“That’s good.” Armando sat down on another chair, his motions jerky. After a long moment, with only the cheerful music of *Tree Time* to fill the space, he said,

“Frost isn’t happy.”

“Mm.”

“And I hadn’t thought her the type to take it out on the minions.”

“Hmm.”

“You know. Like how if nobody had sparkling water for Kelly when he visited camp, he would throw a fit. ‘You’re fired!’” Armando imitated an adenoidal whine. “‘You’re fired!’”

Charles yawned again.
“Not interested, I take it?”

“I am interested in,” Charles lifted his chin at the vid screen, “the larch. I’ve learned more about it in
the past ten minutes than I thought possible.”

“You’re not interested in my first half-month’s pay?” Armando showed him a roll of bills.

Charles kept his face bored. He did not care – he had a coffer full of jewels in his closet and Erik’s
token around his neck. “Only half a month? You’ve been here since the second.”

“I didn’t think it worth pointing that out.” And after Charles’ continued silence, Armando muttered,
“Anyway, she said the Wolverine’s coming.”

It was easy to feign indifference, because he had caught Azazel’s presence again, and then another –
Logan – before Armando said anything about it. Charles bit down hard on his burst of happiness.
“He’d be a good one to take the list to Albany.”

“The list?”

“Our shopping list – that we assembled last night. You remember?”

Toilet paper, toothpaste, shoes and a razor; a globe from Albany; a plea for a generator just so they
could keep the pipes thawed and not live with the stench. “We talked about this.” Charles’ voice
sharpened. “I gave you the list to give to Frost.”

Armando stared at the vid screen. His face was drawn. “I forgot. I’m sorry.”

“Forgot? Christ, you didn’t let Frost into your mind, did you?”

“I didn’t. I just …. Look, I’m sorry I forgot the list.” Armando thrust the piece of paper at him. “The
experiments did a number on me, so some days I hurt more than other days. Today’s one, and I got
distracted.”

The children and Tree Time were forgotten. Not Logan, though. Charles kept one thread of thought
touching his friend’s mind as he shoved the list into his pocket and sighed. “Why didn’t you tell me?
At the very least, I would have talked to you less shrilly during bad times.”

“It’s all right. Frost gave me some meds when I came here – you know, I showed you. And she’s
promised me more as soon as I run out.”

Charles’ skin prickled.

“You should be very careful about what sort of gifts you take from Frost, my friend.”

“I’m not stupid.”

“I know.” Charles kept his eyes on Armando. “Believe me, I know. So you must appreciate what
she might be trying to do, with kindly presents of powerful opiates.”

Armando’s teeth clenched. “It’s just until my power bounces back all the way.”

“You’ve been grounding Kurt this whole time with your mobile gravity well. This isn’t you at full
power?”

“If I had it all back, I wouldn’t hurt now, would I? And I’ll tell you what.” Armando crossed his
arms over his chest, scowling. “You want Frost to get that shopping list? Then bring it to her
“All right, then,” Charles said. “I will.”

Logan was there anyway – if he played it right, Charles might even see him. There had been the same let’s go let’s go vibrating as Charles had felt so many other times. He was not sure whether to take it as an insult. Surely Logan would make time to see his friend?

“If I’m not back before you leave, don’t worry. Someone else will escort me back, I’m sure. I’ll just drop a note in your mind to tell you.”

“You’ll just try –”

Charles shut the door on Armando’s snarl and walked off. He was calm, collected: because even if he wanted to see Logan, he had his dignity – so. No running. Or perhaps, just a little. It was a short distance from the vid room to the Finder – just enough time to check the placement of his hat and to straighten his clothes. He put Erik’s token in his pocket.

He took a moment to catch his breath at the double doors, and then knocked. The coldness flung at his mind was a necessary evil, for there was a familiar silhouette, and Logan himself opening one door from the inside. Giving him a single wide-eyed stare – without his usual madcap grin – and –

– closing the door? In his face? Hell.

“Oi,” Charles said. He tapped on the door again. Whatever had Frost angry, he could weather it. Hadn’t he done so already? Bowed and scraped; submitted himself to mockery? It was all a pile of rubbish and he wanted to see his friend –

“Shit, X,” Logan growled as he opened the door again.

“Nice to see you, too?”

“No. Get out, before –”

“Mr. Xavier.”

“– too late. Target acquired.” One square hand took his shoulder. “Come on in,” and in a whisper: “watch it.”

Charles quirked an eyebrow at him; then schooled his features. He inclined his head. “Lady Frost.”

“I told Armando not to leave you unsupervised.”

“I told Armando not to leave you unsupervised.”

“Surely you were referring to the children, Lady?”

“I was not, you fool!”

Fool? Charles opened his mouth to snap back, but then flinched as something made of glass shattered. He cautiously looked at Frost – or at her back, at least. She wore yet another white ensemble. This one had a longer skirt than usual for her, and a blouse that he could not see under a delicate lace shawl.

There had been nothing delicate about the shattering sound.

Charles squinted, looking for the remnants of a vase or dish, or something else breakable. There was a long table flush against one wall, stretching beneath Frost’s beautiful new vid screen – and though
he could only see half of it, on that half he noticed boxes, containers … even something that looked like a bolt of fabric.

“Lady?” he said, meek. “May I ask what’s the matter?”

She did not move. “No.”

Charles looked at Logan. He returned the look with interest; then tried to mime something –

*What happened?* Charles sent his smallest bird – the sparrow, now – to drop a banner into Logan’s mind.

It was difficult to get any answer. Logan frowned. Then screwed up his face and appeared to be concentrating very hard.

Charles tried to see what Logan was thinking. Then: *Never mind*, he sent – for Frost was turning in place.

“Ugh.” She glared at him. “Didn’t I tell you to shave?”

“I beg your pardon – I don’t have a razor.”

“Another village idiot? Fine, Professor Idiot: look at that table. Take a very long look.”

“May I come closer?”

“If you must.”

Charles stepped around the Finder’s slabs and main platform. The table came into view in full, creaking under the weight of …

“What are these?”

“Gifts,” Frost said.

“Oh. How very impressive.” Walking closer, gazing at the laden table, Charles felt his eyebrows ascend to his hairline. Well – to his capline. “Do you have a favorite?”

Frost made a quiet sound of contempt.

“Would you look at – *this* one,” Charles bent to peer at a gorgeous sculpture – some strange creature, all sinuous curves and claws, carved from white jade, “surely that’s from Zhōngguó, isn’t it?

“Well-deduced, Professor. Now here’s another little exercise for you. These are gifts from leaders of different lands. Which one of them, you think, is not quite … diplomatic?”

*One of these things is not like the others,* chimed through his head – a *Tree Time* song the children loved. Charles covered his nervous laugh with a cough. “Right. Here goes.”

The vid screen from President Almaz, *Mexico*; the jade, *Zhōngguó*. There was a large lacquered box – *Japan* – he looked inside it and saw, nestled against each other, at least two dozen paper lanterns. Gilt boxes, silver boxes: he did not bother trying to guess their origin. They all seemed exquisite enough to be very flattering indeed.

The bolt of fabric turned out to be a tapestry. Charles had intended just to take a peek, but its edge rolled off the table with a puff of scent – cedar – and revealed a gorgeous landscape. Green hills in
front of mountains; blue sky and a blue lake – a city, shining silver in the middle of it all.

“My god.” He knew his jaw had dropped. “That’s incredible.”

“As a novelty, perhaps, but the Galuti always seem to have one fresh off the loom.”

_Erez Galut_. Charles’ curiosity flared. He lifted the tapestry – and there was a woolen bag beneath it. “What’s this?”

The bag had Hebrew letters on it. He tugged at the drawstrings and pulled out a longer length of wool, so finely woven that it was almost slippery between his fingers. Charles caught the glitter of silver stitching. What was it?

“That. Ridiculous.” A hard clack of shoes behind him – and then Frost reached out and snatched the cloth from his hands. “They’re too big to use as dishtowels, so whenever I get one I throw it out. You’re taking far too long to answer my question, Mr. Xavier; allow me to give you a hint.” Frost strode down the table and picked up a book with her free hand. “This.”

Charles looked at Logan while her back was turned. In reply, Logan opened his mouth, tossed both hands in the air by his ears and wagged them, imitating – a temper tantrum? Charles bit down hard on his lower lip.

Controlling himself became more difficult when Frost turned and Logan had to pretend he was smoothing down his hair.

“Oh, give up,” she snapped at him. Then turned again, and shoved the book in Charles’ face. “And Mr. Xavier – what do you think of this?”

Charles had to cross his eyes to read. _The … Joy of Cooking._

“Yes.”

What to say? “… Ah.”

Part of him, detached, wondered if he could hear Frost’s teeth grinding, near as she was. The more diplomatic part said, “May I take a closer look?”

She set it down on the table and paced away, motions controlled – pushing the wool cloth back into the Galuti bag and tossing it in turn at a heap of scrap beneath the stairs. Or - no, Charles saw. There in the shadows stood a trash can, and it seemed as though Frost had missed it several times, throwing things.

Carefully, he picked up the cookbook. _Poor dear_. “You didn’t ask to be anyone’s present,” he murmured to it, “did you?”

“What, Xavier?”

“Nothing.”

Charles resolved not to look at Frost. He had a first moment with a book completely new to him, after all. Why not deploy the full Oxford ritual – bring it back for the new year, now nearly a month gone?

He opened it, smoothed one palm over the exposed pages – first one side, then the other – and then bent his head to the crease. He inhaled. The gentle weight in his left hand, the creak of the spine, the
smooth pages beneath his cheek, the smell of new paper …

Or not quite new. He lifted his eyes. “Are you insulted because it’s secondhand, Lady?”

Frost’s expression was … closed. Intent on him, though.

Charles realized that he had to look very foolish indeed, peering up at her with his face practically buried in the book. He straightened and ran his free hand over his jaw, scratching at the stubble. The poor paper – it had to have felt that roughness –

“And how do you know that it’s secondhand?”

“The smell. There are a few hints of spice – I daresay this was used in a kitchen somewhere. No marks from grease, though; no fingerprints, which I’d expect … so perhaps it was someone’s favorite.”

Charles glanced at Logan. He was watching Frost in turn, dark eyes now wary.

“Look at the nameplate,” she said.

Charles closed the book, opened just the cover again, and read: “‘Kathrine Du Pont, 1935.’ Quite a childish hand.”

“Now the title page.”

“ ‘To Emma Morozova, with all my hopes for peace and prosperity, First Lady William Stry –’”

Charles inhaled wrong, and coughed. “Stryker? President Stryker’s wife – gave you a –”

“Cookbook. I wonder what was going through her stunted little brain when she did. Such a well-kept little book, such a well-brought-up little housewife – do you know what I was doing in 1935, Charles?”

He shook his head.

“I certainly was not cooking from such a book. The desserts in there are nothing but cream and lard – prosperity, indeed.”

“You think that the Free West intends to insult you with this, Lady?”

“I don’t think. I know.”

Charles stayed quiet.

“By having First Lady Stryker give me this, that entire government is showing me that they think of me as they think of their women – silent and subservient – and moreover, that I have overstepped my bounds in life. And I tell you now: I have not done what I have done, Charles – wandered and worked and fought for so long – to be insulted in such a way.”

“So you disagree with that opinion of women?”

“If I had wanted the Socratic method from you, Professor, I would have asked for it.”

“I only mean to say …that you could make them look foolish and show them that you value women, with one gesture. With one invitation: to Lady Stryker – for tea.”

“You’re joking.”
“Oh, no.” Charles closed the book and polished its cover with a sweatshirt sleeve. “She gave you something of hers, whether or not her husband was behind it. Surely that could be met by a gesture of hospitality – and,” he made his voice carry, “it could show any moderate factions in their government that you are willing to meet them in negotiation … and show it in a way all the messengers in the world could not.”

“Tea and sympathy.” Frost was intent on him, her brow marred by a frown. "You remember. I ..." But then she forced a smile, rigid. "Did you do that often in Oxford, Charles?"

“I found that common ground was to be had over dinner and drinks, certainly. Civilized rituals, you know.”

Frost turned on one heel and paced away. As though, Charles thought, she could not bear any more of his voice. Ironic, since – let’s be civilized – was writhing through his gut like a snake.

“It’s nonsense,” Frost snapped at the table. “Even if they let her visit, we would accomplish nothing, seeing as she is powerless. And who else? Mrs. Kelly has fallen from favor alongside her husband; there is no Mrs. Slade – not yet, I assume – and as for Mrs. MacMurphy …” She tipped her head towards Logan; Charles only saw the gleam of her hair, from the back. “I can’t imagine she’d enjoy tea with me.”

“Right.”

“Right …?”

“Right, my Lady.” It was a grunt.

Frost strolled up to Logan. “Even my most loyal have to relearn their manners once in a while.” She gave his forearm an affectionate squeeze. A muscle jumped in Logan’s jaw.

“So you see Charles, you are not unique, though you have unique ideas. Now, poor old Kathrine has daughters – the three of them might find it an adventure to step into my den of wickedness. And I could give them my gift there. Remind me how long you required, Logan?”

“Your – gift, Lady?” Charles’ mouth was dry.

“Yes. I must return the gesture, hm?”

“What will it be?”

“MacMurphy in a shoebox. Oh,” and she glanced over her shoulder. “You don’t look as though you approve, Charles. You have to grow a thicker skin.”

“I –”

“How long do you need, Logan?”

“To cremate him,” Logan said, voice flat, “I’ll need twice the time and four times the wood as for the others. Lehnsherr stuck MacMurphy full of metal before he finally killed him. You know how much heat that’ll take to melt?”

Shite. Charles tried to look as though the image came as some sort of surprise – or that he had gone white at Erik’s name, and not through a combination of dizziness and – and disgust, that she would be doing such a –
Frost laughed. “Charles, you are excused. If you hurry, you might catch Armando – he’s just heading back to the kitchen.”

“He can’t go like that.”

“I say he –”

“He’ll fall over. Fuck, what more do you want?”

“You know, I think I want to tutor him. Charles!” she said. “You can stay. Tell me, what should you like to learn today?”

“… I don’t know.”

“Lady,” Logan snapped, “lay off.”

“Don’t talk to me in that way, Howlett. And Charles – you can send your pretty little raven from across the estate to contact me. Why not try farther? Show me now: how far can she fly? We could practice, and take you as far as Cornell’s library – another library, Charles. Isn’t that lovely? All the books gone so cold; you could add them to your precious little reading room –”

Her voice was long since a buzz in his ears. Charles focused on his shoes and on taking deep breaths. This was ridiculous. Erik had been gone for weeks, and Frost no longer frightened him. Why this stupidity? Unless it was a learned reaction now, and – Pavlov – flashed across his mind.

“–we’re going.” Heavy boots clomped across the floor. “C’mon, X man.”

“But I didn’t ask – Albany,” Charles croaked. He fished the list out of his pocket. “We need supplies. Toiletries, some more milk for the –”

“No worries – come on, let’s go.”

Charles let himself be herded out of the Hive.

Logan picked up the pace, and kept silent until they reached the library. When he closed the door behind him, he exhaled. “Sorry for the rush. I just wanted to get away from her.”

His mind bounced from one irrelevant thing to another, and then wrenched the dedication to the fore. “Emma Morozova. Emma. God damn it, I liked that book.”

“Huh?”

“Jane Austen’s Emma – vain little matchmaker, thinks she knows everything.” He laughed, high-pitched. “It fits. Her Royal Majesty, Queen of Highbury, and her little Charles Smith –”

“Ostie de tabarnak! C’mon X.” Strong hands took his shoulders. “Stay with me.”

“I’m fine.” Charles pressed his hands against his eyes. “Really, I’m fine. Emma, though. Christ.”

Logan jerked away. “Let’s put tracks between her and us, yeah? She’s pissed as hell.” He started walking fast. "Haven't seen her like that in a while.”

“Wait.” Charles shivered; tried to catch up. “Wait – I’m sorry.”

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry for.” Logan stopped … to stare at the library door. “Fuck, Charles. I thought you’d be all right.”
“I am all right.”

“I come back, and – three weeks, X man, and you’re a nervous wreck.”

Charles tried to smile. “Not really, Logan. You just caught me on a bad day.”

“Right.” All the lines and shadows on Logan’s face came together into weariness. “Right. I’m sorry. I just – I wish I could …”

“Could what?”

“Don’t know.”

There was silence. Then Logan broke it. “She didn’t …. In your mind. Do you feel all right, X? Thinking-wise, I mean …"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I'm mean: all the nuts and bolts O.K.?" Thick fingers waggled over bushy hair. "Up here?"

Charles blinked at him. "I feel the same as always."

"Fine." A nod; Logan kept nodding, as if - to reassure himself. "O.K. You feel like a pancake? I’ll make you a pancake.”

“A pancake – for dinner?”

“Yeah.”

“Certainly. One moment.”

He reached his thoughts ahead. Armando – we’re coming back. Logan will make dinner.

But all he felt in reply was – pain. Charles winced.

Logan did not speak again until they reached the kitchen. And then it was only to grunt: “Pancakes. All right with you, Muñoz?”

Armando looked up from the table. Whatever reply he had was drowned out by the children’s chatter.

“O.K., O.K., I’ll make you all pancakes. If you sit still, and be quiet – or if you have to move, go get me the frying pan and then set the table. Two frying pans, because I am the master. Go.”

And he motioned at Charles to sit down.

Armando stared at him. Charles felt a flicker of worry – those dark eyes were dull.

“You give her the list?”

“I didn’t quite manage it.”

“Told you.”

“Hey,” Logan said, “I told you, I’ll take care of it. Just give it to me, Chuck, and I’ll go on a shopping spree next chance I get.”
“Here.” Charles handed him the list. Then he turned back to Armando. “Are you sick? Is your headache worse?”

“I think you were right, before, Xavier. Congratulations.”

“... Right about what?”

“Frost’s giving me those drugs to soften me up.” Armando gritted his teeth. “My head’s hurting again, and I haven’t taken any, and now – it hurts more. I –” He broke off; pressed both palms against his brow. “You were right. Are you happy?”

“No,” Charles said, helplessly. “Not to see you in such pain.”

“I’m going to kick this. All my power has to do is catch up. Here.” Armando put a bag on the table between them. “Take these.”

“What are they?”

“Those opiates. Take them and hide them for me – and don’t let me know where you put them. Please?”

“No prob.” Logan reached down and snatched up the bag. “You don’t want Mr. X to get hold of narcotics. And don’t give me that look, Charles – I’ve seen you with my whiskey.” He smirked and went to the cupboard for flour.

Charles kept a narrow eye on him. Perhaps he’d keep hold of the bag – but perhaps he’d hide it, seeing as he would need both hands to flip pancakes – he had two frying pans out, the show-off.

Sure enough.

Charles smiled to himself. Logan had paused, stared – and opened the box of tea. Had shoved the bag inside, and pressed the lid down.

Erik had made that box, he remembered. Or at least, so Erik had claimed. Wires in intricate loops, neat corners …. Jean had given it to Ororo, had gotten it back – had loved it.

“All right, kids, watch and learn. Or you, Scotty – you listen and smell and learn. You can tell when a pancake will be done when the steam sound goes down – oh, here. Listen.”

Charles let his mind wander back over Frost’s valediction. Sending his raven to Cornell, and calling it an accomplishment? Little did she know that the same bird had beat her to finding Sean in Syracuse … had flown to Albany, to the ruins of New York City …

He would practice, Charles told himself. Perhaps when he was not such a nervous wreck. Maybe tomorrow. In the meantime, he stared at the tabletop as he waited for his plate to be filled.

He felt strangely dull the next day. He had options, Charles knew. Down a bottle of the opiate and dream of nothing – he had checked, and Logan had forgotten them in the tea box. Then again, he could drink his way through Erik’s liquor cabinet. Rest on the low red couch in the library and stare at the ceiling; wait in the kitchen for the others to return.

Armando was in bed, laid up by his headache. And the children ….

Logan had left a note.
The Free West had found her out, though. Had it been before she had been able to send anything to Raven?

Charles sighed. His jewels, Frost’s choker, the beautiful indigo robe … his clothes and shoes and winter gear. Jean’s toy on the bookshelf, all the books he had received Third Quarter – and *Let Rain Come Down*. Ororo’s book, he remembered, smiling.

“I hope you’re well, dear,” he said to thin air.

And his cardboard box from the closet. In it: Ororo’s cosmetics, lying loose; one last incense stick; the bottle of aftershave …. The first aid kit John had given him … but no lantern. Which made sense – it had gotten smashed against the hearth. Erik must have cleared it away with the rest of the metal he collected, bloody magpie that he was. Besides, Charles thought, dismal, now he had a candelabrum Erik that had made from his chain. A constant reminder. *Joy.*

Last in the box: his sewing kit and an empty bottle that had once held wine – Angel’s last Quarter Gift. A skein of blue yarn. The metal cup Erik had made him.

And Logan’s bear grease.

Charles swallowed. Then he opened the wooden container. The lid did not so much as squeak. “Of course,” he muttered. “You’ve had plenty of use.”

It was two-thirds empty. And the smell …. Charles swallowed, again, now that a rush of saliva had filled his mouth. *Fuck.* “So to speak,” he said, voice thready. “Right, *put it away*, fine – *fine* –”

He dropped the box back into the closet and slammed it shut.

“Hello?”

A voice echoed from outside. Charles flinched – except: it was a woman’s voice, and not Frost’s.
He peered out, wishing fiercely for his bloody door back – “Yes?”

“Oh, thank goodness!” Footsteps hurried towards him. It was Jessie, and she looked harassed.

“Are you allowed to be in this wing?”

“I’m making an exception, Mr. Xavier. I have to go to Brussels for a surprise surveillance job in less than fifteen minutes. And with Dr. McCoy down in Durham, and no one else here – could you tape the news for me?”

“Of course,” Charles said. He let himself be towed down the hallway. Jessie did not have so terribly strong a grip. “Surveillance?”

“Some meeting. I have to mike the place before they get there, and since it’s ten already –”

As she rattled on, Charles made the conversions in his head. Five hours difference – so it was three o’clock in the afternoon, Brussels time. What was Frost doing?

“The noon broadcast is the most important, though I need the eleven too. Before that, they rebroadcast special panels.” She dug out a key and unlocked the West Wing door. “Come on.”

“I know my way from here - if you’d just let me have your card to the vid room.”

“No, thank you,” Jessie said.

“Well, it was worth a shot,” Charles replied, smiling. She blushed.

“Here.” They walked into the vid room and Jessie flipped a switch. “Just put this in the slot,” she handed him a cartridge, “and press ‘record’ – the red button on that panel. If it’s blinking, you know you’ve done it right.”

“Right. And could you please tell someone I’m here? I’d hate to waste away locked in a vid room.”

“You have nothing to worry about. I’ll put it on the bulletin board, but even then, I’ll be back by five o’clock. Thanks, Charles; remember, start no later than eleven.”

“But what if I need –”

The door slammed.

“ – some water?” he said.

All was quiet.

Locked in – he tried the door – yes, locked quite firmly in, and with an electronic lock to boot. Charles fought down a nauseating rush of claustrophobia. He was all right – he was all right, because he had been shut in a smaller room for almost three months running last Quarter. And there was that bathroom to one side, he remembered with a rush of relief. He could drink from the tap.

“Right.” Action, then. He turned the vid screen on and pressed the button to change the channel. He remembered what Hank had said: channel three showed broadcasts from United Europe. So. Channel three. There were some people seated at a table – having some sort of discussion, it seemed. Two women; two men. One of those – procedurals? Who knew. Charles tipped his head – there was a time readout on the recording panel. Only half ten; excellent.

He stabbed at the control panel until it flared into light. “Good – so, here we are …” He peered at the
cartridge. There was an arrow embossed in the plastic on one side, next to 240m. 

Of course – four hours of time. Recording devices existed; he knew that full well. How else would vids get made? And just because none had been permitted to anyone outside the Queen’s media specialists did not mean that Charles was a complete naïf. He had considerable training in other instruments. He had been consulted by Coventry for their scientific work. So it was straightforward enough to ease the cartridge into the slot and press ‘Record.’

Then he sat on one of the uncomfortable chairs, brought his knees up to his chest, and tightened his arms around them. The program’s sound was punctuated by static. The four panelists were talking about the arts.

Well. Two of them were talking. They were interrupting each other – Charles frowned – and one in particular seemed angry. A slight woman on the left looked uneasy; a stocky, white-haired woman on the right – irritated. He grinned. With her brow gathered into a frown, and her hands folded in front of her capacious bosom, she looked just like Benson after a student had come unprepared to a tutorial –

Then Charles’ breath left him. “Oh my god.”

It was Benson. Britain’s Poet Laureate.

He stared at the screen. She wasn’t saying anything. But – Charles squinted at the subscript – the program had been recorded three days ago, and in the morning, Brussels time. So she had been there, and if Benson had been there, then surely others from Britain were –

Someone was almost shouting, “– based on documentary evidence –”

“As is ours.” Another voice – English, but with a heavy accent.

“One photograph!”

“There are many, from when Life magazine came to –”

“Life magazine was defunct in 1953. Those photographs are faked!”

“So you admit to more than one –”

“Gentlemen!” Someone was rapping on a table. “Order, please.”

“And perhaps others might be permitted to speak,” Benson said.

“A few moments more for Mr. Shumyatsky.”

“Yes, thank you.” The man with the accent – Shumyatsky – mopped his brow with a handkerchief. “My counterpart from the Free West has indicated just how difficult it is to recreate these moments using wirework, mirrors and miniatures, other tricks. My choice, then, was montage – not only to give a visual vocabulary for this power, a symbolic vocabulary, but also to show this moment in time as a – a splitting, from the world before, of what is now known to be true. That such strange and beautiful things are now possible – are now a fact.”

“You call this beautiful – it’s hideous violence and bloodshed, and to paper over it with your precious symbolism is –”

“The Weathermaker is on vid,” came the retort. “And that is beautiful.”
At that moment, the panel was replaced by footage of ….

Charles exhaled.

He had seen it once, on the old vid screen at the Rose in Bloom. When Ethiopia and its allies had been invited to the first truly international conference after the third war – Britons going to Brussels did not count, apparently – Coventry had agreed to show the historical recording of the Weathermaker. And here it was again.

Charles knew that it had some aesthetic value. The black and white vid made the figure in its pale robes look like someone had torn the fabric of the world to let in light. He rose into the air, arms outstretched, and tipped his head back to the sky - and there were his followers, reaching up to him, some with tears shining on their faces. There had been no sound accompanying the images. And so for the longest time, Charles thought that the flash of lightning was a rip in the reel; that the blurring of the image was a technical error and not the rain pouring down. Haile Zänäbä – the first mutant to reveal himself, in what his followers called the Glorious Appearing.

Of course, bringing a month of rain in the face of a killing drought and a resurgent desert … that would make a hyena glorious. “And you’re much kinder than a hyena,” Charles said, “or so the rumor goes, your Glorious-ness.”

“You compare the Weathermaker with – that –”

“And why not? By your own country’s law, both face execution if captured.”

“We have the one exception, because Mr. Zänäbä –” the name was butchered, “has signed articles indicating that he will never travel to the Western hemisphere, nor lend aid to our enemies –”

“He was looking rather friendly with them last week,” Benson said.

The representative of the Free West – he had to be, Charles thought – sputtered. But the visual had changed to a photograph: Frost in her white business suit, smiling at the slender, turbaned figure that Charles remembered from ….

The occasional article in the Oxford weekly, he supposed. Books. None that he used to teach.

There were people surrounding Frost and the Weathermaker. Out of focus on the table in front of them, there was a nameplate in English and Cyrillic and a glass of water. Had they met after her speech, perhaps? Or before?

Charles saw how Frost’s slender hand was placed over the microphone.

“And so we come back to my point,” Shumyatsky said. “You concede, then, that your Erik the Red and the Ari Binyamin are the same person –”

“I concede nothing!”

“Gentlemen, please.” The moderator looked harried. “Mr. Shumyatsky – responding to the accusation of conflict of interest?”

“Though I am not a Jew, I was commissioned by a group from Galut to make this film, yes. But events of such magnitude created a story that begged to be told. And diplomatic relations between Galut and Rossiyskaya Imperiya have never been better; thus the sharing of resources for the –”

“Thus the rewriting of history,” the Free West man snapped. “Baikal was fought between Galut and
Russia – to drag up nomadic cannibals for your villains is utter stupidity. And where the hell would cannibals get tanks?"

“Mr. Bradford, please. You will be allowed a comment in due time.”

“The Bitva pri Baykale is recorded historical fact, stretching over most of 1953; the migration of Jews to the area had its pre-Galut peak in 1952, before war broke out. That migration in itself was a feat, given not only the inclement conditions but also the main route being the Trans-Siberian Railway – which was thought rendered unusable near certain cities, by Third War chaos –”

“And how was the organization accomplished? Through word of mouth, communications being what they were – and are? We know the Elders of Zion brought about the Red takeover of Russia that was – if their network was still in place for –”

Benson cut in. “With reference to non-forgeries: if I understand correctly, the original demographic was motley: from Russia and China, Korea and Japan that were – but that both the Trans-Siberian and Trans-Manchurian journeys proved mobile loci of security, given those same groups of guerrillas and cannibals. Then the Jewish narrative proved most appealing, given the length of the journey, the perceived need for a new city-state, even the stories to boost morale.”

“Show me any Jew,” Bradford spat, “and I’ll show you a –”

Shouts came from the audience. The moderator grimaced. “Quiet, please. And Mr. Bradford: you forfeit your own time if you continue in this way.”

Bradford fell silent, glaring at the others.

When Shumyatsky spoke again, he sounded shaken. “In any case. There was a photographer on the first train – Jakob Apfelbaum, from America that was, I understand, stranded in Europe when the third war broke out. He documented parts of that journey. Then he found more equipment in Ulan-Ude and did the same for the Bitva pri Baykale. I understand that Life magazine published his work in the 1954 spring edition.”

“Let’s have a few of those,” said the moderator, relieved.

Shumyatsky continued to talk. But Charles hardly noticed, for he was looking at –

“… Erik?”

It couldn’t be. Could it?

It was a picture, black and white, of a man leaning out the window of a railway passenger car. A long torso, an outstretched arm – he was in a parka, which made it difficult to see his build, but the hood had blown back and his long hair had been tangled by the wind. He was grinning from ear to ear.

It was the sight of those teeth that had made the connection for Charles. Those teeth, framed by a beard.

Charles blinked. Erik looked so bloody young.

“ – normal ones. The photographs that stirred the most controversy were those like this.”

He saw a simple image – Charles shivered. Simple, yet somehow utterly chilling and bizarre: a dark rectangle against a white sky, taken from a distance. A railway car … fucking floating over a chasm,
framed by twisted remnants of a bridge.

“That’s a fake,” Bradford said, sounding strangled.

“Well, I’m sure you have images considerably more dramatic in your Dallas recordings,” Shumyatsky replied.

Charles looked for Benson, and for the other woman on the panel. Benson was staring at what had to be the same image, in the handout she was holding. The other woman, much younger, was looking at her own fingertips, and the handout lay closed in front of her.

“So. The climax of Baikal was of course the battle on the ice – which took many, many extras to recreate, I tell you now. It was for this that I used the montage.”

“Let’s see a selection,” the moderator said. “Ladies and gentlemen, ‘Al Naharot, Pri Rekah – By the Rivers.’”

It was very beautifully done. Black and white, again, but a vid this time. A rider in a parka, on a horse, galloping down a line of assembled men – and women, Charles saw, after the shot switched to one closer. The rider had long hair, but it was knotted somehow. And there he was, telling a person with a long white beard something. It sounded like Hebrew, so Charles read the subtitle:

_I am afraid._

_Fear nothing,_ White Beard said, and started in on what had to be an inspirational speech, judging by the music. The rider listened, enraptured.

“If that’s meant to be you, Erik …” Charles couldn’t help it: he smiled. At least they didn’t have to worry about the physique, given the parka. But the nose was wrong, the teeth were wrong – the beard covered up what had to be a receding chin – wrong – and his eyes were set too close together.

Then the character lifted a sword, quite impressively, and galloped down the line again – knocking the blade against swords, axes, and what looked like a shovel; screaming – _Ride with me!_ – as the music swelled.

“Rough on a horse’s hooves,” Charles mumbled – but he was staring at the flashes of hands, swords and axes and a shovel – and then parts of animals, stones and running water, shimmering white light –

The montage, then. It was interesting enough, Charles supposed.

The clip came to an end. The panelists were shown again; there was applause through the room.

“We have the same photographer to thank,” Shumyatsky said. “Images like those seen before, and like these.”

Two pictures appeared in slow succession: one of a group of people bunched together, holding weapons and clearly posing for the photographer. The second: each of them had taken off a glove
and rolled back a sleeve, to produce a veritable thicket of forearms.

Tattoos, like Erik’s, from the second war? Perhaps, Charles thought. There was no telling if Erik was in the group.

“And the most famous.”

Charles choked.

There was a hilltop, just like in the vid, except everything was much dirtier. In it he saw a line of riders, all holding weapons. The faces that he could see were twisted in … what? Fear? Joy?

But the man riding in front of them was unquestionably Erik, wearing trousers and some sort of vest in what had to be subzero temperatures. And there was his arm and hand outstretched - not holding a sword. Instead, he was leaning out from the saddle …

And something around his open hand was blurring.

Metal, Charles thought. He swallowed.

Erik had never mentioned horseback riding. A shame. Charles had been on a horse – they could have had something to talk about. And his boast about his skill at combing seemed particularly ill founded, since his hair looked atrocious in the picture – knotted strands whipping behind him as he rode.

“If I may be permitted to speak?”

Charles shook himself out of his daze. The other director – Bradford – was visibly fuming.

“I wish you would let me speak,” Benson said, tartly. “I should like to talk about my most recent book of poems, Songs for Penelope, if you would only –”

Bradford slammed his hand on the table. “Those photographs could have been easily faked. The photographer himself – Jake Appletree – he was killed shortly after coming home, so he can’t corroborate his story. And our evidence was shared with other intelligence agencies, worldwide, when it came into our possession –”

“Which?” Benson said.

“What?”

“Which intelligence agencies?”

“That’s classified,” Bradford snapped. “We have video footage, and photographs too, that tell a completely different story than this pile of propaganda you’ve put together for Jews.”

“Mr. Bradford –”

Shumyatsky pursed his lips. “So let’s see them.”

“Right.” A gesture. “Roll it. This is newly released in theaters: Red Sky in the Morning.”

Charles watched, his skin prickling.

It had been filmed in color – the wash of vivid blues and greens made him slightly queasy. A sky, with a storm swirling across it … and the camera moved down, down – and was that –
“The Washington Monument,” he told an imaginary student. “I know that one, at least.”

The way it looked was oddly familiar, even though half of it had been blown to pieces. The camera traced the skeletal framework remaining – black bones against the sky – before moving over a pool of oily liquid … to the stairs of another monument. And there, kneeling, was –

Was that really what they thought Erik looked like, close up? Broad and bulky, muscle rippling beneath – lord, a cape of shiny red fabric. “Who wears silk to a battle?” he sighed. Because Charles heard the echo of explosions, and ominous rumbling music – and a baby crying?


Then Charles had to roll his eyes a little, even as this Erik opened his own – glass-green and empty against a face that looked hewn out of granite … as another vivid color rolled down his brow, and cheekbones – and, fuck, Granite Face stuck his tongue out the corner of his mouth for a taste.

“Blood red – that’s disgusting,” Charles told the character. “How old are you? Five? We do not lick up blood, Mr. Free West’s Erik. Especially not that of a baby.”

The music swelled. And the camera drew back to show – Charles’ eyebrows flew up – a woman probably meant to be Frost. Her cleavage almost spilled out the front of her dress as she held up a mammoth crown, stepped towards the man meant to be Erik, and forced the iron circlet down onto his head.

Charles hardly knew what to think. He was not sure whether his reaction was from Erik taking a bath in the blood of the innocent, or from Frost giving the entire Free West an eyeful.

“We have the photographs to prove this,” Bradford said. “Reporters were present at the Battle of D.C., and one of them had a long-range device.”

“I’m sure,” Shumyatsky said.

“That baby crying …” Benson sounded incredulous. “Are you deliberately referencing the blood libel?”

“I don’t even know what that is.”


“This is set in the capitol that was: Washington D.C., in February of 1956, when freedom began to flourish in the West. Just like my Galuti counterpart –”

“Russian.”

“ – I tell the story of a battle – and here, of how abominations against nature were the only thing that allowed true freedom fighters to be defeated in their stronghold –”

“Or underestimating your opponent,” Shumyatsky said.

“This,” a picture appeared in place of the panel, “is one small part of our body of evidence.”

Charles felt his skin crawl. The image was blurry, but close enough to be conclusive: it was Erik. And Frost. She was gripping his left shoulder; he had one hand stretched out to the sky.

His hair was cut as close as Charles had cut his own in his disastrous ruse. Habit made him shove
fingers beneath his hat to scratch.

“And unlike you, Mr. Shumyatsky, we have audio support. Separate radio transmissions were linked to photographs or synchronized with vids by our news media afterwards. This was the moment when Erik the Red turned a barrage of missiles around in mid-air, and obliterated scores of freedom fighters.”

“ – who happened to have launched them in the first place,” the other woman, the young one, said. But her voice was almost drowned out by the crackle of a recording, in real time:

“... Bill?” and static, “Bill? Can you see? Christ, Jesus Christ get them away from there - the bomb –” static crackled - "get them away they'll die –”

Cut off in more static.

“Oh –” Charles mumbled. “I need a drink –” Of water, he told himself, and he stumbled towards the bathroom.

He choked back a dry heave and splashed water from the sink onto his face. Then he made himself take a drink. And since he was not afraid of anything, Charles made his feet go back into the main room.

Bradford was storming to his conclusion.

“And as far as I’m concerned, the fact that I was there counters any rebuttal one might try. On the right, see? That’s me.”

An image: two men, one carrying a bulky tripod; the other – much younger – grinning gap-toothed at the person taking the picture. The two of them were dressed in winter gear.

“February 19, 1956 – the day after the incident with the missiles.” His voice shook. “I had just started as an assistant at the Potomac Post, and they sent me out to help Appletree record. The first shock wave had leveled things we had just rebuilt – the Monument, the entire museum district. There had been no organized resettlement yet, which was a small blessing. But all of it, all the rubble everywhere …. It was like the third war all over again.”

The room was silent, watching.

“Cue it up,” Bradford said. “This is what we got on video. The mike was spotty, so I narrated parts afterwards – but you hear original voice in this entire section. The important thing to know is that the person in the frame is Erik the Red, and if he’s your hero, and Appletree is your photographer from that Trans-Siberian fairy tale, you’re telling me that the hero did this to his friend.”


The vid was shaky, with uneven focus. But – he bit his lip as he saw a dark figure, shambling from screen left to screen right. It took a long time. But when the figure went offscreen,

“Keep him in sight,” a man’s voice said.

“I will.” A child.

Jolts and bumps, indicating the camera being lugged over uneven ground. The angle had brought them closer. The dark figure had stumbled over a block of masonry; it was leaning over it, head bent.
It tried to push off. Failed, and fell to its knees, doubled over. There was no way the sound could pick it up from that distance. But Charles knew the signs of vomiting when he saw them. He remembered from the Oxford missions.

“Who is that?” the young voice breathed.

“Quiet. Walk closer.”

“I don’t want to –”

“Do as I say. It’ll be all right. Erik?”

Charles bit his lip.

“Erik?” the man shouted.

The figure raised its head.

“Mr. A.?”

“It’s all right. Don’t worry.”

He sounded distracted. And no wonder. The figure – all in black – had started to crawl in the direction of the camera, and then given up. It hunched over and put its hands on its head. And simply pressed them there, rocking back and forth.

“Damn it. Erik?!”

Fuck, was that Erik? If it was him, there was no grace whatsoever, as he – it, there was nothing of Erik in there, surely – braced itself on the masonry, pushed up, and stepped towards the camera.

“Mr. A., I’m scared.”

“It’s all right. It’s –”

“Mr. A.?”

“Oh, shit.”

“Mr. A., Mr. A. it’s on your feet! Your feet!”

With one nauseating judder, the camera focused on – something – twining around a pair of boots. Was it a cable? Wires of some sort?

“Johnny, listen to me.”

“Yeah?”

“Listen to me. You have to put the camera down, turn around, and run. You understand?”

“But Mr. A –” the camera swung up, and the child – Johnny – shrieked. “It’s coming closer! It’s closer!”

The figure was indeed larger. It was leaning against the toppled cement base of a telephone pole. Then it pushed off and lurched forward.

“It’s coming!”
“Johnny, put the camera down! Drop it and run!”

But the camera jolted to one side, showing –

“Fuck,” Charles gasped. It was a mailbox, but in the black and white, even dissolving into static, he saw metal emblazoned *U.S. Mail* lurching towards the camera like it was just learning how to walk, and then peeling into quarters like a piece of fruit –

“*Run, Johnny!*”

The camera fell to the ground.

And the image vanished, replaced by the four panelists and the moderator, looking different degrees of unsettled.

“It did not stop recording there, of course,” Bradford said. “I went back for the camera, and gave it to my superiors when I met them again in Harper’s Ferry. The complete footage is in Stryker’s possession, since Harper’s Ferry was evacuated before being overrun in late ’56; and so on, and so forth. But in sum: you cannot make me believe, however much you try, that this individual is anything but a monster.”

Shumyatsky sighed. “You do everything to help that image.”

“The public likes its shocks – why ignore a subject ready-made for horror cinema? And as you point out, the demands of verisimilitude form an excellent artistic challenge. I need three people to film anything involving Erik the Red. I need the face actor – you saw him in *Red Sky* – I need a swordsman, and I need an acrobat. And even then things are close to impossible. How am I to recreate, for example, this security footage? It’s from the recent attack,” Bradford explained, “on Lincoln Laboratories."

A murmur went up from the crowd. Then there was flickering footage – a digital time readout blinking in the lower corner – of a pair of doors, set into what looked like solid rock. And there: they were ripped open and the guards went flying, and everything was still –

– and the video paused. Then it went back, and proceeded, at perhaps a quarter of its normal speed.

Charles saw a shadow darting into the empty space. There, then gone, like nothing more than a scuttling spider.

“And this. Tell me about this kind of warfare, why don’t you? Tell me this is *fair.*”

Charles gulped.

It had to be Erik, sprinting down a hallway, through frame after frame from different security cameras. He reached a larger room, threw a pair of knives ahead of him – metal flashed –

– and at least four different cameras played in succession his *running up the wall* to dodge a group of soldiers; flipping to the ceiling, throwing out his arms, and bringing all the metal of the air ducts down onto their heads.

“*Erik,*” Charles breathed. “That’s – that’s –”


So why was his breath coming so short?
"This is always good for a joke." The footage switched to something grainy. A lean shadow, stock still, gripping what looked like two scythe blades. Staring at what looked like a closed door -

- and then startling backwards as a tiny light flicked on. The button to call a lift, Charles realized, and that thing - Erik - was leaning forward to sniff it.

"From the destruction of the CIA, of course: March, 1956. I based the conclusion of Red Sky on other archival images."

A vividly colored scene: the red-haired, block-jawed actor taking off a trilby as he placed a duffel bag into an X-ray machine; then tossing the hat in after the bag as he strolled through a metal detector - and grinned at the camera as alarms went off -

The picture of Erik they showed looked very like. Staring, face tipped up at an angle - the picture had to have been taken from a security camera. Both long-fingered hands raised above his head as a guard reached out to pat him down. Very like ...

Except his hair was cropped so close that his head looked shaved. And his eyes were rather less ghoulish than the actor's, though set in something more skull than face.

“Right.” Charles' voice caught. “That’s enough. That’s more than enough.” He jumped to his feet and went to the door; wrenched the handle and tugged before remembering: locked in. “Fuck.”

“And take this,” Bradshaw’s voice was still going, “from the attack on –”

Charles stabbed at the vid screen buttons until panel and panelists vanished. He stared at the controls to the side, breathing heavily. The red light was still flashing, so something was still being recorded.

“And at this point, I don’t care what,” he said. “God.”

He had to swallow repeatedly. It was being locked in, Charles told himself, that had his heart hammering at such a pace. All the memories of being locked in: Erik prowling in front of his door – Jean sending Love? – Erik circumventing the lock, sitting in front of the hearth, staring at him hungrily – take your clothes off – and finally: I’m going to break the door down now, Charles, so calmly …

“Let me out.” His voice cracked. And it was odd – seeing it from a distance, outside of himself: a ragged-looking man wearing a winter cap even in the warmth, clawing at a door. “Let me out, please –” he sobbed, “let me out –”

Too ridiculous.

Charles stumbled into a corner and sat. He pressed his hands against his eyes.

Tell me, what should you like to learn today? Frost’s voice, mocking him. And now he had learned new things about himself. It seemed he had certain things he didn’t – care for, anymore. Hearing that they were running out of any kind of food, and being locked up. It was good to know these things.

She had said … she would show him how to fly his raven to the library at Cornell. But he was so much stronger than that.

“Raven,” he whispered.

It appeared in a burst of darkness, whirling in place, feathers quivering and eyes glittering at him.
“Let’s fly, shall we?” Charles said. His voice caught. “Somewhere far away—”

Already, the raven had shot out of the room. Straight up through the manor, and out, out into the winter sky, and flying with an exuberant shriek … due east.

“All right.”

Charles kept careful hold of his raven – brave friend – “Dearest,” he whispered. Raven would never leave him; not like the hummingbird – even if that had been his own fault. He wiped his eyes. “Where are we going?”

It took a while, even above the dark winter clouds, the hollow moan of different storms massing over – Albany. “Oh.” That had not taken as long as it had last autumn, certainly. “Wonderful,” Charles said. “Where now?”

The raven plummeted from the sky, twisted in corkscrew turns around the dim reverberations of buildings and trees – the world reflected into his mind through his own power. “You’re my Finder, so what have you found?”

And the answer was: a mind bristling in surprise when he touched it.

X?


*Fuck me how’d you get out how’d you come here –*

*No need to fret,* he sent. *I’m still at the manor.*

Logan’s shock reverberated through his mind. The raven *cree’d* at him.

Holy shit X man.

“Thank you very much.” Charles hugged himself. “And …. How long will you – that is. When.”

*We’re just heading back. Sky looks nasty. Hey here’s Azazel –*

The raven fluttered away.

X … ?

It was a distant echo – Charles pulled Raven back to himself, faster, faster –

The impact laid him out on his back in the vid room. “Ow.”

Then he stared at the ceiling for a little while. It had been so fast. Nothing like last autumn: the migraine after the return from Syracuse, and the time it had taken to find the sunken city …

“Amazing,” he told his raven. “We’ll have to do that more often.”

Not when Frost could feel it, of course.

*Frost.* "Lastly, good Raven," he whispered, "hide everything of those vids. All of it - into the pillar now; go." He closed his eyes to check; there was a swirl of activity in his reading room, and - Charles frowned - *water damage.* From the ice, weeks ago, now; Frost's last visit. "Stoke the fire," he said. "Dry everything out, and then your work for me this night is done."
Dragging his thoughts back to the vid room, staring up at the ceiling - easy enough. Even if it was spinning slightly. "Next, Raven, I will stop talking like a storybook." He smiled. "Promise."

A thunder of knocking on the door made him start. Then there was a scrabbling sound, and Logan’s face came into view above him – upside-down, given their respective positions. Charles felt his smile widen. “Hello.”

“Charles,” Logan growled. “Who locked you up here?”

“Oh. Jessie.”

“What?”

“I had to record something for her.”

“She could set that tape to record however long she wanted. No – she just took orders from Frost to make sure you were locked up, if Muñoz wasn't able to breathe down your neck all fucking day.”


“Who you can trust around here varies, day to day.”

“What about you? Can I trust you?”

Logan held out a hand to him. “Always. Come on.”

Charles let himself be hauled to his feet. His face bumped against Logan’s hair – they were much of a height, although Logan had always seemed taller. Something about his presence, perhaps. He smelled like snow and pine needles.

_Shit_. Charles’ mouth went dry. No, _no_, it was because he had just seen the images of Erik which had brought back memories of … was it a honeymoon? He supposed he could call it that. A sick, _twisted_ honeymoon – with more sex by far than in the months before and the weeks since –

“Whoa.” Logan jerked his hand away; backed off a few steps. “Easy there.”

“What?”

“I smelled that. Even with that whole ‘I haven’t showered in three weeks’ thing you’ve got going on.”

“I wash as best I can in the laundry basin,” Charles said, flushing. “It’s too cold in the dormitory.”

“Yeah. Let’s go get you a real shower.” Logan backed out the door, looking everywhere but at Charles. “Like, right now.”

“Logan, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.” Following him, Charles tried to smile. “You’re a warm body. And before I came here I was, ah, used to –”

“La, la, la, not listening. Except: I’m flattered, Chuck, but all I got is Marie’s, yeah? My baby would have you by the balls if you try to get me into bed.”

“Then I won’t.”

“Right.”
They walked in silence down a hallway. Logan swiped his card into a reader.

Charles blinked at the laundry room. “What …”

“I wanted to show you something.” He swiped the card again, by a door that Charles had assumed was a closet. “The dryers are here, and all the toiletries are in that anteroom there – see? I got you plenty of stuff in Albany, this time, but in future you can always come here.”

“But … Frost didn’t give Armando access to this room.”

Logan stared.

“It’s true.” Charles tried a shrug. “I don’t know why.”

The messy tufts of black hair … twitched. Charles bit down against a smile. It looked as though steam would start whistling out of Logan’s ears at any minute, or that his head would explode.

Instead, he slammed past Charles and stomped out the door. “This system. It’s fucked up, is what it is.”

“I gather the Monitors had access to this room? For toothpaste, candles, those sorts of things. No one ever told us about the washers and dryers, though.”

“Because Frost thinks it builds character. She thinks that because she had to use a washboard for ten odd years, everyone should. And then she gives different folks different things, tosses a few perks into the mix for people doing random shit – unpredictable, you see – and she sits back to watch who comes out on top.”

“Really.”

“Yeah. Explains why Lee’s second in command of the whole army, why Kitty’s on her way up, and why Hank jumps at the sight of his own shadow. Their cohort had him at the bottom of the heap.”


“You saw it here, didn’t you? Even at the kitchen table. Ororo was always in charge, no question, but she comes by it honestly. And she’s doing fine now. Bobby and John are inseparable, so they’re together in the field – and even before, they always helped each other out, so they got by. Sean … got stuck between the boys and Jean, and he felt it, and now he’s the odd one out.”

“Is he all right, Logan?”

“He will be. Angel’s working really hard to train him; get his confidence back. He’ll be O.K.”

They had reached a familiar door. Charles watched Logan open it. Right. The showers.

“Here.” Logan crossed his arms. “Don’t mind me saying so, X, but take a shower, and make it a long one. I can actually see the smell coming off you.”

Charles looked down at his grubby trainers. “I’m sorry.”

“I told you –” Logan’s eyes had flashed, fixed on him. “You have nothing to be sorry for, Charles. Now you listen to me. Are you listening?”

Charles nodded.
“I need you to pull it together.”

“… What?”

“Frost is acting like such a bitch – because she can, to you. You have to push back a bit, starting now.”

“Are you mad?” Charles spluttered. “That’s exactly what I tried to do, all last Quarter, and you see what happened? When she – she’ll –”

“She needs your power, Charles. When you wouldn’t listen to anyone else, she decided she wanted to scare good behavior into you, and – lo and behold – it looks like she did. Thing is, you got something she wants, so it can be a two-way street. And right now, you’re getting more and more like Hank. Twitchy, and ‘I’ll do anything you say, my Lady’ – fucked in the head, through no fault of your own.”

“Hank. What happened there, Logan?”

“Well, you may have noticed I was angry? A bit?”

“I did.”

“Thing is, I was angry until I understood. I thought he chose to – Look, Charles. The truth is, Frost tried him on for size. Then she chewed him up and spit him out, and now he has something else to make him cringe.”

“Logan. Are you saying she –”

“Took him to bed? Yes. I gather she’s moved on to President Almaz. Mexico, y’know? Nice and sunny, so she can bang al fresco.”

Charles felt a laugh bubbling up. “Frost, of all people – and here I thought her so high-and-mighty, and turns out she went to Hank –”

“Wait, Chuck. Don’t you get any wrong ideas.” Logan was pale. “Don’t you go thinking Frost is just some sort of – bed-hopper just for shits and giggles. She uses it. She did that to Hank – because she wanted to scratch an itch, maybe – but mostly because she. Could.”

Silence fell.

“You get it?” Logan said.

“I … suppose.” Charles swallowed. “What did she say to him?”

“No idea. She’s just back to treating him like she did before, which: whatever, she’s his boss. But after you kick someone out of bed –”

“You have to be just a little considerate.”

“Right. I forget – you did that a lot, X?”

Charles smiled a half-smile. “Shameful of me.”

“Whatever. Just … two things, then. I need you to watch your step, around Frost. And I need you to pull it together, because Jean’s coming home.”
“Jean? Really? That’s wonderful!”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t have Ororo to keep her an eye on her now. And – Lehnsherr,” Logan grimaced, “sorry for bringing him up, but Jean listens to him. He won’t be here, though. He’s going to be just as busy as me.”

“What’s happening with the war?”

“After this treaty’s signed we won’t have outright battle for a little while. Frost got the idea to bring in the Heirs of Aztlán for a different agreement - under the table, you know? She connived it so they came to her, asking first.” A grunt. “Smart. So if they bite, they’ll be doing the dirty work in New Mexico and Arizona that were, with no treaty violation on our part. And another group of us is going to divide time between guerrilla work in California – and … tracking down that little anti-telepathy thing the Free West has got going on.”

Charles tried to process it all. “I see. But – the treaty with the Free West will go through, then? An armistice? I thought Stryker wouldn’t speak to Frost.”

“He’s going to have to. After shit goes down today.”

Curiosity gnawed in him, but Logan soldiered on.

“So you see what I’m asking you? I need you to watch Jean, Charles, and also to make sure that none of these kids gets put down to the bottom. Three of them – that’s a cohort. And Frost is going to want a certain power dynamic in it.”

“Logan, all I can do is read them stories, hear their maths, and make sure they get enough food. You’re going to have to explain in greater detail what you need me to do besides that.”

“That’ll do for now. Just make sure they all stay on an equal level. That Jean doesn’t play favorites - you’ll see what I mean.” A sigh. “And now, I have to get started. Viking funeral, you know?”

“… Viking funeral?”

“Yes. Without the water, since the lake’s frozen. And without all the gold, and horses, and what have you, since that’s not our style. I’m off to build a bonfire for MacMurphy, Charles.”

“Oh.”

Logan waited. Then said, “Frost is having Mrs. Stryker and Kelly over for nibbles right now, you know. Feel flattered.”

“Really?”

A nod. “MacMurphy in a box, though, is what’s in reserve, in case Operation Teatime doesn’t work – and news flash, she doesn’t think it will. But part of me thinks she just wants to see the look on Lady Stryker’s face, on Mrs. Kelly’s face … when she pulls some shit like asking Lehnsherr to pass around les petits fours.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Because she can.”

Charles deliberately put the image out of his mind. Erik, with a tea tray …. “Fire for MacMurphy.” he said, instead. “It has honor to it, I suppose.”
“Sure.”

“And Logan?”

“Hm?”

“I’m glad you’re the one doing it.”

Logan grimaced.

Charles kept going. “But what does Frost have on you? Emma? Why on earth stay and serve her, when, with your ability, you could escape and live anywhere in the world?”

“I chose to fight this war, Xavier. For people like us.”

“Under someone competent, perhaps –”

“She’s plenty competent.”

“You could do better. I could do better.” Memory flashed: Erik, hand outstretched, galloping past a line of warriors, mouth open in a shout. Forever silent in a photograph … from so long ago. “Could Lehnsherr do better?”

“Once, maybe.” Logan shook his head. “Not anymore.”

They were quiet.

“And that really explains it, doesn’t it, X?”

“Beg pardon?”

“Why I stay. You see,” Logan said, “my baby’s in Denver. And all it takes is our Lady dropping one wrong word in the wrong person’s ear – or head, with the Finder. Then Marie has to get out of Dodge. And Dodge is big, and full to the brim with Westies and their guns … and on the other side of the fucking continent. You get me?”

Logan’s geography was slightly off … but Charles thought better than to mention it. Because surely the point still stood. He nodded.

“So.” Logan clapped him on the shoulder. “Ditch the clothes – there’re some extras on my hook,” he pointed, “over there. My stuff’ll fit you. And you can use my soap, razor, whatever – it’s on the little shelf above. I have to go make a Free West flambé, so here’s my card.”

Charles stared down at the I.D. that Logan pressed into his hands.

“You can get back to the East Wing with it. The kids are with Armando – so when you all have dinner, I’ll come back and get it. Don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t.”

“And for the love of fuck –”

“Don’t set the place on fire’ – of course not. I won’t. I promise.”

“Believe it or not, I was going to say: pull it together.”
“Sure.” Charles smiled. “See you soon.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful.” Charles groaned as he leaned forward into the spray. “Thank god.”

He turned the water on in one of the shower stalls, adjusted it to be piping hot. Then he stripped. Perhaps Logan had been right about the clothes. Charles grimaced, and shoved them into a corner. Not the green sweater, so he could dispose of them without thinking twice.

He kept his cap, though. And he took careful hold of the token in its leather bag, and placed it beneath the clothes on Logan’s hook. Then he grabbed a towel and soap and made for the shower.

Poor Erik, never taking a shower – because of such terrible associations, admittedly, but the hot drumming of the water on Charles’ neck was so splendid that he wouldn’t trade it for anything in the world.

Well. Perhaps being free to go back to Oxford, or having thawed pipes in the dormitory. Or … Charles bit his lip, running his hands over his scalp. His hair was coming back, in a fuzz that was even for now. But he hated to think of how it would look. Especially since he might trade the hot water – for sex. One round. Just one, to take the edge off – to make embarrassing moments like his own sniffing Logan’s hair less likely to happen.

To help him be on his guard around Frost.

He could hardly believe it, that she had bedded Hank. Charles gave in: he laughed. It echoed off the ceramic tiles. Poor Hank. Charles could have told him that such a lopsided affair would have no chance of happiness in the long term. Fine enough for a short period of time, but apparently Frost would not have it so.

“Certainly, I haven’t talked about it.”

Not about Erik’s would-be affair with him. The silly man, panting for it, day in, day out. Charles rolled his eyes, scrubbing at the fuzz on his scalp – and then sobered.

He hadn’t told anyone about Frost’s kiss either.

He turned the dial hotter to rinse. Judging from her little tantrum with the diplomatic gifts, Frost would not take rejection well. But since she knew how opposed he was to even the idea, given his raven’s flying to protect him .... Surely her vanity would not let her risk another attempt.
That left Erik.

Charles soaped his hair again. Gritting his teeth, he moved down his body and scrubbed as impersonally as he could. Those photographs of Erik; those vids …

The Battle of D.C., February of 1956. The *Bitva pri Baykale*, for most of 1953. And the migrations in 1952 …

Erik leaning out of the train window, laughing at the camera …

*So young,* Charles had thought, then. So: how young had he actually been? Erik had said something about his birthday …. 10 April, 1946, and I was fourteen. And: *She said I was born on the tenth of April, in 1932.*

Taking Frost’s word as truth, then: at D.C, Erik had been –

Charles dropped the soap.

*Oh.* February being before April, Erik had been … twenty-three.

“Fuck me,” he breathed, and grabbed for the bar. It squirted out of his fingers.

Cursing, Charles took hold of it. Twenty-three in February, 1956. Which meant that he had been – twenty-one, or bloody *twenty* for the Battle of Lake Baikal, and before that …

He had thought Erik so young, in the photograph taken on the train. True enough. Leaning out the window and laughing – he had been nineteen, perhaps eighteen years old.

Charles let the water cascade over his neck. He stared at the soap in his hands.

What to say? What to *think,* even? To go from calling an army to the charge, power blazoned on hand and arm – at the ripe age of twenty or twenty-one – to go from that to … what Erik was now …

*I’m thirty-seven,* he had grumped, Charles remembered. *I’m not old.*

He leaned forward against the shower wall.

Then cursed again, because the soap had escaped. “Stupid thing.” Charles bent to grab for it, and –

“*Oh.*”

When had that happened? When had his cock gone and –

“What do you think you’re doing?” he snapped. “Settle down.”

But his cock did not settle down. Quite the opposite, in fact.

*Erik,* Charles thought frantically. It had to be Erik. The memory of him grabbing at Charles like Charles had just grabbed the soap, clutching with greedy fingers. Then mouthing, sucking, *biting* –

“Oh, no,” he said. Not squeaked, because he had dignity. He didn’t want those memories. The photograph – Erik on a horse with outstretched arm – and the security vid: Erik running up the wall, flipping to the ceiling and bringing down destruction with one flick of his hands …

“*Fuck,*” Charles groaned. He hit his head against the wall, gently. He didn’t need this. Not now.
So: best get rid of it.

If anything, he thought, grabbing his cock as roughly as he could – this would make everything easier. He wouldn’t be able to get off in peace with three children and one canny Muñoz listening, especially since he didn’t have a door and the bloody bathroom in his room was so cold. Charles set up a punishing rhythm. He didn’t have to think of Erik, or of Erik doing this –

His mind pulled up the memory: Erik, reclining at the foot of the bed amongst rumpled red sheets, hair and skin and all those muscles licked gold by the light. As he had stared at Charles, while – hell – moving his hand up and down his cock. Not slowly, either; he had worked up to quite a lather, a bloody primate in a cage – and one would think that with such a large hand, said cock would suffer in comparison, but –

Charles took in a deep breath and slackened his grip. No. He wouldn’t do this. It was pathetic.

After all, he had always had an excellent imagination. Logan had mentioned a treaty – and Erik, bless him, only twenty or twenty-one, would have needed someone to help negotiate for the creation of Eretz Galut.

Charles took his mind away. There. His office at Oxford, table laden with papers and books. There would be a knock on the door, and he would call: Enter.

And there would be Erik – trousers and vest. Fit for riding on a horse. He would have long hair, falling down his back … in knots or braids or whatever they had been.

What was it that you needed? Charles heard himself say.

Erik would hold out a scroll.

Ah. A treaty. I know very well that all is in order, smooth and calming, since Russia left very pleased indeed. So all you have to do is sign.

Then he would take the scroll and catch its edge; run one hand down, unfurling it in full on his desk. See? Right there.

Erik would look at the pen. Then look at Charles.

Like this. Charles decided: he would watch for a moment, smiling, and then walk behind Erik, place the pen in his hand, curl his own fingers over tendons and knuckles, stroking …. He took in a deep breath; shuddered as he let it out. Because he would slide his hand away, next, reach down - and find that Erik was hard. So of course Charles would have to touch him again.

The thought of that cock made his mouth water. Except: no, it didn’t, because Erik would still be dressed, and Charles had more control than that. He would be in particular control as he touched Erik - slowly, watching for a reaction.

Would Erik gasp or growl? Or just start panting for breath? It would be a new sensation for him, surely, since leading exiles across Siberia for the better part of one year before fighting a war over the better part of another would have left him without much time for sex. And that would account for Erik's clumsiness in bed when he was so graceful out of it. Ari Binyamin, Erik the Red ... an overgrown puppy of a virgin for well-on twenty years - however much he had otherwise changed since playing Alexander the Great. Alexander Nevsky. Whichever.

So ... if Charles dragged his hand up the trouser placket, pressed his own hard cock against the lean muscle flat on Erik's hip, took an earlobe into his mouth - and even if Erik was tough enough to
traipse half-naked into battle in the freezing cold ... still. Perhaps at Charles’ touch, Erik would shiver all over.

You want this? Charles would lean against him; kiss his throat. You’re so lovely. You beautiful creature – you want this. And this – slide a hand up his abdomen, flick fingertips over his sternum, take a nipple and pinch –

Erik would open his mouth, arch up into his touch, wrench his head round to say something - but Charles would muffle it in a kiss. Who knew if he even spoke English, back then? Far better that he stay silent.

“Nnh.” The sound echoed, even with the shower's noise, and hot water coursed over his chest as Charles pulled at his cock, desperate. Fine, he would speed things up - reach with his free hand behind his balls and press.

Any other image, though, then a shower stall. A treaty would not be signed on a cluttered desk. No – rather, in an assembly room, or a grand hall, or anything more impressive than an Oxford office.

So Charles placed himself at the head of a steep stairway – in a vast room, shadowed rafters, hanging banners and all. And there was Erik: walking slowly towards him.

Not in trousers and vest – and not in a parka, either. Erik no longer looked so young – but not as old as he had this past – honeymoon, fucking hell, Charles thought: was he really going to call it a honeymoon?

Erik stopped a few steps below him, and looked up. There was nothing in his face but yearning. He opened his mouth to speak.

Shh, Charles said. Here. He took out the scroll and showed him: sign there. With this. He held out a pen.

Erik made no move to take it. Instead, he covered the remaining steps with one stride – the parchment crumpled between them as he cupped Charles’ face in his hands.

But Erik, Charles said, don’t you want to –

It would seem not – for Erik kissed him, breathing hard, and moved his arms to cling to Charles’ neck. Somehow, Charles realized, his raven had been on his shoulder, for it beat its wings, croaking, as it was dislodged. He could not see it as it flew away into the dark. And he couldn't concentrate on it anyway, because Erik pressed close, and closer, kissing him, tasting like heat and salt.

Charles tossed his head back and let the shower spray hit his face. Best not to think about kissing. Think instead about Erik licking his ear - Rabe - biting down hard on his shoulder, pounding into him from behind, covering Charles’ hands with his and twining their fingers together –

But had that last even happened? What was real, and what was his god damned imagination taking over? Grabbing his guts and - oh -

Gulping for air, Charles stared at the come dripping from his fingers. Had he – oh, yes, it would appear it had hit the wall, too.

He gritted his teeth and rinsed his hands. Then cupped them together to gather water; tossed it at the tiles. When had he come? Who knew? All he knew was that it had been hard enough to make his balls hurt.

Charles waited quite some time for his trembling to subside. Through it all, the water remained obligingly hot.

Which was a good thing, he reminded himself. Tomorrow, he could greet Jean smelling like a rose – or like Logan’s harsh soap. He could walk to dinner with Armando and the others now, perfectly collected. And Charles could put the memories of Erik back where they belonged, locked away safe in his mind.

Chapter End Notes

Shameless ripoffs from: *Alexander Nevsky, The Return of the King, Ringu* (if you squint), and a tiny bit of *The Matrix*.

Oh, and *Fallout 3*. Precious, precious *Fallout 3*. 
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Thanks for your patience, those of you still with me. Hopefully this is the slowest chapter remaining. Stay with me to the end of this one, and perhaps ... there will be a reward.

I wanted to get this up before going off the radar for about a week. So: subject to editing, at some point in the future, if need be. My thanks to Neptunerain & agewa (so long ago!) and exaberry for the Russian, and my particular thanks to Irena, who knows why. :)

ETA: thanks, Gier 00, for the correct Spanish!

Enjoy!

“This is great, Mr. Xavier.”

Charles looked over his shoulder. Scott was sitting at the library table, one hand running over the raised surfaces of the new globe. His sleeve flopped down over the fingers of his other hand. The cuff was not fraying yet.

The memory of his own blue sweater was distant, now, although it had only been ... one month? A month and a week? It was a Monday, and Erik had left on an early Thursday morning. A month and a dirty weekend, then. Charles plucked at the blue yarn of the token round his neck.

“And it’s all ours, right?”

“Yes, it’s yours. I’m glad you like it.”

“Ours,” Scott corrected. “I’ll share with Kurt, even if he keeps spinning it. But that’s because he’s so much younger.”

Charles recognized his own words parroted back to him. He smiled, rueful, and turned to look out the window again.

“Kids are in bed,” Logan had said the previous night. “Azazel had to make tracks. And you’re due in the library tomorrow, X. High noon.”

Silently, Charles had fetched a mug and filled it with tea. Sipped, and grimaced, since Logan always brewed it strong enough to peel paint.

“Didn’t you hear me?”

“I heard you.” He had eased down onto the bench next to Armando. “Who wants me there, and why? Frost, and ... ‘need-to-know-basis’?”

“She didn’t tell me why. Don’t shoot the messenger.”
“I’ll move up the food chain and shoot Azazel.”

“No way you’d hit him, so just as well it was Frost, straight-up on the line to yours truly.”

“Surely the Seeker’s not capable of trans-Atlantic communi –”

Charles shut his mouth. Best not reveal that he knew more than the minimum about Frost’s range as a telepath … unless there was another Finder hidden somewhere in Europe, and of all the complications for the EBS, surely that would be –

Logan did not look up from washing the dishes. “Phone.”

The manor’s telephone ...

“You all right, Prof?” Armando said.

Charles nodded.

His mind clicked over the possibilities. He could find it. He would start with Hank’s lab, then move in the direction of the Hive, checking rooms –

“And I’ll be having my I.D. back, Chuck.”

Logan had turned to lean against the sink. There had been no avoiding his outstretched hand.

Charles had made a point of stopping the morning’s Tree Time early. Kurt was helping Armando put away the new supplies. Surely it was noon by now, and here he was, waiting on Frost. Again.

At least it was not storming anymore. Charles rested his forehead against the window’s chilly glass, taking in the stunted evergreens, windblown, and the skeletal branches of the deciduous trees. He hoped Logan’s work gathering wood had not been too arduous. Perhaps the blizzard had left broken pieces within easy reach.

To him, the drifts looked like nothing more than the Sahara, married to winter, all done up in pure white. Frost undoubtedly thought it lovely.

He let his power drift over the manor, waiting.

Logan had walked him to the dormitory in silence. Had tipped his head at a jumble on the chair: towels that looked new and plaid slippers that looked old.

“Thanks ever so, but …” Charles had raised an eyebrow at the roll of toilet paper perched on top of the pile. “More than one might be necessary.”

“No shit.”

“Actually –”

“Did I walk into that or what? Kurt has the rest.”

“Why?”

“Scott wanted to carry the globe, so of course Kurt wanted to carry something. I gave him the lightest bag. You should have seen him.” Logan drummed his hands on the back of the chair.
“Wouldn’t even let his daddy help.”

“Azazel.” Charles knelt to build the fire. “I’m sorry I didn’t get to speak to him.”

“He’ll be coming back and forth; you’ll have your chance. But wait – you’re going to start lobbing all your nosy questions at someone else? And here I thought I was your favorite.” Logan extended one claw to snag a square of toilet paper, and deployed it as a handkerchief. “Boo hoo.”

“You’ll put your eye out.”

“They grow back fast.”

“Ugh.”

_Speak of the devil.... Azazel’s presence flickered over Charles’ outstretched power; there and then gone. And there was Frost. Charles exhaled; watched the glass in front of his mouth fog up._

_Develops don’t exist, _his memory whispered to him.

Perhaps his existence would be more straightforward if they did. Devils versus Charles; Manichaeism at its finest. As it was, he had to decide if his anger at groveling before Frost outweighed his desire to help the children. To help …

Charles closed his eyes at the touch of another mind.

_Jean._

The previous night Charles had left off thinking of Logan’s ability; had stared into the fire and remembered Jean’s phoenix instead. Not Frost’s eyes, pale and knowing; Erik’s, green-grey; Jean’s … all grey, really: clear as a forest pool, while Erik’s were sometimes clear as mud –

“Hello,” Logan had drawled. “Are you even listening?”

“To what?”

“To my making fun of you; what else? I can’t practice on Hank. And you’d better not, either – he’s had enough of –”

Suddenly, Charles had had enough, too. Had straightened from his crouch. “Thank you for making dinner, thank you for the toiletries, and thank you for the fine inspirational speech in the showers. Good night.”

“What’s gotten up your ass?”

“You think you’re so amusing –”

“In the last hour, I mean.” Logan’s dark eyes glinted. “Easy, X.”

Charles bit back the rest of his retort. And since there was no sense beating around the bush, he swallowed his pride. “Next time I would be very grateful if you woke me. For Albany, I mean. I should like to go – anywhere but here. Just once.”

“Thing is, X-man, unless we get Jean to cover it up for us, we get in deep shit. Frost doesn’t want you anywhere but here. And I don’t care if she goes digging around in my head, but I really don’t
want you to catch any more flak.”

Guilt made his skin prickle, so Charles gave the entire issue of memory a miss. “So I should push back on certain things, but asking to go to Albany is too much? I don’t understand you.” He felt weary. “I don’t understand such arbitrary … stupidity.”

“Believe me, X, I know just how much it sucks. But prove you can be trusted in little things, and Frost’ll come around to trusting you with more.”

“I know Frost can hurt Marie, but even so – this – this appeasement is unlike you. Or what I thought of you.“

“You ever love anyone, X man?”

Charles gritted his teeth. Raven. He pushed her memory back down into deep water. “I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“You going and calling me a coward makes it my business, ‘cause I got my reasons, and the L word’s the big kahuna.”

“The – what?”

“Free West surfer films. Sun and waves; no skin cancers to be seen. Anyway, you called me a coward.”

“I didn’t –”

“I think you did.” The firelight made Logan’s face look like granite. “You go ahead and lump me in with Hank if it makes you feel better. I bet it will, because you’re different than us. You don’t have these little things like other people hanging round your neck, dragging you down …. Oh, wait. You do.”

Charles refused to look away.

“You went and put out for Lehnsherr, just to try and keep those kids safe. You told me so yourself, didn’t you? So I think if you had anyone to you like Marie is to me, or like Hank’s family to him … then you’d be a lot more fucked than you are now. What do you think?”

The pop and snap of the fire was curiously distant. Or, at least, muted by the rush of blood in his ears.

“What do I think, Logan?”

“You heard me.”

“I think it’s fortunate that I have no plans to love anyone or anything in the near future. Adults or children; friends or slags.”

“Damn, did it just get colder in here or what?”

“I am what I am.” Charles doffed his knit hat, and catalogued Logan’s twitch – his hair still look wretched, then. “And I will take better care of myself in the future; I promise you that. Perhaps with more help along the lines of those pancakes you made.”

“Gotta have a true love, X – keep going like that and I’ll think yours is food.”
“Food and Charles Xavier. Oh, ours will be a passionate affair. I’ll eat so much that you’ll have to roll me to Albany when Frost gives me permission to go.” Charles twirled his hat on two outstretched fingers. Then tossed it onto the armchair. “Will we see you tomorrow at all?”

“I won’t leave before Armando’s up. I’ll lay in some more firewood for you all,” Logan said. “But I have to be back in Brussels early.”

“Right. Carry on.” Charles walked to his bed and sat. Began unlacing his shoes.

“Aren’t you going to ask me why?”

“Why, then?”

“Security check. Tomorrow night, Brussels time, we’ve got final negotiations with the Heirs of Aztlán.”

“Good luck. And make sure Jean has some new winter clothes to bring back here. This snow,” he tilted his head towards the arrow windows, “is like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah. Britain’s got it good, all things considered.”

Charles did not dignify that with a reply.

“Night, Charles.”

“Good night.”

Now, taking his eyes away from the snow, Charles touched Jean’s mind in return.

_I missed you, I missed you!_

He sent a burst of: _Quiet, and Love_, while he straightened his shoulders and took a deep breath. Time to receive them both.

“Look alive, Scott. Lady Frost is coming – and so is a friend of mine.”

“Who is he?”

“She is someone I think you’ll like very much.”

And, Charles realized, someone he loved.

He felt … not so much the sense of a puzzle piece sliding into place, as a calm resignation.

_You love us_, Jean had sent to his mind so long ago, as he had read Ororo’s note aloud. It appeared it was true. So, Charles, thought, he could acknowledge that. Just as he could decide later whether or not to take careful steps back from that path: love leading him further into prison. And he had no clue to find his way out. Theseus he was not.

_Never again_. He would not be chained again. Charles lifted his chin and sent his raven flying through the West Wing door, past Frost’s ice and Jean’s fire, pulling in the rest of his power, all unseen, and spiraling a quicksilver circle round them all.

One chain, even for his sister’s sake, had been quite enough.
Frost’s mind touched his own like cold velvet on bare skin. He sent acknowledgement, put Erik’s token in his pocket and checked that his hat covered all his hair. Faced the door and took a deep breath.

And there they were.

Queen Frost – Emma – swept into the room with a rustle of silk. The hem of her dress was oddly rigid – except: lace, Charles’ mind told him – and it made sense, given Belgian exports.

Jean was wearing even more lace. At first glance she have been a doll, peeping out from behind Frost, her own white dress starched to an extreme – but with her dark red hair gleaming in the firelight and one small hand wiggling in a wave where Frost couldn’t see, she seemed just the same as ever – and as happy to see him as he was to see her.

Motioning Jean to the fireplace, Frost draped herself over the low red couch: pristine white on deep red.

Charles thought, distantly, of an open fracture.

“I’m so glad to see that you’ve finally shaved. Stubble did not suit.”

“My lady. I hope I find you well.”

“Very well.”

He looked out of the corner of his eye at Jean – and smiled for her, not for Frost. She smiled back at him, the little fern curl of her mouth …

At least, Charles thought she smiled. The fire had been built high that morning; she had moved to stand with her back to it. The flames made her glimmer, and made Charles squint.

“Now, Scott: come here. I have someone I would like you to meet. No,” Frost raised one hand, forestalling Charles’ stepping forward to help. “Scott is perfectly capable of walking across a room by himself.”

Of course he was, Charles thought. There was an element of cruelty, though, in forcing a blindfolded child to walk across a long expanse of carpet, hands outstretched.

“Or Jean can help him. Jean? Show Scott the room, please.”

Charles watched. Jean firmed her mouth and tipped up her chin.

“You don’t need to ask, darling,” Frost sighed. “I’ve told you as much before.”

But Scott said: “Yes, please.”

Please what? What had he just agreed to? Charles was on the brink of stepping forward when Scott – stopped.

“Oh!”

“Scott?” Concern made Charles’ voice sharp. “Are you all right?”

“Mr. Xavier! It’s the room – I can see the room! Look –” He took one step to the right and grabbed one of the armchairs. “I could have bumped right into this!”
“And what do you say to Jean, Scott?” Frost said.

“Thank you!”

“I’m sure she feels you are most welcome. Now, Jean: show him your pretty new dress. We went to a boutique after our tea party yesterday afternoon,” Frost said over her shoulder to Charles. “I almost persuaded the youngest Stryker girl to join us. Quite the daring little adventurer, that one.”

Charles was not listening. He was focused on Jean’s small hands, and their tight grip in her white skirt.

“Just an image of yourself,” Frost coaxed. “Come here, Scott; come by me. You see, Jean?” She took hold of Scott’s arm and reeled him in before passing one hand over his dark hair. “You know what Scott looks like. Why shouldn’t he know the same of you?”

There was silence – but with the warm edge to it that meant Jean was saying something.


“Laugh at what?” Charles said.

Jean sent him an image. Herself, silhouetted against the library fire … with a frame of worried words, spiky as a little hedgehog: *It’s my tooth.*

The picture was not clear. Charles squinted. There was no seeing Jean’s mouth, whether in projected image or reality – until she smiled wide at Scott.

Scott’s mouth fell open. “You’re beautiful.”

“You lost a tooth? Well done,” Charles said.

Hopefully it had come out in a piece of nougat. Anything other than - Erik flexing his fingers and placing them to his jaw –

Charles shook off the memory.

“Jean, Scott: I hope you two will be very good friends indeed. Now, for proper introductions, we shall be going into Mr. Xavier’s mind. If that is acceptable to you, Mr. Xavier?”

Charles stared.

Frost raised one eyebrow. “Is there a problem?”

“Not at all.”

Far better to murmur polite nonsense than to scream: *of course* there bloody well was a problem, her laying casual claim to his mind as though she owned it –

*You have to push back a bit.* Logan’s voice whispered from his memory. *Starting now.*

“Allow me a moment or two there alone, Lady.”

Frost shifted on the couch. “Why, I wonder?”

“Just so I can prepare for you, and alert the aviary.” He smiled, thinly. “They’ll be on their best behavior.” Not that guano would show up on her dress; still, rather safe than sorry.
“I hope so. Come, Charles.” She gave Scott a gentle push to one side; patted the couch. “Sit by me.”

Charles watched his old, worn loafers as they steered him towards Frost. He remained detached. Calm. Even when she took his arm in turn and tugged him down. “Sit.”

“All right.”

Her silk gown had a great many layers, rustling as she moved to make room for him. This close he saw how they were different shades, ranging from the purest white to mother-of-pearl, from diaphanous material to the lace he had seen before. He didn’t envy her the laundry bill.

Scott was still turned toward Jean like a flower to the sun. There was heat in the air – was she sending him more images?

“Whenever you’re ready, Mr. Xavier.”

“And how will Scott join us there?”

“Jean will take him.”

Charles did not wait to hear any more. He closed his eyes instead.

“Hurry, hurry, everyone! Yes, I’m glad to see you, too,” he gave his penguin’s head a quick pat, “but for the love of god, make sure there’s nothing incriminating in here, and then go – go –”

To the atrium? To the book pillar? By the sea of crystal? What on earth could he call it?

“Be safe,” Charles finished. “Quickly, now.”

With their flutters and cheeps, the birds flew for the corner of his reading room. Except his raven, who had landed in the middle of one of the broad worktables, and tapped its heavy beak next to Jean’s tea light.

“You don’t think Frost will approve? Then what about that there?” He jerked his head towards the fire, blazing away in the brass fireplace. “Rather bright and hot, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

The raven made an angry crahk.

He did not dare put it out; he would have to weather Frost's anger - for something told him she would not be pleased with fire. “Fine.” Charles swept up the tea light in one armored hand and paced to the hidden corner as fast as he could. He bent to strip off a gauntlet – no, to set the light down, take off each gauntlet and press all ten fingertips into the two walls where they joined. He just managed to kick the light alongside as he practically fell into his hidden atrium.

“There has to be a better way,” Charles muttered. Then he pitched his voice to carry. “Stay put! Do you hear me?”

The words rebounded off crystal, chasing the birds as they spiraled into the air. Only his penguin was touching the pillar – the illusion, Charles remembered, satisfied. He’d like to see her royal icy Majesty dive in to retrieve a book – see if she would resurface. He’d wager not.

All in the aviary, except his raven, were calling out to each other in excitement, darting back and forth, so there was no sense in wondering if they missed the hummingbird. “And no sense in dwelling on it. Here.” Charles tapped a sabaton against the tea light; his raven hopped aside to avoid
getting poked. “Keep a sharp eye on this one. And on those –” the gold casket of jewels he had made, from feathers and thoughts and forget and veil and god knew what else.

“Guard them all, won’t you? I’ll be back as soon as I may.”

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For all his quickness, Charles had only just managed to alter his armor to a morning suit, plaster a calm expression on his face, and drape his hands in his lap where he sat … when Frost floated down through the great window, bringing with her a rustling, chilly breeze. The effect, he thought, snide, was far greater at night – sparkling snowflakes and blue-black darkness covered a multitude of sins, her crows-feet first among them. Her present mental get-up was, once more, the low-cut Dallas number and the glowing crown. And if he had to be honest, Charles could see no crows-feet whatsoever, damn her eyes.

Her eyes ... that were staring down at him. With no expression whatsoever.

He lifted his chin. "My lady."

"How interesting." She tilted her head to one side, very slightly. Charles would not have noticed, were it not for the glitter of one earring, falling to brush her bare shoulder. "I had expected to find you …"

"And you have," he finished. "Found me, that is."

He left unsaid what he had almost tasted in the air, her cold conclusion: I had expected to find you ... different.

He would decide his own costume changes, full stop; if she could not detect them, that was her problem.

"It's too hot in here." Frost flicked at her gown, mouth a thin line - and Charles caught a ruby red glow in her hand, before she tucked a bag away ... into a hidden pocket, perhaps, with a rustle of silk. Covertly, he glanced at the fire. What the hell was she playing at? Was she just drawing out the suspense? Actually carrying around coals? Well, he would play, too: remain bland and unruffled.

Or only blink once as she interlaced her fingers and cracked her knuckles. How unladylike.

“And you stay seated to greet me?”

“Beg pardon.” Charles got to his feet. “You are most welcome here, Lady Frost.”

“Thank you, Charles.” Frost extended one hand.

He looked at it. What …

She cleared her throat.

Was she really – oh, it seemed she was expecting him to do something that archaic and stupid. “I suppose,” Charles murmured, taking her hand, bowing, bringing it to his lips – ridiculous – “that all the diplomats in Brussels have been paying you this honor.”

“They have indeed. Even some from the Free West, just this morning. Did I tell you that?”

Charles shook his head. She strolled towards his books, crystal slippers chiming on the floor, and did not bother turning to reply.
“Though I have yet to see any important result of my little tea party yesterday, some Western academics, if you believe it, called on me this morning. We had a lovely discussion.”

“On what subject?”

“Russian literature. I had Pushkin on my mind.” Frost trailed a fingernail over the spines crammed together on one shelf. “So we had a great deal to talk about.”

“I’m sure.” Charles only had time to catch sight of one freckle on her left shoulder blade before a scuffle from near the fireplace made him prick up his ears and turn.

“Jean,” Frost laughed, turning. “How quietly you always creep up, and –”

Her voice stopped.

Jean’s eyes went wide.

“I do not think,” the Queen whispered, “that this is appropriate. Send him away.”

It was the phoenix, draped round Jean’s small shoulders, and fixing Frost with burning eyes. It opened its beak and hissed.

“Be careful, Jean.” Charles kept his words light. “I won’t have Sir Firebird scorching my books, so look sharp.”

“He brought fire, did he? I thought it was too hot in here. Ah. There.” Frost pointed, then snapped her fingers. “Put that out.”

Jean turned behind her to look at the fire, burning merrily, framed by brass. Then she turned back. Charles could see the quiver of her lower lip.

“Now, Jean. Do as I say.”

Jean hung her head.

With a screech, the phoenix leapt from her shoulder and flew through the fireplace, whirling round like an angry cat. Then, folding in on itself, it disappeared in jagged orange-red lines of flame and a crackle of heat – leaving the fireplace blackened in places – and, more importantly, quite empty.

Jean looked back up at him, face full of woe. Charles tried to look reassuring in reply.

“How did you come by that fire, Mr. Xavier?”

The reassurance vanished; his stomach lurched in panic. Charles opened his mouth to lie. “I –”

He was interrupted. Jean must have lobbed a thought with great focus and strength – he could almost see a heat wave from it. He certainly saw Frost’s mouth go thin as her eyes flicked away from him and to the ashy hearth.

But then, after a tense moment, Charles saw her shoulders relax.

“Well. That’s very sweet, to think of Scott –” and indeed, there Scott stood – or crouched, really, cowering in the shadows behind the golden chair, eyes screwed tightly shut, “but you must not light fires willy-nilly, especially when people can’t see them. Haven’t I told you this?”

Jean nodded. Sent: *I’m sorry*, loud enough for Charles to hear.
“I – oh. You mean, with that bird …” Charles made his eyes round. “I wondered why it was so warm in here. What with the way you … left it and all.”

He sounded almost too stupid to be plausible; he hoped Frost would fall for it. He would keep the thought of … of why she couldn’t bloody well see a fire blazing away three feet in front of her nose – later, keep it for later.

“The bird took it away, just now. Jean brought it here for Scott, I suppose.”

“But I didn’t see any –”

“And she won’t do it again,” Frost said, calm. “Will she.”

Jean lifted one shoulder.

“She won’t do it again. Or else she won’t get to go to the ball next week.”

Even removed, Charles heard the babble in reply: please please oh please –

“Then behave yourself.”

I will! Oh, I will –

“Won’t we all,” Charles muttered.

The White Queen had not heard him. She strode to the golden chair and flicked Scott’s fingers where they were digging into the brocade. “You: move. This is my seat.”

“I can’t! I’m scared.”

“It’s just my mind, young Mr. Summers.” Charles walked over and touched Scott’s hand, eased it loose. “It can’t be so terrible a place.”

“It’s bright,” he said, voice cracking, “but it’s too bright – even with my eyes shut. And –” Scott’s other hand, Charles saw, came up to slap tight over his eyelids. “And even now –”

“Hush now. I won’t let anything happen to you. Here, have a seat on this workbench.”

He guided him there and tugged out the other end of the bench for Jean. Then he straightened behind them and dusted off his hands. Or what Frost saw as hands. He knew them to be gauntlets, still.

“Perfect. Professor Xavier and his two star students.”

What about Kurt? Charles felt Jean send.

“He’s happy enough sorting groceries. With your intelligence … well. Kurt will never quite reach your level, Scott, Jean. Be kind to him, though. He’s a sweet boy.”

Perhaps Frost’s smile was for his own astonishment. Charles closed his mouth with a snap. That she should begin by denigrating – a child –

“Oh, don’t look at me like that.” Her teeth were very white and even. Not as many as Erik’s; nothing missing in front like Jean’s, obviously. “He is quite precocious with spoken Russian, but he cannot have dear papa whispering to him all day long.” She flicked a feather off one golden armrest. “Not anymore.”
“I don’t have a papa,” Scott said.

Charles did not feel Jean’s – *Me neither* – but he sent as much warmth to her as he could while still being discreet.

*Russian, Scott, Russian.* Frost sighed. “I was talking about Kurt, not you. It will be an uphill path with more than one, dear Charles.”

With such an auspicious beginning, Charles told himself, grim, their own little discussion could only improve. Though ... if it did, he would bloody well be king of Britain before the new year was up.

“I was right,” he said to Jean, afterwards.

*About what?*

“That was not the most enjoyable conversation. Was it?”

Jean grimaced. It was a curiously adult expression on her – a wry twist to the mouth – so much so that Charles had to bite back a laugh. “Check on Scott,” he told her instead.

She moved to obey, trotting over to Scott where he lay slumped on the low red couch.

On impulse, Charles sent his mind searching for Logan, for Azazel – for anyone else. Nobody except Armando and Kurt in the kitchen. The others had all gone.

He was alone in the library with Jean and Scott. Frost had smirked and preened and finally bestowed a few parting remarks. “There can be no having Scott back in your mind, Mr. Xavier – I believe we can agree?”

“Whatsoever you believe, Lady,” he had murmured, not taking his eyes off Scott, “must be so.”

“So. I will see you, Jean, one week from today – and you, Charles, rather sooner than that.”

*Why?*

“It’s a surprise. Ah! Nothing having to do with my Prince,” she had purred – Charles had winced and thrown a glance at Jean. “And nothing to do with her. Remind me, though, what languages do you have?”

“Languages?” Charles blinked. “Latin, Classical Greek, German … um. French?”

He had kept his Russian efforts veiled – and it seemed to work, because Frost had left with only: “No Spanish? Pity.”

Charles had decided not to think about what she meant.

And now he was faced with Scott looking quite clammy and Jean trying her best to chafe his hands. Charles watched until she patted Scott’s cheek – her fingers brushed the blindfold and he leapt into action.

“Careful! Don’t touch.”

“I don’t want to hurt anybody, Mr. Xavier –” Scott croaked.

“I know you don’t. Jean, Scott has Alex’s talent with plasma, but through his eyes. Isn’t that right,
Scott?”

A low mumble.

“And so he has to keep them shut at all times. At least for now.”

Jean looked inquisitive.

“Well, now that you ask: I’ve told Hank to start working on the problem. But,” and Charles held up one finger, “I don’t know if anything will come of it. We’ll have to wait and see.”

He could have kicked himself for the word choice, but neither child seemed to notice. So Charles sat down on the couch. He patted the cushion to his side, and Jean joined him.

“Was my mind so very frightening, Scott?”

“I wasn’t frightened.” Scott’s breathing gave that the lie, but he soldiered on. “I just felt dizzy. It’s bad when I can’t see and I’m in a new place. It was worse there because it felt … different.”

“How so? Not cold, I hope.”

“No. It was warm.” Scott shivered. “It just felt really big.”

“… Oh.”

Charles supposed he could be flattered. His mind, bringing a vast expanse to the temporarily blind … but he looked at Scott plucking at the pilling on his ratty sweater, and sighed. “Next time you come in I shall see if a friend or two of mine will keep you company.”

“I think it’d be just as scary if Jean was there –”

“Not my Jean-friend, Scott – my bird friends.”

_I was busy with the fire_, Jean sent, hot enough to hurt.

“That’s right. Thank you for helping me, dear. I’m sorry you had to lie.”

_I only said that Scott looked cold. He did. You were the one that lied._ She turned a solemn gaze on him. _And didn’t Lady Frost say he can’t go back?_

“She said: ‘I believe we can agree.’ So do I. Perhaps in some lovely peaceable world the Queen and I could agree on everything. But on the matter of Scott visiting what is, all in all, _my_ mind … we disagree.”

Jean’s brow knit. _I …_

“– don’t think that’s very honest, do you? Well, I’m sorry.” Charles drummed his fingers on one knee. “I want to help Scott, though, and I’m curious to see if I can control his power in my mind.”

A long silence in reply left him disconcerted. He flicked his eyes back to Jean’s face. Her jaw was set.

_You have to ask._

“Of course I would ask before I did anything,” he soothed. “You know that. Besides, I would only want to help.”
He cautiously stretched out his power – and brushed up against the glimmering, massive conch shell.

\textit{Right.} One hint of disreputable deeds and Jean was up in arms. Really, she was more of a knight than he was. It made him wonder what the hell she thought of the wreckage of Erik’s mind, and of Frost’s being the one responsible. Except … he had no idea what Jean knew about Erik, he realized. Or what she truly thought of Frost. For that matter, he remembered Erik’s castle as being quite strong. Impregnable, one would think, given its forbidding appearance.

Speaking of which. Charles bit his lip, refusing to look away from Jean’s scowl. Her face still seemed oddly adult – with that new expression, of course, since she still had roundness to her cheeks. Perhaps it was something about the angles of cheekbone, only hints below the baby fat, that held the promise of being …. Striking, when she grew up, he supposed. \textit{No}, not striking …. Something else. What was –

And while he had been woolgathering, Jean had gone back to patting Scott. Charles shook off his unease by making his voice loud.

“Well. I’m rather tired, even though it can’t be later than one in the afternoon. Shall we go make lunch? We have quite a supply now, Jean, but I hope diplomatic dining has not spoiled you.”

The picture she sent was dark, framed with – \textit{I'm not spoiled!} – like broken glass.

“Sorry.” \textit{Christ}, he was putting all his feet wrong at once. “Of course not. I only mean … I’m not as good a cook as Logan.” He made his voice worried. “And he’s gone now.”

It worked; the image brightened as she leapt to his defense. \textit{I think you’re just as good as he is.}

“No? You?”

\textit{Yes. He doesn’t read to me either, even when I asked and asked.}

“Really?” Charles was puzzled. “That doesn’t strike me as being like him. Surely if you asked politely –”

\textit{I did!}

“Ow,” Scott said, plaintive. “I felt that.”

\textit{Sorry.}

The hair on Charles’ neck prickled. Jean had not just amplified her thoughts. She had wrapped both of them round with the projected image: herself, hands outstretched, and \textit{Sorry} framed with blue flowers – clear as day and twice as bright.

“ ‘S O.K. Can we get lunch now, Mr. Xavier?”

“Of course,” Charles said. “Come on, Jean. And if you stay cheerful, then we’ll read together.”

Jean bounced to her feet, made for the library door, and opened it quick as a wink. Charles followed, holding Scott’s hand. A thought came to him.

“Jean? I’m sure you were polite – but how many times did you ask Logan to read?”

She poked her head back around the door. Sent: \textit{A lot.}
“How many is a lot?”

But she only grinned, showing the new gap in her teeth, and then dashed away. And since Charles could hear the patter of her shoes, he did not need any of his birds to tell him that she was skipping as she ran.

Charles nodded to Armando in the kitchen, spared a glance and a smile for Kurt running around Jean in circles. “Someone’s happy.”

“I guess.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Better, now.” Armando gave a stir to something in a pot on the range. “Kurt and I helped Logan a bit – he says good-bye. He left a lot of firewood in the lower hall.”

“By Hank’s lab?”

“Yes.”

“That’s as good a place as any.”

“Speaking of a good place – you hid those opiates, right?”

“What opiates?”

A snort. “Nice.”

“As nice as that smells.” Charles tipped his head towards the stove. “What is it?”

“Just rice and beans. We’ve got a ton of them now.”

“Right. I’ll set the table.”

Armando nodded and kept stirring.

Scott had already started with the silverware – he had been relieved, weeks ago, to find no knives there.

Charles remembered when he had first asked about knives. Bobby had snorted at him.

He shook off the memory, focusing on unwinding Kurt from where he clung to Jean like a limpet. There was no stopping his chattering through dinner, though, and catapulting gobs of food at the other two with his spoon.

Before Jean went to bed, Charles searched his wardrobe, scooped up the handful of spindly metal rings with their bird in the middle, and gave it to her. “I hope you enjoy it, dear. Happy New Year, from your friend.” He sent an image of Erik.

*He’s your friend too, now – isn’t he?*

Charles looked away. When he looked back, Jean had extended her cupped hands, and in them the metal sphere had reformed. The bird was wobbling in fits and starts off her palms.
“You could lift a cup easily,” he said. “Last year – remember?”

*This is different.* She frowned at the toy. *It’s hard to keep the thin parts separate from the fat part.*

“Well. I hope you enjoy it – and keep it as your little secret, Jean. Kurt might break it, and Scott would have no fun with it at all. We’ll think of some different toys for them.”

*Oh.* Walking to her room, Jean paused. *I have toys, Mr. Xavier. Do you think they’d like to play horses?*

“… Probably? Try it and see. But be careful – until I get to Albany, we won’t have any glue to mend serious horse injuries.”

*We’ll be careful. Do you want to play?*

“No, dear. I’m a bit too old, I think.”

*But I didn’t get you any present. For the fairy book, I mean.*

“You gave me the fire in my mind.”

*Lady Frost made me put it out, though.* Her shoulders hunched. *I’m sorry.*

“You know,” and Charles hunkered down next to her, “I might have concealed just the tiniest bit of it. I’ll double-check, but you might not have to give it to me again, especially since Frost told you not to. It was an excellent present – keeps the birds and me quite warm.”

*Good.*

“All right. Go to sleep.”

Jean did, eventually. Charles waited in his own room until he felt her mind go quiet. And while he did, in the shelter of his mind, he walked quietly through the darkness. He checked on the birds, now back and drowsing in their golden chair. Then Charles paced to the secret corner, opened it, and gazed at the shining floor and pillar; at the slow churn of his thoughts, like quicksilver beneath glass.

At his feet the tea light sent up a brave flame. It made the casket of jewels next to it glitter gold.

“Well.” Charles bent and scooped up the light. “I’m glad you’re still here.”

He took it into the main room. Stooped down below the brass frame and set it amongst the ashes on the hearth.

He did not have to look to know that his raven had flown to his shoulder.

“The firebird helped us before. But in case Frost visits again – could you put out such a blaze, darling?”

A gentle touch of beak to his hair.

“And could you start it again?”

The raven fluttered its feathers. And before it had finished, flames were leaping up into the flue.

“Make sure to hide that tea light when I’ve gone. It seems Jean was the catalyst,” he reached up to smooth the raven’s ruff, “but if we can keep it safe, then we need never be cold again. At least, not
here.”

It was soothing to watch the fire; to reflect on the shadows it had to be casting up behind him. It seemed Raven thought so too, for it did not leave him while he stayed.

Starting the very next day, Jean fit into their routine as if she had always been there. She watched *Tree Time*, absorbed in colors and numbers; she helped Charles carry baskets to the laundry room, sending him image after image with her mind.

Some things, though, she changed.

On Tuesday, Charles opened the library door to find a plastic horse lying on the threshold. He frowned, bent to pick it up; heard scuffling, a whoop and the thump of shoes. Then Scott and Jean charged round the corner: Jean waving two more horses through the air; Scott making what Charles supposed was the sound of a gallop, drumming his free hand against his leg. His other hand was clutching –

“Don’t let go of her sweatshirt,” Charles said, voice sharp, “running that fast.”

“I’m fine!” Scott said. He stopped at the library threshold, still clinging to Jean, both gasping for breath. “Who won?”

“I …”

But Jean’s eyes had gone wide, and he felt the heat of a thought.

“Yeah!” Scott beamed from ear to ear. “And you said he wouldn’t!”

They placed the horses at Charles’ feet. Then Jean tugged at Scott’s sleeve, and they dashed away down the hallway once more.

“Be careful!” Charles shouted after them.

Suddenly Kurt ran around the corner, clutching another plastic horse with both hands. Charles waited for him to reach the library door.

When he did, he had to gasp for breath before squeaking: “It’s a race!”

“Yes, I can see that.”

“You hold Greenie!” Kurt shoved the horse at him and ran off again.

“… Fine.”

Charles looked down at the horse. It was orange. Clearly, at least for Kurt, *Tree Time* needed more time to take root.

The days and nights went by, and Charles began to have trouble sleeping. At least Armando seemed in better spirits. Probably because, Charles thought tiredly, he would not be dreaming of a sister running up to him from across a field – rippling from peach and gold to blue and red, and back, again and again.

That always happened when Raven got particularly excited about something. Or frightened …
“You all right?” Armando asked on Thursday afternoon, turning from the dishes in the sink.

Charles shrugged. “Going a bit spare, I suppose.”

“English.”

“This manor …” He picked at a splinter in the kitchen table. “I’m ready to get the hell out of this manor.”

Armando merely picked up a dishtowel and started to dry.

Staring at the back of his head, Charles gave in to a sudden wild impulse – reach out, touch, see what Armando was really thinking –

The static started to prickle after ten seconds, but only became intolerable after twenty-five. Then the dishtowel slapped against the counter, and one sharp shock broke the connection.

Charles pressed his hands flat on the table.

“What the hell was that supposed to be?”

“I – I wanted to –”

“What?”

“I thought –”

“Thought what? You want me to be practice for you? Kick me around some?”

Armando’s eyes flashed – but – shite – they weren’t the only things that flashed black, as all of his skin that was visible crackled and turned to obsidian –

Charles pushed away from the table. “Sorry!”

For a long moment, Armando just glared. Then: “Whatever.” He sat down, heavily. “Now I have to fix all this shit. ‘Important tokens’, she said.” He threw pieces of warped metal at the table. “My super-adaptive ass.”

“Truly, I apologize. I should have asked first.”

“Yeah, you should’ve.” Obsidian fingers clacked on the table as Armando drummed them. He did so for quite some time.

Then he spoke, abrupt: “Still. You held on longer than last time.”

“… Yes.”

A flash of black stone – but then, amazingly, Armando’s bared teeth started to show enamel again as the obsidian peeled off – and then reached his lips, fading back to brown and melting into skin. “I can’t have that.”

Charles swallowed. “No?”

“Practice, huh? Have a seat, then.”

Cautiously, he sat.
“We’ll practice on my terms, after dinner, when the kids aren’t here. Don’t want Jean getting ideas or Scott telling Frost. All right?”

“All right – yes.” Charles exhaled. “Perfect.”

“Go on, then.” Armando lifted his chin – all of his skin now normal. “Take your best shot, mutie.”

“I will.” He carefully checked his own mind; its defenses … the aviary all at rest. It would be best to let his raven sleep; to try to fight without any prop, the better to strengthen himself. “Get ready.”

Besides, Raven could very well disapprove – and Charles wanted headaches on his own terms, not those of an overactive figment of superego.

“Set,” Armando said.

“Then: go.”

They had shaken hands, later, and agreed to practice more. Armando’s teeth had flashed in a rare grin.

For the rest of the evening, Charles busied himself with shifting all of Logan’s firewood supply from the front hallway to the dormitory rooms. Then he let the children race him from the kitchen to the library door and back, several times. He wanted to be tired enough to sleep the whole night through.

Later that night, his raven came to him in a dream.

He knew he was standing on the manor’s tower again. The sky was opaque: white and grey. He could see nothing – nothing except his teaching attire on his own body: tweed and gown; shirt and trousers. His scuffed leather shoes.

“I remember this.” A fine start to the new year, that dream had been. And now, an encore. He shivered. “It’s cold.”

The silence made no reply. But of course it wouldn’t, being silent. Charles rolled his eyes at himself; he was not afraid.

Still, he took a deep breath of relief as he saw his raven fly to him. “You came back.”

But … why wouldn’t it?

The raven dug its talons into his forearm, and croaked – somehow more rattling than usual. What was wrong? Was it angry? Charles winced. He remembered: an overactive figment of superego – “Oh, dearest.”

– rest – came hissing out of the stark whiteness that had to be his mind – his memory. Something.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that, earlier today.”

His raven fluffed its feathers. Then, oddly, its head drooped.

“Oh. Please don’t.” He lifted his free hand; stroked Raven’s head. Everything about his body felt heavy. “Don’t be so sad.”

His raven screeched, flapping its wings.


And that did the trick.

With one final shriek, Raven shot into the air, shattering the sky like a hammer on a porcelain plate. Charles gasped, shielding his eyes – but no, he was flying too: flying into the sky now full of stars, shining beautiful in the darkness. Fresh air, and he could breathe, thank God.

“Thank you.”

He listened for the flutter of feathers, reassuring as the thump of his own heart. “I’d be lost without you. I’ll never speak of you that way again – I promise. Just …” Charles swallowed hard, even in his dream. “Just don’t leave me.”

A crrrrr in his ear – Raven somehow ran its beak through his hair, flying and all.

“I don’t care. This is a dream, isn’t it? So we can do anything we want – like … flying …” He caught his breath; grinned into the darkness, “to Albany – and further this time. Fly with me.”

_I am my own Finder_, and asleep, flat on his back in his bed, with one door gone but the rest firmly locked … . Charles flew free, and farther than he ever had before.

The best part was that he felt quite fine the next morning, a Friday. It was enough to shepherd the children through the beginning of the day: breakfast, quick washing of hands and brushing of teeth – though the bathrooms were still rather frozen, Logan’s firewood aside – and to go on a jaunt to Tree Time, Armando strolling alongside him.

“I’ll watch them. You take care of those sheets.”

Charles made no argument. Just walked with the basket to the laundry room. He felt … well exercised. Smiling at nothing, swallowing back a jaw-cracking yawn. Quite a contrast to his migraine after reaching Syracuse last autumn, and even to his flight to Albany to touch Logan’s mind. He had been breathless then. Not so now.

“Lovely,” he said to himself. _As good as sex_ – but he batted that thought to the side. Really, he had not thought of Erik in a while. And now he had more important things to do.

It was easy enough to tip the laundry in and measure out the powdered detergent. Charles put in the wash and leaned against the machine, feeling its rumble. Very relaxing.

He could not say how long he stayed there, daydreaming.

Behind him, someone cleared her throat.

... Damn it.

He was sluggish from the exertion of such a long flight, Charles decided. That would explain his not noticing. He checked that his token was concealed beneath his sweatshirt, turned, and bowed.

“Lady.”

“Charles.” Frost smiled and walked into the room, her white shoes clicking on the grubby linoleum. “How are you?”
“I’m glad to see you.” He smiled back.

“… Really.”

“Yes. It’s nice to have Jean back, but I’ve been talking to children the past four days straight.”

“What about Armando?”

“He’s not the chattiest person in the world.”

“No indeed. Well, come along then. We’ll talk in my office.”

As he followed her, Charles made sure of his shields – careful, discreet. Practicing with Armando had strengthened his attack, but defense was a different matter entirely.

“Come inside.”

He blinked at her office. Right. Time to pull it together, perhaps. Frost gestured at the chair opposite her desk; Charles sat down in it. She closed the door.

“Why was it you wished to see me, Lady?”

“Checking on the children.” She strolled to her own chair. “Any problems?”

“Not really. Kurt is somewhat hyperactive, but being pent up inside all day –”

“– it’s easily explained. Hm. Jean’s mood?”

“Cheerful enough. Why?”

“She was misbehaving before I brought her back here.”

Charles tried a smile. “Am I that harsh a punishment, then?”

“Not as harsh as some I’ve known.”

Fuck you, Charles thought, keeping his face placid.

“And Scott, I’m sure, is well. Now then: to business.” She reached for a carrying case on the shelf behind her – white leather, of course. Charles heard the click of hinges and the rustle of paper.

“What seal is that?”

“Mine.”

He squinted. Some design of geometric lines – it was stamped into the leather and thus difficult to see.

“Why don’t you guess what I have for you, Charles?”

“… I have no idea.”

“Here’s a hint: it’s a reward.” Frost’s laughter chimed through the room. “For good behavior.”

Charles refused to be unsettled. Take control. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”
“What is it?”

“It is the final draft of our treaty with the Heirs of Aztlán. I thought you could read and tell me if it seems watertight. You have some interest in history; I know you taught it. And interest in diplomacy, I’m sure.”

“Yes.”

Had Erik told her that? All his senses, hyperaware, caught only Frost’s self-satisfaction. Best to be cautious, nonetheless.

“You may read it over the next few days. I shall stop by for Jean on Sunday night; next week’s ball is a Monday. I’ll have to sign the treaty in an anteroom – can you imagine? – and I’ll have only the smallest moment to catch my breath before our further negotiations in the West –”

“Further negotiations?”

“Yes. We of the Eastern Brethren and Sistren have been invited,” her lips twitched up, “to Las Vegas.”

Charles knew the place from old vids. “Isn’t it somewhat – destroyed, Lady?”

“To be more precise: we’ve been invited to the Free West resort on Lake Mead, near the remnants of Las Vegas. It’s supposed to be rather pretty; less so in the winter, but that’s Nevada that Was for you. There will be a masquerade, I’m told, for Mardi Gras.”

“Isn’t that a little decadent for them?”

“Their elite has to burn off steam somewhere. Besides: I know, and they know – and now you know – that absolutely nothing will come of it. They’ll probably try to assassinate me again.” She examined her manicure. “Amateurs.”

“Then you’ll need protection –”

What was he even saying? Why the bloody fuck should he want her protected? Charles fought to concentrate, did his best not to look away.

“So perhaps I should take you instead, since Erik will be otherwise occupied.” Frost smiled at his rapid blink. “In Albuquerque. No need to be afraid.”

“That’s good.” His face felt stiff. “My lady.”

“If you come along, you can keep your power attuned to any threat to me … what do you say, Charles?”

“I say: I have not yet had any lessons with you, Lady Frost, so how can I possibly keep my power – what was it?”

“Attuned.”

She stared at him, narrowly, for a long moment. Charles tried not to breathe.

Then she said: “Come here.”

“Where?”
Frost tilted her head to one side. “Here behind the desk. With me.”

It was a tight fit. Charles felt ridiculous, standing, his right elbow bumping the shelf flush against her chair back. He focused on the crystal knick-knacks, the books and binders lined up in a row, and what looked like a decent imitation of a Fabergé egg. Anything to keep his eyes from her décolleté.

He heard a sigh. “The only way this will work is for you to kneel.”

“Right,” he said.

And she was wearing a short skirt again. God damn it – Charles went to his knees, carefully, and skewed his eyes to the side as she crossed her legs. He gritted his teeth as she tugged off his knit hat, movements brisk. Except - Erik’s knit hat - he shoved the thought down as, out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the hat tossed to the floor. A habit of hers. Wasteful.

“Look up at me, Charles.” A finger landed beneath his chin. “Don’t be shy.”

“I’m not shy. I’m just …”

Charles swallowed his sarcasm. For this close, her eyes were …

Strange.

Gooseflesh prickled over his body. For a moment, he had thought that their ordinary blue – somewhat pale, but nothing out of the common way … had turned into splinters of glass.

“Now, Charles: follow me.”

"How?"

"It would be easier with like elements," she murmured. "We’ll have to try again sometime soon. In the meantime …"

What the hell? Charles thought, but -

– a strand of diamonds - or ice - whipped past him like a rope flying out of a high window – if the other end were attached to something heavy, something falling fast.

– Take hold – he heard Frost whisper.

He did, and gasped –

– and exhaled shakily, watching his breath stream white in front of him, feeling cold clog his throat and mouth. The gap in his teeth on the upper left side ached especially. He probed at it with his tongue as he carefully looked round.

Ice stretched as far as he could see. Standing on a glacier would be very like. Charles glanced at the sky, half expecting the aurora, but it was just as cold and white as everything else.

There was a shadow stretching in front of him … far bigger than one he would ever cast. Charles turned in a circle. Nothing behind him, and there was nothing to either side. His sabatons crunched on the ice.

Then he thought to look up into the sky with more attention.
“Well, well. Modest, you are not.”

It looked like nothing more than a cake ornament – perhaps a marzipan palace, etched with designs by the most skilled of hands, resting on top of a cloud of spun sugar. It was too far away for him to see much. Pillars near the cloud, spires in the air, and even a dome …

He heard the ice crunch behind him.

“Very impressive.” Charles pitched his voice to carry over his shoulder.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“What if you relocate to the tropics some day? I’d imagine the heat would work on one’s head to an extreme: quite a mess if everything melts.”

“As you must know by now, Charles, what happens outside our minds has no effect on the fundamentals we have chosen for the inside. The reverse is different.”

“And your fundamentals are snow and ice.”

Her crown was shining bright again, even against the unrelenting white glare of their surroundings. “I spent much of my youth in Solovki – in the Solovetsky Archipelago, less than one hundred fifty kilometers from the Arctic Circle. There, it was very cold, I assure you.”

“All year long?”

“I suppose there were some flowers and berries in high summer. I mainly noticed the mosquitoes.”

“And unending sun.”

“Yes.” She raised a hand to the sky. “So you see, I have kept the best of both.”

That best of both was bloody well giving him a migraine: white reflecting off merciless white. “Why did you bring me here, Lady?”

“This is my projection: a mental space I created, into which I invited you. I have your gift here,” she said, and with a twist to his stomach, Charles saw the crystal hawk land on Frost’s right wrist, held high, “so you can see how to take your mind with you as you fly.”

She paused.

Perhaps, Charles thought, she was waiting for him to sound impressed. “Ah.”

“It can be quite helpful. With my lovely friend here I hardly have to use the Seeker anymore.”

“Really,” he choked. “That’s – excellent. But I’ve tried it already; with my raven, I mean.” Far better to have him tell a truth three-quarters lie than have her find out the whole later. “I felt so sick after I did. My head hurt for days.”

“Show me the memory.”

“How?”

She began to pace in a circle. “Augustine describes the mind as a warehouse, from which we take our memories. Some more easily than others –”
“All these doth that great harbor of the memory receive in her numberless secret and inexpressible windings, to be forthcoming, and brought out at need; each entering in by his own gate, and there laid up,” Charles quoted.

“Thank you, Professor. A primitive understanding, but useful nonetheless.”

Frost struck the ice with one heel. With a creak and a groan, a rough circle within it began to move. Charles watched as it picked up speed and ground away like a grist mill.

“So, cast something into your mind and bring out the memory that I wish to see: when you tried to fly with your raven. I use diamonds in a chain – they have a tendency to catch well. Bring the memory here,” she dipped one toe into the circle, now sinking as it whirled round, “and we shall watch.”

Charles set his jaw. He had done something similar, perhaps, sending the memory of Victor to Moira. But how …. He sent word darting to the aviary. *Help?*

For a long moment there was nothing. Then the air flickered, and twisted, and his penguin dropped onto the ice with an irritable squawk.

Charles couldn’t help it; his lips twitched. “Hello, my dear.” He held out one gauntlet as the bird waddled close. “Thank you for coming.”

“Really, I meant for you to try casting a line or tossing a net … not calling up some little anima. Although you are rather pretty,” Frost told the penguin.

It hissed, and the banner in its mouth fell out onto the snow.

“It’s not that susceptible to flattery, I’m afraid,” Charles said, wadding up the cloth.

“Unlike someone else I could mention.” She pointed at the circle; stepped to the edge and kicked at some of the blue-white hands that were reaching up at her. “Drop that here.”

Charles hesitated only a moment before obeying. It was unsettling, to watch the ice crunch up strands of silk one by one – then faster, as though it were hungry. It went on for a while. But then Charles felt immensely satisfied when the movement hitched, stuttered, and ground to a stop, the wheel webbed in place by threads.

Frost muttered what could have been a curse. Then she snapped her fingers.

The light dimmed. Charles reached out for his penguin and tugged it close as the sky started to ripple, and then – he inhaled – as images started to turn round the horizon, in a circle fast and then faster, a wild panorama streaking through the sky in the aurora’s place. And *everything* was there. He saw the dizzying view from the manor tower, his own clawing at the merlon and gasping, and then his raven taking to the air. Each image juddered and blurred into the next – Raven flailing and falling back to him, too tired to go on. Failing.

Frost’s voice was soft. “Poor thing …”

“I don’t want to see anymore,” he said. “Please stop.”

“It’s your memory.” The hawk shifted on her shoulder. “Go on, take it back. Make it stop.”

*Fine.* He did not care for brute force, normally, but this was different. Charles leaned forward into the sinkhole, grabbed at a fistful of silk and *willed* it back to him –
And after one blinding flash, whiteness replaced the images in the sky.

“Very good,” Frost said.

Beneath his arm, the penguin pressed closer to his side. It was shivering.

“Thank you,” he replied, and gave the remnant back – *take this and go home – quickly.*

It disappeared without a sound. Frost, staring up at the sky, did not notice.

“The possibility of memory sharing exists in every mind, Charles. What you need is a place for projection – into which you can invite guests. Your reading room, while cozy, does not have enough space for certain … entertainments.”

He had no idea what she considered *entertaining.* The concept made him feel slightly ill. “Perhaps I will expand it, then.”

“You will expand; no 'perhaps' about it. I should like to join you there when we next have time together. But you need not worry about not being strong enough – I could help you build it, Charles.” Frost flicked her eyes back to him. “If you’d like.”

“I’ll have to think about that too.”

“Do. And come back with me.” She glanced up at her palace. From her shoulder, the hawk took off and soared up into the thickening clouds. “That’s enough for today.”

Charles fell back onto his arse in her office. At least he had not gasped, or groaned, or made any other dead-fish noise this time. “Ow.”

“I always hated kneeling that long. Here, now.” Frost gripped his hands. “Up.”

He stood and leaned against the shelf, trying to control the dizzy spell. Nothing more than orthostatic hypotension … brought about by a sojourn in a mind as overwhelming as it was … wrong, he thought. Stark white, cold, and somehow … twisted.

But why would he think that? It was not as though the snow had screamed evil at him –

“Was that a lesson informative enough for you, Charles?”

He nodded. Let her think so. He’d be damned if he’d change anything about his own mind, anything at all –

“Not as wide-ranging as I had hoped.” Frost clicked her tongue. “And not a sufficient reward for your good behavior.”

“The treaty’s fine,” he said. All of a sudden, he wanted nothing more than to leave. “Thank you.”

“Nonsense. I wish to reward you with … hm. Perhaps a new book to read?”

Charles watched her flip through one of the stacks on the shelf. His blood thumped in his head.

“This one I plan to take back with me. A gift from Britain’s Poet Laureate, Sylvie Benson. Some of the poems are quite lovely, and it’s hand-printed, too. Far better than a cookbook.” Frost looked him straight in the eye. “Did you know her?”
He nodded.

“Very good. Thank you for not lying to me. For you see,” and Frost opened to the front matter, “there’s a dedication here. ‘To the memory of C.X., two scones, and seven cups of tea.’ What might that be about?”

“We taught in Queen’s College together.” He could not dissemble if he tried. His entire face felt frozen. “We were friends.”

“Should I have a talk with her, I wonder?”

“I don’t know what good it would do.” Charles let his eyes go wide. He knew they were very blue. “She’s not like us.”

“There are very few like you and I in this world, Charles. But your point is well taken. Here, then. You,” and she patted his shoulder, “pick a book from my shelf. Whichever you choose, you can read.”

“All right.”

He strained to see the cover as she tucked Benson’s book away in her carrying case. No luck. So Charles looked at the shelf, listlessly. Volume after volume, spine after spine … each quite ordinary, nothing he wanted to read.

He could not say what made him touch his fingers to a scuffed binder at the far end.

“That –”

Frost’s voice made him jump. The wrinkled cover was only halfway out of the shelf and quite safe in his hand, so he did not drop it. “Yes?”

“That’s not a book. That’s a – collection of papers.”

Charles opened it. “With some photographs.” He sucked in a breath. “Who’s that? And is he insane, to choose such a relaxing place for reading?”

The picture was grainy black and white, but immediately striking: a thin man reading a book in his seat, before what looked like nothing more than a cylinder made of metal rails – somehow producing huge bursts of electricity, like handfuls of lightning bolts, to his right and his left.

“It always did smell like ozone in there. But it’s a multiple exposure. He’d usually stay several meters away.”

“You knew him?”

“His name was Nikola Tesla; he was something of an eccentric genius. He did immensely valuable work with electricity,” she nodded at the picture, “as you see. In Colorado Springs first, and then in the Soviet Union that Was, by invitation.”

Charles went with his instincts. The way she had spoken …. “You worked with him. On what?”

“Turn ahead a few pages.”

He did, and saw rough typeface in Russian, flimsy carbons. A few more pictures of coils and electricity, and one of Tesla holding a glowing lamp, intent on it. Charles shivered.
And then stopped, when he saw, in a photograph, at an arrangement of wires – and a cap – that
looked horribly familiar.

“He invented the Finder,” Frost said, softly.

“… When?”

“Between the wars.” She reached out to turn a page, and another – he saw cords and cables and even
a few diagrams – sheet metal, and tools, and Tesla to the side of a group of brawny workmen. The
Finder coalescing from them all; fixed in form by the last photograph.

Which was of the same sort as the first. Electricity arcing round a figure – but one that was an
absence of … anything. Pure light. Charles poked at the picture to make sure nobody had cut out
round the silhouette with scissors.

“That’s me,” Frost said.

Charles did a double take. “You’re very small, there.” For there were shadowy figures clustered
round the platform. “How old were you?”

“When I met Tesla I was ten. You see, Charles,” and she took the binder from his hands, “I was
living in Solovki when word came through. There was a search underway, all through the country,
for that special person that could survive the Finder. I was one of many little boys and girls: all taken
to Moscow, all given warm new clothes to wear.” She smiled at him. “And I was the one chosen.”

“I see.”

“Do you?” Frost closed the binder with a snap. “He was first quite shy of me, and then unbearably
fond. His angel, his princess, his little white dove … I’ve never felt so satisfied as when he
convinced himself he would try the Finder after all, for if a little girl could make such progress …. Foolish
man. Perhaps a bit of a telepath, but we’ll never know.”

“He died, then.”

“Happily, at least. From what I felt of his last thoughts, he believed he was seeing the face of God.
All I saw was his hair catching fire. It smelled atrocious.” She pulled out another book – small and
dusty. “Here’s another one for you.”

“What is it?”

“The work of Pavel Florensky, also on Solovetsky …. You would have liked him, Charles.
Inquisitive, always running his little experiments; always kind to all his hangers-on, children foremost
among them.”

Charles opened the book. It was written in labored English. “Did he –”

“I transcribed those for him, before I went away. My dear father wanted me to be an accomplished
woman, for my mother’s memory. I practiced my languages by translating for all and sundry on the
island.”

“But these are recipes.”

“Yes.” Frost put the binder on her desk. “Mostly for seaweed.”

_Time to push back._ “Quite interesting, I’m sure. But you did say I could pick my own. Charles
closed the Florensky; set it back on the shelf. “I would prefer the book about the Finder, please.” He took a deep breath and looked into her eyes. “Emma.”

There was silence. For the first time he had ever seen, Frost seemed at a loss.

She recovered quickly enough. “And I thought you prided yourself on good manners.” Slamming her case shut and grabbing it, she strode towards the door.

“She did this.” Charles nicked the binder from the desk and dashed ahead of her, holding the door open. “Was there anything else?”

She sailed out into the hallway and left him scrambling to catch up. “Lady?”

“I don’t recall giving you permission to use my name, Charles. I ought to punish you again.”

He could not dodge; she whirled too quickly and grabbed one of his earlobes – gave it a vicious twist. *Fuck* – his mind flew to his knit hat, of all things – on the floor in her office. He went with her yank, so it would not hurt too much; he had to look absolutely *ridiculous* –

“But I won’t, since you obeyed me until just now. To think: I was almost ready to let you have that book of precious poems. Too bad.”

A lie, he thought. She had intended nothing of the sort.

“You never told me I couldn’t use your first name,” he gritted out. “Let me go.”

She made no answer, but released his ear. He shook off the pain and caught up again. “How can I know things that you don’t bloody well tell me?”

When they reached the library Frost walked straight to the windows, staring out them. He retreated to the chairs and chess set, and cupped his throbbing ear. He looked down. The token was still hidden, thank goodness– but perhaps, given that she would soon be back permanently … perhaps it was time to hide it with the rest of his jewels in the wardrobe.

“I’ll send Azazel for Jean this Sunday afternoon.”

Frost spoke with her back to him, still, and as though her entire juvenile flash of temper had not happened, Charles thought. It was ridiculous, or she was mad. Perhaps both.

“Make sure she dresses warmly.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Frost turned. Then she caught sight of the binder in his hands and glared at him.

Charles gulped. “You said I could –”

“*Fine.* I will lend you that binder if you turn and look into the fire.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

He obeyed.

A draft in the room was making the flames gutter; there was no sign of Armando or the children. He
reached out with his power and found them in the dormitory, all in different rooms.

A whistle broke his concentration. It was high and shrill enough to make his teeth rattle, more piercing than he had ever heard a whistle sound in his life. Charles fought with all his might against the urge to turn, and to see how the hell she had done that.

“Thank you,” Frost said.

Charles wheeled on one foot. “What was that?!"

She opened her mouth, but could not reply before Azazel appeared in a tangle of black vapor, smelling like smoke and sulfur. “Vy zvali?”

“Voilà, Professor Xavier.”

Frost picked up her carrying case. Then one corner of her mouth tipped up, as she opened it and took out a sheaf of paper. Looking directly into Charles’ eyes, she uncurled her fingers – and let all the paper fall onto the floor.

“The treaty, as promised. Enjoy.”

Charles felt his face burn. He bowed to cover it. “Thank you, my lady.”

Frost laid a hand on Azazel’s shoulder. “V Bryussel’, tovarisch. You’ll see Charles on Sunday.”

Without a word, Azazel flipped him a salute.

The two of them disappeared.

And Charles wished he had watched more closely, to see how they looked when … they had shifted out of existence – amazing.

Almost as amazing as his own striding out of the library without cleaning up – and, Charles thought, he would not second-guess himself and go scurrying back in ten minutes. Let fire burn the whole manor down, if one of the papers caught a spark – it would do them all a favor.

Saturday morning, the fuzz on his head was comedy material. He accepted with dignity the children’s giggling at him during breakfast; then took them all to the storage room so they could pick out another hat for him. They voted. The winner was a candy-striped number with a ridiculous bobble. And since they giggled even louder at the sight - Jean sharing the image with Scott - Charles vetoed Tree Time, sat them down with a pile of books on the library couch, and spread out the treaty on the table.

So Saturday turned out to be a working day.

Whenever they finished one book, he smiled and gave them another. “And that is for laughing at the hat. What did it do to you?”

They had invented a system: Jean sent images of the pages to Scott, who then read aloud. Kurt, meanwhile, exercised each of his limbs by hanging off the upper rail and flipping himself from shelf to shelf – and with his following Jean around like a puppy, they had no fear of his wandering off via other dimensions. So, Armando got his rest.

Sunday was much of the same.
“Careful,” Charles called. The treaty was very interesting – he had previously detected conditions on rights to the Rio Grande that, if conceded, would make Frost look rather foolish. Now it was time to rewrite them.

“Can I have another piece, Mr. Xavier?”

“You may,” he told Scott. “Jean, please help: there’s the bread.” He pushed it towards the sounds of Scott’s voice.

*You got it on the floor!*

“Sorry.”

Charles paid cursory attention to the clink of utensils. One supper of bread and jam in the library would do no harm.

“Mmbrglg –”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, Scott.” He turned over another page of the treaty. There had been the conditions of trade outlined earlier – where, exactly?

“I want more! I want more!”

*Kurt, be careful. Hold the knife like –*

“Oh no!” A clank and clatter.

Charles felt Jean sigh. *Now there’s jam on the floor.*

“You would mind cleaning it up, dear?” he said, absently.

... O.K.

Then … blessed silence for a little while. The children were happy; *he* was happy – at least, happy with something that proved a bit of a challenge.

His power flickered a split second before he heard a faint crackling noise. And Charles had only time enough to think – *Schrödinger’s mutant* – before the West Wing door slammed open.

Kurt shrieked. Charles jerked his head up in time to see Azazel crouch down, arms outstretched, and Kurt dashing across the room into them.

“Really …” Charles started, uncertain. What if the two took the chance to teleport?

“*Moj spinogryz – try to get away now!*” Azazel hauled Kurt into the air, tossed him over his shoulder, and started tickling him. Kurt screeched with joy.

“You know,” Charles said. “It’s getting on towards evening, and he’ll never sleep if you work him up that much.”

“Allow me to know something about his habits, yes? Just a little? I was a parent for a while.”

Charles set his jaw. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“The trick,” and Azazel manhandled Kurt around the other shoulder and slung him to the floor, “is to wear him out. Then he sleeps like the dead –”
He broke off as Kurt kicked off his shoes and clambered up him again, his strange fingers and toes grasping tight. “All right, a moment. Hello, hello, you,” he blew a wet raspberry into Kurt’s neck. “And to you, children.” He gave a sharp nod. “Xavier.”

“Hello,” Scott whispered. Charles sketched a sardonic wave.

“Nice hat,” came the breezy reply. “Now that the formalities are out of the way: Jean? Are you ready?”

Jean stared up at Charles with round eyes. Charles stared back. And saw, with rising dismay, her wrinkled clothes, tousled hair, and the jam smeared over her hands and face.

“Right. Five minutes!” and he dashed for the door. “Jean dear, come on – Scott, you stay there –”

“Everything all right?” Armando said as they almost knocked him over in the hall.

“Perfectly fine! Here, Jean.” He thumped into the wall, tipped his head at her door. “Pick a nice dress and coat, and make sure they’re warm. Wait, wait – actually, let’s get that jam off first. May I come in?”

Jean nodded. The door flew open, as did a chest inside the room. Charles jumped. Telekinesis – he had almost forgotten. “Here.” He found one of her towels and willed the pipes to be warm enough for water. Come on, come on. There was only a trickle; it would have to do. It, and the sliver of soap left. Logan hadn’t brought them nearly enough -

“Come here and hold still.”

They met on the threshold of the bathroom; Jean screwing her eyes shut as he scrubbed at the jam. His hands got sticky as hers got clean. Charles didn’t much care.

“Pick out some warm clothes, and make sure you take a coat. Maybe those white furs I saw last Quarter? Do you need anything else? Come on,” and he tried not to glance at the door, “hurry, please.”

I’m hurrying! And I have everything else in the palace at Brussels.

Palace? He bit back a flash of envy – not of a six-year-old, for God’s sake. “I forgot to get you ready in time, and I don’t want you getting to bed too late in Brussels. Remember to brush your teeth; you had a lot of jam for dinner.”

He came out of the bathroom to see Jean wrestling with the back of her starched white dress. “Excellent.” Charles had it buttoned in a flash, and her boots laced too. How she had managed stockings in thirty seconds, he had no idea – Raven had always taken much longer –

Who’s Raven?

Charles froze.

…?

“That’s …. Jean, dear. That’s private.”

I’m sorry. Jean looked worried. I didn’t mean to hear, but you were saying it so loudly.

“Just don’t eavesdrop like that again.” He made a mental note to guard his mind around her, too. Shore up the defenses – twice as strong, they’d have to be, and who knew what else she had –
“And do keep that name a secret for me, will you?” He forced a smile. “Lady Frost doesn’t like my raven.”

*Oh. I thought you were talking about a person.*

He would find a way to take that name from her mind later, and never bloody mind asking.

But at that thought, guilt surged up in him. Jean was an innocent. She said herself that she had not meant to hear … but if she let it slip to anyone – *Frost*. What she would do, with a metamorph of Raven’s skill? He would have to take the memory back.

He practically bit down on his tongue as he hustled Jean out the door. She only just had time to grab the toy Erik had made, but he hardly wanted to let her keep it, not if she had plucked Raven from his head like a greedy robin would a worm –

Charles could not help it: outside the library door, he took Jean by both shoulders and squeezed. “Jean. When you return …”

She tipped her head to one side.

“… I’ll need this memory from you. It’s very important.”

*Why?*

“I’ll explain later. But for now, promise me you’ll keep it secret. It’s very important to me, Jean. *Promise me.*”

Jean’s eyes were huge. *I promise.*

That made two weighty promises she had made in only a month: first, to stay out of Erik’s mind; and now this. Charles told himself to consider it later. Meanwhile, there was the library door; there was Azazel, flicking the tip of his tail back and forth; there were Kurt and Scott, taking turns spinning the globe.

“About time,” Azazel growled.

“I’m terribly sorry.” Charles ushered Jean forward. “All set for the ball; as ordered. Now Jean,” he said to her, “you behave yourself. I’ll see you … when?”

“Later tomorrow night … hm, that will be early Tuesday morning,” the red tail sketched a circle in the air, “Eastern time.”

“It must be difficult to keep track, traveling between zones as quickly as you do.”

“My time is my own. Well, Jean? My little lady?” Dark eyebrows waggled; the scar bisecting Azazel’s left eye crinkled up. “Shall we?”

*Yes, please.* Jean took his hand.

“Bye!” Scott said, and Kurt sniffled.

“No crying, *meloch*. I will see you soon. Oh, and Xavier?”

“Yes?”

“I need something from you, to take back with me.”
“What’s that? I don’t have time to make you a sandwich.”

“One moment.”

Charles shook his head; bit his lip harder as he watched Jean vanish. He would never get used to the vapor and the stench, and Azazel reappearing only two minutes after he had gone – without Jean, and telling the others: “Kurt, you take Scott to go find – this Muñoz person.”

“No papa –”

“No buts. And you speak English in front of Mr. Xavier.”

Kurt drooped, but plucked at Scott’s sleeve. Charles watched the two of them leave, Kurt holding the jam jar like a treasure, and then turned warily to Azazel.

“What did you want?”

White teeth in red skin looked uncanny. “That thing around your neck.”

“What thing?”

“This thing,” Azazel moved: hooked one claw into Charles’ sweater – and before he could jerk away, startled, the claw caught the yarn, flipped the pouch above his collar, and tugged. “I need it.”

“It’s mine!”

“I’ll bring it back.” He bared his teeth in a smile – uneven, this close, and more yellowish than white. “Promise.”

“Absolutely not. It was given to me in confidence, and I have to keep it safe. How did you even find out about it?”

Azazel swore. “I do not have time for this. Stay here.”

“… Because I had so many plans to go elsewhere.” Charles waved the vapor away, coughing. “Fine.”

He would get more work done, since he was almost finished with the treaty corrections. Some seemed rather crucial – easy to absorb his attention, at least … so five minutes – or ten – passed in the blink of an eye.

But then Azazel reappeared.

_Not alone_, Charles’ mind said, and calmly: Run.

For there was …

Erik.

His eyes were glittering and his teeth were bared. He was snarling in Russian; Azazel was hissing something back. They could have been a pair of angry cats; it went too fast for Charles to catch.

Erik was wearing a long, ragged coat. It was still somehow swirling around his legs, as though Azazel had grabbed him mid-motion. And Charles could guess what that motion had been.

Because Erik was holding a butcher knife.
Adrenaline was sloshing into his system. Charles was in control, though. He cleared his throat.

Erik whirled round like he had been shot.

“See?” Azazel said. “There he is. You tell him yourself if it’s so important.”

Erik was wide-eyed; staring. Charles had forgotten how green his eyes were. Look away – his heart was thumping, irregular. Adrenaline. He glued his eyes to the treaty.

“And make it fast. I don’t have all night.”

It was Azazel’s voice. But: All night, Charles remembered: rasped in the dark of their bed, before Erik had pounced on him –

Fuck this fight-or-flight nonsense.

“Hello to you both,” he said, calm. “What was it that you wanted? Erik, put down the knife, please.”

He heard rather than saw the clatter of metal on wood.

A low whistle. “Now how do you do that, Mr. Xavier? Quite impressive.”

Charles did not take his eyes off the papers. “What is?”

“He likes his knives. You’d sleep with them all cuddled close if you could, eh droog?”

A growl made the hair on Charles’ neck stand on end.

“Anyway,” Azazel said. “Erik told me to get something from you, but I figure he can tell you his own damned self. Go ahead.”

Another growl, and in Russian. Charles scrabbled for the translation –

“All right, all right.” Footsteps and, fading away: “Ten minutes. I’ll go sneak up on that Muñoz; bastard, keeping my Kurt –”

The library door closed on his voice with a click.

Charles focused on his breathing, and on the sight of his hands, flat on the table

One of them had a smear of jam across the knuckles. Fuck.

“Charles?”

He swallowed, hard.

There was a shuffling sound. Erik’s – shoes? Shifting in place?

And the whisper: “Rabe?”

Charles’ toes curled inside his shoes.

“Charles is fine,” he said, quickly, to the table. “Charles. That’s me. How are you?”

There was no answer. But there were quiet sounds: footfalls, soft on carpet … and then one faint creak from a floorboard.
Charles brushed Erik’s mind with his power; just enough to catch a hot seethe of want – he jerked back, not reaching for the blueprint or the sullen cloud; whatever else of Erik was present –

“I’m well.” A pause. “Thank you.”

“Mm.”

“But …” The footsteps stopped.

Charles saw the shadow now spilling across his papers.

“I miss you.”

What to do? What to say?

He saw Erik’s hand reaching across the table for his. Charles forced himself not to flinch. The hand settled. The shadow moved. And one thumb brushing over his fingers was enough to make his heart jolt into his mouth.

Thank god Erik missed the jam. His dignity was still intact, and his courage, too – so he said: “Surely you have plenty to do. You know I promised to stay here. Remember?”

Something that might have been a yes rumbled across the table.

“So. Besides missing me, you’re well enough. You seem more than well.”

Bits and pieces of snow were melting on the floor at Erik’s feet. Charles let his gaze move up, slowly, from scuffed shoes to the hem of that disreputable coat, and then up to the brim of the battered trilby. There was no bruise on that stark cheekbone anymore. The cuts on the side of his face were completely gone – even the nick on his ear. Charles looked closer, but then Erik shifted, forcing eye contact.

Green-grey eyes, shining – and fixed on him, Charles saw. He would not look away, even if he had forgotten how that stare gave him goosebumps. He reached up and flicked at the brim of Erik’s hat instead. “Off.”

A chuff of warm breath hit his cheek.

“I mean,” Charles continued, “that one usually takes off one’s hat to say ‘hello’. A gentleman to a lady, and in this case, a man to an – object of interest. If I’m still that.” He refused to assign them roles; he would not be the blushing damsel in this scenario.

It took a moment to sink in, but then Erik fumbled at his hat and off it came.

“Thank you.” Charles raised an eyebrow. Erik still looked quite rumpled, and that stare – like a starving man at a steak – was hardly polite. But he would try. “Have you enjoyed Brussels?”

A pause. Then one shoulder went up.

“Have you gotten a chance to dance yet?”

Erik had to think about that for a moment. But then he shook his head.

“Shame.”

No reply to that one. Just the same warm stare.
Charles narrowed his eyes. “You haven’t forgotten how to talk, have you?” Except Erik had said I miss you, but that was beside the point.

“Of course not.” That voice rasped, slightly; Erik cleared his throat. “You look – better.”

“My poor vanity. What must I have looked like before?”

“I only mean … you’ve been eating.”

“Yes, I have. Every day”

Erik smiled. “That’s good.”

The portrait of a blinking idiot – enough. Charles grabbed at the treaty pages, stacking them. “Azazel will be back soon. What was it that you wanted?”

“I …”

“Quickly, please.”

Erik squared his shoulders. “I would like to borrow your token, Charles. I want – I need. I –”

“Why?” After all, what the hell would one such as him do with a star sapphire? Stare at it, think of one Charles Xavier, possibly masturbate –

“I found a craftsman,” Erik said, “who will carve a case for it. Nothing metal, like you said. But I need to show him the size.”

“… Oh.”

“I will return it soon. Zwanzig Uhr? I have to – finish something.”

*That knife.*

Charles shoved that thought aside. Two o’clock in the morning, his time. *Fine.* He could stay up. And all the better – Scott, Kurt, and Armando would be asleep, and there would be no nosy questions.

“All right.” Charles took the token off from around his neck; placed it on the table. “There you are.”

He watched a hand gather up the pouch and yarn, and heard Erik say: “Thank you.”

“No, thank you. I’ve missed your unique understanding of what is civilized. Showing up looking like Jack the Ripper – that is, a Victorian serial killer.” He looked up in time to see Erik flush red. *Ha.*

“Surely fond of a spot of tea in between disembowelments. It’s the coat, mostly. A favorite, I assume?”

Erik nodded.

“Well, that’s understandable. I have my favorites, too.”

“Is that hat a favorite?”

Charles stiffened - just for the other daring to mock him, he’d - well. He’d think of something later.

“The one still in your Lady’s office – that one is my favorite. Not this one. The children picked –”
“You’re still beautiful. Even with – what’s that on your face?”

He reached out; Charles backed away. “None of your business.”

But a finger landed on his cheek anyway. Charles froze.

Erik drew it away, and then – licked? Christ.

“It’s sweet.”

“It must be jam.” Charles was not blushing. He wasn’t.

“Shouldn’t you wash it off?”

“With all I have left: the most pathetic scrap of soap on this continent. Isn’t it time for you to go?”

“Geliebter,” hot on his face –
– but then the door opened, and Charles hastily bent back over the treaty, now in a neat pile.


“Oh.” Charles edged away from the table. “Then I’d better go.”

He made it to the door. Turning to open it, Charles caught sight of Erik staring after him, and Azazel taking hold of his arm. And with another turn, Charles heard rather than saw them disappear.

The kitchen was deathly quiet.

“Armando,” Charles said, hurrying in, “are you all right?”

He was bent over the sink. “Fine.”

“Something’s wrong – what happened?”

Armando pinched the bridge of his nose, hard. Charles stared harder – blood was dripping off his chin. “Nosebleed,” he said.

“How?”

“Kurt’s dad did something,” Scott said, angry.

Kurt bristled. “Did not!”

“Did so!”

“Did not!”

“Children!” Charles snapped. “Enough. Let Mr. Muñoz tell me.”

“Nothing so bad.” Armando wiped his hands on his jeans and reached for a towel. “I'll tell you in a second. Scott, Kurt: delen, művansen.”

Charles followed the other to the dormitory; waited for Armando to tell the children to, “Go to bed early, for fighting,” and to withstand their complaints. Kurt was especially tearful.
When they had gone, Armando leaned against a wall. “It was Azazel, all right.” He took the towel away and passed a hand under his nose. “Just had to come down to dinner and show me that my gravity well would work for a kid, maybe, but not for him.”

“What did he do?”

“I thought it’d just be practice. But I tried keeping hold of him, and he ripped out of it – and now it feels like he pulled my brain out of my fucking eyeballs.”

“I’m sorry.”

A shrug. Armando folded the towel differently; replaced it. “My own fault. But I have to lie down. You need me for anything,” he said, turning away, “wait for tomorrow.”

He closed the door of his room in Charles’ face.

Wordlessly, Charles went to his own room. He had no door to close.

How he found himself in front of the mirror, he did not know. But he stared at – the smear of jam on one cheekbone. The spot in the curve of one nostril. And – above all – the laughable, oversized red-and-pink knit hat on his head, its cheerful bobble drooping down to one side.

“Fuck.” Charles ripped it off and turned a faucet. There was no water. So he stomped down to the kitchen, filled a saucepan, and took it back.

He scrubbed his face clean; changed from his pathetic sweatpants and layers of grubby shirts into a darker pair of jeans, his green sweater, his Oxford shoes ….. He could do nothing about his hair, or about the beard coming in patchily.

“But I’m damned if I’ll wear that.” The stupid hat lay on the toilet tank. Erik had the dangerous, elegant grace of a predator prince, even wearing rags – and here he was, scrawny and spotty, scraggly hair on his chin better-looking than the hair on his head – it wasn’t fair.

At least he had good manners on his side. And charm, Charles thought, lifting his chin. He would have to speak to Erik again, but this time he would show himself very firmly in control of it all.

Charles took two mugs from the kitchen to the library; retrieved a bottle of Scotch from Erik’s hidden cabinet. And then waited.

He stayed warm by the fire, becoming more and more drowsy. To stave off sleep, he amused himself by examining each chess piece, and the intricate designs on the strip of silver framing the chessboard’s base. He ignored the butcher knife that Erik had left next to it. Except for picking it up and noting that, while well-balanced, it was heavy.

Charles only intended to shut his eyes for a moment.

He woke up, though, when his power caught their arrival. Azazel and – well, Azazel left again at the West Wing door.

But Erik stayed.

Charles pretended sleep … as a door creaked, as quiet footsteps came close, and then closer …

Then there was nothing.
Until he heard a scrape as Erik retrieved the knife.

“You didn’t need that, then?”

“I used another. And you are awake.” Erik sounded pleased. “I thought so.”

He had probably felt out his pulse. Charles prepared a look of indifference, opened his eyes –

– and sucked in a breath.

Yes, he was holding the knife - but in his other hand, Erik held a trilby much finer than the first. He had changed into a suit: dark grey, with a darker shirt. He had a tie. He had polished shoes. He had cufflinks.

“Well, well. Don't we clean up nicely?”

Bloody hell, was that smile - shy? "You like it?"

Charles shrugged.

Bright eyes held his, before Erik looked down at himself. The smile vanished. With finger and thumb, he caught at a thread at the bottom of the suit jacket, and - Christ, he let go of the knife.

It floated in mid-air.

"I don't need to tell you to be careful with that, do I?"

"I'm always careful." The thread parted on the knife's edge. Charles tried his best not to think of how sharp the thing had to be: gleaming, perfectly level -

Erik took hold of one cuff with his free hand; tried another smile. “I brought you something.”

Charles jerked his eyes away from the sight of the knife slithering up Erik's sleeve. "My token back?"

“That,” Erik said. “And this.”

He had gone to clutching his hat with both hands, like a schoolboy, and used the brim to nudge something on the table. Charles twitched; turned from his huddle in the chair to look.

Crowded up next to the chess set was a basket. It had ribbons wrapped round its blonde wicker handle, and a silk rosette in front. Charles plucked at the card with finger and thumb. “Bienvenue,” he read, “à l'Hôtel Métropole.’ Have you been staying there? Very fancy.”

Erik opened his mouth to reply. Then closed it, and shook his head.

“So you just snagged it from an extremely wealthy passer-by, who just happened to have taken his room service along?” Nerves made his skin prickle. “Unlikely.”

“It was in the hotel.”

“And it didn’t belong to someone?” Another look had shown soaps, shampoos and lotions, other toiletries – all wrapped in monogrammed paper. He took the handle and tugged.

“It’s yours now.”
Charles registered the words at the same time he noted something on the basket ... sticking, slightly, to the table. It gave, eventually.

“Don’t you like it?” Erik said.

“I …” Charles peeked at the base. There, a label detailed the contents in both English and French. It was difficult to read, due to the crimson stain obscuring half of it.

He looked up. Erik was staring at him again …. Expectant.

He managed a weak smile. “It’s lovely.”

Erik glowed. “Good.”

“But was it necessary to kill someone for it?”

“Not for the basket, no.” Erik looked fond. “That was something else.”

“Ah.”

Charles pushed up from his chair and walked to the fireplace. He cast out his ability, searching for Azazel. No sign. Best to keep Raven close by, in case –

“May I touch you? Just your sweater.”

The voice was right at his ear. Charles pressed his lips together; then said, “If you’d like.”

*Back to this, then.*

Erik’s hand on his shoulder, and slight pressure making him turn. Erik’s lips at his ear – close, *too* close, but there being little room to lean, since he was standing on the hearth.

“I miss you, Rabe. Every day – so much.”

Charles focused on keeping still.

A sigh gusted over his ear. “Please. May I …”

“… ‘May I’, what?” Charles croaked.

“Put this back on you.” Out of the corner of his eye, Charles saw the token. Erik’s words felt urgent, hot. “Please.”

He paused. “Erik.”

“Charles –”

“Erik, I …” He forestalled Erik’s hand going for his neck, blue yarn grasped tight – forestalled it by taking hold and stroking, just the tiniest bit.

He heard the click of Erik’s throat; a rough swallow.

“I wanted to let you know,” Charles said, softly, “that it’s more and more difficult to keep the token a secret.” He turned to look, over and – up, just slightly. Erik was taller, but not by as much as he remembered. “Frost might see the lump of it, here,” he guided Erik’s hand to his sternum, “and then she might find us out. Then what?”
Erik’s lips parted, slightly.

“Then what?” Charles repeated.

“I …” Erik splayed his fingers against Charles’ chest. His hand felt warm, even through the sweater. “I don’t know.”

“I think,“ Charles murmured, “that I might need to leave it in my room when I go about my day.” Hearing a growl, he hastened to continue: “That doesn’t mean I’m breaking my word. It doesn’t mean that I don’t – appreciate it. I do.” He stroked Erik’s hand. “Very much. I just want to be sure … that you’re safe. That we are safe. Do you understand?”

Erik was silent.

Charles turned to face him fully. Erik’s hand moved with him. “I just want us to be safe, Erik. Hmm?” He kept up the stroking. Was he really going to … Charles licked his lips; watched Erik’s eyes widen. Was he really –

It appeared he was.

“Erik,” he whispered. “May I kiss you?”

The trilby falling to the hearth made only the smallest sound. Charles almost missed it under the quiet crackle of the fire.

Erik looked ready to pass out.

But then he nodded, shakily, and changed his grip to take tight hold of Charles’ hand – and squeeze.

Fuck. Charles supposed he had to follow through, so he thought about something else as he brought his free hand to Erik’s face, caressed … drew close – and closer – until he could press his lips against Erik’s and wait for him to have an aneurysm.

No such luck.

Charles looked – as best he could, given the angle. Erik had closed his eyes. This close, his eyelashes were thick and dark on his cheekbones.

Charles sighed, and opened his mouth to lick a little.

Oh. He remembered now: Erik’s love of – “Mmf,” he tried to say, but there was a tongue going for his tonsils – Erik’s love of licking. God knew he had never kissed a dog, even on a drunken bet, although Owens from Political Economy had, that was right – Charles had watched, drunk off his arse, had howled in disgust and laughed with the rest of them, on the edge of a lime pit outside the ruins of London –

The kiss broke, with a wet sound. Erik’s breath on his lips was cool. “Charles.”

“Yes?”

“Let me put this on you.”

Erik leaned into his body. Charles braced his feet on the hearth – any closer and his jeans would catch on fire. He tried not to think about the suit, about the trousers … about the hot jab at his hip that was surely not a floating fire iron.
“All right,” he said, bowing his head. “Just slip it on there. Over.”

He waited, and then felt the leather pouch thump on his sternum. “Perfect. Now fix me up a bit.”

Erik tilted his head, but with Charles’ encouraging smile, tucked the token beneath this sweater and smoothed everything down.

“Now,” he said, “let me fix you. Here, now, who did this?” Charles tugged at Erik’s tie; undid the knot and started in on a double Windsor. “Whoeve...
Too late. They had disappeared, with a snap-crack of – of dueling dimensions, perhaps, and in a cloud of noxious smoke.

Erik was gone. All right. Fine. Back in a week, perhaps two – unless he were to send the case by special courier. Which, Charles supposed, was possible.

He would have to plan. His legs wobbled as he pushed away from the hearth. What could he –

Azazel reappeared, not subtle about it at all. Charles gasped at the stench and choked on the vapor twining round him. Then a strong hand took hold of his throat, and shoved him closer to the fire again.

“As I said: What. The hell. Was that?”

“That?” Charles coughed. “That was a kiss. You must know of the idea –”

“With Erik?” came the hiss. “Erik? Are you mad?”

“Oh. No.” He did his best to look vague, inoffensive. Harmless. “Just … a little frustrated, I suppose.”

“Frustrated,” Azazel said, voice flat.

“I’m a grown man, and I have certain needs. I’m stuck here with only children for company – and Armando, who is not,” he cleared his throat, “receptive to any overtures.” Not that he had tried, but Azazel did not need to know that. “So, unless I can find another candidate, I find Erik as good for relief as anyone else.” Charles gave Azazel a tentative smile. Just the right balance between timid and slightly skeevy. The spots would help. “Surely you understand?”

“I understand that Lady Frost would not be pleased to know of this.”


This close, Azazel’s eyes were even more pale than from a distance. The scar over the left one was just as brutal, and their expression … cold, now. They looked at him for a long time. Charles fought the urge to squirm away.

“Why should I help you, Xavier?”

“If you can’t keep her from taking the memory, I understand –”

“Oh, I can. We have an understanding of our own, she and I.”

Charles filed that away for later. Consideration of each and every motive in the room could wait until the time when he was not in danger of being shoved into a fire.


“I could make it very worth your while.” It was insane. He was insane – but Charles reached up and trailed his fingertips … down Azazel’s face. And touched his goatee. “What do you say?”

So close, Azazel’s breath was hot. And it stank. Liquor, perhaps, or maybe some herb - anise? Did teleportation lead to motion sickness? Charles’ heart jolted up into his throat as he looked away from the sneer and the pores in blood-red skin - Jesus Christ he was insane -

“I say: keep your sweaty little paws to yourself, Xavier.” One claw-tipped finger came up and gave
the meat of his hand a flick. Charles winced and yanked it away.

“And what more do I say? I say: I suppose I can keep your secret – for now – but that is only because you are protecting my Kurt. And if you fail to protect my Kurt, I will throw you to the wolves.”

“Ah.”

“He must want for nothing. No-thing – do you understand me?”

Charles nodded. “No trouble at all.”

“Hnh.” Azazel snapped up Erik’s trilby with the point of his tail. Then he flipped it into his hands and walked away.

Charles leaned against one side of the hearth and waited for his pulse to slow. “That’s the only reason?”

His curiosity would surely be the death of him. For Azazel bared his yellowish teeth. “No.”

“You might change your mind, then? Do let me know. I can - try to be ready for -” He couldn't force out the words, even though ... it was choosing, rather than being chosen. God damn it, he wanted to choose. Not to be someone's pawn or gift or ... treasure -

“Nyet. I keep your secret because I care for Erik and for my son – not for you. And I will keep it – for now – because I can. And for my own reasons.”

“So Frost can’t really trust you .... Interesting.”

A snort. “Of course she can.”

“How?”

“Family history.”

Azazel was walking to the West Wing door. Charles turned to watch. Surely he cut a striking figure, silhouetted by the flames - so why .... “And you don’t want me, because …?”

“Because, Professor Xavier,” and Azazel twirled the trilby on two fingers, even as tendrils of vapor started clotting in the air. “Whatever crimes I commit on a daily basis, one thing I never, ever do ... is play with other people’s toys.”

Which, Charles thought, was insulting enough to be a membrable exit. And it seemed Azazel thought the same, for he had disappeared.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

So many thanks to so many people, who helped with this chapter! First and foremost: to R., at resurrecttheliving on tumblr, for the invaluable contributions to the nature, structure, and power dynamic of - erm. Spoilers! Please see the end notes for what, exactly; suffice to say, for that, and for all the details of Orthodox culture, many many thanks from me.

Thanks to Aida and afrocurl, for ass-kicking down the home stretch. Thank you as well, very much, to E. and M. for advice on Azazel's Russian. And to those who wrote with encouragement!

So: this is moar!world-building, with the second half of it to come a week from today. Promise! Hope you enjoy it. For some disclaimers, please see the endnotes. As usual, XMFC and all things X-Men belong to Marvel. Please don't sue me. :P

ETA: (3/2017, great googily moogily...) - Thanks so much to lily43130, for improving the French!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next day Charles felt exhausted. His wrangling of Erik had been nerve-wracking; his offer to Azazel a bit mad; and the two had worked in tandem to keep him up all night.

So to speak, he thought, gazing into his bathroom mirror again.

The stupid hat with its bobble was where he had left it. Charles gave it a miss. His hair was …. He ran one palm over his head. Not quite respectable, yet, and growing back unevenly. Damped down enough, it looked less like fluff. And if he caught cold, sans hat, who cared?

Not Azazel, came the inner whisper. But that had been a matter of personal taste, surely …

Charles grimaced, examining his face from all angles. No, not just personal taste – Charles Xavier seduced whoever he wanted, unbowed by anyone’s personal taste. It must have been that he looked pale and tired, and probably had looked so last night too. The spot had grown. No: not as scintillating as usual, and not just because of the stubble –

Then he remembered Erik’s latest gift, and an instant later he had wedged the token into his pocket, slipped on his shoes, and made for the library.

The basket was right where he had left it. So were the papers of the treaty with Aztlán, scattered on the large table, and the bottle of Scotch, stoppered on the small. Erik had not had a drink, and had not allowed him one.

But to be fair, Charles thought, he hadn’t asked.

He put away the bottle; then peeled the label off the basket’s base – “No sense in traumatizing the children,” he murmured at the bloodstain. “Lavender soap, lavender oil; ditto for roses and violets;
manicure kit; hydrating mask … et cetera, et cetera, no razor, but plenty of hand cream,” and away went the label, crumpled, into the ashes in the fireplace. “Damn.”

The basket’s ribbons gleamed prettily in the morning light. Charles turned his back on them and went to work on the treaty.

And perhaps it was his lack of caffeine that made him take so long to realize: the basket had been intended for a woman, and it was rather too much to hope that Erik had murdered Frost in her sleep.

“Oh, Erik …”

But why should it matter? Remnants of chivalry, perhaps. And all the arguments in Britain: if their nation were to survive demographic winter, then their women were owed great consideration, courtesy, first place in the bread lines …

They’ll kick us out of schools next, Raven had said, eyes flashing.

Charles inhaled.

He had not remembered his sister’s voice in … how long?

“Well, I’ve said it before, and I’m sure I’ll say it again,” he said to the treaty’s pages, and piled them out of the way.

It would not do to dwell on her. Not if he wanted to stay calm and capable and out of a Scotch bottle. So Charles sent his raven winging to Armando; pressed against his mind; and delved as quickly as he could.

After what felt like an interminable roll in stinging nettles, he received:

– got them til lunch, now beat it –

And Armando pushed him out.

“I could tell him where to beat it,” Charles said to his raven, gleefully. “And for how long.”

The contact had lasted at least two minutes: much longer than ever before – he must have caught Armando off-guard. The best part was that Armando had asked for it, specifically, when they practiced. Had given permission –

If his raven could have blown a wet raspberry, Charles was sure it would that time. As it was, it disappeared to rest.

He stared, somewhat dizzy, at the grain of the table – and his gaze fell on the binder, obscured by two sheets of paper.


He had intended to read it in more detail the previous night, but with Erik’s unexpected visit, there had been no chance. Curiosity made his smile stretch ear to ear – he grabbed the binder, waltzed over to the low couch, and settled in for the morning.

It was not that the contents were gruesome; not at all.

Just … unsettling.
After paging through everything once, Charles studied the papers and photographs carefully, turning each over after reading the Russian as well as he could. In other words: *not well*. All of his memorization was all well and good … but god help him, the notes in script – and of what he could read, the bloody *grammar* –

After his frustration had spiked, he had rested his chin on his hands, sighed, and decided it was time for pictures. And dates, since numbers – whether script or print – he could understand perfectly well.

The pictures of Tesla building the Finder had been pasted to their pages – Charles frowned at the discoloration of the paper round each one. They faced paragraphs of close-typed commentary, each with a date for a header.

Most of the Finder’s construction had taken place in the ‘30s. At around the 1939 mark, Charles unfolded a sheet of heavy paper, ornamented with seals. He caught a glimpse of Финляндия – *Finlyandiya*. “The Winter War,” Charles said to himself, scanning all the way down, “and a commendation for … Emma Morozova, on her –”

He blinked.

According to the paper, November 1, 1939, had been her eleventh birthday.

*Born in 1928*, he calculated. Surely there lay the foundation of the charming adult she was now: a stunted childhood in some barren Russian backwater, and Finder fodder before her teens. “In Leningrad that was,” he murmured, turning a page. “Well situated for Finland.”

In 1941, the Finder was moved to Moscow.

“Which makes sense, given Barbarossa.” And it seemed Frost had told the truth, the night she gave him to Erik – *I was the first to use the Finder, and with it I saved the city of Stalingrad during the second World War* – for there was no missing it: Сталинград, again and again, over the next ten, twenty … fifty pages. Charles counted them. From what he remembered of Stalingrad, “saved” was a relative truth.

He turned back to 1941. Several photographs looked official: groups of suited or uniformed men. Stalin himself was present only as a portrait in the background of each. There were the more informal pictures – mostly those with Tesla. Opposite all of them, the same format: the date, the … weather? *Odd*. Several different columns, full of type: names of cities; coordinates; something Charles thought meant ‘elapsed time.’

His eyes lit on one photograph he had missed earlier. It had to be Emma – and a very informal Emma at that. He would put her at eleven or twelve years old, her close-cropped hair very pale in the black and white picture. One side of her mouth was curled up in an impish smile, and in her hand she held a sturdy shoe.

But a shoe with something – many things – dangling from its sole.

Charles puzzled over the caption for a while. *Comrade Morozova offers copper for the Front*. Even translated, it made little sense.

Except: he remembered Frost taking off her shoes before having the Finder powered. Every time.

“And copper is a conductor …”

Instinct made Charles look at the entry opposite the photograph. Sure enough: there was a new column, which looked to be electrical measurements. *Input, output …*
At some point in 1941, the nails in Frost’s shoes must have melted.

How had she survived? After only a few months of assisting at the Finder, Jean had looked half dead. And yet here was the same Finder, channeling huge amounts of energy – and, judging from the schematic below the photograph, channeling through the wielder …

Or perhaps, Charles thought, the Finder had been weaker. That would make sense: its operations would have to have been less refined, because if it had slung the same amount of power about as it did now, many more than Tesla would have been electrocuted.

There was something else about the photograph. Something about Frost’s eyes. “And it’s not just that you’re very young indeed, Miss Morozova.”

But what was it? Had she ever glanced at him that way? The way she was smiling, Frost looked almost elfin – wide eyes and high cheekbones, a heart-shaped face and … a dimple in one cheek. Had he ever noticed that?

Trying to decode all of Frost’s smiles would wreck the rest of his morning. Charles decided to consider the matter later, marked the page, and read on.

There was no photograph as interesting in the rest of the binder. One caught his attention: yet another group of men in suits with Emma in their midst, staring into the camera with absolutely no expression on her face. *Patriotic Celebration of Great Victory – Morozov Palace.* Perhaps the contradiction: if that were a family palace, Emma as hostess was very drably dressed indeed. *June 1945* – the war was over in Europe; thus the celebration. No, not the location or the date. Perhaps one of the men had jogged something in his memory. Standing at the far right – something about his smile …

Charles marked that page for later as well; for now, he had a headache from working his aviary too hard.

“Damn Cyrillic, anyway. Bloody missionaries.”

He settled more comfortably on the couch, closing his eyes for a nap. And he only woke when Armando walked inside without a knock, dragging the children behind him.

“Take over until lunch?” Armando left Kurt and Scott in the middle of the room. He looked frustrated. “I need a break.”

“Of – course? What’s the matter?”

“Headache,” Armando grunted. “Still.”

Charles checked on his own – *ha.* Thanks to his nap, it had gone. “Not from my little visit, I hope.”

“Well, it didn’t help much.”

“Sorry.”

“I don’t care, Xavier. Just keep an eye on them?”

“I’m happy to. Scott, Kurt: behave yourselves.” Charles sat up. “Let me talk with Mr. Muñoz.”

“No need for that.” Armando strode to the West Wing door and swiped his card. “Thanks. See you.”

“Wait – where are you going?”
“None of your business.”

“Well, just stay close enough to keep hold of Kurt.”

“I know, all right? I know.”

The door shut behind him. At least, Charles thought, Armando had not noticed the gift basket — though Scott had walked to the fireside table, hands outstretched, and was now leaning over it, intent. Charles heard a clatter: Kurt dashing up the spiral stairs.

“No,” he called, “no, Kurt. Enough. Come back down by me — we’re going to have some quiet time.”

Kurt started to protest. Scott, being closer, did not have to raise his voice to be heard, saying: “This smells nice, Mr. Xavier. What is it?”

“It’s a present from,” he swallowed, “a friend.”

Scott drooped. “I wish I had a present.”

“You’ll have a party of your own, soon. Remember? For your birthday?”

Scott turned his face towards him. Not for the first time Charles wished the blindfold could be removed, so he could better judge his expression. “We’ll have to get some birthday supplies — the eighth will be here before we know it. Jean is at a ball today, but she’ll be back to help tomorrow.”

“Why does Jean get everything?” Now Scott sounded like Kurt, petulant. “I want to go to a ball.”

“Remember, you’ll get a party. And do you know what a ball is, Scott?”

“Like baseball or basketball —”

“No indeed. It’s when you have to wear fancy clothes, smile your biggest smile, and dance the night away.”

“With girls?”

Charles grinned. “In polite company, yes.”

“Gross.” Scott left off picking at the wicker. “I changed my mind.”

“Will we have to make your party ‘no girls allowed’, then?”

“Maybe. I don’t want to invite Lady Frost.”

“Don’t let her hear that, boyo —”

“— but Jean can come, can’t she?”

“Jean’s a girl.”

“She’s different. And besides,” Scott walked to the couch and sat, “her birthday’s in February, too.”

“It is?”

“February twenty.”
“How do you know?”

“We were talking about it once. The party, I mean. She said she wished she could have a party – she’s going to be seven.”

“I suppose we could have two,” Charles said, starting to worry. *Two cakes.* “I’ll see if I can get enough supplies to –”

“Or we could share.”

“But I thought you were just upset about her going to the ball, and getting everything.”

Scott shrugged. “I changed my mind.”

“Quite a changeable lad today, aren’t you? And why were you talking about parties anyway?”

“I told Jean what you told me, when we met. About having a birthday party. I asked if you had forgotten,” Scott said, simply. “Jean said you would never forget. And she was right.”

“Well.” Charles smiled, pained. “That’s kind of her.”

Scott shifted on the couch, thumping his shoes against one of its carved legs. “What are we going to do today, Mr. Xavier?”

“I’ll read you some stories.” They did not have Jean’s book, but there were fairy tales on the mantelpiece. Charles took a volume down. “A bit of quiet –”

“Shhh!”

Charles turned and frowned at Kurt, who had poked his head out from behind the couch. Kurt offered him a wide, fanged grin. “Quiet?”

“I can’t be quiet if I’m to read, can I? Budge over,” he told Scott, “that’s my favorite corner. Kurt –” for he had climbed over the couch’s back, “mind your tail.”

Charles made himself comfortable with pillows, and the children jostled for the space under his free arm. Scott won; Kurt turned defeat into victory by wedging himself behind Charles’ head – and they both had good positions for commentary.

“The Princess and the Pea.”

“Ugh, peeeeesas.”

“Princesses don’t exist, Mr. Xavier.”

“On the one hand, these stories are make-believe. But on the other hand, there’s Princess Alexandra of the Empire of Russia; there’s Princess Charlotte of Britain, though she has a face rather like a horse; and the Weathermaker has a score of children – there has to be a princess or two among them.”

Charles could not say why he thought of Jean. Except that Frost favored her, so if Jean played her cards right, surely she could be a princess too. As soon as he thought it, though, he dismissed the notion: scheming on behalf of a soon-to-be seven-year-old child, even if she were a mutant of mutants, telepathic and telekinetic both …. He shook off his distraction and cleared his throat. “Once upon a time …”
Halfway through the second volume: “Cinderella,” Charles said, voice hoarse. He had only taken one pause from reading; just long enough to place the basket in the hidden file room. He wished for a watch, or for a clock. The three windows showed more light – perhaps it was noon. “It’s the story of a beautiful girl and her fairy godmother – and her evil stepfamily, and I’m going out of order. Turn the page,” he told Kurt.

Kurt worked his lithe blue tail beneath the page and turned it.

“Thank you,” Charles said. “Once upon a time, there lived a rich lord and his beloved daughter –”

“How rich?” said Scott.

“Very rich.”

“Did he have gold?” Kurt asked.

“Indeed.”

“And cookies?”

“Lots of cookies.”

Kurt heaved a sigh. “We don’t get cookies.”

“But we’ll get cake, right? For our birthday party.” Scott nudged him. “Jean’s and mine.”

“If I can get the ingredients –”

“Can’t I have cake too?”

“Don’t tell me February’s your birthday as well,” Charles said to Kurt. “Once is nice; twice is a coincidence; thrice –”

– sounds like a midsummer night’s orgy, his mind finished, but all Kurt said was: “Mine’s June.”

“Hm. That’s tricky. Unless,” Charles snapped his fingers, “we have our party on the 14th – Valentine’s Day.”

“Oh, ugh,” and, “What’s that?” came from his side and his head, respectively.

“Good St. Valentine lost his head / not his heart, but just as dead.’ I’ll tell you the story after Cinderella.”

Scott got over his disgust quickly. “Do you get presents for Valentine’s Day? Cause birthday parties are better if you get some. Can’t we have presents, Mr. Xavier?”

“Presents?” Kurt squeaked.

Charles’ heart sank. If he did not manage to get to Albany, or to delegate at least one shopping trip, they would be so disappointed …

“We’ll see,” he said, firmly. “For now, let’s read.”

“Yes! Rrrread!” Kurt drummed his heels on the couch.

“Watch your tail – careful, I can’t read with one eye!”
It was a long morning.

Armando returned at the stroke of twelve, with no explanation and no reaction to Charles’ raised eyebrows. They fed Kurt and Scott lunch, and livened up the afternoon with a wood-gathering expedition.

Outside, a grey sky lay thick and gloomy over cold, deep snowdrifts – and over them, as they walked back and forth. They kept as much as they could to the tire tracks on the road – now icy ruts – but from there, Charles struggled to clear a path to the woods.

“I can hardly believe it,” he told Armando over steaming cups of tea, after. “And I lived through two years of nuclear winter.”

“Yeah.”

“Where were you, then?”

“Me?” Armando took a long sip of tea. “San Juan, where I was born. That’s in Puerto Rico –”

“I know where it is,” Charles said. “But I thought –”

“We came through it all right. Hungry years, of course, and radiation. But it was Cuba that got the worst – when the war reached the continental forty-eight, you know?”

“Yes.” The United States that Was, lashing out in self-defense, in retribution, and finally … in bewilderment, Charles had always thought, what with different factions clawing for the presidency after Truman’s assassination. Who had known which bombs were where, at any given time? “You mentioned leaving, though. Alligator wrestling in Florida?”

A nod. “It was only in 1956 that things really went bad in Puerto Rico.”

“What happened then?”

“Storms. Huge storms, and not just in hurricane season. One would rip up the north side of El Yunque, and two weeks later another would take care of the south.”

“I remember some disturbance – but mostly the joy in Britain, that the winter ended closer to the time it had, Before: early May, instead of all year round. Scientists thought it remarkable that the Gulf Stream showed signs of …”

He trailed off, remember his exchange with Hank, so long ago. Hadn’t the EBS …

“Signs of starting again,” Armando said. “Professor, any geologist, climatologist, meteorologist – anyone with an ‘ist’ will tell you that you don’t restart something that huge without a massive amount of energy. And since there weren’t many nukes left –”

“Hurricanes,” Charles breathed.

“And a few other muties doing things with actual ocean currents, but: pretty much. I saw a Free West file on the guy: Janos Quested, code name Riptide. Frost sic’d him on the coast of Texas every summer.”

“You saw many Free West files, then, in the camp? When you weren’t reading meteorology textbooks?”
“Oh, you really don’t get it.” Armando drained his cup and gave him a tired smile. “In Dallas? Frost got Quested to drain all of the lakes and send them against the walls – a kind of winter-rainstorm ‘fuck you.’”

“A terrible waste of water, if you ask me.”

“He can release projectiles, too – nasty ones. And the EBS had good luck with rain that campaign. And the wheels were coming off pretty fast down at Dallas camp – I read that file when Kelly and company was called out of a meeting. I bussed the tables.” He got up to take their mugs to the sink. “Informative times.”

“With your ability, Armando, how did they let you just walk about and clear tables?”

“Their experiments –”

The children dashed into the room, wearing warm and dry clothing, and set up a clamor for dinner. Charles thought the moment lost, until, fetching a pan, Armando caught his eye. He tapped one temple with an index finger.

Charles stretched out his power.

– They thought the experiments had me fixed. –

No more adaptation? Charles sent.

– I faked getting sick when they put me through radiation. They kept it simple after that: radiation and blood draws every week. Scaled things down … and so did I. Why not adapt to do nothing? –

Well done, then. Very wise. But leaving the files out for you to see –

– Professor, Professor … and the words felt sardonic, even with the static of Armando’s mind strengthening to push him out.

– They didn’t care if I saw those files. They didn’t think I could read. –

To comfort himself that night, Charles took his volume of Shakespeare to the library. The smallest drink of Scotch had a surprising effect – going dry as a desert that entire January had changed him, it seemed – and he fell fast asleep waiting for Jean’s return.

He woke up to the crackling sound of teleportation, the smell of Azazel’s power … and a page of King Lear sticking to his face. “Eurgh.”

“That’s all I get?”

“By which I mean: Logan, hello – and – Marie, how excellent to see you!” Charles pushed himself out from behind the table. “It’s been so long. You look wonderful.”

For she did. Her hair was piled up on top of her head, and she was wearing a formal dress, emerald green, with pearl-grey satin gloves going up to her elbows. She gave him a tense smile. “Glad to see you too, Mr. Xavier, but,” and she turned to Logan, “honey –”

“Yeah,” Logan growled, and kissed her.

The sight of his skin bubbling and cracking was as disconcerting as the social nicety trampled. Really, couldn’t they find another time to –
Azazel reappeared.

Marie tore her mouth away. “Wait! You said you’d give us –”

“Sorry,” came the reply. “Orders.”

Even as he was saying it, Azazel took Marie by one gloved hand and vanished again with a snap-crack, leaving only Logan’s voice – “Marie!” - echoing in the room.

Charles felt blank as Logan stared into space, gasping for breath. Then he staggered to a chair and collapsed.

“Are you all right?”

“No, Charles.” Logan covered his face with his hands. “I’m not all right.”

The pause was terribly awkward, with the only sound Logan’s harsh breathing. Charles tried to think of a good way to break it.

“That was quite abrupt. How many of these little trips does he have to –”

Azazel appeared again, and Charles waved the foul vapor away from his face. “Ugh. How many of these do you have to make a night, Mr. … what is your surname, anyway? And hello, Jean, welcome home. Hank, hello.”

“Dr. McCoy, and my little lady.” Azazel flicked his tail, ignoring Charles. “That is all for this drop. You have everything?” he asked Jean.

She nodded, clinging tightly to an odd little box. Suddenly, however, she gave the death grip over to one hand and clapped the other over one of her ears, wincing.

“What was that?”

“Frost’s little whistle, Marie’s getting grounded, or Jean’s present? Pick one.”

Logan sounded drunk. Charles looked at him in consternation, and picked the topic most likely to be soothing for all in the room. “You have a present, Jean?”

She nodded, eagerly, holding the box out to him. It was pure white and had a lid secured with a strap and buckle. There were holes punched in the lid.

The box meowed.

“Her,” went off in Jean’s mind like a firework. She’s from the Emperor of Russia! She undid the buckle and lifted the lid.

Charles peered down at a trembling ball of white fur. He reached in, cautiously, to pet it. Nothing but swansdown fluff and bones – but it turned toward him nonetheless and opened its eyes.
Isn’t she beautiful?!

The kitten opened its mouth in another meow, and Charles saw tiny needle teeth. “She’s very young, Jean.”

“I know,” Hank said, sounding strained. “I tried to tell Lady Frost that we didn’t have anything here, but –”

“– who cares,” Logan finished, “when there’s other people to do the dirty work.”

“Of?” said Charles.

“Of explaining kitty heaven,” came the muttered reply, and Jean’s face crumpled.

She’s just small! She’s mine – I can feed her, and take care of her, I promise, please, please don’t take her away from me –

“Nobody will take her away, Jean,” Charles said, soothing. “We just need the appropriate food. Milk, or cream, for a kitten? What do you think?”

“Hell if I know –”

“Logan, watch your language, please.”

“It’s old enough to eat solids,” Hank said. “It’s just a bit small.”

“We can mince boiled meats, and put them with milk, or oil – but – oh. The snow is three feet in full sun outside,” he grimaced, “so that’s not an option, unless we want the front door to reek. We need a dirt box.”

“Câlice de crisse. We’re coming on twenty years after the apocalypse, Chuck. I didn’t think we would have to deal with pets pissing indoors anymore.”

“My priority is sanitation. Connected to that is the priority of getting a generator, but since neither that nor a dirt box is in storage, as far as I know, the only option is –” he decided to gamble: “Albany.”

The word echoed in the room – ridiculous. Or … all in, if he were gambling.

“You want,” Logan said, slowly, “to go to Albany – for pet supplies?”

“Pet supplies, items for birthday celebrations, possibly a generator, other items on lists I don’t know about – why not?”

“We are due for a run,” Hank offered, and Logan grimaced at him,

“You think Frost will give the go-ahead for a pet, in the dead of winter?” Jean was staring, eyes huge; Logan had not noticed. “We’ll find another kitten in a barn this summer, and see if – see if –”

Jean had started to cry.

“– aw, come on, kid.” Broad hands went to Logan’s temples; he raked his fingers through his hair. “Stop. Hank?”

“Yes?”
“Put her to bed, would you?”

Jean set up a wail then. It was terrible, to feel it echoing through their minds like a thunderclap. “Fine, fine,” Logan said, “keep that kitten, and Hank, find some – I don’t know. Do we have fish downstairs, X man?”

“We have a can of sardines.”

“A fit sacrifice for the cause. Find ‘em, Hank.”

“I will,” Hank said, and placed his hand on Jean’s shoulder.

Her inner cry redoubled: *I want Mr. Xavier!*

“There, there,” Charles said, feeling as though he were shouting into a headwind. “I shall see you in the morning, Jean. You sleep well and tomorrow will be here in a second. I promise.”

... *Promise?*

“Yes. You’re tired, darling,” for every instinct told him it was so. “You’ve had a very busy time: parties and palaces and an entire ball to dance through. You shall have to tell me all about it.”

*And, he remembered … she would have to give back the exchange involving Raven. Charles swallowed hard; kept his face neutral.*

*I’ll tell you everything.*

“Good. Then go to bed, and make sure the kitten sleeps on your pillow if the fire is high.”

“See, that’s what worries me, Jeanie. Your little pet could wake up and stretch one day,” Logan stretched, “like that, and then decide to …”

... *Set the place on fire?* Jean wiped her eyes and peered at him.

“Yep.”

She still did not smile. *She’ll be good – I promise.*

“Just make sure to give her some water,” Charles said. “Hank? Can you help?”

Hank nodded.

“Then it’s off to bed with you. Good night, Jean.”

*Good night, Mr. Xavier.*

Charles waited until the door had shut after them to turn to Logan. “Are you all right? Making Jean cry like that … it’s not like you, Logan.”

His face was still grey, but after a long stare into the library fireplace, Logan muttered: “Sorry.”

“I should hope so.”

“Hope? Stupid of you, X.”

“Was it something with Marie, that has you …”
“What?”

“More charming than usual, I suppose.”

"Marie ..." Logan heaved a sigh. “I miss her. Every day without her, I feel like I have a broken arm. Before this shindig tonight, you know, I only got to talk to her for five minutes at Christmas.”

“I assumed you worked together at Dallas.”

“She’s got Denver duty. Remember?”

“Then, when I met her in October ...”

“I hadn’t seen her the whole summer. And I didn’t see her afterwards, not until Christmas.”

"You're that attached ..." Charles surveyed Logan - the strong lines of his face looked carved in concrete. "I always thought you had a soft heart."

Logan did not reply.

Another tack. "It can be difficult," Charles murmured, threading his voice with gold, "not to have anyone to talk to. To be honest with."

A blink.

"So many secrets, hm?"

Another slow blink, and half a nod - but then Logan frowned and shook his head, hard. "Whoa."

"What is it?"

"It's -"

"What."

"It's nothing. It's that - Charles,” and Logan clapped his hands onto the table’s edge, and squeezed, “I haven’t gotten laid. In. Months.”

The moment had passed. Charles glared at Logan's tufted hair, frustrated. "Poor Mr. Howlett, howling at the moon. You could … hm. How would you take care of yourself? Those claws might pop out at inopportune moments."

“Dirty mind, X man.”

“You have no idea how much I sympathize. I had a dry spell of four months,” he left out kisses and fellatio, “and then a lovely winter storm of Lehnsherr. Not an ideal combination.”

“Shit,” came Logan’s growl, “that slipped my mind. I’m sorry, X.”

“Never mind that. I’ve pulled it together,” and Charles spread his hands. “See? Just like you told me to.”

Logan gave him slow, mocking applause as he sat down at Lehnsherr's desk and pushed the rickety chair back with a scrape of wood on stone. Then he pulled out a cigar and lit it.

“You sprout those like a tree does leaves.”
“I,” a puff of smoke, “am more of a coniferous being, if you ask me.”

Charles sat down on the round table. “Prickly?”

A salute. Logan put his boots up on the desk. Charles checked for dirt from them, saw none, and then looked round, realizing –

“Logan, who cleans this place? I’ve never touched it, and it usually looks … nice.” Though now that he looked closer, he could see dust on surfaces, a rip in one chair – children tend to do that, came the thought, and he guiltily leaned forward to rub at a ring left on the table by a mug of tea.

“Lehnsherr does.”

“You’re joking.”

“No joke. He stays up all night to do it – the Quarter days, most of September, other days he can catch at. This is his digs,” Logan gestured with the cigar, “and we’re just borrowing it to shoot the shit. ‘Course, it used to belong to Frost’s old cuckoo-bananas boyfriend.”

“… Here in Ithaca?”

“Nah. She threw a lot of money at some Albany folks to remake the interior; then she brought over all this furniture,” another gesture, “and all these books, one teleported board or box at a time. You should have seen Azazel when she made him do it. Mad enough to spit tacks. He was as glad as anyone when we found Kitty Pryde, but that was a long time coming.”

“You once said that Frost has a hold on Azazel.”

“Don’t know what. It has to be strong, to keep him here. But we don’t need to talk about him.” Logan put the cigar out in his hand. Charles smelled burning flesh. “We just need a box for kitty. I could jerry-rig something pretty fast –”

“I promised Scott a birthday cake – a party. I can’t throw a party in that poky little kitchen or in a dormitory wing that smells like a septic tank. Not without a few bits of tinsel, at least.”

“I suppose a generator is a good idea.”

“Of course it is – it’s my idea, isn’t it?”

Logan threw a punch. He pulled it before doing real damage.

Charles ranged back over their conversation. Logan had been evasive – and he had so many things to ask before Hank came back – Hank, who his power felt hovering at the library door. “I want to talk more about you and Marie. And this former crazed lover of Frost’s. Later, though – we’ll need time to ourselves.”

“Don’t know where we’re going to get it.” A nod at Hank, who had opened the door. “Closest thing might be my truck cab. The third person always takes lookout.”

“When?”

“On the way to Albany. When else?” Logan took his feet off the desk and stood. “There’s only one little general store in Syracuse.”

“You’re really going to try, then?” Rising in turn, Charles felt only surprise. It had been a venture – but to have it work – “To get to Albany,” he told Hank, who had walked up to them. “When would
we go?”

“Azazel’s going to be at Albuquerque,” came Hank’s reply, “and we can’t have Kurt take us, not if he could escape right after. We’d have to drive.”

“Is that safe? Are the roads clear?”

“It’s never safe,” Logan started, but, “We follow the old canal route – the interstate through-way, where the convoys go. The hardest part, physically, is getting to the top of the lake. So,” Hank continued, “three days – one day going, the second there, the third coming back. I think now’s just as good a time to do it as any. More than good, because you’re almost out of fruit,” he told Charles.

“All right, gentlemen,” said Logan, “it’s eight A.M., Brussels time. The million Eastern dollar question: who’s going to call up Frosty and ask?

Hank and Charles looked at each other.

Logan grinned. “The suspense is killing me.”

“Can’t we just go without …” Charles started; then frowned at Logan’s shake of the head. “Well, I haven’t done this before, have I?”

“You always ask, Charlie. One thing about Frost: she always likes to know where everyone is, and what they’re doing –”

“I’ll do it,” Hank interrupted. “I – I can.”

“Really?” Logan said, interested. “That’s new.”

Hank lifted his chin. Then he turned on one foot and made for the West Wing door. Charles and Logan scrambled to keep up – but fell behind anyway, as he made rapid tracks for the Hive.

“I thought you two had come to a better understanding,” Charles said under his breath.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I can’t tease him a little,” Logan replied. “He has to pull it together, too.”

They caught up with Hank outside a door Charles did not recognize, down one of the panopticon hallways that led neither to the laundry nor the vid room.

“First things first,” Logan said. “Check if the security camera’s on. If it is, we’ll stay out here; if not, it’ll be a party.”

“O.K.”

Hank swiped his I.D. and – Charles blinked – placed one palm flat on a panel revealed next to the door. A blue light flashed. Then the door opened.

Walking through, Hank disappeared from sight as the door hissed shut. They waited for a moment or two. Then he opened it from the inside.

“All clear.”

“Right.” Logan strolled in. “Come on, X man.”
Charles looked round at the room – but his attention immediately fell on the telephone on a desk in the middle of it. “Ah ha.”

“Don’t be getting any ideas,” Logan said, dropping to his knees and fiddling with a desk drawer. “The calls can be checked … huh.”

He drew out a long spill of paper. It looked like a receipt from the Oxford soup kitchen, with numbers punched all the way down to where the paper emerged from a squat little machine. Logan squinted. “You make a call to Albany this morning, X? That why you want to go there?”

“What?” Charles stared. “No. I was in the library with the children all morning. Ask them.”

“Muñoz, then.” A sigh. “Great. Now I gotta worry about him more.”

“He would never betray you – not to the West.” Charles looked between the two of them. “You know that as well as I.”

“He’s got his own agenda.”

“And nobody else,” came Hank’s voice, “has any agenda. Right, Logan?”

Logan gave him a sour look. “Make the damned call.”

“All right. But be ready to hide.” Flipping through index cards placed on a sort of wheel, Hank nodded up at a corner of the low ceiling. “In case that goes on.”

*That* looked like a camera. Smaller than any he had seen, Charles thought, staring. Trained directly on the desk. Nothing about it looked active, though.

“Yes, operator. Put me through to Brussels, Belgium, please. City code UE-2. This is Dr. Henry McCoy, Sworn, who wishes to speak to Lady Frost.”

Charles heard the squawk of a question.

“Business,” Hank said. And then: “Priority … um. Four, probably.”

“Four?” Logan snorted. “There’s sanitation at stake. Priority two, at least. One and a half.”

“Shh.”

It was fascinating to watch the technology in use. There was only one phone he had seen regularly – that of the Rose in Bloom. The Proctor of each college had one. And despite his and Raven’s recovered wealth, such as it was, Charles had never had the inclination – or the patience – to wade through the paperwork in order to have one at home.

“Thanks,” said Hank into the receiver. “Fingers crossed.”

“For what?” asked Charles.

“For us to connect. It’s easier when Jessie’s here.” Hank gnawed his lower lip. “Say what you want about the Finder, it takes all of the trial and error out of calling people. See?” he exhaled. “No luck.”

Then he redialed. “Operator? Yes. Dr. Henry McCoy, Sworn. Try again, please?”

All in all, it took them ten minutes. Logan was silent, watching, his arms crossed over his chest, until:
“Yes!” Hank grinned. “We’re through.”

“Wonderful,” said Charles.

“Yeah.” And Logan turned his body away, and stared directly up at the camera.

“Le Palais Royal, s’il vous plaît,” Hank said, shifting from foot to foot. Charles grimaced at his accent.


He paused. Then: “La chambre de la Reine.”

Charles snorted. Logan swatted at him. “It’s just because it’s the nicest,” Hank hissed.

“It’s no surprise that she thinks so highly herself. There are several constitutional monarchs in United Europe – what gives her the right to elbow them all out?”

“It’s all a show anyway,” said Hank. “Who cares about her?”

Logan flashed him a thumbs-up. Hank lifted his chin; Charles could have sworn that he saw a flush spreading across his cheekbones beneath the rims of his glasses.

“Good morning, sir. This is Hank McCoy. Could I speak to Lady Frost, please?”

For one wild moment, Charles thought: Erik – but Hank put one hand over the receiver and said, “It’s Archangel.”

“Him?” Logan growled. “Why isn’t he at Albuquerque?”

Charles amused himself by picturing a winged angel answering a phone. “Frost has moved on,” he saw Hank twitch, “from Almaz, then?”

“To Archangel? No,” Logan said. “Believe me.”

“How do you know?”

“She’s not his type.” He jabbed his index fingers together.

“I don’t … follow?”

“Oh, right. What do angels have, anyway?” Logan made the fingers of one hand flutter, and smacked it against the index finger opposite.

The penny dropped. “Tell me when you’ve grown up,” Charles sighed – but Hank hushed him with a hand wave, and said:

“My lady,” with a nervous swallow. “Good morning.”

Then: “Yes. Yes, I know.” Hank pushed up one shirt cuff. “Two in the morning, by my watch.”

More sound from the other end. Hank muttered, “I – changed it before I left.”

Frost must have asked him his reason for calling. The tinny chirp from the receiver, Charles thought, was the least threatening he had ever heard her.

Hank squared his shoulders. “We need to go to Albany, my lady.”
There was a pause. Then a squeak that must have been: Why?

“The usual replenishing of supplies – the students are out of fruit. Also, Jean’s kitten –”

A longer interruption.

“Yes,” Hank replied. “Yes, I know. But it does not look well, and we thought we would get supplies for it. Special food, a box – yes. Yes, my lady.”

“Whatever, my lady,” Logan growled. He was still staring up at the camera.

“We thought – Logan, myself, and … Charles?”

Charles could have kicked him. Be decisive – but then Hank was looking over, wide-eyed. “Of course I can. He’s not here – it will take me a moment to fetch him.”

There was more squeaking.

“Ah. Yes. Shall I, then?”

Hank waited, nodded, and stabbed at a button on the phone’s body. “I’m fetching you,” he told Charles. “It’ll take,” he shook out his watch again, “say, two minutes.”

“Good lie, Doc. Very convincing.”

“Thanks a lot,” said Hank.

“Baby steps,” Logan replied.

They waited, staring at the phone, until two minutes had passed. Then Charles carefully picked up the receiver. “Hello?”

“You’re on hold.” Hank pressed a button. “There.”

“My lady?” Charles said, then frowned at Hank. “There’s static now. Not like the silence before.”

“Shit,” said Logan, staring up at the camera. Charles looked, too. A red light flickered, then went dark. Then flickered again –

“Hide!” Pulling Hank next to him, Logan dove behind the desk, wedging them both into the recess intended for the knees.

“Oi.” Charles crammed in a stray leg with a shove of his foot. “What does it matter if you’re here?” he said, watching the red light flare … and stay lit. But then:

“Charles?” came crackling over the phone.

“Oh! Yes. Hello, my lady. Did you have a enjoyable ball?”

“Hello, Charles, and yes, I always enjoy them.”

So to speak. Charles choked, and told his mind to shut it.

“Now, what’s this? Do I hear you want to go to Albany?”

“Yes. Please.” He twisted the phone cord. “I thought – we need things for Jean’s new pet, and I promised Scott a birthday cake, and I –”
“Ridiculous.” What might have been a sigh was lost in static. “You spoil them too much, Charles. You’d make a terrible parent.”

“I – excuse me? My lady,” Charles said, nettled, “I don’t think the one follows the other.”

“You think that. In any case, I suppose you could have my permission, if you do one favor for me.”

“And what might that be?”

“Do you remember the gifts I received earlier this month?”

Charles could hardly forget the table groaning under their weight. “I do.”

“Pick up the Galuti tapestry. It’s in a duffel bag in the Finder room, beneath the stairs. Next Monday the techs will be back to prepare the Finder for the spring – ordinarily, I’d let them take all the trash, but I have a better use for that piece.”

He remembered her tossing the smaller bag in that direction, but not the tapestry. Then again, Charles thought, he had not looked beneath the stairs recently.

“Take that tapestry and bring it to the Jews in Albany, where they congregate. It’s –”

Static crackled.

“Pardon me?” Charles twisted the phone cord harder. “I didn’t catch your last.”

“ – the Shalom temple, or whatever it’s called. I’m sure they’d like to have it.”

“I … do I just waltz up and ring a doorbell?” He had never been to a synagogue. “Or – what do I do?”

“Knock.” She sounded amused. “They’re just Jews, Charles, not another species. They know what a knock means: a friendly neighbor, dropping off a present.”

“We’re all friends here;” he muttered under his breath. “Really, Emma –”

And he bit back a yelp as Logan punched him in the shin.

“Really,” he continued, “they might see it as rude, dropping in with that cumbersome a gift, and without advance notice.”

“Charles?”

“Yes?”

“I see no other reason to send you there. So will you do as I tell you?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Excellent. You may pick up a party hat for Scott while you’re at it.”

“And for Jean.”

Static crackled again.

“She told Scott, who told me,” Charles coughed, “that her birthday is in February.”
“February twentieth,” Frost said. “That is correct.”

There was no understanding her tone – and perhaps what he thought was anger was distortion from the connection. For she sounded completely as usual when she said, “Enough wasted time. Have I been clear in my instructions?”

Charles nodded.

“Good.”

Which meant that she was **watching**, and he looked up at the camera before he could help himself.

“Dear me: caught out.” A crackle in the static must have been her laugh. “When you see them, tell Howlett and McCoy that you have seventy-two hours. Tell Muñoz to time you, and by no means take any of the children along. Good morning to you, Charles. You might consider getting some sleep before the journey.”

“But –” he would try, even if the others had already assumed otherwise. “Can’t Azazel take us?”

“He’s busy,” said Frost, and she severed the connection.

After a moment listening to the hollow whistle, Charles placed the receiver gently in its cradle. He looked up, and waited for the red light to go dark.

When it did, he bent to peer beneath the desk. “Gentlemen? Whenever you’re ready.”

They were ready later that morning.

Even with the limited time to do it, Charles could hardly sleep. He still half expected to hear Logan reveal it was a prank, or to see Frost swooping in, all smirks, to tell him she had changed her mind. But the morning came, and he put on his warmest clothes, stomach twisting with excitement.

*Pathetic*, part of his mind whispered, as he followed Hank into the West Wing.

But Charles dismissed the thought. He had not left the grounds in months. He was allowed to be ... as excited as when he first went to London; yes, that was the feeling.

And he was allowed to wait – two days, at most – to take back Jean’s possible knowledge of Raven.

*Possible*. Charles bit his lip. Should he go into her mind? Risk losing a bird, like his hummingbird with Logan, for the sake of a possibility? Should he –

“Somewhere here?” Hank flicked one of the lights on in the lowest level of the Hive.

The Finder gleamed from its height like an electric squid. Ignoring it was not easy, but finding the duffel bag beneath the stairs was.

Charles hefted the bag. “Yes, that’s all.”

“Let’s go back. You’ll need another layer, and we’ll get a pair of snowshoes for you,” Hank’s voice was fading, “just in case.”

Lingering, Charles caught sight of the other bag, much smaller, beneath the stairs. The embroidered one, with the peculiar cloth in it from Eretz Galut. Frost had thrown it away first.
He snatched it, shoved it into a side pocket of the duffel, and ran to catch up with Hank.

“Is that it?” Logan was waiting outside the kitchen door, Armando at his side.

“That’s all I was instructed to take.”

“Drop it at the garage,” directed at Hank, and to Charles: “Put on another layer, and get your toothbrush and what have you. Meet me back here in fifteen minutes.”


“And that was faster than this’ll be. No hard feelings, except …. Logan read me the riot act for phoning Albany. How’d he find that out?”

“I didn’t say a thing. There’s a device that records all calls made from the phone I saw. Logan saw a number – it must have been the one you dialed.”

“Thought I fooled the operator.” A shrug. “No harm done. Come on up to the dormitory, though, Charles – I have a favor to ask you.”

Charles followed him. Hearing excited voices, he looked in on Jean – and saw Scott and Kurt crammed with her on her bed, and the kitten climbing into a bowl half full of sardines. It smelled quite pungent. “I hope she likes the fish, dear.”

*She loves them,* Jean sent, happily.

“We’re going to think of a name for her today, Mr. Xavier,” said Scott.

“Make sure it’s something original,” Charles said. “Something she likes as much as the fish. I’m going now, and I’ll see you the day after tomorrow – probably in the afternoon.”

Scott nodded. “We know.”

*Logan told us,* from Jean, and: “‘Bye!” said Kurt.

Not caring how long he would be gone, enthralled by a scrap of kitten … but there were worse things to be. Charles smiled to himself, ruefully. “In the meantime, try to encourage that little beast to relieve herself in the bathtub.”

“He means pee,” said Scott.

“Ew,” said Kurt.

*You’re one to talk.* “If she quite can’t manage it, clean up the accidents fast. And be good for Mr. Armando.”

“We will,” they chorused, and Charles went off to find the same.

“What can I do for you, then?” he asked.

Armando shut the door of his room. “Catch.”

He reached out and tilted a pair of cufflinks and a gold-plated pen into Charles’ hand.
“What …”

“Could you pawn them for me? Nothing less than one hundred, Eastern: that gold is real. You can keep – say five, or ten, and get yourself a haircut.”

“Is that a fair shake – and is that what you called about? A pawnshop?”

“Yes to the first; maybe to the second. You feel up to it?”

“Yes,” Charles said, keeping his smile genuine, securing the articles in his pocket.

He waited until Armando had gone down the hallway to dash to his room; to take the jewel box Erik had given him out of his closet; to flip open the lid.

“Nothing too memorable,” Charles told himself – and fished out some pearls, and a topaz or two.

And just to be safe, he took off Erik’s token and placed it in the coffer.

“That’s all it is.” For shoving the box into a corner beneath a pile of sweatpants, he could almost feel a glare from Erik, prickling on the back of his neck. “You wouldn’t want it to fall off in the snow, would you?”

It was the work of only a few moments to pull more clothes on, grab his toothbrush and hat, and dash back downstairs – the jewels safe as houses in an inside pocket, alongside the gold.

Logan had not let him see the location of the garage. “Underground,” he had said, and, “don’t you trouble that amazing hat – I mean head, about it.”

It had not stung too badly to go along with the joking; to pretend he did not care about Logan still keeping the manor’s secrets from him. For there was Hank at the wheel of – not the truck he remembered from Moira’s escape. Charles frowned. This one was different – the one, he realized, that Kitty Pryde had driven: bulky and battered, with dents in its sides, and peculiar tires.

“Snow tires times ten,” Logan explained, seeing where he stared. “If the through-way’s clear, they’ll be a pain; if not, we’ll be sitting pretty. And we have to go north quite a ways to get there in the first place. How’s fuel?” he shouted at Hank, who had rolled down a window.

“I topped it off.”

“And you filled the cans?”

“Yeah. Logan?”

“Haven’t changed my name. C’mon, Chuck,” and Logan opened the passenger door. “Up.”

Charles climbed up the fender and scrambled into the seat – placed quite high – as Hank continued. “You remember the bat you couldn’t get rid of?”

“Archie? Sure, he keeps the bugs down.” Logan vaulted up on the hood of the truck. “Roll up the window, Charles.”

Charles did. Logan started examining the base of the window wipers.

“Um. Logan?”
“He can’t hear you,” said Charles. The windshield glass was very thick.

“Yes he can,” Hank replied. “Logan? I think Archie’s done with mosquitoes forever, now.”

Logan’s head snapped up, and Charles saw him mouth: shit. Then an elaborate mime: a finger drawn across the throat and a shrug: He’s dead?

Hank nodded.

More words that must have been Québecois. Logan glowered, slid down and off the truck’s front, and tossed up the hood.

“I heard a crunch when I put the mirrors in.” Nudging Charles, Hank pointed at the different wires wending through a hole in the interior – holding the driver’s side mirror in place? Charles was not sure. He saw a delicate filament of bone stretching down from the hole, though, and brushing against the dashboard.

“Rest in peace, Archibald Bat.”

“I guess. Hand me the maps from the glove compartment, will you?”

Charles had to take off a mitten and a glove to get at the latch. His hand went numb. “Does this truck have heat?”

“It’ll warm up once we get on the road. The maps should be beneath the signal flags,” said Hank, for Charles had paused at a jumble of brightly colored cloth. “The notebook too, please.”

He handed Hank the maps and notebook. It was just as well he did not have to talk – Charles gazed at the manor’s arrow windows and massive front door. He could hardly believe it. Finally – finally – getting away. For such a trivial reason, he thought – but dismissed that, fiercely.

He glanced down. Hank had wedged the duffel bag in the passenger seat wheel well.

“Charles.” The larger map crackled in front of him, and Charles jerked to attention. “The passenger is always on record duty. When we run into anything out of the ordinary, it goes on the map, and –” the notebook and a smaller map joined the heap, “in the log, with the date. All right?”

My thanks for your trust, Charles wanted to say. But he just nodded.

“We’ll wait for Logan to finish checking the engine. He takes point most of the time.”

The wait felt interminable. But then Logan slammed the hood shut, rapped on the window as he passed to the back – and he must have checked something else, for Charles counted another minute before he reappeared on the driver’s side. Charles looked for the appropriate lever and rolled the window down.

“All set.”

“We’ll put that in the log,” Hank said. “There are pencils in the glove compartment,” he told Charles.

“Let’s get it rolling,” Logan caroled. “And where’s my favorite part of any trip?”

With a sigh, Hank reached between the seats to – a very long strongbox, Charles saw, as spindly fingers flicked the wheel of the combination lock to open it, hoisted the lid, took out –
Charles whistled.

“It’s all mine, X man. Gimme, gimme.”

Charles lifted the machine gun and handed it through the open window. Then two boxes that rattled – Logan crammed them under one arm – and a rifle –

“You can’t shoot both at once, surely.”

“Different strokes for different folks; different guns for different funs. Your long-range folks,” Logan shook the rifle, “and,” he waggled the machine gun, “your crazy cannibals swarming the car.” He mistook Charles’ silence for fear, perhaps, because he grinned. “We haven’t any of those for a while.”

“You’re letting more cold in,” Hank said. “Do you have your pistol?”

“Ouais.”

“Then let’s go. Roll up the window.”

The guns went up first with a clatter, and Charles watched Logan hoist himself to the top of the cab.

Hank revved the engine; then waited until three thumps came from above. The rifle stock, Charles thought, or a boot on the roof.

“Move out,” muttered Hank. “Here goes.”

And he hunched his shoulders, leaned forward, and pressed on the gas pedal – looking, as his scarf rode up around his ears, like nothing more than an anxious, bespectacled turtle.

Charles needed a distraction to keep from laughing. He found it, as he watched the manor recede in the side mirror – first to the size of a child’s model castle, and then gone behind a snowy hill, covered with barren trees.

The ride north along the lake was nerve-wracking. Not from the cold – the cab got warm quickly, even if there were drafts coming in through what looked like bullet holes – and not from any attack.

Rather, from the sheer – stress –

Charles grabbed hold of one handle as the truck listed to the left.

– of wondering just where the road ended and the deep drifts began.

“I suppose death by snowdrift would be peaceful enough.”

“Are you kidding? We’re not going to die,” Hank said, voice wavering. He leaned on the horn. Charles grimaced at the klaxon – then jumped, jabbing himself with Armando’s pen in his pocket, as Logan’s head came into view on the driver’s side, upside-down.

“It’s fine!” he shouted. When Hank cracked the window, Logan gave him a madcap grin. “You’re fine! Aim for two o’clock and rock it, don’t floor it. I’ll get out the gravel if it gets bad, all right?”

“All right,” Hank tried for the same enthusiasm; tried and failed.

“Ha! Where’s Mags when you really need him, huh?” Logan swung himself back up and thumped
on the cab roof three times. “Tally-ho!”

“He’s gone mad,” Charles muttered.

“That kind of thing happens,” Hank said, closing the window and pumping the accelerator, then the brake, “when Marie leaves.”

“Really?”

“Logan – can’t – die,” each word punctuated by a spinning tire or jerking stop, “so he gets – reckless. When he’s – upset.”

“Mm.”

“Hang on tight, O.K.? This is why he’s up top, in the winters, for – this –”

The truck lurched forward and rumbled into motion again. Even through glass and metal, Charles could hear a whoop from above – and in the side mirror, he saw a boot dip into view and skid, until somehow Logan found traction and pushed himself back up.

“ – and when we’re away from the cities.” Hank exhaled. “They’re the riskiest parts.”

“Ambush or snowdrifts?”

“Yes.”

Ambush, indeed. He was not angry, not anymore, but when Hank had told him – put your head down – as soon as they had seen the first ruins of Ithaca … Charles had been angry then.

Head between his knees, hat wedged against the glove compartment – he had not been able to see a thing, except the occasional grey wreck of a building out Hank’s window, and Hank himself biting his lower lip, hard. So much for Ithaca.

“Put a mark for ‘loose snow’ on that bend. ‘LS’, with the date. All right?”

Charles took out the smaller map. Welcome, it read, to Cayuga Lake State Park. It was covered in a hodgepodge of marks: different letters and symbols, and the occasional large X that made him think back, smiling, to Raven’s search for buried treasure in Wytham Woods. The map he had made for her had been much nicer; this one was falling apart at the creases.

“You’ll need another copy of this,” he said, as he penciled in the mark and wrote a note in the logbook: LS, Tues. 4 Feb. 1970.

“I’ve made plenty of copies,” Hank replied.

“Why not go up 13?” He traced the faded red line. “Then to 81, and then you’ll reach Syracuse.”

“This area is usually pretty secure, and even so: the fewer small towns we go through, the better. Ithaca’s got enough hide sites for a sniper already. Cortland too. Besides, the main convoy runs on the through-way.”

Charles glimpsed it, a solid line at the top of the map. Interstate Thruway – he frowned. “All right. I believe you.”

Hank gave him a small smile.
Strange. Hank knew the way at present, like Charles knew the road to Coventry, so it should not sting to yield navigation to him. Probably Logan knew the area far better than either of them, Charles thought. That was comforting.

A sharp rap on the roof made Hank slam on the brake. “Head down!”

This time, Charles saw he put his head down too.

They waited in silence. Then there was a single crack of a rifle from above.

A longer pause, and then three raps. “Right,” Hank breathed, straightening. “Right. The hard part is getting momentum back.”

And he promptly started alternating accelerator and brake again.

“What was that?”

“If it was a deer, Logan would have gone down to get it. We’ve got enough time. But …”

“But it wasn’t a deer.”

“I guess not.”

“What if it’s just an innocent passerby?”

“Anybody living in EBS territory knows not to trespass here.”

“Really,” Charles said, skeptical, as the truck rocked out of its rut and advanced. “All of them somehow know? Do they learn this in whatever schooling they have?”

“Frost reminds the city mayors using the Finder, sometimes.”

Charles digested that.

“You know, Hank, I don’t think I’ve ever heard you refer to her without an honorific.”

Hank kept his eyes on the road.

“All I mean is: congratulations.”

“Thanks,” said Hank, tense. “Make a mark on the map for that shot, and ask Logan what it was for when we switch places, and then fill out the log, please.”

“What mark?”

“An X.”

As they approached the thruway, Hank started to relax. Charles tried for more information.

“Convoys use it, you said?”

“Yes,” Hank hauled on the wheel, steering them to the right. East. “We try our best to keep the road from Buffalo to Albany clear. Lake Erie’s been freezing over since the war, but we built an icebreaker early on to get ships through from Mackinac and Sault Ste. Marie.”

“And what’s in trade these days?” Charles asked, as the truck’s wheels started grinding up an
“Here we are, by the way: the interstate thruway.” Hank blew out a sigh of relief. “Trade? We get more iron ore than Leh – than we know what to do with. What we really need is more lumber for houses. We’ve been working to reforest this area, but we can never be sure of a blight-free summer – and I’ve told you about the acid rain, right?”

“Yes,” Charles said.

“That’s why Tree Time runs, you know. It’s educational.”

“Yes.”

Hank fell silent, carefully adjusting the gearshift. Charles gazed at the thruway.

It stretched long and wide from their vantage point, slightly higher, on what might have been a pre-war entry ramp. It was larger than the road to Coventry, and with marks, he saw, of recent passage.

As the wheels settled into the tracks that the previous vehicle had left, two thumps came from above.

“Time for a break,” Hank said, fumbling with his seatbelt. “We have some food,” he tugged a rucksack from beneath his seat, “and coffee. And if you’ve got to, well, go, then take the opportunity.”

“Piss, Hank. Say it.”

“Just come on.” Hank opened the driver’s door and hopped out.

Charles followed suit. Then winced. Clear from tree cover, even if that cover were bare of any and all foliage, the thruway was quite exposed. Piss? His cock would snap clean off in a winter wind like this.

“Are we having fun yet?”

He walked to join Logan on the other side. “A fair bit of fun. What was that shot an hour ago?”

“I thought it might’ve been a drifter, but then I saw reflected light. Coulda been binocs. Not good.” Logan opened the rucksack. “Who wants jerky?”

Charles took a piece, his mind elsewhere. “Still, you could have shot at an innocent person.”

“Better safe than sorry,” Hank mumbled.

“You got a better idea, X man?”

His mind caught up. His mind. “You can use me. I’m as good as a short-range Finder,” he told them. “I’ll let you know if I feel anyone suspicious. Shall I?”

Logan methodically chewed. “Short-range, huh? What about that time you were stuck at home and still pinged me in Albany?”

A splutter: Hank had coughed on his mouthful.

“Never mind.” Charles glared at Logan. “I can help. If you give us the warning – one stomp, isn’t it? I’ll find the object of your interest and suss them out.”
“Suss. Right. Hank, I’ll stay up ‘til we’re past Jordan; then it’s your turn, all right? Unless – X, can you drive?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe on the way back, then. I don’t want us run off the road if you’re looking out with that big bird-brain of yours. What time did we make?”

Hank shook out his watch. “About two hours.”

Logan glanced up at the sun. “We’d better book it, then. Pass round the coffee and we’ll go.”

The thermos Hank produced was old, with a cloth wrapping that might once have been a cheerful plaid. Charles watched the other two to make sure not to drink longer than they did. Hot drops hit his cheek; no handy cup from a lid here.

One swig later and Charles was scrambling up the passenger-side fender. Hank re-started the truck and waited for the three thuds.

Then they drove on in silence.

Charles huddled into his manteau, waiting for the cab to re-heat. And forget Logan telling him when – he could send Raven out and find any trouble, first. He took a deep breath.

“What Logan said,” Hank muttered. “Is that true?”

Charles did not answer.

“You didn’t borrow the Seeker or anything?”

“You know I don’t have access to the West Wing. Armando has the card.”

“Right. But Charles …” Hank peered at him. “You really should tell me these things. What if Lady Frost finds out?”

“How do you know she hasn’t?”

“… She would have asked me to start analyzing your brainwaves by now. Not just IQ tests.”

Charles swallowed hard. “We can talk about it later. I will talk to you about it later; I promise.” He had to decide what to say, and what to keep hidden. “Watch the road.”

“Right, right. Sorry.”

“No need to cringe. I don’t want to end up frozen solid on my first jaunt away, that’s all.”

To which Hank made no reply, concentrating on driving. And Charles, calling up his power, concentrated on his raven – sending it first right, then left, then winging all around the truck in a perfect spiral, dark to his mind’s eye against the unrelenting glare of sun on snow.

The glare became wearying as they progressed. With his power, Charles only felt the occasional flicker of an animal’s presence – nothing human in the whole expanse. There was faint buzz at the edge of his thoughts, though, growing closer and closer, that might be Syracuse.

“Jordan that Was is off to the right,” Hank said, hoarse – his first words in what felt like an hour.
Charles stared out the window at the same grey smudge of trees. “I can’t see anything.”

“It’s a few miles away. Can you feel anybody there?”

Carefully, Charles searched.

He had not tried the trick in some time … but it was easy to circumscribe with a thread what he saw – a grey reflection of the reality of a wreck of a town – and then close a gossamer net round it, and send power pulsing throughout –

There was one – itch. And a mind connected to it.

“A woman’s there,” Charles said, distant.

Hank jumped. “Just the one?”

“Yes.” He cautiously pressed closer …. “She’s – hungry.”

“Oh.”

“Starving, I think.”

For that was the itch: the scrabbling sensation of – anything something anything – a body gnawing through itself from the inside out. Charles pulled away with a wince. “Can’t we stop?”

There was only the rumble of the tires. Hank hunched his shoulders. And when two thumps sounded from above, he practically threw the truck into park. “I’m going up. You can talk to Logan.”

“Hank,” Charles said, exasperated, but the driver’s door slammed shut. Then he saw Logan’s boots dangling on the windshield – and then the rest of his stocky body, sliding down slowly, spread like a starfish. His playing the fool gave Charles time to sneak some jerky from the rucksack. He opened his door to let it fall, and tore off a bright orange piece of cloth to let fall after it.

Who knew if it would do anything? But Charles knew he could not just sit in his warm truck and do nothing. He found the woman again, and pressed an image of the cloth into her mind, along with a thought-compass pointing the way. All veiled: owl and raven had worked together – such a pity his hummingbird was long gone –

“Xavier?”

Charles reeled his power in, his words to Logan – “You took long enough –” muffled, slowed in his own ears, along with the reply.

“Tell someone who cares.”

He came completely back to himself to the sound of Logan cracking his knuckles. Actually: his fingers, white with frostbite. “What a refreshing little ride: a two-froze.”

“A – what?”


“Do I put that in the log?”

“Shut up. And … wait for it.”
Hank seemed more tentative stomping on the roof than Logan had, but that could have been his imagination. Whistling, Logan started to drive.

After a few miles, he said, “Anybody alive in Jordan?”

“Not for long.”

“Too bad. We'll be in Syracuse soon, and we can’t stop there either.”

“Very callous of you both.”

“You think so. But do your Oxford teams stop for everyone on the way to London? Give them a picnic basket?”


“Do they?”

“We hardly saw anyone.”

“So you didn’t stop.”

“The group didn’t. But I helped someone, once.”

“Hope he was worth it.”

*Raven.* “She was.”

With a glance at him, Logan had the grace to fall silent. Forget Marie; forget Frost’s lover. At least for now, Charles did not want to talk anymore.

Syracuse was hardly worth calling a town. Cupping his hands round his eyes to cut the glare, Charles glimpsed the occasional shadow that might have been a person – but the shops all looked closed, and the windows of homes were boarded up.

“Albany’s better,” Logan said.

And that was all, for another half hour.

Then Hank and Logan switched places – Logan still silent, after a few murmured words outside – and Charles resigned himself to being questioned.

Hank said nothing, though.

Mile after mile of white glare; hill after snow-covered hill. Charles was not afraid of heights, but he kept his eyes firmly on the dashboard when they drove over bridges: cement ones in crumbling condition; cast-iron ones, impeccable. He added notes to the log. An exit sign – *Rome* – half-severed from its support, twisting in the wind high above the ground. *Dangerous.* A herd of some animal, crossing the thruway between Rome and Utica. “Moose,” Hank said.

Utica itself: a drab huddle of buildings, smaller than Syracuse.

Then nothing – miles of white nothing for another half hour – until they rounded a curve in the road and saw a toll station –
– its booths lying on top of each other like toppled dominos.

Charles stared. “What happened?”

Hank stopped the truck, rolled down the window, and they heard:

“God damn it,” Logan, bellowing, jumping down, “the next time I see him,” a snarl, “shit, this will take a half hour to …” fading away as he brandished the machine gun and went to check the depth of the drifts on the side of the road.

They took the detour eventually: following convoy treads, Logan guarding them on the ground. There had been nothing to see besides the surreal picture of so much metal and glass folded up like an accordion – until a tap on the window: Logan, looking grim, holding up a piece of blue cloth.

Charles recognized the phoenix insignia.

They sped up, despite Hank’s worry. “I don’t know if we can –”

“Risk it,” Logan ordered. “Tighten your seatbelts, and if I fall off, just keep your eye on the mirrors and wait long enough for me to catch up. Check the log, Charles.”

“For what?”

“For when that,” he waved a hand at the toll booths, “fucking happened. Check it,” he snapped, and leaped onto the roof of the cab.

Charles had paged through the logbook. Once every two weeks, it seemed, someone journeyed to Albany. Over January, though, each penciled date had next to it a strong: A. Azazel, Charles assumed. Fine transportation, if one could get him.

“You have to keep track of teleportation?”

“Yes. Just to show that we’ve fetched the supplies, every other week.”

“Inconvenient. Why not just set up headquarters in Albany?”

“Security reasons.”

Escape reasons. But it would not do for that to cross Hank’s mind, so Charles observed: “Lack of use for this truck aside, surely there was a convoy or two in January. Why didn’t they report what happened?”

“I suppose they were scared enough to violate protocol.”

“Lehnsherr does have that effect on people, doesn’t he?”

Hank tightened his grip on the wheel. “You know his name, now.”


“Oh.”

Charles scanned more dates. “There’s nothing in December – except Angel and Azazel.” He smiled at the memory of her Fourth Quarter trip, for the book he gave to Jean … but then he realized: there was no record of any transport of the Free West prisoners.
“I don’t see anything for the diplomats visiting after Dallas. Remember the party in the stadium?”

“Yes, I remember. I think that was a special occasion – not supply.”

“Off-the-record special: how convenient.”

Hank did not reply.

Charles looked further. “Nothing in November. No wonder we almost starved.”

The last journey on the road had been in October: the 24th, Charles read. L, Ang, JP, S … and a list of near-accidents involving black ice.

His raven gave him the memory: Sean, weeping.

– Yesterday – I got taken to Albany, to the doctor there. They had to reset my leg. And it really hurts now. –

The return had been on … he saw the A next to the 25th.

“The last trip taken by the supply truck,” Charles said, coldly, “was in late October, when Sean was brought to the doctor in Albany to have his broken leg reset. Only the drive there, though, since once Sean was in less pain, Azazel took care of the journey back.” He slapped the book shut. “Which seems a bit sadistic to me.”

Hank’s mouth thinned into an unhappy line. “I know.”

“Do you? Another first.”

“We can talk about it later, maybe.” A cough. “Could I please have the thermos?”

Charles fetched it, unscrewed the top and held it out. “Drink some; come on.”

Hank took one shaking hand off the wheel; took the thermos; took a drink. Coffee slopped onto his scarf. “Sorry.”

“Never mind, Hank.”

He didn’t feel like taking a sip, himself.

They drove in silence for another quarter hour. Charles could swear that his breath was slowing. The endless monotony of snow and road … his power flying in vast swoops over – nothing. Miles and miles of nothing.

“Do you feel anything? Any minds?”

“No.”

It took them almost three more hours to reach Albany.

In his stupor, Charles hardly noticed the change in speed, the snow of the road growing as hard-packed as cement, the wind quieting down.

After they rounded a particularly sharp turn, though, he could hardly miss the wall.
There was a rattle and thud from the roof – it sounded like Logan was dancing a jig. “All right,” Hank said, sighing in relief. “Made it.”

Made it – Charles’ felt stupid, staring, but he could not help himself. A huge brick wall reared up from brambles in the snow, stretching quite high. Far above, lights flickered, though it was only mid-afternoon. A spotlight glanced through their windshield.

“Pull out the green cloth and drape it out the window, would you?”

Charles obeyed. And as the truck trundled over a small bridge and towards a mammoth gate set in the wall, he saw that what he had thought brambles was actually barbed wire.

Logan jumped down to talk to the gatekeeper; several gatekeepers, Charles saw, clustering round. There was a discussion. Then Hank lifted a hand, acknowledging something, and eased the truck forward as the gate opened.

They went down into a tunnel lit by florescent lights. There were shadows of people on walkways above them, one pointing at a strange discolored area in the bricks – some sort of water damage. By practically mashing his face against the window, Charles confirmed he had not mistyped only the barbed wire. The orange-red color of bricks was, in fact, an entire layer of rust.

Another set of gates opened at the end of the tunnel, and Hank drove the truck into the fading light.

“You O.K., X man?”

“I’m just tired. I don’t know why – I sat the whole way here.”

“The first trip’ll do that to you.” Logan shoved the duffel bag into his arms. Taking tight hold of it, Charles swayed where he stood. “Hank?” Footsteps crunched in snow as Logan strode to the back of the truck. Charles could not hear the ensuing conversation.

He stared down at Albany instead.

After the tunnel under the wall, Hank had steered them through a warren of buildings. They had then wound their way up a hill – the final part of which rose steep as a ziggurat, with a huge structure perched at its peak. “The old capitol building,” Hank had explained – and had driven right to it.

After sliding from his seat, Charles had gazed up the granite stairway; some steps cracked, others intact. Then he had turned and looked at the view. Albany entire lay stretched beneath the building, a model in miniature.

“Just like Vieux-Québec,” Logan had said, walking up to him. “Give people a bluff over a river,” he hooked his thumb over his shoulder, “and they fortify the hell out of it.”

Those walls were a considerable bonus: bigger than Oxford’s, his mind whispered to him. No reply had seemed necessary, though, so Charles had just stayed in place and nodded as Logan had put away the guns and taken out the bags.

Now the back doors slammed shut. “Charles?” Hank called.

“Yes?”

“We took longer than I thought, and the market closed at dusk. We’ll have to go tomorrow. For the time being, we can go up to headquarters and … thaw.”
“That sounds wonderful,” said Charles, fervently.

“I’ll get you there, and then see the militia,” Logan said to Hank.

“But after dark—”

“I’ll be fine.”

“To deliver whatever’s in the truck?” Charles asked.

“Yes. I’m like Santa, only a month late, and all the good little boys and girls get bazookas.”

Charles kept his voice even. “Surely not a whole truck full.”

“Nah. Mostly just guns.”

“Supply runs both ways, then?”

“Well, we aren’t going to keep the best of Dallas here in town, are we? Come on,” and Logan slung the rucksack over his shoulder. “Time to say hi to Corny.”

Mayor Erastus Corning II was made very nervous by their arrival. Logan let Hank do the talking. Charles thought to join the conversation, but …

He could scarcely believe it. All his social graces, deserting him: his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth; his head buzzing. Only because …

… Well, at least he was not overwhelmed by the size of the building, or by the décor of its interior. The electric lights throughout only made the cobwebs in the corners more obvious. The mayor’s cursory tour, Charles slowly realized, had to be aimed at him specifically, since Logan and Hank had been there before. He made appreciative noises at the vast rooms used by the House and Senate Before; one now for the city commission, the other for – he did not quite gather what.

No. Charles could not speak … because he had not seen a new person – one not a mutant of some sort – since the four Free West soldiers in the stable.

Hello, he practiced in his head. Charles Xavier; very pleased to meet you. Greetings to Albany, from Britain’s Queen.

But his lips would not move.

The mayor gave orders. More strangers arrived and bustled about; breath steaming even indoors. Then Logan saw the two of them safely deposited in a small room – heated completely through, Charles felt with relief – entrusted his rucksack to Hank, and went off to deliver the guns.

The mayor bleated a protest, following. The rest of the people scurried after them. And when the door shut, Hank caught Charles’ eye. Something about the whole situation made them both start laughing.

“It’s not fair, really,” said Hank, after they had calmed down. “We should have given him notice.”

“There’s no phone in that truck, and I didn’t see one on the road.”

“We always take a radio. And all the emergency supplies – we would have been O.K. stuck out there a night or two, you know.”
“I’m sure. I’m much happier to be here, though.” Charles smiled. “You did an excellent job driving, Hank – I’m impressed.”

Hank beamed. “Thanks.” He stripped out of his coat, spread his arms, and flopped down on the room’s bed. “I’m tired.”

“You’re not the only one.” Charles flopped too. “We share, then?”

“Sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing so much? I don’t care. I’ll just be glad of a sleep. This is the largest bed I’ve been in,” and Charles rolled from side to side, “for quite a while.”

Which, he remembered, had made fucking Erik rather a contortionist’s act – but he was not going to think about that, not now.

Hank practically dislocated his jaw, yawning.

“Are you hungry?”

“Not really. It’s weird.” Hank mumbled, “but I suppose it’s the adrenaline. I’ll have a big breakfast tomorrow, though.”

“How big is a big breakfast?”

“Huge.” Hank sounded like Kurt. “It’s a bit of a perk. The mayor’s got a chef and everything –”

“Even when we at the Manor starved?”

“– just in case Frost shows up.”

“That makes more sense, given the tithing policy. Frost eats like a horse, does she?”

“I don’t think the tithes really …” another yawn, “work.”

Charles let silence fall. He listened to the tick of the room’s radiator. The electric light showed faint marks on the wall – surely this had been some sort of office, once. He took off his mittens and gloves, reached up to pull off his hat, and let them all fall to the floor. He checked the pockets of his jeans for the pearls and topazes; for Armando’s gold. Still there.

There had been something about tithes that had jogged his memory … No, about food, and Hank … Someone had brought them …

The pieces fell into place. “Some outsiders must think us more worthy of extra food than others. Remember how Dr. Vogelzang gave us a sandwich?”

“You don’ mind if I sleep, do you?”

“Not at all. Dr. Vogelzang … Hank, where’s her practice?”

A snort. “What?”

Charles changed tacks. “Is there an address book anywhere in this place?”

“Yeah. Main offices.”
“Good. I’ll need it tomorrow, to run my errands.”

“Thassagood idea …”

“Go to sleep, Hank.” Charles patted his shoulder. “Well done.”

Another mumble. Then a bit of a snore.

_Shite_. Sure enough: it grew into a clatter that kept Charles from deep sleep – blinking awake to elbow Hank into momentary silence, then dozing again, and off and on again until the door creaked.

“You could’ve turned this off.” A _snap_ – Logan flicked the light switch and the room was plunged into darkness. “I can still see fine.”

“Logan,” Charles groaned. “I can’t sleep.”

“New place. That and you have to roll this one over to shut him the hell up. C’mon man,” a rustle next to him, as Logan took hold of Hank. “Heave, ho.”

The snoring dwindled to a buzz as Hank mashed his face into a pillow.

“Oh, thank God.”

“I know, right?”

Charles heard rustling in the dark. Logan had to be taking off his boots. And then he felt hands on his own boots, tugging.

“Your feet will hurt tomorrow, otherwise.”

“Thank you.”

“No prob. Is there room down there?”

For a moment, Charles thought he meant his shoes – but – _oh_, the bed. “Yes.”

“I’d normally keep watch for a while, but I’m tired, X.”

“I’ll use my ability.” Setting thought-fires on the threshold and through the halls was easy as anything.

“Are you sure?”

“It will work. Did the guns get delivered?”

“Yes. No problems, no surprises. Run-of-the-mill … arms-running.”

“Logan?”

“Hnh?”

_I still can’t sleep_, Charles thought of saying – but the bed creaked as Logan settled next to him, and he blinked up into the dark. _How awkward_ – but great minds thought alike, it seemed, because,

“Promise not to hump me when you drop off?”

“In your dreams,” Charles huffed.
“Pre-cisely.” Logan’s sigh rumbled in his chest. “But we’re all grown-ups here, and I’m trusting you now, Charlie. I *trust* you won’t get all grabby on my attractive ass.”

Which brought to mind Erik’s relentless hugging in bed .... “Lehnsherr’s not a grown-up, then?”

For a long moment, Charles heard only Logan’s breath.

“Thought you would have figured that out by now, X.”

“Um,” he hedged, “I’ve realized some things.”

Charles did not want to reveal too much. But what more did Logan know? He would never be so forthcoming as when he was half-asleep; perhaps he could be pressed –


“You can’t have known him well. Not after … how long?”

“Only a month or so. He busted me out of Alkali, and then we did the run on the Free West nukes.”

“Sounds like quite an adventure.”

“It was. Sold me on the whole EBS thing – at least, before I met Marie.”

*Marie.* Charles reminded himself: *dig deeper, there.*

“Frost sends me to scout D.C. round Christmas. I get back a month later, and I see him ...”

Was it the darkness that made Logan’s voice sound so strange?

Charles frowned into the darkness. What to ask –

“I don’t know why I care. I shouldn’t care – in fact, I *don’t* care. His idea of fun is ripping my ribs out of my body. He’s insane. He’s gone.”

“I find he has lucid periods.”

“Course he does. How d’you think he leads the army?” Logan’s voice slurred with fatigue; then dropped. “She cut his hair, you know.”

Which was a non sequitur, and besides: he had shaved himself bald not a month ago. So why did the words make his skin crawl?

“Who did?”

"Frosty the snow bitch. You cold, Chuck?"

“Yes. Give me some more blankets?”

“Help yourself, and go to sleep. Big day tomorrow. Big *breakfast*, hell yeah.”

“You and Hank, the pair of you ...”

There was no reply, except for Logan’s even breathing. He couldn’t have fallen asleep so quickly. Charles thought of nudging him again, prying for more information.
He decided against it.

And Charles thought of Erik when his eyes finally fell shut: Erik, and the tapestry stuffed in the duffel bag, with its beautiful city on a hill shining between a blue lake and a blue sky. And when Charles saw horsemen galloping out into the darkness of the room, roaring down a hill with Erik at their head holding aloft a sword … he knew he was dreaming then, for in reality there were no figures on the tapestry at all.

Charles bounded out of bed the next morning, dove into the bathroom to wash in record time, and went for the door.

“Hey,” Logan growled. “Wait up.”

“Of course.” He took his hand off the doorknob; smiled broadly. “Just eager.”

“Well, sit your eager ass down and wait up.” Logan tossed off the covers and stretched; then meandered towards the bathroom. “Or wake up Hank, would you?”

Charles did. Eventually Hank took Logan’s place, and Charles heard him start singing in the shower. Loudly.

“My poor ears,” he sighed.

“Let him be.” Running a comb through his hair – or yanking at it in places, anyway – Logan continued, “What’d I say last night, anyway, X?”

Checking his pockets gave Charles time to come up with a good answer. “Nothing much. You talked about breakfast.”

“Good stuff. I was tired, you know.”

“I gathered.”

The comb got tossed onto Logan’s battered leather bag. “Nice of you not to run off on me, just now.”

“Really, where would I go?”

“I know, right? This building’s a straight-up maze. But since all of us are being all trusting, now, here’s a rule of thumb – I talk about Marie? You keep it to yourself.”

“Um.”

Logan glared at him.

“Certainly.” Charles searched for the duffel bag under the bed. “Ah, here it is.” He straightened. “You know you can trust me, Logan, just as you’ve said I can trust you. I can hide anything – even from Frost.”

“Maybe, Charles, but you know I don’t want to test it.”

As Logan moved to make the bed, quick and efficient, Charles leaned against the door and watched. *Logan and Marie …*
What were the two of them hiding? Why was Frost so vested in keeping them separate? His intuition flared like a beacon: if they were hiding something, it had to be … significant. Not a tired Victorian-novel device like concealing an affair, Erik –

“Ready?” Hank said, emerging from the bathroom.

A short while later they left, all carrying their outdoor layers, and Charles carrying the duffel bag. There was no getting away from the other two as they walked down hallways and flights of stairs.

Logan lifted his head and sniffed; then opened a door. Charles saw two strangers in what looked like livery – catching sight of them, setting down handfuls of silverware, dashing away. Then he saw steaming trays lay on the sideboard alongside a jug of juice and a carafe; the table in the middle of the room set for three. “They don’t partake?”

“Nope. They give us food, they run away – same story, every time. It has to be orders, and not from Julie, because I’m not so freaky, am I? Not so scary.”

“Not at –”

Logan extended the claws of one hand and stabbed three sausage patties at once.

“– all,” Charles finished.

“What?” came the reply, muffled by sausage.

“Nothing. You go first, Hank.”

“Twist my arm,” Hank said happily, and brought them all their plates.

Breakfast proceeded in silence. Charles kept his best manners, pleased with the other two: though they were hungry enough to be wolfish, they did not make a terrible amount of noise or mess. The food was some of the most delicious he had ever tasted.

Soon enough, they were finished. “What do we do with …” Charles gestured at the dirty dishes.

“Kitchen.”

“We don’t let someone else just – take them?” We could tip, Charles thought –

“Kitchen,” Logan repeated. “I know where it is, and it’s a chance to say hi. You know?” He stacked the plates into an empty tray, and gestured for Hank and Charles to help.

They followed him in procession, Charles carrying the empty jug and carafe, the duffel slung over his shoulder. Erik, he thought, amused, could carry everything by himself – glass jug and tapestry aside.

Best not to think of him, though.

Logan led them down back hallways and narrow stairs. Charles gave up on keeping conscious track of the route, and delegated mapping duty to the aviary instead. Subconscious, because into his consciousness blasted heat and steam and raucous noise – a kitchen in full operation, Logan having opened the back door to it.

“Bonjour-hi!” he boomed.

“Jacques!” And a tall woman, skinny as a rail, elbowed through the cooks that had turned to gawk.
Greetings in rapid-fire French flew by. Charles stared at everyone and everything.

“Yeah, it was delicious. Thanks,” Logan said. “You know Hank – this is our friend, Charles Xavier. Charles: Chef Julie.”

“A pleasure!” The woman - Julie - flipped him a salute. “And I would talk, Jacques, but I have a breakfast meeting to prepare, so I have to shout some more. You need anything, you tell me.”

“Corny give you a raise yet?”

“Ta gueule.”

“Don’t you go poisoning him now.” Logan grinned.

“I don’t care who orders me; you know I never will,” she replied, grinning just as broadly. “Va-t’en.”

“You call me if you need some vegetables diced. Come on Hank, Chuck. Time’s a-wasting.”

Charles decided against any protest. Far better to pick judicious moments to object to the pace – for example, after they wound through yet more back passages, and emerged into a large hall. A grand staircase swept through the middle; Charles had to crane his neck to see the ceiling.

“Front door.” Logan had been giving cursory nods to various workers and civil servants – the whole foyer was a hum of activity, with people looking over shoulders to stare. Charles could not pause to think about the meetings undoubtedly starting; if he did, he would remember Oxford, and Cambridge, and Coventry, and he would have to sit down and weep on the steps.

“Suit up,” Logan said, “and we’ll go.”

Hank started putting on his coat and gloves. Charles swallowed. “I need an address book.”

“I know where we have to go, X.”

“No. I have to deliver this,” Charles held up the duffel, “to a synagogue with the name Shalom in it. I need an address book.”

“All right, all right. One second.”

Logan went into an office. Charles saw him gesturing; saw a boy nod and hand him a binder. And one minute later, in his own hands, said binder was quite light.

“That’s it? For the whole city?”

“Some don’t like to be listed, but that’s most of it. Religious groups are after the post office.”

Charles flipped through the pages. Impossible, to stop and pore over the listings for – acupuncture, dentist – doctors – He glanced over that leaf in a flash and moved on.

There was only one synagogue in town. “Here. Temple … Beth Shalom, 109 North Pearl Street. Easy enough.” Pearl. Damn, he needed to find a pawnshop. “Where first, gentlemen?”

“To the market,” Logan said. “We’re walking.”

“Who has the money? We do have money, don’t we? Or is this on a barter system?”
“There’s money,” said Hank. “Wait – the sledge – I’ll meet you out front.”

He dashed off. Logan pulled on gloves and a hat that looked like a badger turned inside out.

“There’s a routine, Chuck. Just follow along and you’ll be fine. Oh, and keep up.”

“You couldn’t run me into ground last fall.” Charles followed him out the foyer door. “What makes you think you’ll be able to now?”

Logan leaned against the front door. Smirked. “Bit chilly out.”

And when they went outside, the cold sucked all Charles’ breath away.

But pulling his scarf up over his mouth fixed a great deal of that, and left his mind free to focus on the view stretching in front of him: smoke from chimneys; dots of people. Was Albany considered the capital of the EBS? If so, Charles thought, Oxford had it beat for population. He hugged the fact to himself as he kept pace with the others: Hank, tugging a sledge on metal runners, and Logan whistling.

The market began at the foot of the bluff and stretched down State Street all the way to the moat inside the east wall – but even so, the crowd was thin. Surely there were not so many kept inside from the cold. If Albany were like any town he knew, residents would seize with both hands the chance to see a new face. Or, a new half-a-face.

There were people looking up at them, watching them come down the stairs. Hank had hoisted the sledge – he was stronger than Charles thought, but surely that was not the only reason they had attracted attention.

Just in case …. Charles set his power hovering over the market The noise of so many minds proved more overwhelming than the sight of so many actual people – but even with all quieted to a dull roar, any emotion out of the ordinary – powerful anger or fear … recognition – any of that would send up a flare and catch his notice.

Charles could glimpse a river beyond the wall – the Hudson – as he caught up with the others and passed through the security barricade.

“Watch your pockets,” Logan said.

“Will do,” Charles replied, and Hank set the sledge back down.

It was impossible to keep from grinning at the hubbub: vendors shouting out to passers-by; bargains being argued and then struck; goats bleating and chickens squawking; even one yowling screech that set his hair on end –

“They’ve got the puma here again.” Logan grimaced. “Damn.”

“We don’t have to look at it. Where’s the list?” Hank asked.

Charles drew close as Logan unfolded a paper. “The usual. Oh, Chuck, you get whatever things you need for your party, yeah? And there’s a – luxury pet emporium,” he grinned, “just around the corner.” He pointed south. “You get that kitty the best little shitbox money can buy.”

Logan flipped four bills out of a battered wallet and handed them over.

“It’s a dirt box,” Charles said, dignified. “Forty dollars, Eastern …” The bills looked just like a ten-
dollar ones, from Before – he had seen the pictures. He secured them deep in a pocket. “That’s enough?”

“More than enough. Any overdraft comes out of my pay, so watch it. Hank, you get the cans, I’ll look up perishables –”

“But – Logan …”

“What?”

“Are we allowed to …”

Charles watched their interplay.

“To split up? Why not? If we can’t trust him now, when are we going to start? Chuck, you’re on your own.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Meet back here at eleven o’clock.”

Hank checked his watch. “That’s an hour – it should be enough to –”

“Make it noon, since I need to drop this tapestry at the temple. And how will I know the time?” he asked, forestalling Hank’s protest.

“Market Hall has bells at the top,” Logan said, tipping his chin at a tower that came to a sharp point. “They go on the hour, and at twelve, we’ll get some music, oh, là là. Here.” He pulled a revolver, and gave it to Charles. “In case anyone gives you trouble, X. Back here at twelve noon.”

“Twelve noon.”

Charles checked the safety and shoved the gun into his coat pocket, gave them both a broad smile and a wave, and turned on one boot heel to walk north before Hank could open his mouth.

Armando’s gold, his own jewels, the money – all of it was burning holes in his pockets. That and Dr. Vogelzang – after, he told himself, and: “Excuse me. Excuse me,” he said, and then he used the duffel bag to clear a path through spectators.

They were gathered round some species of big cat – the puma – in a strong cage, hooting and throwing scraps. Typical trade-fair crowd. The cat looked mangy at first glance, and Charles did not give it a second one; he had things to do.

Duty before pleasure. The first stop was the synagogue. Beth Shalom had set up shop what looked like a former church – the crosses had been removed, at least, and a tablet with its name had been erected outside. Charles knocked.

He had to stand, and had to bloody knock, for a full ten minutes before the door opened and a close-faced woman in a long skirt and a lace snood stared out at him. “May I help you?”

“Yes, thank you. I come with a gift for your temple.” Charles gave her his most innocuous smile. “From Lady Frost.”

Shite, did people even know her name? Aside from mayors and soldiers, and civilians unfortunate enough to fall in the Finder’s way, of course. Did the average –
Except it seemed they did know, for the woman’s eyes widened. “One moment, please.”

She made to shut the door, but Charles said, “May I come in at least? It’s quite cold.”

“Yes,” she said. “Come in.”

Inside, Charles knocked the snow off his boots and took off his hat and scarf.

“Here.”

He looked down at the small … cap that the woman was offering him. He had heard the name for it; he didn’t quite recall - “Sorry?”

She fished in one pocket of her skirt, and held out a bobby pin.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “If you want me to wear that, I don’t have very much hair to hold it down.” I don’t suppose you have something sticky instead? he wanted to add, but restrained himself.

She handed him the cap. “Please, wait here,” and she ushered him to a warm room. “Your name?”

“Charles Xavier.”

Charles waited several more minutes in their receiving room – or, whatever the word for it was, in Hebrew. “I have no idea,” he murmured to the plush carpets, the overstuffed chairs, and the grandfather clock ticking in the corner. There was a fire burning. He drew his gloves off, one finger at a time; set the duffel bag down next to a chair near the fire, and sat.

There were few decorations in the room, he saw, but the heavy furniture had elegant lines that glimmered with the firelight. Charles stared at the fire. He wondered who they got to build it Friday sunset. He tried to center the cap on his head. Not bad – if he just held it in place –

“Mr. Xavier?” an accented voice said, and he jumped and dropped the cap.

“Oh, excuse me. Yes – please call me Charles.” He got to his feet, and held out a hand to the bearded man in the doorway. A shorter man, wearing a suit and his own cap – his beard close-cropped and white, and his eyes dark beneath greying brows.

“Thank you.” He took Charles’ hand and shook it; his palm was cold. “My name is Reuven Maltovsky; I am the rabbi here. May I ask – Miss Green was not quite clear about why you have come to visit us?”

“I have come,” Charles said, grandly, “to bring you a gift.”

The words clanged in the room.

“I see. May I clarify: from which person?”

“From Lady Emma Frost.”

The name registered again, Charles saw, for Maltovsky went pale beneath his beard.

“With nothing but the best wishes, of course,” he hastened to add. “Also,” and Charles lifted the duffel bag to the chair and unzipped it, “I apologize for the lack of notice. She thought your people – your congregation, that is – might have use for … this.”

Charles had forgotten how the tapestry’s colors glowed. For as they unrolled with a waft of cedar
scent over a side table – the green hills, white mountains, and blue lake and sky … they warmed the room in a way the fire could not.

After a moment had passed, Charles sneaked a look at Maltovsky for his reaction.

Damn. His face was quite blank. At least he could move his lips, though, for he said:

“It’s …” Maltovsky hesitated. Then he reached out to touch the silken weave. “It’s magnificent.”

“I thought so, too,” Charles said. “It would be a shame to keep it rolled up in a duffel bag for God knows how long – sorry,” for he saw Maltovsky’s lips thin, “for who knows how long. Something as beautiful as this needs to breathe. It was made in Eretz Galut, you know.”

“I was next going to ask,” Maltovsky said, quietly, “how it came into the Lady’s possession.”

“It was given as a gift. Along with –” the other bag, he remembered: the strange cloth. But he kept it to himself for now. “Along with other things. She in turn tasked me with giving it to the temple named Shalom, and so here it is.”

“… Not Shomrei Shalom? They are another congregation,” Maltovsky said, even more quietly, “on Maiden Lane.”

“There’s another? Then – I’m so sorry; I have no excuse. It’s possible I have the wrong people – and I must deliver this. I said I would, and she …” To a complete stranger, he would not admit being afraid of her, or being – however unwillingly – a toady. “I …”

Maltovsky flattened one hand on the tapestry, and touched Charles’ shoulder briefly with the other. “You need say nothing. I shall send a messenger and they will come. Would you care for something to eat or drink while you are here, Mr. Xavier?”

“Do call me Charles.” He sat down again. “I should like that very much, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

And Maltovsky left the room as silently as he had entered it.

Charles brought his fingers to his temples. Some don’t like to be listed – and sure enough, here was a group that had made such a choice, just to cause him trouble.

But he did not have to tell Frost. Had she even known there was more than one group of Jews in Albany? He resolved to find out.

“Here.” Maltovsky returned, holding the door open. The woman of earlier – Miss Green – and a younger girl came inside: Miss Green holding a tea tray; the child almost skipping behind her, carrying a plate of what looked like cakes.

“Set them there, maidele.”

Charles controlled his twitch well. “And who is this?” he said, kindly.

The little girl set down the cakes and ducked her head, shy. Miss Green took hold of her shoulder in a tight grip – Charles saw her knuckles whiten.

“This,” Maltovsky said, “is one who should not be out. Hannah? Please take her upstairs.”

Miss Green nodded and whisked the child out of the room. Charles blinked after them. She had not
been so much like Jean, after all – Jean would have made some protest.

“Let me offer you some refreshment, Charles.” Maltovsky poured out a cup of tea. “Have a cake.”

Charles bit into one. It tasted powerfully of honey, and stuck in his throat, moist. He swallowed – “Thank you –” and took the tea.

Inclining his head, Maltovsky poured himself another cup. “Rav Levin will be here soon. It is a bit of a walk from Maiden Lane, given the market – the tram is not running today.”

“I’m happy to speak to him. Again, I’m sorry for any inconvenience this has caused you.”

“It’s nothing. Please, eat. Although when he is here, I will ask you to wear that yarmulke.”

“But – my hair’s so short –”

“There’s a trick to it.” Maltovsky smiled. “I’ll show you.”

“Thank you,” Charles sighed in relief. “I don’t suppose you could recommend a good barber?”

“You’d have passed it on the way here – it’s across from the soda fountain, next to Market Hall.”

“And do you know a good pawnshop?”

“... Why do you ask me?”

“I’ve never been to Albany before,” Charles said, honestly, “but a friend asked me to change some gold here.”

“Then from the market, you’ll go the opposite direction, down South Pearl Street, and turn right at Second. There’s an alley soon after, Van Buren’s Way. It’s the first door on the left. They do a roaring trade in jewelry –”

“I have jewels, but not set.”

“ – thanks to grave-robbing.”

Charles flushed to his ears. “I came by mine quite honestly, I assure you.”


For lack of anything else to do, Charles ate the rest of the honey cake.

His catalogue brought up the page from the address book; spread it before his eyes. Vogelzang, Sarah W.: Radiation Therapy, Counseling, Pediatrics. 255 South Pearl St. South – past the market again – it might take him a good while to get there. Charles swallowed his cloying mouthful; chased it with some tea.

“Good?”

“Very,” he said.

“Then have some more. And tell me,” a sip of tea, “where in Britain you are from. I had distant family in London – not anymore, obviously, but for a while, Before.”

“Oh. I’m from Oxford. In London – I’m so sorry.”
“The rest of my family was in New York that Was, so please, send the sympathy there.”

“… How did you escape? December of 1950, wasn’t it, for New York?”

“I was giving a lecture to a group of students from Yale. We could not meet on campus, but that turned out for the good, since we avoided a crush.” He stared into space. “I found a bus and took the students as far northwest as I could, New Haven being in the line of fallout from both New York and Philadelphia, given the winds – and the road due north was chaos, pure and simple. We drove until we reached the Catskills, and we stayed there for several months.” Maltovsky’s mouth twisted. “I was surprised at how many of them knew how to ski. But we had moved in very different circles, Before.”

Charles shook his head. “I was a student myself, then, and the greatest comforts to me were those who led – who knew what they were doing, and reassured through their example.”

“I did not know what I was doing.”

“Well, who gave a decent impression of knowing, then.”

“That is good to know.” Maltovsky took a last drink of tea. “More?”

“Yes, please.” Charles drained his, hurriedly. “Thank you.”

His cup was refilled in silence.

He tried to think of other conversation. The grandfather clock ticked into the quiet; the tapestry’s colors seemed to whisper in their own voices: that he was a stranger there, with no idea what to do or say; that he was too far from home –

Charles heard a distant knock.

“Already?” said Maltovsky, putting aside his teacup. “No, Hannah,” he told Miss Green, who had looked into the room, “send your brother to the door. Stay upstairs.”

“What need I do?”

Maltovsky put the cap – yarmulke – on Charles’ head, and twisted it to stay on, somehow. “Keep hold of that, and tell them what you told me. Stand up.”

Charles jolted to his feet and swiped the cake crumbs off his front. He felt better for doing so when a man as old as Maltovsky – but taller, robed head to foot in black and wearing a caftan – swept into the room. The caftan was as tall as his beard was long. Neither softened his demeanor.

The two younger men with him, one on each side, looked less forbidding. It could have been the patchy beginnings of a beard on the first, or the sidecurls of different length on the second – whatever it was, Charles smiled at them to see if they would smile back. They did not. Surprise.

The older man glared at him, and spoke abruptly to Maltovsky, in … what had to be Yiddish.

“The same, from me and mine,” Maltovsky replied. “May I introduce Mr. Charles Xavier, an envoy from the great Lady Frost.”

That touched a nerve – the man started talking faster than before.

“What’s he saying?” Charles asked.
Maltovsky smoothed down his suit front. “He asks if it is true, what I said to bring him here. Indeed, it is. Rav Levin – Lady Frost’s gift to us is here.”

He indicated the tapestry with a wave of the hand.

Rav Levin stared, as did his two followers. One stepped forward to look more closely, and stepped back, abashed, at his leader’s shake of the head. Charles kept a straight face at the sight of the caftan waggling.

The same leader crossed his arms over his chest and spoke again in Yiddish to Maltovsky.

Who related to Charles, “He says it’s not as good as the one they have already.”

“They had one from Lady Frost?” Bloody hell, what were the odds of her acquiring two?

“No. From Galut.” Maltovsky gazed at his … colleague, surely, an unreadable expression on his face. “They came to Albany more recently than I, and built their own place of worship – from nothing unclean, you understand. And they can speak English as well as any of us can. Just to let you know.”

Another glare and a diatribe in – damn. Charles knew he had a chance of decoding the inflections of Yiddish, but switching to Hebrew meant he was sunk. And since Levin seemed to be settling in for a long rant, Charles decided to change the subject. “You can understand when I ask, then,” and he strode over to the duffel, “if you can you tell me what this is.”

He tugged at the drawstrings of the smaller, woolen bag, and pulled out the cloth.

Silence fell.

Charles grinned to himself. What an effect – Levin staring again, tight-lipped; his followers goggling; Maltovsky’s fingers clenching in his beard.

He heard guttural words.

“He asks, and I ask – that is: where,” Maltovsky started; but had to clear his throat. “Where did you get that?”

“From Galut. It was a present – Lady Frost received it, alongside the other.”

“No, but to whom – that is …. ” He looked pained. “Mr. Xavier, do you know what that is?”

“Obviously not. I wouldn’t have asked you, otherwise.” Nettled, Charles stared at the pack of them. “Anyone care to enlighten me?”

“It’s a prayer shawl,” Maltovsky said. “For a Bar Mitzvah, of course. May I see?”

He carefully took the shawl from Charles’ hands. Charles watched them all step closer to see – and to touch. One of Levin’s followers plucked at the blue thread in one of the fringes; the other – touched the knots? Odd. Levin only looked.

“ ‘A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand, but it shall not come near you.’ That,” and Maltovsky pressed the raised silk calligraphy, shining silver on the shawl, with one thumb, “is here, and on the bag, I believe, in its entirety. Can you think of the intended recipient of such a –”

“Erik Lehnsherr, of course.”
The grandfather clock sounded very loud in the room.

*Mistake,* Charles thought, but at least he had their attention again. “He lived in Galut for a while, I think,” he said, reckless. “He was well enough the last time I saw him, but,” he tilted his brow at the prayer shawl, “he had no idea about that.”

The Jews said nothing. The two younger men, Charles saw, looked especially … disconcerted? *No.* Wide-eyed, a strange emotion glimmering in their faces – one of them took Levin by the sleeve and said something, to which he –

Charles flinched as the older man shook free of the younger, and – glared at him, Charles Xavier, with piercing eyes – and *spat* something, vicious.

“He calls you a liar,” Maltovsky said, quietly.

“I’m *not* a liar,” Charles snapped. “Erik Lehnsherr – about this tall,” he gestured, “red hair, tattoo on his shoulder? A lion, with Hebrew written round it?”

*Shagged him rotten this past Christmas,* he added to himself, but if Levin were angry at the name alone, he would fall about foaming at the mouth at such a flagrant violation of Levitical law –

Or he would just storm out of the room, dragging along the other two, all three of them gone in one fell swoop.

The front door slammed.

He winced. “I’m sorry. I’ve lost you your guests.”

Maltovsky sank into the chair by the fire.

“Sir?” Charles walked to him. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he replied, voice low. “But I would ask to be alone now, Charles Xavier.”

Charles was silent.

“Please leave,” Maltovsky said.

“Of – of course. If you wish it.”

Charles took the duffel bag, left the tapestry on the table, and stared at the open door to the sitting room.

“They took the prayer shawl with them. Lady Frost might miss it – is there any way I can get it back?” He bit his lip. “It wasn’t quite a gift, was it? Not like the tapestry was, for you.”

*No indeed.* He remembered: she had meant it for the trash.

“She won’t miss it.”

Surely he wasn’t a telepath. “How do you know?” Charles said.

“In all my years here, Charles Xavier, the Lady Frost has never once spoken to, or consulted, or taken any notice of my congregation. If she does so now – ah, I begin to see. I see. As the end comes, she wants an assurance.”
“And what might that be?”

Maltovsky pointed with an age-spotted hand. “That silver plate on the mantel? That belonged to my father, in New York City that Was. Take it to the Lady Frost.” His voice was bitter. “Tell her in my name that we are content with our lot, and we will not ask for his return.”

“But –”

“Just do as I tell you.”

Charles took the plate with nerveless fingers. It was large, and very heavy. He turned back to look: in his chair, Maltovsky looked exhausted.

“I know the way this world works, Professor.” He ran his fingers through his beard. “I cannot guarantee the silence of Levin and his followers, but …”

“I don’t think she knows they exist.”

“Just as well.” Maltovsky closed his eyes. “You may go.”

“But –”

“Now.”

So Charles went - but not before leaving the prayer shawl's bag on the table, for someone who would be able to use it.

He walked down North Pearl Street as quickly as he could, the snow squeaking under his boots and unease crawling up and down his spine. He would consider that whole little Jewish drama later; for now, he had supplies to buy, a pawnshop to find … Dr. Vogelzang to see, although he had no idea what he would say to her.

“Hello, at least.”

And: thank you, for trying to help him – even though he had given the game away, revealing too much power …

Charles ramped up that power now, searching the whole market for a spark of recognition, or rage, or Free West. Nothing. He felt Logan’s mind, though, and Hank’s. Separate from each other; the one running through lists, the other … also running through lists.

He retraced his steps; noted the barbershop right by Market Hall. The wild cat had been taken away, and there was the pet shop, just as Logan had said. Charles squared his shoulders, lifted his chin, and walked inside.

Instinct made him project goodwill and veil the secondhand nature of his clothing. Perhaps, Charles thought, he should have done a bit of both at the temple.

“May I help you?” the proprietor said.

“Yes, please. I require all the necessaries – and luxuries – for a new kitten. My daughter just acquired one.” An air of a spoiled dandy; eccentric but kind; yes, that would suit. “I tried to protest, but faced with two little darlings, what can one do?”

“Very little.” It seemed the proprietor – Mr. VanEck on the nametag – was rubbing together mental
hands at the thought of such expense. “What are you prepared to spend, sir?”

“Upwards of twenty dollars,” Charles said, grandly.

Here that tone had the perfect effect. VanEck beamed and ushered him through the stacks of merchandise. Soon there was a cartful of items in front of him at the counter, and an assistant was scribbling figures on a pad of paper.

“You can check these if you wish,” said VanEck. “My total is eighteen dollars and three cents.”

Charles waved his hand. “I trust you. Do you deliver?”

“We – can, at market’s end. It would be fifty more cents.”

“Excellent. Please, then, pack these up –” a dirt box; a basket; one bag of clay granules and one of wood shavings; canned mashed fish that he would have eaten last December; and a bag of toys with feathers on them, “and have them delivered to …” He grinned. “James Howlett, Esquire, at the Capitol Building.”

He gave the assistant two ten-dollar bills. “Keep the change.”

There was nothing like a bit of fawning to raise one’s spirits, Charles thought as he was bowed out of the shop. Just for fun, he kept the blurred appearance and aura of goodwill when he went into a cookery shop – and then out, having purchased all the powdered sugar, flour, candied violets and chocolate he would need for Scott and Jean’s party. That and two round pans, all to be delivered to Logan. Perhaps he should rustle up some scandalous pieces of lingerie; make Logan sign for them and scowl. As it was, he had ten dollars left for a haircut, after –

His goodwill faltered when he heard the bells strike quarter past eleven –

– and when he felt a flicker of a familiar mind.

Charles picked up his pace and sent his power flying. The seethe and roil of so many thoughts – there were fewer earlier, he realized, because of course the three of them had been early to the market – and the flicker became a spark. He closed in on it. “Show me,” he told his raven, and he saw the dizzying reflection of the capitol building, refracting through of reality –

– and Schrödinger’s mutant loping down the granite steps, sending shock waves through the minds around him.

“Damn,” Charles whispered. He checked the gun in his pocket and walked faster. Azazel was far enough away that he would not catch up quickly … but he could teleport, of course. Charles gritted his teeth and crossed one intersection – First Street at South Pearl Street, then Second. He scanned both sides of the street for 255, found it, and ran up the steps.

“Come on,” he said. “Come on.”

The clatter of someone walking, the rattle of lock and chain – he fought back a shudder – and there –

It was her assistant.

“Is Dr. Vogelzang in?” Charles asked. “It’s urgent.”

“… No,” the boy said. He looked at Charles askance. “She’s on her rounds.”
“What?”

“It’s Wednesday, isn’t it? She’s outside the wall.”

“But.” Charles blinked hard, eyes burning in the cold. “When will she return?”

“Before dark, we hope. You know how it is.”

“That’s four-thirty?”

“Say, five o’clock. Who are you, anyway? What do you want?”

The assistant did not recognize him. “I’m nobody,” Charles said. “That is: I’ll call back later. What days is the doctor usually available?”

“She does rounds on Monday and Wednesday; house calls Friday and the weekend. Does someone need help? I’ve training.”

“Tuesday and Thursday all day, then; thank you.” He would not leave any incriminating word; he would not risk her well-being again. He could sneak out of the capitol building somehow. “Until later,” he murmured, and dashed off.

He felt the young man’s suspicion focusing on him; found that focus and nudged back –

– just enough to move it to the mailbox. 255, came the thought, and it’s getting rusty.

Charles checked the aviary. Good. That bit of manipulation had not made any bird disappear.

“I would miss you, my dears,” he said, half-running down the street. He found Second, reversed Maltovsky’s first direction – turned left. Sure enough, there was Van Buren’s Way. First door on the left – there it was –

And there was Azazel’s mind, appearing high up – on top of a building? – at Second and South Pearl.

“Jesus,” Charles gulped, and slammed the pawnshop door behind him.

“Someone’s in a hurry.”

Suspicion again – Charles closed his eyes, strengthened his power, and forced a smile as the mind on the far side of the shop retreated into indifference.

“Something I can help you with?”

“Yes.”

Charles walked through the dimly lit shop. Dusty odds-and-ends gleamed at him from every nook and cranny: a massive tea urn here, a pink china pig there. At the counter, he saw gold and gimcracks in a glass case.

The blurred reflection in the glass made him smile and look up. “Quite the assortment you have here.”

A cloth came up to polish the case, and – oh. This proprietor had a hook for his left hand – and a peg for his left leg, but Charles had certainly seen worse. He looked overfed and sickly, but the eyes that met his were hard little pebbles. “What business?”
“Gold business,” Charles said, and took Armando’s pen and cufflinks from his pocket. “What can I get for these?” As bald-faced an approach as he had ever used, but he did not have enough time to bargain hard.

“My pleasure. The name’s Stanley.”

“Nice to meet you.” Charles projected assurance. “I’m Oscar Wilde.”

Mr. Stanley had enough teeth left to test all the gold. Then he pulled out a scale and started fiddling with its balance. Charles watched him narrowly.

“Don’t you trust me?” Weights fell into one pan with a clatter; Stanley placed the pen in the other. “Why the eagle eyes?”

“I use them, in case I lose them – sometime in the future. One never knows.”

“Cataracts?”

“Mm. The glare off the snow here is quite something.”

“That’s why I never go out,” Stanley said. “Where’re you from?”

Charles doubled the assurance. “Buffalo.”

“More snow there.”

“Yes.”

“No snow down in Mexico.”

Such a genius, but: “No, indeed,” Charles said.

The scratch of pencil on paper, and then cufflinks replaced the pen.

“And more gold in these, I think. Four ounces each; total eight point two …” Stanley sucked on his teeth. “I’ll give you seventy-five for everything.”

Charles raised an eyebrow. “Not a cent less than one hundred twenty-five.”

“You want me to go to one hundred? Well, I’ve just met you, and I like you, but I have two children to feed. Eighty-five.”

“I’ve got three. One hundred twenty-five.”

Stanley blew out a breath; it stank. “Ninety-five, and that’s my last offer.”

“One hundred ten.”

“Done.”

Charles could have kept going, but he felt Azazel’s mind … not moving, damn it, right above Second and South Pearl. He watched the fingers of one hand fly over greasy bills; shoved his own hand in his pocket and took out the jewels.

“And how much for these?”

Jowls waggled as Stanley pursed his lips. “Those will take me a while.”
“I’m in a hurry.”

“I thought so, Oscar, remember? Not five minutes ago.”

“They’re real, I promise.” Unless – but Erik had told him they were real –

“Hm.” Stanley took the pearls and rolled them in his hand; rubbed them gently together. “They feel all right, maybe.”

“And these two?” He held out the topazes.

“Those would take me quite a while.” Stanley shrugged. “I’ll run a risk, and that’s because I like you: forty, for all four.”

Charles stared down at each topaz. One had more of a pink luster than the other. It was ridiculous to feel attached – and he had so many more in the coffer –

“I can get more any day of the week,” came the oily whisper. “I get a caravan out of New York City that Was twice a year – good pickings there. All you have to do,” Stanley chuckled, “is go glow-water diving.”

“Well, I won’t be doing that any time soon,” said Charles. “Deal.”

“Excellent.”

“And – this is off the record,” Charles added, as he saw the hook go for a brass ring holding a sheaf of papers.

“Really?”

“Really.” He covered the jewels with one palm. “Or the deal’s off.”

“Fine.” Stanley pushed a pile of bills towards him. “Don’t come crying to me when your people ask you for a receipt.”

“They won’t,” Charles said, and stared into the fishy eyes.

And he flicked the memories of the jewels straight out, tossed forgetfulness over the cut – pressed his lips together at the bright stab of hurt flashing from that mind – threw concealment at everything –

No trace.

Stanley’s jaw had dropped. He exhaled, a great shuddering sigh that made his flesh wobble – one of his eyelids started to twitch. Charles took the money and ran for it.

Azazel’s mind had gone from the intersection. Charles directed his steps to the barbershop. The tower clock struck a quarter of twelve.

Enough time, and it was warm, waiting. Two heaters glowed red-hot by the windows. There were three barbers there; all working on previous clients. Charles waited, blank, until a chair opened and a barber waved him to it.

Charles set the duffel bag down – the silver plate clanked – and tugged off his hat, sitting. To his left was a client examining his finished cut with a hand mirror; to his right, a man holding a hatbox, with turned-up mustachios and a tidy suit, was having his hair trimmed.
The bobble of his hat dangled limply, bright against his jeans. He should ask for shears and lop it off.

The barber cleared his throat. “What, exactly, do you want me to do here?”

As the others began chuckling, Charles grimaced at his reflection in the mirror propped on the window. “Shape it a bit? It’s coming in uneven. And I could use a shave.”

“All right, then. Short job.” The sound of razor on strop was reassuring. Familiar. And the shop was quite warm.

The window’s vantage point meant he could see almost all the traffic of the main market square. But Charles let his mind rest, and – heart in his mouth – he called up the aviary.

They flitted through his reading room like shadows. All of them except the hummingbird.

And now: except the sparrow.

His reflection blurred. To waste his sparrow, drab but loyal, on that – pawnbroker – why? What did he care? Except, if he were discovered, Frost would never let him put a foot outside the manor again ….

“Hey.” The barber touched his shoulder. “I didn’t nick you, did I?”

“No.” Charles blinked hard and lifted his chin. “And not much of a man for weeping over a shave, am I?”

“I’m not seeing much of a beard, so who cares what you are?” The face reflected above his own looked like leather. It creased in a half-smile. “I see all sorts.”

“Ah.”

The barber raised his voice. “I had, in this chair, Mayor Corning himself – and halfway through the shave, what falls off?”

“His hair,” the rest of the barbershop chorused.

“His hair,” and the barber went back to his work. “It was a toupee, all that time. And bringing it to your barber; man, that’s wrong. Perjury-wrong.”

“Speaking of perjury,” another client said, “what do you think of Comstock?”

“Comstock got one vote last time; he’ll get none this time. Rickers; I’d put money on Rickers.”

Conversation ebbed and flowed around him. Charles let himself be shaved. He wasn’t tired; he wasn’t – it had just been a stressful two hours.

And the sparrow was not gone, precisely. Its power was still there; only its manifestation had vanished …. Charles would miss it, but he had the others, didn’t he? And they could –

A thump rattled the window. Charles jumped in his seat, eyes flying open.

Another barber swore. “The Wolverine, as I live and breathe.”

Logan ran his hands through his own hair, grinned, and gave Charles a thumbs-up.
“Get yourself in here, c’mon.” The third gestured at Logan.

“Why?” the client to his right said, nervous. “Isn’t he the one that –”

"He’s welcome here, Randy. And I want to hear what’s going on down Arizona way, is why.”

Bells jangled. “Hey.”

Logan apparently knew everyone; he shook hands and clapped shoulders like a politician. He gave the nervous client a broad grin; it widened as the man tried to reply in kind, his smile as frightened as his mind was blank. Charles kept a gentle touch of power on him as he paid, clutched his hatbox close, and scurried out. Why not wear that hat?

A new client sat down.

It was amusing to hear Logan join the conversation with ease. But with bluff posturing by all, the political talk and gratuitous smoking - a cigar on one side of the store and a pipe on the other .... He tried not to give atmospheres a gender, but this one was almost oppressively masculine. Charles coughed and wished suddenly for – Marie, or for Angel, or for one of those women round the bonfire last October. Well. Not Frost. She would sneer.

Erik, he thought suddenly, would retreat to a corner to watch, silent … shy. Which could be mistaken for lurking by many.

_Mistaken, _hell: the man lurked and that was that. It could be his middle name. _Murder-Lurker Lehnsherr_ –

“Got any of my money left, Charles?”

“I do.” Charles pulled out a ten-dollar bill and gave it back. The money in his other pocket he kept hidden.

“Got yourself a friend, Wolverine? Pays you back, so you can get yourself a haircut,” Charles’ barber said. “About time, too.”

Logan swore a negative; Charles let his mind wander again.

_She cut his hair, you know._

If Erik had still had all his braids – or knots, or whatever they had been … a haircut would have taken quite some time. Unless Frost had gone at him with shears, which would not be surprising.

“All set,” the barber said, and whipped off the cloth from round Charles’ neck.

“Thank you,” he replied, peering in the mirror. “It looks excellent.” And it did: cropped closely along the sides, with longer hair fluffing at the top, but in a more stylish contrast. It would grow in much better now.

“Have a good one,” Logan said. He handed the ten to the barber. “Five back, and you can get a bit drunk on me.”

“You’d better believe it.” A handshake; Logan took hold of Charles’ shoulder.

“Let’s go.”

“Where’s Hank?”
“Hank is safe.” Logan opened the door and Charles pulled his hat back over his ears in a hurry. “Let’s have that gun back.”

Charles fished it out of his coat pocket and slapped it into Logan’s hand with scarcely any regret. “Safe? What is it, Logan? Did something happen?”

“No, nothing yet. But I smelled Azazel popping around, and where he goes there’s usually trouble.”

“But does he make the trouble? One has to consider that possibility.”

Logan scowled. “Frost probably just sent him to check up on us. You feel him?”

“Let me check …” Charles made a show of touching fingertips to one temple. “Ah. Don’t look up – but on top of the tower.”

“Market Tower? Those bells will scare his ass off in about a minute.”

And sure enough, when the jangle of music started, Azazel’s mind vanished. Charles laughed. “Knew it.” Logan held open a door for him. “Last stop. Did you get everything?”

“Yes – it will all be delivered tonight, I think.” An opportunity … “I can be sure to meet the shop clerks.” And then get conveniently lost, and find Vogelzang.

“We’ll figure it out. This is the best part,” and Logan smiled. “Better take off your coat.”

“What? Why?” For it was warm in the – random office building they had entered, but he was still comfortable wearing gloves, mittens, manteau …

“Here’s why.”

Logan tapped in a security code on a circular door, and led Charles through a vault and another door … into a greenhouse.

Charles felt nothing but wonder.

Wonder and sweat, the latter prickling over his body almost instantly. He stripped off his winter gear and shoved its various smaller pieces down the sleeves of his manteau - as he gazed round and round, open-mouthed. The lush greenery surrounding them was flourishing in what felt like tropical heat, filling the two stories completely roofed in glass, brushing up against condensation dripping off the panes. Charles saw pale orchids and pink-striped leaves; bright red tomatoes and yellow peppers; even orange trees, all in barrels, lining one side.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Tell that to Hank.”

“Where is he?”

“Somewhere in here. Ah, careful.” Logan caught his sleeve as Charles stepped towards a large humming box, curious. “That controls the heat and water. One wrong switch thrown and you might get –”

It started to rain on his body, but not his face. Charles stared round for the source.

“ – that out of order. A sprinkler.” Logan dashed water from his sleeves. “They go on a continuous
I know the queen of Britain uses some in her orangery.” Charles reached out to catch falling drops. “I’ve not seen one up close, though.”

“C’mon. Natural springs? Fountains? Same principle; nothing fancy.”

“If you say so – oh.”

“What?”

Charles tipped his head toward a wizened, human face propped back against a fig tree growing up towards the windows. His heart was pounding with the surprise, but whoever it was seemed to be sleeping, body mostly obscured by ferns.

“No worries. They take some of the older folks from the hospital and the homes and let ‘em sit here, most days in winter. Good for their lungs.”

“I see.”

“Hey, guys!”

“There he is,” Logan said.

“Charles! Logan!” Hank waved from far down an aisle. “Come and look at this!”

They walked over. Hank’s glasses glinted as he peered down at a huge green insect.

“What’s that, Hank?”

“It’s a praying mantis – they’re great for pest control. I only had two last year, so to see one this early is excellent.”

“Those the ones that bite a guy’s head off for the after party, yeah?”

“Cannibalizing their mates is a female trait that may have appeared in a laboratory setting,” Hank said firmly, “and not necessarily in nature.”

“Still.” Logan gave the large insect the side-eye. “Bit of turn-off.”

“How can you get turned on by thinking about insect sex?”

They started to bicker. Quietly, Charles watched the mantid pick its way over a leaf and move to a main stem. Then it waved its antennae and scuttled off more quickly than he thought it could.

Something must have surprised it.

Charles could not say what made him look up and around at the door – but for a split second, he thought he saw a blood-red and black … tree, growing at the height of the second floor.

But it was Azazel, standing on the lintel.

He met Charles’ eye. And held an index finger to his lips. In the other hand … he held a sword, oh God –

The door hissed open. “Dr. McCoy?”
“Yes, Mr. Pinkner? Did you get the salts?”

Charles stared at –

– the frightened client from the barber shop?

Who was still holding the hatbox.

He made eye contact with Charles, and blinked. Once, twice. It happened very slowly, as he reached for the hatbox lid.

The aviary shrieked in his mind – “Oh, fuck!” Charles gasped, and ran at him.

The client ran for the water and heat control box – device –

A blur of red in his peripheral vision made Charles skid to a stop – and everything sped up.

What was most frightening about Azazel was the way he dropped like a stone, disappeared halfway down, and flew through the door when he reappeared, horizontal somehow – kicked the man in the chest, rolled with the movement and grabbed the hatbox, spat: “Teeth!” at Logan – and disappeared again.

Charles could hardly breathe, coughing at the vapor – Logan barreled past him and tackled the client – Pinkner? – Hank was shouting something and somewhere an alarm went off. That woke even the oldest of the visitors, who joined the pandemonium. “Logan?!” Charles yelled. “Do you have him?”

“Got him. Got you, motherfucker –’

He had wedged his hand into Pinkner’s mouth; blood was trickling where teeth had cut him. “Logan,” Charles gasped, sickened. “What are you doing?”

“They always have a cyanide tooth.”

“Who?”

Logan snarled up at him. “Guess.”

Saboteurs? Charles guessed, and immediately knew it to be true. And Hank confirmed it – staggering up, twisting one hand round the other, round and round. “Mr. Pinkner. What are you – why –”

Then his face crumpled. “You’re fired.”

“And how. You are so fired,” Logan shook Pinkner. “You are so fucked. You know just who you get to talk to, now? Feel lucky, bastard.”

There was a snap-crack and a gust of sulfur. “Made it.”

“What happened?”

“It blew up over the ocean. The little bomb this one had,” Azazel hissed at Charles, yellow teeth bared, “in his little box.” He whipped the blade down in a vicious arc. It sank into the earth an inch from Pinkner’s head. “I ought to kill you right here. But instead …”

“Time for a field trip, boys and girls,” Logan said.
“Right. Gag him.”

Pinkner spat against Logan’s hand and began to struggle, making noise — loud, desperate. Logan scooped up a pair of gloves — Charles wasn’t sure whose — whipped his hand free and shoved in the makeshift gag in the same motion. “Done.”

“May I request the pleasure of your company?” Azazel’s voice sounded like poisoned honey. “Bud’te tak dobry — allow me.” He grabbed Pinkner’s arm and dragged him up.

Then, as if with an afterthought, he glanced at Charles — and took tight hold of him, a pinching grip on his upper arm. “You too.”

“What?” Hank gasped.

“Not like that, no.” Azazel smiled, cold. “Emma asked for him. Tell your friends good-bye for now,” he said to Charles — and the world turned inside out.

It felt as though there was only fire to breathe. Charles tried to scream, but could not get air. Not during the first flash of coolness — room: white, grey, cupboards — and not during the second; at least, not until he had doubled over and coughed until he choked. He would not vomit, not on a pristine floor — not on — … Frost’s shoes.

He saw one shoe tapping. He heard a blur of Russian above his head: first Azazel, then Frost cutting him off. Silence. And a snort, and a snap-crack —

The stench made him dry-heave again. Strange, the way the vapor undulated over the floor — rather like dry ice, except red and then black.

Frost sighed.

“My lady,” Charles rasped, making himself stand. He gathered his winter gear from where it had fallen around him. “I apologize.”

“That’s all right. It does take time, to get used to Azazel’s style.”

“Indeed. I’ve only seen the like back in Britain.” Charles clutched his manteau, considered the memory of Azazel’s mandarin collar, squared-off shoulders under heavy black sateen. “Such a coat, for marauding through Albany?” He tried putting refinement and courtesy back on, a coat in themselves. Frost seemed pleased by the effort. At least, she was smiling, slightly.

“I had it from the New Caliphate: they claim they had it from Nehru himself. Perhaps it’s gone to my dear friend’s head.”

“Azazel is that good a friend, then?”

“Really, had I known you had wanted to fish, I would have given Logan bait and tackle for your trip.”

*Your trip* …

Charles looked round Frost’s office, his breath coming faster, in small sips. To be in Albany — to be
at a market, free – and the greenhouse – and now …

He looked down. His boots still had droplets of water on them.

“I am sorry, Charles.” Frost did not sound particularly sorry. She sounded smug. “I needed you back here.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “Did you enjoy yourself in Albany?”

“Very much.”

“Where did you go?”

Charles licked his lips, holding his winter gear closer. “When?”

“Since your arrival. Professor.” Her face was still. “List every place, in order.”

He picked a focus: Frost’s lapel would do – pressed white and flat; her suit jacket spotless; the ruched neckline of the blouse beneath. “One moment.”

“No. Tell me now.”

“The wall,” Charles replied, gritting his teeth. “Last night we drove through the wall and straight up to the capitol building. I met the mayor and went to bed.”

“Not with him, I hope.”

“Oh god, no. Terribly homely man. This morning we had breakfast, a big breakfast, and met the chef. We walked to the market. I went to drop off the tapestry, like you said, and then I went to a pet shop, and to a – cookery shop. A pastry cook’s or – I bought baking things there.”

“And then?”

*The doctor. The pawnbroker.*

“I went to get a haircut.”

“Nothing in between?”

Dread took hard hold of his gut. “No.”

“I think you’re lying, Charles.”

“I’m not –”

“Because Azazel was following all three of you, in alternation. And coming from watching Hank stop in at a chemist’s, he saw you duck into a grubby little pawnshop on the south side. What were you doing there?”

“I …”

“Tell me.”

He could feel the command pressing through the words. *Part of the truth* – Armando had always said he wasn’t afraid of her, so Charles could throw him to the wolf, perhaps? “I pawned
“Give me credit for some intelligence, Professor – since you have no personal contact with the Heirs of Aztlán, of course you pawned something. What was it?”

“Gold.”

“And where did you get the gold?”

He could tell the truth – Armando – or he could lie – Erik ... but to implicate either would bring trouble on all of their heads.

*Just my head, then,* Charles thought. “I stole it.”

Frost’s eyebrows shot up. “You stole it?”

“You heard me.”

“I’ll have respect from you. From whom did you steal it?”

“From the pawnshop, Emma,” and he held up a hand, “with the greatest respect to you, your ladyship – because you know, I’m sure, that half the fun of a game like that is the look on the other one’s face.”

A wild bluff. But he had threaded his voice with gold: would she fall for it?

Her face was a study. “In the pawnshop itself?”

“Right under his nose.”

He had done the exact same thing in Coventry, once, but only when he was a very young man. When Raven was sick, and they needed money for medicine –

“How much?”

“Beg pardon?”

“How much money did you get for the gold?”

“One hundred and fifty dollars.” Charles scooped the money out of his jeans pocket and dropped it on her desk. “There.” He would pay Armando back, somehow –

Frost gazed at the crumpled bills in silence. Then murmured: “You drive a hard bargain. Tell me, my dear boy …”

And her lips curled up at the corners. “Did you … influence him?”

Must as he did not want to, Charles understood her perfectly. He hesitated.

“It’s all right. You can tell me.”

“I’m not sure. When I did that before, in Coventry – stealing from a pawnshop, I mean – I was so anxious that it go off well, that …. I felt a similar pressure – here.”

Charles touched his temple with two fingers.

Frost rose from her seat, glided over to him, and touched the index and middle fingers of one hand to
the same place. Her fingertips were cool and smooth. “Here?”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

She kept her fingers there for a long moment. Then she brushed her hand up and through his hair. “This is much better.”

“Thank you.”

“Keep the money, Charles. Such ingenuity deserves a bit of a reward – but you won’t be applying any pressure, of any sort, to anyone here, will you?”

“Of course not.”

“What do you want money for, anyway?”

“I …” He swallowed. “I wanted to buy the children some presents.” True enough, Charles thought, dull, but he had forgotten completely, and now the chance was gone.

“How sweet. But don’t fret: the others will be able to pick up something for you, still.” She drew back her hand – then rapped her knuckles lightly on his brow. “Now let me in, please.”

So close, Charles could smell her perfume.

“I won’t ask again, Charles. I wish to see for myself.”

“Yes, my lady.” He quirked a smile at her; forced, but she smiled back anyway, the fool. “Make yourself at home.”

Please, please. He kept his call to Raven quiet as they went to his mind. Charles tried to make the staging of it longer – it was quick for him, usually – a blink here, a blink there – but this time he could peel back the veils one by one. Help me.

In his reading room a moment later, no birds could be seen. And Frost cast an approving look at the dead fireplace.

“This shelf, I think.” Charles swept a gauntlet over a stack of books, bound in blue sky and snow, sparkling with newness. His cloak flared alongside it. “In order. Have at them, my lady.”

“Thank you,” Frost purred. “I will.” And she plucked a book from the shelf and opened it. “Let me show you a trick.”

Charles gasped. For in the blink of an eye, they were back in the market – goats bleating and chickens squawking; even one yowling screech that set his hair on end –

“They’ve got the puma here again.” In disbelief, he saw Logan grimace – again. “Damn.”

“We don’t have to look at it. Where’s the list?” he saw Hank asking.

And himself, staring round the market with eyes wide as dinner plates – Charles bit down hard on the inside of his mouth.

“Oh, you are adorable, aren’t you? Look at that hat.”
“My lady, I’m thirty-one. You can’t be that much older,” flattery and a lie; brilliant, "so could you please stop using such a tone?"

“Really,” Frost put up one hand to adjust her glowing crown. “I was trying to pay you a compliment.”

Calm. Keep calm. She could not frighten him, even if she could set them both down in one of his memories without so much as an ‘abracadabra.’

“So. This memory: why here? Why now?”

“I find that entry points in memories usually consist of certain striking moments. That sound, for example –”

“It was a big cat in a cage.”

“– that serves as a knot in the thread; a catch that bring us here.” Frost spread her hands. Her dress reflected his memory of the sun off every single facet. “Oh! And you’re off on quite the mission, I see.”

“I went to the temple first.”

They followed – himself, through his own memory. Seeing himself from outside – it was bizarre, Charles thought, and at least his spot had gone down, but when had he started to walk in such a hunched way? The duffel bag had not been so heavy.

“Here it is,” he told Frost, after the long walk. “Temple Beth Shalom.”

And then they were in the sitting room, where Emma peered into the corners, ran fingertips over the furniture, and admired the grandfather clock – and where Charles felt fear crawl up from his gut: the other temple, she would find out about it and then the prayer shawl – and she would interrogate him about his continued interest in Erik –

Maltovsky entered. Pleasantries ensued. Charles saw himself pulling out the tapestry – there was no quelling its colors, even in memory.

Questions asked …

Charles closed his eyes.

And then heard: “Sir? Are you all right?”

His eyes flew open.

There was Maltovsky sitting in the fireside chair, pale and tired. “I’m fine. But I would ask to be alone now, Charles Xavier.”

Oh my God.

Frost tsked. “Such a sentimental man – all of a piece with his reputation. I believe he runs a soup kitchen.”

“I begin to see. I see,” the aged voice, paper-thin, echoing in his memory. “As the end comes, she wants something in return.”

Distract her. “And what end is that, my lady? I was curious, at the time; I suppose I still am.”
“Never you mind,” Frost said, eyes fixed on Maltovsky.

“That silver plate on the mantel? That belonged to my father, in New York City that was. Take it to the Lady Frost. Tell her in my name that we are content with our lot, and we will not ask for his return.”

“Very kind of him,” said Frost, smug. “I appreciate good silver. Where is it now?”

“In the duffel bag, I think. I – it was left in the greenhouse, when Azazel took me here.”

“Safe, then. Well, you’re going,” and Charles saw, in a daze, that he was indeed striding out – no wool bag to be seen - and the room was fading to black.

“What’s happening?!”

“You no longer see this, so we should move soon. Ah. Here.”

For their surroundings gave a sickening lurch, and they were outside, Charles squinting at the bright snow. Frost looked displeased. “You’re going back?”

“The pet shop,” Charles said. “Back down Pearl Street.”

“And that will be just as dull. I want to see the pawnshop. Let me see …”

Everything blurred. And stayed blurred, as Charles felt a surge of nausea intensify into a torrent, as his memories flew past. White and grey of street and crowd - nothing at 255 South Pearl -

“We’ll stop as soon as I find it.”

“You won’t cut out anything,” he said, knowing he sounded fearful. “Will you?”

“Not so pleasant having the shoe on the other foot, is it, Professor?”

The memories stopped, and Charles staggered.

“Ah ha – there you are.” And Charles saw himself, tossing a look over his shoulder and darting inside a door like a mouse into its hole. “If I had Azazel’s memory of this, we could see it from different angles.”

“You don’t?”

“No. His are difficult to extract – part and parcel with his mutation, I daresay. One might as well try pinning down a live butterfly. Let’s see what you saw at the pawnbroker’s.”

And they were inside, with another juddering change. Charles saw himself bent over the glass case.

Now he had a moment to examine it more closely. Who knew that he remembered silver watches and cameo brooches, and cut glass bottles of perfume? And other things: a medal that looked particularly fine: Aztec? Olmec? Who knows. That and several beautiful coins, shining all in a row. Charles saw a British pound at one end.

“Here we are,” Frost said.

For: “Quite the assortment you have here,” was ringing out, cheerful –

- and, disbelieving, Charles saw one of his hands slap flat on the glass case, and the other flick to a
pile of gold to the side … that had not been there before.

The proprietor grumbled, nudging at him to move – to polish the case, where his fingers had left prints.

_Christ_ – it was his memory of the theft at Coventry, superimposed on this one – and _fuck_ for an instant the proprietor had two hands, and then the left one, polishing, blurred into a hook again, and Charles whipped a glance round at Frost.

She was watching his memory’s left hand, now in his pocket – an absorbed look on her face. She had not seen anything else.

“What business?”

“Gold business,” Charles heard himself say, and saw Armando’s pen and cufflinks come out of his pocket.

Frost laced her fingers together. “Oh, well done. And when did you push him?” She looked gleeful. “I want to see.”

One last dizzying rush.

“Don’t come crying to me when your people ask you for a receipt.”

“They won’t.” And then –

“Ah,” Frost inhaled. “There you are …”

Charles stared, aghast. Was that the way he looked, when he – _took_ things? His fingers at his temple, digging in; his eyes like sapphires, blazing from his face?

_Rather terrible, all round._

“Wonderful,” said Frost.

And Charles saw the breath stream white from her lips, even as she faded alongside him, as the memory of the pawnshop went dark.

Sunlight hit him like a blow to the face; he reeled. “Stop. Please, Emma, stop – I don’t feel well.”

“Too many memories, too fast – that will do it. And where are you going now?”

For there was the memory of himself, sprinting down the snow-covered street, duffel bag banging his hip. “I told you,” Charles gasped, “a haircut.” He took tight hold of his hair – _normal_, in his mind – with both hands. “And then we went to the greenhouse, and that’s _all_.”

“And that is the truth.” A hand landed on his shoulder. “I hear it in your voice. I believe you, Charles. Come, now; you’ve done very well. Come along.”

She kept up the murmured reassurance, stroking him. _Like a pet_, Charles thought, dizzy, as the white light intensified, and the sun bled out into the blue sky, leaving it all opaque – her sky, he remembered, and looked down. He was standing on thick ice.

“Thank you.”

“Let’s go for a walk. Just us.”

“Let us go then, you and I—”

“Charles,” and Frost tipped her head up at the sky, “I have no patience for that simile.”

“Oh, very nice.”

She cast down her eyes in reply, and curtseyed. There was graceful strength in her shoulders and her arms, but more delicacy in her neat waist bending and her slim bowed neck. When she straightened, the grace was still there, even in the one finger beckoning him. “Come along.”

They walked for a long time in perfect silence.

He saw no sign of the crystal hawk; he did not know how to feel about its absence. But feelings aside, it was a relief to have quiet in which to think. Raven – his aviary – all his power had worked together to edit his memories, hiding anything incriminating, and with such speed and power ….

Charles would have been elated, were it not for what he had just seen. The sight of himself, tearing memory out of another’s mind … it was enough to make him unsteady on his own two feet.

He would be sure to thank the birds later – except. Charles bit his lip. Would he have to do the same with Jean? Take from her mind the memory of their conversation – his slip about Raven? What did she know?

His sabatons crunched on the ice. He was relieved for the cold – it accounted for his shivering.

Occasionally, he handed Emma over a drift, although he was sure she did not need assistance. The gallant knight. She took his hand every time, though; her fingers curling over his gauntlet. When she stepped down from a low stone wall he had helped her ascend, she even laughed. The sound suited the surroundings well: a delicate chime. Snowflakes, Charles thought.

“There.”

He looked where Emma pointed: at a small grey house, with a thread of smoke curling out of a smaller pipe chimney. She smiled at him, dazzling. “Let’s go there.”

“No,” Charles blurted.

He could not say why.

“Why not?” She tugged his hand. “Come along.”

Why not? Because, Charles realized: that house did not belong in Emma’s mind – any more than he did, in truth. She floated along as a natural part of the landscape, while cold light snagged to him and stuck. Just like it did on that house: one grey chip on white, throbbing like a splinter in flesh.

“Lady Frost,” he tried. But she did not listen.

They reached the house. Matter-of-fact, Frost opened the front door and stepped inside.

Charles stayed on the steps, peering at an ordinary interior. Hyper-ordinary. Dull brown carpet, pale yellow walls. One painting of orange flowers; another, of a beige woman.

“Hm.” Frost sounded disappointed, turning on one heel. She glittered in the room – wrong, like a
diamond set in cheap plastic. “Further, then. Follow me, Charles.”

“I’d prefer not.”

“I don’t recall asking for your preference. I do recall telling you: follow me. Now, please.”

So Charles stepped inside.

It was slightly warmer. And dusty – he coughed. “This isn’t right.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I …” Instinct. “I don’t know.”

Frost hummed, considering a door that had a polished brass plate where the doorknob should be, Charles saw. One could lean on it, and it would open.

She leaned. Curious, he looked over her shoulder. The room was very dark. And inside it, he could hear –

– something breathing.

And then a half-sob.

“Oh. That, maybe, tells me something isn’t right? Emma?”

“I suppose I will permit informality, now that you are enjoying my projections.”

When had he given the impression - Charles shook off the distraction. “There’s someone else here – and I would say that’s impossible with the security of your mind, but this isn’t your mind,” he said, sharply. “This is someone else, and I want to leave.”

“Nonsense. And he’s not in that room, anyway.”

Oh, no. “Who?”

Treading lightly on the carpet, Frost made her way to another door: this one with paint flaking off. She opened it. “Bozhe moy – this is it. Smell?”

Charles did: the stench of a privy, unfolding almost visibly from the dark doorway.

“Minds work the same way in so many people, Charles. There may be culturally-specific flourishes – that door, for example,” she gestured at the brass plate, “cannot lock, which is an immediate tell.”

“Why can’t it lock?” he said, hoarse.

“If wedded, then bedded – there’s no going back from that. Western wives, Charles.” Frost was gazing down into the dark. “It does not do for them to lock their doors. I’m sure St. Paul has something against it.”

“That sounds more like one of the Patriarchs,” Charles gulped. “I don’t recall any –”

“Down here. As I was saying,” and she stepped forward into the darkness, “minds work in similar ways. Secrets, repressions, memories to hide, are often removed from the normal ebb and flow of thought. More often further down, and most often quite filthy indeed. Will it be so here?” Frost leaned back to catch his eye. “Let’s see, shall we?”
She disappeared. Charles heard a stair creak. And heard her voice.

“Hello? Is anyone at home?”

There was a strange tinkling sound. Her dress, Charles realized, his breath coming faster. The diamond facets of her dress, dragging down the steps.

“Where are you?”

More of the strange sound.

Charles saw a thread of ice crackle between the floorboards.

It was coming from the stairs – *fuck*. He dashed to catch up; donned his shield from where it lay slung over his shoulder; drew his sword. Light glimmered over the mold-dark walls. Ice was crawling up at them, faster than his eye could see. “Emma!”

“Come out, come out, wherever you are ...”

As he stumbled down the stairs and into the basement, he thought for one terrible moment that he had fallen into his own nightmare. Ice was growing out from where Frost slowly turned in a circle: spiraling over the floor, and up the walls. Light from that ice and light from his sword reached each corner, falling on muck and grime - which in turn congealed into little blobs that squeaked and scurried for cover, clawing their way beneath rickety cabinets to hide.

“Emma!” he shouted.

Frost turned to face him. “Yes?”

She looked half-crystalline – her own power in the mind, Charles thought wildly, consuming her as well? Wouldn’t she stop, then? But she kept turning, kept *going* –

“Stop! Please!”

“No,” she said. “This is one who tried to harm us, Charles; tried and failed. And he must be punished for it. Unless,” and she spoke louder, “there are some things you’d like to tell me, Randolph? Before it gets very cold?”

*Fuck.* The temperature had just dropped – but even in the cold, his mind could work. “This is – that Pinkner person.”

Frost hummed. “Our guest at the manor, now. It seems only appropriate that he reciprocate.”

“Surely this is why courts exist – a court of law, to try him for terrorism, or.” He stared from side to side, at the ice solidifying on the floor. “Or you could try a prisoner exchange, with the Free West?”

“They don’t take prisoners, Charles. *Ran-dolph,*” her voice chimed. “Come out and speak to me, please? Treat me better than you did your poor wife.”

One of the cabinets rattled, sharply.

“What about his wife?”

“That ugly portrait upstairs; the woman crying in their room – it doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together, does it? So many minds are so obvious with their symbolism.” She paced towards the cabinet.
“Please.” Charles sheathed his sword, caught her arm – and almost swallowed his tongue, because even through his gauntlet, the cold of her flesh burned. Her eyes were wide and glittering, staring at him. “Please don’t hurt him.”

“So soft-hearted. But Charles: in this type of cold, nothing really hurts. You just fall asleep and don’t wake up.” Frost fished beneath a fold of her skirt; produced a pouch purse. “I wonder …”

From within the pouch purse, a ruby-red light glowed.

“No.” She shut the purse tight. “In an ugly little shack, with no inhabitants save mud pretending to be mice? Nothing worthwhile, Randolph - except your life, except your life, except your life ...” Frost opened the cabinet door. “Oh, dear.”

“What is it?” Charles whispered.

“Come see.”

Charles did so. And there, in a corner the tall cabinet, he saw a man huddled in on himself, shaking uncontrollably. His head was buried in his crossed arms. His fingers were curled round his elbows – Charles saw how they were turning purple, like the lobes of his ears, only just visible.

Was the shaking cold – or fear?

What had her power looked like to him?

“Pathetic,” Frost sighed, “and not worth any more of my time,” and she straightened. “So: he’s yours. Go ahead.”

He had to thank his raven for intuition, Charles supposed, distantly. For he understood again, as soon as she had spoken.

“I won’t tell you twice. Take your sword and run him through. Or send your lovely little raven to crack his skull and eat his eyes – I’m not picky.”

“No.”

“I just gave you an order.”

“And I just refused it.”

Frost’s nostrils flared. “You remember the punishment I promised you, if you were to disobey me again?”

Charles lifted his chin. “I do.”

“For this?” She nudged Pinkner with her slipper; Charles saw rags peel away and flesh blacken. “For the sake of one who would kill your friends, and sabotage our great work, you will let yourself be served up to Erik on a silver platter?”

“I figured: Maltovsky’s given you one such platter,” and he shrugged, “so you might as well use it.”

Charles was beyond fear. He was staring down at someone about to die.

So he was taken considerably aback when, after his words, he saw Frost’s lips – twitch.

Then she shook her head, closed the cabinet, and dusted off her hands. “Spare me from all these
idealists. Come.”

“Where are we going?”

“Fresh air.” She crossed the room, gathered her dress ... glided up the staircase. “The midden of any mind can affect one’s behavior. Small wonder I seemed so bloodthirsty – I just wanted to see what you would do, you know. Hurry up.”

Charles scrambled after her. He needed the ice-coated banister to keep from sliding straight back down.

“Hurry, Charles.”

He obeyed. And he sprinted after Frost’s petite, upright form as she strode away from the house – back to her glacier, bloody hell, home sweet home, he thought, gasping in the frigid air, on ice –

A rumble shook him head to toe; a strange creaking sound came from behind him.

Charles turned and saw a wall of ice looming over the little house.

He felt his breath slow, and stop.

For a moment, with the tiny silhouette dark against the opaque wall behind it, Charles could have sworn he saw the image’s negative flicker into being, and flash: white on grey, grey on white. A speck of house first visible and then gone, as the blank wall yawned around it, blending into the sky, and as the whole vast expanse of whiteness leaned forward, forward, and down … grinding the house into splinters and dust.

The dust blew away with the snow.

He held on to his manteau like a life buoy: as he followed Frost without a word, as she hurried out of her office and down through the Hive to the infirmary. In that room sat Azazel, leaning his chair against the wall, one leather boot braced on the hospital bed. On that bed lay Pinkner.

Or, Charles thought, what had been Pinkner.

“– and I didn’t even need the Seeker,” Frost was saying, her color high.

“Then I owe you five dollars, Snegurochka. He’s dead, by the way.”

“I should hope so.”

“When?” Charles said.

“Not two minutes ago.” Azazel’s tail came up to nudge the heart monitor, which rolled, slightly, on its wheels. There was no readout visible.

“Then dispose of it, please.”

“As my lady commands.” Azazel yawned and stretched, cracking his back. His tail moved to prod at the leather straps that had tied Pinkner down. Charles saw abrasions on the wrists. For her part, Frost went to pick up the Seeker, where it rested atop the machine Charles remembered from previous sickroom stays: a squat box sprouting electrodes.

“A thousand feet above Denver should suffice. And the sheets should be washed. Charles, we will
“talk about your intransigence later; for now,” and Frost was alive with energy, and smiling, “I have some plans to make.”

“Better get right to it,” said Azazel.

“The children will be expecting you,” Frost told Charles. “Thank you for your work on the treaty, by the way. You've been very helpful.”

Then she left.

*The treaty.* He had forgotten about it. Numb, Charles stared at Pinkner’s corpse. There was no blood on the sheets. They looked damp, though – he reached out to touch them.

“That’s sweat.”

Charles saw his hand hitch to a stop; then he turned, without staggering, and faced Azazel. “Does she do this often?”

“What do you care, Xavier?”

“I want to know how often she’ll expect me to watch.”

Azazel’s eyes flickered. “Not so often, these days.”

“Oh.”

*Good,* Charles wanted to say, but it stuck in his throat.

“Up we go.” Limbs flopped as Azazel hoisted the body into a fireman’s carry. “You wash those sheets. I’ve got to go drop this one off.”

“I won’t,” he grated at the infirmary - and too slow by half, for Azazel had vanished.

The rest of the day seemed fragmented, somehow.

At least the children were pleased to see him. Had they even left Jean's room? Kurt was jumping up and down on the bed.

*We named her Princess Alexandra!* Jean sent, fire-bright, holding the kitten out to him with both hands. It squeaked, its tail and stubby hind legs flailing in the air.

"Be gentle with her." Letting his winter gear drop, and sliding to sit on the floor, Charles received the kitten carefully. He cradled her in one arm. “She might need some quiet time, now.”

“She’s *not* Princess Alexandra – she’s Catspaw,” said Scott. “That’s the one in the comics,” he explained, “who can jump *really* high, and always lands on her feet –”

“**Kotyonok!**” Kurt shouted.

“A bit of a debate, I see.” Charles leaned against the wall. The kitten burrowed down into the crook of his elbow, so he tucked her tail in after her. “And has she been, ah, sanitary?”

*We took her to the tub, just like you said.*

“Good. Logan and Hank will be coming with all her accoutrements, Jean. Tomorrow, I think.”
She sent a burst of happiness. “Good,” said Scott. Kurt only giggled, jumping from the floor to Jean’s mantelpiece and back.

He needed to get Jean alone, to take that memory from her. But ... holding the kitten safe and watching them quietly … Charles found he did not want to. Not just now.

Armando was pleased with his money. “Nice. Everything go all right?”

“Yes.” He closed his eyes. “I was followed, though, and so Lady Frost asked why I went there, and I told her I obtained the gold from the pawnbroker himself. Sleight-of-hand, sleight-of-mind.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“It seems as though I did, so a ‘thank-you’ would suffice.”

“Thank you.” Armando folded the bills and put them in his pocket. “Did the pawnbroker say anything?”

“I didn’t really steal from him, Armando. We just exchanged the usual pleasantries.” Charles wrapped his arms round himself. “I’m going to bed now; I don’t feel well.”

“I’ll bring you some tea ~”

“Please don’t,” he said, tiredly. “I’ll be fine.”

In his room, he sorted out hat and scarf, gloves and mittens, from the sleeves of his manteau. He placed everything on the hearth, to make sure it all dried. Then Charles retrieved the jewel box, and put his own forty dollars into it. The bills looked dingy against the soft shine of rubies and emeralds, pearls and topazes, all of them safe together ....

Charles touched the sapphire in its leather bag.

It would stay safe there - more so than round his neck for Frost to grab. So he closed the lid and put the box away.

Charles did not put much effort into separating Jean from the others, to take the memory back. The children played constantly, which did not help, and something in him recoiled at the thought of himself, creeping into her bedroom at night.

Hank and Logan returned on Thursday. The children piled into the kitchen to help unpack supplies, but disappeared with all their kitten-related loot halfway through.

“Just as well,” Logan grunted, lifting a box. “Here's some presents for them. More marbles for Jean, some of those plastic horses for Scott - a frisbee for Kurt. Don't give me that look,” he grumped at Hank. "He has to start practicing one of these days; catch up with dad and all. You ever seen Azazel play tennis with himself?" he asked Charles. "It's pretty fucking amazing -”

“You didn’t have to do that,” said Charles. "Buy the presents, I mean."

“I did, actually. Frost sent me a reminder. And here's your cake pans and baking shit, all ready to go.”

Charles made a mental note to hide the sugar and chocolate from the children. "Thank you."
"You O.K., Charles?" Logan's eyes were searching. "You don’t look so good."

"Yesterday was a very long day for me."

"Us too. That Pinkner ..."

Logan looked at Hank; as did Charles - or, at least, at Hank's bowed head. He was checking items off a list, and his hand did not waver.

"We missed you on the drive back, that’s for sure. Right, Hank?"

"Right. I brought you something," Hank said, lifting his head and tipping his chin. "From the greenhouse."

Charles unwrapped a box Hank had indicated, and saw six ripe tomatoes. "Thank you," he said, except that he did not care for tomatoes as much as oranges. But Hank had no way of knowing that, and the children could use the vitamins.

Then Armando took the boxes to his room - "Safekeeping." Presents and ingredients and all. Charles found he didn't really care.

On Friday, Charles woke and fed the children, tidied his room: went through all of his chores like an automaton. He could not say why. Except: he tried staring into the mirror, touching his fingers to his temple. It did not look the same.

"Is that really how it is?" he asked his raven that night in his reading room.

His armor felt very heavy. All that day, he had not wanted to talk to anyone.

Raven made a crrrrr, deep and rasping, and nestled close to his face.

Charles stared into the fire blazing away, flickering orange and gold on its brass surround. He reached up and stroked his raven’s feathers. "You were so clever, darling, with my memories. And you’re right, you know."

Raven was silent – waiting.

"All these … accessories, like a kitten’s toys, but Raven …" He shivered. "I can blur my own image with this cape and cover my tracks with tokens. But I can’t take people’s memories in the way I have. Not if it means I look like …"

That, he finished. But he said nothing.

It did not seem to matter. Words or no words, Raven stayed by him that whole night, fluffing feathers next to his cheek in silence.

Early Saturday morning, Charles could not even muster up affront when Azazel swept into the library and said to all, “Another visit to Albany,” and, “not you, this time,” directed at Charles.

Armando had frowned. “Why the hell not?”

“It’s your turn,” Azazel said. “I’ll hold on to Kurt. Where is he, anyway?”

"Bathroom," Charles replied.
"Ah. Well, he and I will cause a fuss, so we'll go hop the Himalayas or something. So Muñoz, you get to take these two," he pointed a taloned finger at Jean and Scott, "to a play, and we'll all be back tomorrow evening."

"Is this for my birthday?" Scott squeaked.

Azazel looked nonplussed.

"It's tomorrow," said Charles. "February eighth. Although we're celebrating Scott and Jean's together in a week, so Kurt can have a Valentine's Day present as well."

"Right. Many happy returns, little Summers, and so on. What are you waiting for? Go get ready."

The two children were beaming already, but they catapulted out of the room at Azazel’s order, dragging Armando in their wake.

“And you, Xavier: a message from Emma. Consider this your punishment – a mild one, she says.”

Charles stared at the library table.

“For disobedience, I think it was? Connected to the poor unfortunate Pinkner? Well. She throws this trip together just for spite; I tell her to play the longer game; she tells me to shut up; so it goes. The play is Peter Pan, I believe. British, yes?"

“Yes.” He shrugged. “I’ve seen it already.”

"Are you well?"

“What do you care?"

“Emma wants you well, Xavier,” came the soft reply. “We are going to Lake Mead to talk with the Free West on Monday, and she wants you in the best of health and mind for it. So, you rest. Is that clear? No running."

“No running,” Charles said, flatly. “Give my regards to Hank and Logan.”

“They’ve gone their separate ways, but I will when next I see them. Ah ha, moy spinogryz – come to Papa!” Kurt barreled into Azazel’s arms, squealing with delight, and Azazel wrestled him round.

“All ready?"

“I – suppose?” A frown still creased Armando’s face as he ushered Jean and Scott back into the library. “Are you sure Charles can’t –”

“Quite sure. Let’s go."

Take care of Princess Alexandra, take care of her, please? Jean’s thoughts were a tumble of excitement.

I will, Charles sent. He did not send: Take care of Raven. He would have retrieve back the memory when Jean returned. Any other day, panic might have plucked at his gut, at all the opportunities lost. Today, he felt tired.

"I will be here to transport you Monday noon, Xavier. There will be consequences for vomiting."

Charles sighed, and walked to the window after the others vanished. Mild punishment. Missing a children’s play? He did not care.
But there was still a long, empty day ahead of him now.

He traced patterns in the frost with a fingernail for a while. Then he tidied the library, and took the basket from Brussels back to his room. He made himself some tea; made sure the kitten had food, water, and a blanket in its own basket ... and finally settled in for a nap on the low red couch.

Charles did not know how long he slept.

But he realized, afterwards, that the only thing that could jolt him awake – from sleep and stupor alike – was something unexpected.

Specifically, the *something* right in front of his staring eyes, as he woke to the scrape of metal on metal, sat up with a jolt in the middle of his blanket nest - and saw the white knight of heavy silver floating a full hands’ breadth above its board.

Realization sent a surge of electricity over every single inch of his body.

*Erik.*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to R., now at stoneandbloodandwater on tumblr, for the invaluable contributions to the nature, structure, and power dynamic of Albany's post-nuclear Jewish community.

Disclaimer: some streets and buildings from Albany are identical to what they are today, but take everything with a dump-truck full of salt - since, you know ... AU. :D
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to Aida for the advice, to all the tumblr-ites for their encouragement, and to Certain Individuals for strong KsITA.

Before we continue: there are lots of nice new stories through the RBB. The collection is located here. Afrocurl and chosenfire have done a ton of work getting it together, so e-run, do not e-walk, to read!

And enjoy the following. :)

ETA: "köstlich" for "schmacklich" - thank you, Azaria!

Charles stared at the knight rather longer than he should have. What to do? It was still broad daylight – he ground the heels of his hands against his eyelids – wake up, wake up – so if he were to hide, he would have to move fast –

“Hide?” His voice cracked. “Hide, my arse.”

He pushed himself up off the couch and paced to the window. He was not afraid. And if Erik were riding full-tilt to the manor just to say hello – what was he thinking: just to fuck him, of course, of all the inconsequential things – Charles didn’t care. In fact, it might be an amusing distraction. It was easy to think such things, but more difficult to persuade the goosebumps – the shakiness all over, the twist to his stomach … damn it, he was not afraid.

Charles looked outside.

There. A dark shape, coming up the road to the manor; fast enough that it had to be on a motorcycle. Keeping to the treads from the truck, surely – and now that Charles had made the journey himself, perhaps he would give a bit more respect to Erik’s riding from Albany, or Syracuse … or wherever he had started, now.

Perhaps not. He had better things to respect.

The shape veered right. Then Charles lost sight of it - a turn in the road, perhaps, or a snowy hillock.

“Raven,” he gritted out. “Go.”

And he blinked as his power found Erik almost instantly.

The disorder of the metal shards, the dark hunger - all of it snapped to focus on him almost as quickly. A throb of that want with direction, now, aimed at the touch of his mind – Erik, he felt his own power whisper, and Erik's power –

Charles gulped.

Or were they his thoughts? Whichever it was - the thick thrum of dark – something, he could taste the iron in its touch, or blood – that metallic tangle took the thread of Charles’ whisper, reeled it in,
and – consumed it.

Ate it.

“Really, how rude.” Charles’ knees wobbled; he grabbed at the windowsill. “You won’t make a habit of that - will you?”

The metal writhing round itself … purred.

He checked, frantically. But all the birds left to him were still there. His raven was flying somewhere underground: a holding area? A garage? Yes that was it - with a hoarse crahk rebounding off cement, all too aware of the cloud of metal shards in the center … reaching out for it.

“Give it back. Or, since you won’t –” He withdrew – or tried, but it was difficult, there was a magnetic power holding him there – and Charles broke free with a gasp.

Behind him, the knight fell to the board with a clink.

“Hiding it is.”

He considered different option; discarded them. On the library’s walkway he would touch metal; in his room there was only in the wardrobe or under the bed. He had no access to the West Wing … he was above cowering in the kitchen. And the hidden rooms were right out; he had tried them before. Damn it.

Cautiously, Charles reached out for Erik again. Just to track, this time.

Erik’s mind was moving fast. Running east… Charles lifted his chin and stared at the West Wing door. He had little time – and if Erik could feel his blood – “Shite.” He had forgotten about that.

“There’s no point in hiding, then – except for a bit of an experiment. Let’s try,” he told Raven, and walked toward the other door.

He felt Erik speed up.

“Leaving, leaving –” and he grabbed the wrought-iron handle and yanked. “Goodbye.”

Then Charles drew out of his mind the most powerful veil he could, wrapped it round himself, And stepped back to the window.

So long ago, it had almost worked – Erik had only found him by his filling. Professor … In Albany, a projection of good will and better fashion had worked wonders in the shops. Could a veil work now?

The metal cloud rounded a corner and sped down what had to be a hallway. Another turn – tighter turns. Stairs.

If Erik were thinking clearly, he would realize that Charles winking out of his power’s touch on the library threshold meant he was hiding inside. Running away to his room would have been a slow fade. So Charles had to hope he was not thinking clearly.

Another twist – and a distant boom-thud of a door.

Memory made his skin crawl.

“You’re fine,” Charles told himself. “You’re fine. Good Raven, stay by me.” He leaned into its
feathers. “We’re not afraid.”

Not even of the West Wing door opening by itself. *Soundless.*

And not of Erik running in, lightning-quick, before dropping to the floor just inside the library – all ten fingers spread in a sprinter’s crouch.

*Fuck.* Charles fought to control his breathing, even as his mouth – flooded with saliva? *Why?*

Not because Erik had been soundless, too, although he had been. Only the fabric of his coat rustled as he drew himself up from the crouch – *slowly* – and then looked round.

The same stare as Charles remembered, moving over every article of the room – green eyes sharp enough to catch a thread out of place. Charles held the veil tight, and met Erik’s gaze, unflinching.

Even as it passed by.

It landed on the couch. And Charles had to bite back a smile at the image: Erik, with the ears of some predator, and those ears pricking up at the sight of the rumpled blanket.

Erik stalked forward and bent … to *sniff.* Charles thought back, quickly: when had he last bathed? *Shite.* Not since his shower in Albany. But not to worry, it seemed. For Erik shoved his hands into the blanket, gripped and *squeezed,* tendons in his hands visible – and threw it back down on the couch, and dashed out of the other door as soundlessly as he had dashed in.

Charles exhaled. *It worked.*

His happiness at that only increased as he felt Erik move from his room to Jean’s – and a recoil of surprise that must have been him seeing the kitten. Then – Charles snickered – quick movements in different directions that must have been his chasing that same kitten, retrieving it, and placing it back inside the room. Then his mind moved to the kitchen. Down to Hank’s lab – outside, briefly, and in the kitchen again.

It paused there, for quite some time.

“What are you doing, my dear?” Charles whispered. He strolled over to the chess set, grinned down at it, and nudged the white knight where it had landed, sending it falling to the carpet.

Erik’s mind exploded into action – cannonballed back up the stairs, and Charles only had a split second to run back to the window.

The iron on the door rattled – Charles jumped – and Erik crashed into the room. “*Charles – I –*”

It was quite amusing, truly: the way he almost visibly deflated. “Are you here?”

*Yes,* Charles thought to himself in glee. *Can’t see me.*

Erik wiped water off his face. *Oh.* He had chosen the kitchen as a place to clean himself up. Water had spotted dark on his buff coat – he was gloveless, *hatless,* and gazing round the room, crestfallen. “Charles?”

He would savor it a little while longer. All that dark thrum had been not violence, but pent-up … frustration. Charles could imagine what sort. Just another moment to gloat; he wasn’t immune to the triumph.

“*Geschickter Rabe,*” Erik said. “Won’t you come out?” The afternoon light turned his hair red-gold
as he stared at the fireplace, the shelves, the door. “Please?”

Oh, fine. He waited until Erik was looking the other way, then dropped the veil and stepped out from behind the window curtain. “What’s all this?”

The terror of the Free West jumping on his feet and whirling round, reaching out to the couch to break his fall – that was a treat. “Charles!”

“You remembered my name.”

“How could I – I would never forget ...” Erik stared at him, lips parted. Then he smiled, and – oh, the teeth. Charles had not forgotten, but had perhaps repressed the memory of those teeth. That, and the memory of the speed directed at him. In abstract, and observing, it was merely fascinating to watch, but to have Erik cover the width of the room in a maximum of two seconds, and seize his hand before Charles knew it – “Um,” he said. Tugged against Erik’s grip. “Let go?”

“Charles,” Erik whispered.

And he bent to kiss the hand he held.

Charles blinked at the red-gold hair, the brow bent over his knuckles. Erik had read another book of courtly love, it seemed. Jolly good.

No tongue appeared, and he was not salivating or anything so bestial, so Charles let Erik kiss his hand as long as he pleased. With his free hand, he flattened the top of his own hair into something less tumbled. He counted Erik’s puffs of breath. Considered timing him. Or writing another one for the fairytale book: Erik the Red and the Hand of Charles - true love triumphing over all ...

“Mr. Lehnsherr,” he finally said. “As flattering as this is, there should be moderation. Did you not have to kiss hands at the ball?”

A murmur.

“With words, please.”

“Yes,” Erik breathed against his skin.

“Right. And you never did for this long, did you?”

“They weren’t you.”

“All right,” said Charles. “Stand up, then, and say ‘hello’.”

It was uncanny. Erik obeyed, but the stripped-down lines of his face, tanned, and the hot glitter of his eyes looked anything but polite. “Hello.”

“So you did dance?”

“Yes.”

“Your lady did not object?”

“I was – security,” and ... oh, Erik was staring at his mouth. Just for fun, Charles drew his lower lip between his teeth – ha, those eyes almost crossed.

“You were there for security; of course. But with whom did you dance? Did you wear something
Erik still stared, entranced.

“Erik, listen. I understand that you’re glad to see me. But common courtesy, after spending time apart, demands that you make some conversation. So. You danced?”

“Yes, Charles.” Broad shoulders straightened. “Only a few times, but I did. You told me to.”

“And you obeyed me; very nice. Who was your dance partner?”

“The ballerina who danced at the opening of the peace talks. She was a swan, then.”

“Lovely. She wasn’t too afraid?”

Erik lifted one shoulder. “I told her I would not hurt her.”

Charles snorted. “Quite the opener.”

“She showed me some of the more complicated steps, and she danced very well. She was ...” After thoughtful consideration, Erik gestured at the height of Charles’ chin.

“Short? Ballerinas tend to be petite. Strong, though.” Another dance lesson, this time on a ballroom floor? Charles hoped she was as good a teacher as he had been.

Erik kept gazing at him; eyes wide. *Less staring, more talking.* “Anyone else?”

“Just …. Ororo.”

“Ororo? Why?”

“She was waiting to dance, and one of the Free West,” those eyes flickered, “passed her by.”

“Insulted her, you mean?”

Erik lifted his chin.

“And you asked her to dance instead of ripping his head off. Very civilized. And she wasn’t afraid?”

“She’s saved my life, Charles, several times. She’s strong, too.”

“… Oh.”

“We talked about Jean when we danced. Is she here?”

“Jean?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

Erik pressed his lips together. Charles peered at him. Was that - disappointment?

“I’ll be putting a birthday party together for her soon – actually, for both Scott and Jean. Don’t forget them then, hm? Perhaps you felt the cake pans I bought, in the kitchen. What *were* you doing there?”

Faint color came to Erik’s face.
“Aha, I think I can guess. You washed up a bit, did you?” Charles placed one hand on Erik’s cheek; relished how his breath stuttered to a stop. “With soap?”

The nod was hardly there. Erik seemed transfixed.

A thumb, touching the corner of his mouth – another amazing twitch, and Charles smiled as he took his hand away. “Let’s talk more about Brussels. Did you meet any interesting people there?” From transfixed to dazed. “Erik? Did you hear me?”

“Yes, and – yes,” the words came stumbling out, “My lady was displeased when she found out I had met Stryker’s second daughter.”

“What? Where?”

Erik needed time to collect his thoughts. It was difficult to stay patient, but Charles did – he had been a professor, for God’s sake. He knew about patience in tutoring, with hapless students grinding along to an answer –

“On the avenue one evening. I was walking, she was pushed, and she dropped her books on my shoes. It was an accident.”

“And so . . .”

“I helped her pick them up. I asked if she had read Thucydides – remember? You told me to find his work.”

“And you remember: bravo.”

“She said I could probably find it in the bookshop, and she gave me the direction. She was very courteous – like you, Rabe.”

Well, in truth, there could be no one like him. “That was all?”

“She offered me tea at a café, for an apology. I said ‘no.’ But her Russian was better than I expected, and her French was excellent, so I carried her books and talked to her. And when she bought a bag of macarons from a street vendor she gave me one, so I walked her as far as I could.”

“You and your sweet tooth. But, wait – was your knee acting up? Are you all right?”

“It was fine; I’m fine. I’m just not allowed within three hundred feet of any Free West embassy, is all.”

It was an amusing picture: Erik laden with books, glowering at passersby, leashed to an oblivious, chattering lady by one cake given and taken. “So you are capable of the social niceties. If she only knew,” Charles said, entertained. The poor woman. “And then?”

“Two men came to us and upset her. They must have thought I did not speak English, because they spoke very strongly about her having been out by herself. I invited them to leave her alone, and the one who had some French asked me if I knew who she was.”

"And?"

"And," Erik concluded, "I told them I did not."

"You weren't at all curious?"
Erik lifted one shoulder; let it fall.

"That's it? When did you find out? And did they know who you were, or did you tell them then?"
For that would have been such a scene – to see the looks on all their faces –

“No. She and I, that evening … I had the feeling, Charles, that we both wanted to be inconspicuous.”


"And I only found out who she was, later."

Sometime during the story, Erik had taken off his coat and placed it on a chair. He was wearing jeans and a turtleneck, with rips in the former and stains on the latter. Encrusted salt, Charles realized. Anything else would be invisible against the black.

Erik’s green eyes were riveted on him. Charles shivered and cast about for a distraction.

“Well,” he said, “I did tell you to try a woman, but you do realize that Stryker’s daughter might prove an awkward choice, don’t you?”

For a moment, Erik looked confused.

“For sex. Remember sex? One sweats, one grunts, one pounds away at whatever’s on offer – over a week and a half this past December? Hm?”

The penny dropped. “Do you remember what I said? Only you. I don’t want anyone else.”

“Too bad for her. Suppose she uncovered your identity, and decided to seduce you into the enemy camp. Or suppose her father ordered her to seduce you,” his imagination ran away with the idea, "how melodramatic - that is, unless he keeps his daughters without so much as a dirty book to round out their womanly education -"

“She did.”

Charles retraced the conversation; choked. "She tried to seduce you?!

"Oh - no. She just found out who I am. That's all."

“When?”

“My lady invited First Lady Stryker and Lady Kelly for tea, and they came with their children. Did you know Lady Kelly is Stryker’s daughter as well? Older, though. Madeleine was adopted after the death of their son.”

“I know nothing about that family." Not quite true - something about the idea of President Stryker's son tugged at him, a barbed hook from the depths of his memory. Charles kicked it aside for later consideration. "Well. This Madeleine Stryker saw you pouring out the tea, did she?”

Erik shook his head. “She found me in the library.”

“You and libraries, even in a hotel –”

“It wasn’t my fault.” A glimmer of a smile. “I was reading to Jean. She - Madeleine, I mean - must have wanted time to herself, because she came in … and she was surprised to see me.”
“But she put two and two together.”

“She must have. When my lady called me to escort them to neutral territory, they were waiting in the foyer. I saw her there a third time. She seemed,” and Erik drew a hand down his face, “unwell, and then my lady noticed, and introduced us.”

*Unwell,* indeed - with good reason, if Erik had looked anything like he had when he had come to claim the token. Angled hat and ragged coat, all sharp edges and glittering eyes – *prowling –*

“And you barged into their party. How very uncouth.” Charles started to roll his own eyes – but stopped, mid-motion, as Erik moved closer. "You did not dance with her, though."

Erik shook his head. "My lady forbade it. Even though ...

"What?"

"She had ... platinum." One large hand gestured; fingers curled round his neck. "All here. I could feel her pulse."

"Forget libraries: you and chains around the *neck,*" and Charles glared. "I hope you behaved yourself."

"I did."

"And ... *Lighten the mood.* "I hope she wasn't too disappointed. That you kept your well-behaved distance, I mean."

Erik did not pick up on the hint. He stared instead, eyes glowing. 

"Was she? Could you tell that?"

"She never lacked a partner. At least ..." A slow smile. "The platinum kept dancing."

"You have a charming way of phrasing it -"

“And each time I saw her, Charles, I realized something.”

“What was that?”

Erik closed the space between them - and Charles did *not* flinch, not at all.

"*Only you.* I mean that.” So close, his breath was warm. “You know I mean that, don’t you?"

“Mm.”

“But this woman, this Madeleine …. She seemed very – bitable.”

Charles was silent.

“That’s a word, isn’t it?”

“Oh –” he was divided between a laugh and a cringe, “it definitely is. I had only forgotten your fondness for biting *me,* even when I looked like a bag of sticks. You remember how I looked last December, don’t you?"

Erik nodded. He was running his tongue over his teeth – Charles could tell from watching his mouth.
“And you still wanted a nibble. How flattering,” Charles said. “Do let me know what I can do, to – Erik!”

For Erik had lunged forward and grabbed him – had bitten his shoulder with teeth that felt like a clamp made of iron – was bearing down hard, and Charles thrashed between his body and the wall. “Let go!”

A sharp snarl. Even through his sweater, Charles realized, gasping, that bite would bruise. “Stop!”

And Erik stopped, jerking his head away. His breath was coming fast.

“There are other ways to start something like this, for pity’s sake! You don’t just charge ahead, ‘into the valley of sex rode the six hundred,’ all right?”

“What may I do?” Erik growled.

“Leaving aside the fact that you didn’t ask – no biting.” It was difficult to calm himself. “Something else.”

“What?”

“Kiss me,” Charles ordered. “And keep it gentle. This never-ending cold means my lips are chapped.”

And in a split second – there you are – he was crushed into Erik’s arms – ow – and he had another tongue in his mouth.

Joy. Charles would have rolled his eyes again, but he had to focus on wrangling Erik – the only word possible for what felt like kissing … some sort of aquatic creature, perhaps, since things were getting more and more disgustingly wet. Charles tried to lean back – Erik matched him, and shoved him into the wall. Another try, then: he ignored Erik’s tongue twisting through his mouth, hot and eager, and placed a hand on Erik’s brow, and pushed. Erik didn’t budge. He growled in his throat, instead – Charles was close enough to feel it. He sighed into Erik’s mouth; tried pushing and pulling away simultaneously. Finally. The kiss broke with a slurp, and he was able to breathe.

He braced himself for another bout, but Erik seemed content to stand there and breathe on him in turn. Charles could feel each huff gust over the saliva on his chin. He carefully felt the wall behind him. It was solid, and he was far from any alcove or corner, so he would have to talk his way out.

“Once more: you’re glad to see me - you’ve made it obvious. But it’s the middle of the afternoon, and I usually reserve this sort of spelunking for later at night.”

“What’s –”

“Exploring a cave,” Charles said, exasperated. “A undertaking that should not be so damn damp.”

Erik leaned forward with another rumble in his throat; not that unnerving, since he was smiling too. “Tell me what you really mean, please.”

“You’re drooling.”

“… I’m sorry.”

“You should be. It’s quite ridiculous. And I told you to be gentle.”

“You’re very delicious, is all, Charles.”
“I am not food.”

“I know,” Erik murmured. “Geliebter, I know you’re not. And remember –”

“You hate cannibalism.”

“Mm-hm.” Erik buried his face in the crook of Charles’ shoulder. “So you have nothing to fear. But I can’t help that you –” a dab of tongue on his neck, “are –” and another, “köstlich.”

“Remember when you ripped out my filling?” Charles twitched at the kiss pressed into his jugular. “Remember – ah – when you tore down my door, punched me straight into a wall, and got me all ready for a Christmas rape?”

“I said I was sorry.”

“As far as I’m concerned, you can never say it enough.”

For a long while Erik stood still, breathing into Charles’ throat. The smaller details made their way into the catalogue. Erik might have taken that time in the kitchen to wash with soap, but he had apparently shaved before his arrival, making skin on skin completely smooth. Erik had tucked himself close, so close that Charles felt what might have been the tickle of eyebrow, or even eyelash, against his cheek …

One large hand touched his sternum, gently. The token - shite, shite. Charles winced in anticipation.

But Erik merely stroked him there, fingers tracing patterns. "Where is it?"

"Safe," Charles croaked. "In the jewel box."

"Even though you promised …"

"I'm not apologizing," he hissed. "I'm practical. What if Frost finds out?" And - hell, had she sent him here? A question for later, it seemed, because Erik was setting teeth on his neck. "She will, if you mark me any place visible."

There went his sweater, tugged down over his shoulder. “Then may I bite you here?”

“No.”

“Or here?”

Charles knocked his chin on Erik’s brow. “Do I look like a soup bone? No. I don’t want to be bitten today.”

“Some day soon, then.” Erik kissed the base of his throat. “I want to bite you everywhere.”

“Because I’m delicious, and we’re back to where we started, aren’t we? Are you that stupid?”

He had hoped for another reply: angry, wounded – anything to keep them talking – instead of Erik humming against his skin, and hands sliding under his sweater and shirts.

“Oi. Those are cold!”

“Lift a little,” muffled in his neck.

Charles did not lift. He only gritted his teeth as the hands nudged once, then harder – edging under
his arms, sawing back and forth until they were right up in his bloody armpits. The warmest place, true enough, but it was too ridiculous.

He clamped his arms down as tightly as he could. Erik made a pleased sound. The metal of the ring on his thumb was no longer chilly. And he had gone completely still.

Charles waited. It was dull, with Erik plastered as close as he could get, breathing on him.

Of course, when Erik spun him in place, coiled both arms around him, and started dragging him over to the door, Charles realized that he preferred monotony to manhandling.

“Stop.”

“I’ve missed you –”

“But you don’t,” he tried to break free, “need to convey that with rugby, do you?”

“It’s not.” A tighter hug. The library door opened by itself. “I’ve missed you, and I want you.”

Charles struggled harder. “I’m surprised you know what rugby is –”

“There were some from England in Galut.” Erik sounded cheerful, pulling him into the hallway. “Not many, but enough to –”

“I don’t care. Let me go!”

Another kiss, just as sloppy as before, but on his ear this time. Charles clawed at Erik’s forearms, tried kicking back, and finally elbowed him in the gut – Erik doubled over with a wheeze and let him squirm away.

“That’s for you.” Charles saw the library door glide shut. Damn. He went to tug at the handle anyway. “We’re not doing this now.”

“Why not?”

“It’s mid-afternoon; somebody could come back at any minute; I haven’t showered today and I stink – pick one.”

“You think …”

A strange sound. What was it? Charles peeked back – only for a second, and only enough to see Erik … laughing. Well. Laughing and coughing at the same time.

Quickly, Charles looked back at the door. He could stare at the iron ornaments; he could flatten his palms against the wood … but he could not plug his ears without being obvious about it. All he could do was try to think of something else, as Erik regained control enough to say,

“If that’s your stink, I missed it. I missed your smell, I missed your taste. I missed all of you, and I want you now.”

“But …”

“‘But’ what?”

Warm hands closed on his shoulders. Charles swallowed hard. He did not appreciate his stock-in-trade – Erik, stammer; Charles, clarify – being switched around.
“But,” he said, “what, exactly, do you want from me? Now?” Anything to buy some time – although what Charles would do if he wriggled away, he had no idea. Lead Erik on another merry chase?

The hands on his shoulders slid down his arms and found his waist. Long fingers nudged up the sweater and shirts again. But this time, instead of skimming over his ribs, Erik set his hands on Charles’ hips – oh, and found two of the belt loops and hooked his thumbs through them. Clever chap, shifting from foot to foot and stepping forward, tugging Charles back by the loops – and grinding hard against his arse.

“That’s not an answer.” Charles kept his eyes on the door, not an inch away. “Well. Not with words, at least.”

Another kiss. Then Charles’ forehead knocked against the oak as Erik thrust against him and murmured in his ear, “I want your ass.”

“Oh, I want it, too,” Charles said. “Dead useful, my arse. I’m working to get it back into top form. Stop that,” at another shove that crammed him against the door, “I’m going to get splinters all over my face, and then you’ll be sorry.”

“I’m not sorry,” Erik whispered. “Not for this.”

He reached one hand back, even with the thumb in the loop, and got in a good grope. Charles pressed his lips together. One hand, kneading one arse cheek – there wasn’t that much to write home about, but Erik made a pleased hum anyway. “You’ve been eating.”

“That’s not the best compliment in the world, to give your – lover –”

Although Charles supposed Erik had a point, and not just the one jabbing his tailbone. He looked at the grain of wood, trying to think of something different, but his mind kept returning to memories. Too many emaciated survivors of war, the first few years after, to make anything like a flapper fashionable again. Albany, in the greenhouse – but he wouldn’t remember that. He would remember snow instead, and he must have looked ghastly, even to besotted eyes, this past December. You’re thinner – echoing in his memory, and now of course he was fatter, and – judging by both hands joining in the deep tissue massage – Erik fucking liked it.

The strongest squeeze thus far made Charles grimace. “Ow. Watch it.”

Erik’s breath left his cheek; gusted against his neck as he leaned back. He was setting up a rhythm now. And – watching it.

“I didn’t mean that literally – oof –”

He was shoved back against the door. “I want to fuck you again,” Erik rasped. “I want to get you loose, I want to lick you when you’re open and when I’ve come up your ass –”

“I want, I want, I want.’ You want everything. And you haven’t given me anything.” Charles shifted to rest the side of his face against the wood. “I’ve been left here by myself, and you haven’t given me anything to …”

Charles trailed off.

Even flat as they were, and inert, the iron decorations were gleaming in front of his eyes.

How could he have forgotten? My eyes, uncoiling through his memory. I’ve been told they’re very beautiful …. He had whispered that, the other had taken it to heart and – and really, Erik had given
him something after all.
The knowledge that, this time, he wouldn’t be maimed.
He tried to swallow.
Erik nosed at his cheek. “I brought the case for you.”
“Thank you.”
“I’ll let you see it, Charles.” And the grin was practically audible. “If.”
“ ‘If’?”
Erik peeled his body away. “If you come here.”
The sudden chill after such hot pressure meant Charles tried not to shiver as he turned and looked.
There stood Erik, tall and slender. His black turtleneck was rumpled; his jeans were … disordered, to
say the least. Even so, he was smiling, showing a glint of teeth. “Come here.”
“Where?”
Erik tilted his head back and stepped away. “Come and see.”
“The case. You told me,” Charles said, “that you had it. I don’t believe you. I don’t see it, for one
thing.”
“I left it in your room.”
“Oh, how convenient.”
Erik’s widening grin was answer enough.
“Absolutely not.” He walked straight past Erik and strode down the hall. “We’re not shagging in my
room when I still don’t have a door.”
“But –”
“And I can’t think of anyplace else. Anyone could waltz into the library and find us on the couch.
Hank’s lab has video surveillance. Storage smells like dust, the kitchen table would leave splinters in
my arse, and the rest of the places we’ve interacted,” he smiled, thinly, “have histories that kill the
mood.”
The dormitory hallway was darker, or perhaps it was just that the afternoon was getting on. Charles
stopped outside his doorway – wide open, as usual – and glared into his room.
He instantly saw a narrow wooden box lying on his pillow. His fingers itched to take it – but then
Erik caught up. When he glanced inside and made to step over the threshold, Charles snapped, “No.”
“Why not?”
“I told you: no door.”
“I’ve brought you a door.”
The air between your ears, he wanted to add, but restrained himself when he caught sight of a large piece of wood leaning against the chair.

“See?” Erik pointed at the would-be door. “I brought it back for you.”

“It’s a plain slab of wood, Erik. You’re not propping that in the doorframe with my books so you can have at me. I want a door, not a random rectangle. And that,” Charles finished, “will take some time.”

Judging from Erik’s growl, he knew it. But then he turned and looked across the hallway –

“And I’m not fucking you on Jean’s bed. It would be completely inappropriate and you’d traumatize the kitten. So unless you have other ideas, I’ll sit in my chair and you can carve the door.” And during that time, Charles added to himself, you can think of something else to stave him off.

Except: “My room,” Erik grunted.

“… Your room?”

“You have ears.” A hand snapped round his wrist – Charles flinched – and began towing him along as Erik set off down the hall. “Faster.”

“Wait.” Charles tugged against the tight grip, stumbled as Erik clattered down the stairs. “Erik?” He set his feet at the kitchen door, but had to move with a muffled yelp when Erik yanked. “That hurt a little. Slow down – wait, don’t –”

For Erik had swept him up into his arms without breaking his stride. It could have been more dignified, Charles thought, face hot. But then again, it could have been less so – himself, slung like a sack of grain over Erik’s shoulder; his arse right there for Erik to slap. As it was, he was cradled like an overgrown infant, and only just able to glimpse the door to Hank’s lab before Erik skidded to a stop.

“I have to open the door,” he said, breathless. “May I?”

Charles craned his neck. It was the door at the end of the downstairs hallway – the one always locked. He had to admit, he was curious.

“I suppose so.”

The locks juddered in place, and then the door opened onto another long hall.

“We’re on the path to the library,” Charles said, “one floor down. So your room’s at the end of it?” For he could just see another door. “Erik?”

Erik might have nodded as he prowled forward; Charles didn’t see, because the door behind them had creaked shut, and there was very little light.

“I don’t like the dark,” he said. “Not in the afternoon; not when there’s no storm. For pity’s sake –”

Another jangle of locks, audible beneath Erik’s breathing. His clasp on Charles was still hot and tight, as he edged into what had to be the room beneath the library.

Charles’ first impression was of a trap.

Nothing sharp-edged; nothing vicious or biting. Yet, he thought, stiff in Erik’s arms. No: the musty darkness made him feel as though he had been nosing after a bit of cheese or carrot, had caught the
tripwire of a box, and had brought four walls and a top down on himself.

“Erik.” His voice echoed the tiniest bit. “Is there any light?”

A hum answered him. Then Charles was lowered, slowly, and set down on what felt like a heap of cloth. He reached out with both hands as Erik drew away. Coarse fabric. Perhaps it was burlap? He felt a wall of rough brick, or cement, to his left – and another at his back, so he had to be near a corner.

He focused on the textures. His hands were not trembling. Not even when a match flared and moved between different candle stubs before Erik shook it out. A branching candlestick, perhaps – the glimmers of light were at uneven heights as they approached. Charles would have thought them floating, if not for the dim glow they cast over Erik’s hand and sleeve, and face, where he held them high.

“Better?” Erik asked.

Charles shrugged. He cast his eyes down. Sure enough, he was sitting on piled-up rags. He half-heartedly tried to clear a better space for himself. Some of the rags were stiffer than others; all sent up puffs of dust. Then Charles caught sight of a stained mattress at the bottom and he had to cough to cover his start.

“You sleep here?”

“Sometimes.” Erik dropped to his knees in front of him. “Other times – other places.”

“We’re right underneath the library,” Charles said. He peered up into the gloom. There was no sight of any ceiling. “Can you get there from this place?”

A rustle. “Don’t know.”

Charles looked back down; pressed his lips together. The rustle was Erik taking off his clothes. “You’ll get cold.”

“With you here?”

There was nowhere to back up, and Charles soon found himself with an armful of half-naked ... beast. Or would, if he felt inclined to close his arms. He did not.

*Indeed,* he thought, distant, as he brought up a hand and scratched Erik’s head. The hair had grown some; it felt clean. *Good beast.*

Erik’s pushing into the scratches and butting his face into Charles’ shoulder lent credence to the new name. A beast could at least be amiable. A great cat, licking with enthusiasm; a bear on a rope, dancing; and both of them quite warm.

Erik went for his sweater. Charles had a moment of panic: *forget showering – when did you last* – But at the insistent tug, he sighed and held his arms above his head. *Might as well get it over with.* Even if his own cultivated mind cringed at the thought of such a dirty fuck, Erik wouldn’t care.

Charles’ jeans caught on his shoes. “There’s usually an order to these things, you know.”

“Sorry.”

Erik tugged the shoes off. Jeans followed, and briefs, with Erik’s rough hands lingering ... and
Charles shivered with cold.

“Shh.”

The hands came back … to touch. Charles was completely naked, and he had to breathe through his mouth. He would not look down at Erik hovering – he would catch sight of himself, and even if he were no longer quite so scrawny, such poor lighting would not flatter.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re shivering.”

“I’m just cold –”

Fingertips brushed over his brow. “And you’re sweating.”

Charles kept his mouth shut.

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

“Don’t I?” Charles snapped. “You could have fooled me, dragging me down here by the hair.”

“You don’t have enough hair to drag.”

“Thank you for that.”

Erik did not answer. Merely leaned forward, flattened his palm, and started caressing Charles’ head. Intent … content, merely to pet him, hand brushing over his short hair in warm, soothing strokes. Charles could only just feel the roughness of his calluses edging along his brow.

Erik tipped his head to one side. And then pulled a mound of rags over him.

It sent up a cloud of dust. Charles coughed; worked a hand free to clear the air in front of his face.

“What was that for?”

“You won’t be cold, now.”

With a lurch of his stomach, Charles realized that Erik had, at some point, stripped. And the shyness of his smile did not take away from the fact that his cock, jutting up, looked obscene.

At least Erik had taken off that stupid crystal as well. Frost. One of these days, Charles thought, he would have to conveniently lose it for him – in the spine of a book; in the woods; in the toilet tank. He sighed, and focused on pushing the rags into something approaching a nest. “I can’t believe you really sleep here.”

“It’s not so bad.” Erik drew closer. The heat of his body was pronounced, even through the rags. He started stroking Charles’ hand.

Charles calmly took his hand away. Folded his fingers together – and waited.

Soon enough, there was a change in Erik’s breathing. “Charles …”

“What?”
“May I touch you again? Please?”

“Mm, no. But I will pose for you, if you’d like.”

Erik’s breathing stopped.

“I’ve done it a few times already.” He kicked off some of the rags. It wasn’t so cold. “I seem to remember that you liked it. So have a look,” Charles gestured up and down his torso, “and maybe even – touch yourself. If you’d like.”

“I would like,” Erik gasped.

Charles arranged himself better. He reached out and moved the candles, just so. There. Casually, he trailed fingers over his clavicles, his sternum. Then he started in on his ribs. At least they were less prominent these days.

“You’re beautiful.” Erik’s whisper was reverent – at least, Charles thought so. It was difficult to hear, with the noise of his hand on his cock.

“Careful.” Charles rolled onto his stomach. “You’ll pull it right off, and then we’ll have a problem. Don’t I have a lovely arse, now?”

The strangled whimper made him grin. “Slow down. Let’s talk.” He rested his chin on both hands.

“Thank you for the soap, by the way. And now the case, and that door. You were very considerate to bring me things from Brussels, and – from wherever you were just now.”


“Sometimes.”

“Only sometimes? Unless – ah. I suppose you have had to be discreet. The Free West watching your every move before; all and sundry in the camp now; and her Ladyship nosy throughout. It would not do, to have anybody pin you as a sort of – sex –”

Maniac, his mind finished. Except: a larger part of it was dwelling on … Frost ... and what he had thought earlier.

“Erik,” he said.

The flurry of Erik’s hand was very loud. At some point he must have spit – that or there was enough pre-come to make things sticky – because it was a slapping sort of flurry.

“Erik,” Charles said, louder. He turned onto his side. “Stop and listen.”

Erik choked. But … stopped, and stared down at him.


“Why?” It was a moan, but Erik obeyed. It made him rock forward. This close, Charles could feel the warm gust of his breath.

He rolled onto his back. “Now, answer me. Does your lady know about your being here?”

“Why does it –”
“Answer me.”

“No,” Erik gasped.

“You’re sure?”

The only reply was Erik’s ragged breathing.

Could he trust him? Charles gnawed on his lower lip. Frost could have rummaged in his brain again, since Erik was behaving as though someone had shut down a good portion of his higher reasoning.

“When did you last see her?”

“Two days ago.”

Fresh from her killing Pinkner; perhaps they had bonded over it. “Really?”

“Yes. I went to Boston,” Erik whispered, “to tell her. Nobody thought we could take Albuquerque so fast.”

**Boston?** Charles filed the reference away for later. “Bravo. And you didn’t talk to her about me?”

Erik hesitated. “I …”

“You** did.** Hell.”

“I didn’t! Except I asked her if I could see you. And she said ‘no.’”

Charles blinked. “She did?”

“She said you are to accompany her on Monday, for diplomacy.”

*That* explained it. She needed him cognizant and unbloodied. She **needed** something – Charles allowed himself a tight smile. If he could only figure out how to –

“See? You’ve found favor with her.” Erik lifted a hand to caress his face. “I knew you would.”

“And you flat-out disobeyed her. *I knew you would.* "I’m shamefully corrupting you, aren’t I?”

“I like it.”

“That’s rather obvious. And Azazel – you didn’t tell him?”

Erik shook his head.

Azazel’s look of indifference flashed across his memory. “He talked about a long game, earlier. Something makes me think your crimson comrade has an agenda of his own. What do you think?”

Erik leaned down for a kiss; Charles swatted at him; then pressed one hand flat against his chest to keep him at a distance. “Not yet. Answer me.”

“I don’t know. I don’t – please, Charles –”

“Fine.” Charles would have time later to ponder the puzzles. For now … he traced a circle with his thumb on Erik’s sternum.

Erik gulped.
Trailing his thumb to the right, Charles started teasing at a nipple. “So tell me, if you can sort it all out: how did you get back here?”

“Geliebter …”

Charles grimaced. Something warm had splashed his forehead, and since Erik had sounded garbled – “Did you just drool on me?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I should hope so. Come now: civilized conversation. How did you get here from Boston?”

“I rode.”

Charles blinked.

“On my bike.”

“From Boston?” He remembered enough maps of the U.S. Before to say, “Ridiculous.” Charles yanked his hand back. “Don’t tell me you slept in snowbanks.”

“I slept in barns –”

“You could have frozen to death.”

The only reply was a high-pitched whine, before Erik bent to push his brow against Charles’ shoulder. Good lord. He frowned at the sputtering candles. Now was perhaps a good time to start being kinder … but with such foolish behavior, Erik made it difficult not to snap at him. Charles sighed and rubbed Erik’s back – pick a muscle, any muscle – he moved his hand up to squeeze a deltoid, and Erik pressed closer.

“What if something happens to you?” Charles petted his hair. “I get so dreadfully bored here. What would I do without your surprise visits,” he scratched Erik’s scalp, “to liven up my life?”

Sheer nonsense, of course. More like: what would Frost do to keep him obedient, if she lacked her vicious little trump card? Charles did not want to find out. And –

Erik’s cock bumped Charles’ thigh. Right before he jerked his hips away. “Sorry!”

“Don’t fret.” Charles slid his eyes down the body hovering above him. Not so little, really. He supposed he was impressed. That cock had to be throbbing with Erik’s pulse, but Erik hadn’t touched him with it that much. Just – dripped on him. It could be worse. It could be drool on his face again –

The idea slotted into place as easily as breathing.

Ha. Just in case Frost ever needed additional lovely images to drag out of Erik’s head …. And it had been quite some time since Fourth Quarter night – maybe he wanted a taste of that cock again. Charles licked his lips, staring.

“So. Whether in Brussels or Albuquerque, did the knave of hearts go fuck some tarts?” He thumbed the tip; darted a glance back up. “Well?”

Erik looked to be in physical pain.

“I’ll take silence as a ‘no’. Hmm …”
Poor little knave of hearts – Charles paused, thinking. Would Erik be the knave of diamonds? No, it had to be hearts: he was so susceptible to gentleness … Charles touched Erik’s thighs, gently: first, one; then, the other. “Move up a little.”

“But –”

“On your knees. One knee on each side of me.” Charles took his hand back. “Straddle me. Go on.”

Erik obeyed.

“But.” A hard swallow. “If I – my knees there means I’ll … You don’t want –”

“Excuse me: I decide what I want and don’t want. And right now, I want your cock in my face. Move it.”

One undignified scramble later, and Charles had what he wanted.

“Oh, hello.” The whisper hit hot, taut skin; he felt Erik shiver. “There you are.” Charles stuck out his tongue and pressed it against the most prominent vein, and felt the whole cock twitch where it brushed his face. “Very nice.”

Erik might have said something. Babbled something. Charles couldn’t be bothered to listen.

“Well, down the hatch.” Charles worked up some saliva; adjusted his position and opened his mouth. “Come on, love.”

“… What?”

“For God’s sake.” He grabbed Erik’s cock and sucked on the head. Erik fell forward, but must have broken the fall with his hands. Charles drew off with a slurp. “Good catch. Now: I want you to fuck my mouth, please.” He dragged his hand up the shaft; nudged the head onto his tongue – which was nice, since he could swirl saliva round, tease the slit a little …. “Please, Erik.”

And that did it.

One minute he was flicking his tongue under the head – the next, his hand was flat against springy hair and he was gagging on Erik’s cock. Damn the surprise anyway. Charles tried to push him back, but couldn’t. Then … priorities – he tried to breathe. All he could see was skin, all he could feel was heat; all he could taste was pre-come and salt sweat. Erik shoved forward further – Charles had to cough around his cock but he couldn’t get enough air through his nose, so he scrabbled for purchase on one lean thigh and pinched, hard.

Erik yelped. Charles tried to cover his teeth as that cock got yanked out – there wasn’t a lot of room. Then he sucked in a breath and – hell, there was no fakery about his coughing fit. “Oh –”

“Are you all right?”

One hand hovered into view from above his head – Charles saw it out of the corner of his eye. He saw nothing but cock out of the other corners. Pre-come dripped onto his face, rolled into his eye and stung; he blinked hard. “I’m fine. Just …”

“What happened?”
“It’s my fault – I should have explained. You can’t just stick it in all at once … or, you can, but it isn’t good manners. Be more careful with me – go little by little. Understand?”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You haven’t. And you won’t.”

“I won’t,” Erik echoed. He stroked Charles’ hair with his hand. *His left,* Charles realized; he felt the metal of the ring on Erik’s thumb.

“Just – let’s fix a few things. Lean back towards my chest, but don’t sit. Keep your weight on your knees. And push some more of these handy rags under me – I need a better angle.”

Erik obeyed perfectly.

The angle might be better if Erik turned round, but he’d be damned if he did this with balls polishing his nose. *Bloody choreography.* Charles reached out for the mattress, but – *that won’t work.* “Are there pillows?”

He could tilt his head back, if he just put them under –

– and his mind caught up. Frost would not want to see pillows. She would not want any gentleness. She would just want his throat pummeled.

Charles ran both of his hands up and down Erik’s thighs. Hot skin quivered under his touch.

“I don’t have pillows,” Erik said, dazed.

“That’s all right.” Charles moved both hands to Erik’s cock; pressed it between his palms. “One of these days, I’ll do this with my feet. See how you like it.”

Erik’s cock twitched again at that, but Erik himself was stunned silent.

Charles gathered up his courage. “Go on, then. Lean forward; give me a bit of a rhythm. Just a slow one, at first. All right?”

It didn’t matter. Erik would eventually lose control and make the memory brutal enough for Frost. Charles moved his hands from Erik’s cock to his arse; dug in his fingers tight enough to hurt.

A hand touched his hair again, gently.

“Let that lie.” He ran his tongue over his lower lip. “Come on.”

Charles felt muscles flex, and movement of the heat near his face. He waited, with his mouth and his eyes open.

The ridiculous thing was: after all that effort, Erik hadn’t even come. Charles stared at the mattress in front of his nose. It was almost impossible to see, since the candles had burnt out. His throat hurt. He coughed.

Behind him, Erik paused. “All right?”

There wasn’t any reply. Just a pause, in which Charles could almost hear Erik’s relieved smile. And then he felt large, warm hands brushing up and down his flanks, and moving to grip his arse again … and Erik giving him one long, slow lick, leaving a wet trail up his spine, and he couldn’t help it – his whole body shuddered.

“What is it?” Erik rasped, in between pressing his tongue to the nape of his neck – tasting him again. For God’s sake, when had he turned into a sweet?

“Nothing.” He arched into the touch; felt another dab of tongue. “I just thought you were doing something more interesting.”

“Ah.”

It worked. Charles squeezed his eyes shut as Erik went back to working his cock into him. Or:

It appeared Erik had been practicing his self-control.

He had just stared down, eyes awestruck in the candlelight, as Charles swallowed around his cock, over and over. And … Charles had assumed he would fuck his mouth at a jackrabbit pace, and hadn’t known what to think of Erik going slowly. Slowly, but deep, so deep …

Charles had pinched Erik’s thigh every time he needed air – and every time, Erik had drawn back and let him gasp. Had taken his cock in his own hand and squeezed tight at the base –

– ah. That had been it. Charles had been so busy wiping away the wet steadily dripping onto his face that he hadn’t seen Erik’s gripping his cock for what it was. That is the only thing keeping you from coming, you wanker – well, Erik must have wanked, and kept himself from coming, many times in the interim.

Endurance training, Charles thought, and snorted. It turned into a cough, and Erik stopped again.

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine. I just haven’t had something that big down my throat in a while. I’ll be better after some water.”

“I could go get you some – and then, I could get the grease –”

“No,” Charles snapped.

The image of Erik dashing off to fetch him things, a sprinting Priapus, was ridiculous. Besides, the more Erik had to work at actually getting his cock in, the sooner he would come. Surely that was true.

But he had always thought it true that he excelled at fellatio, and now, after such a show, to have Erik’s cock hard, albeit slick with pre-come and saliva, and prodding at his arse … . Bad for morale, that. Discouraging.

Charles shook his head to clear it. “I told you,” he said, “use more spit. I’m fresh out.”

A finger glanced over his hole. “May I –”

“No.”

It was dark, but he did not want running commentary if Erik noticed, fingering him. The curious
questions that would surely follow – wait, what, but when we, may I, 

Far better that Erik just come his brains out, collapse into sleep, and forget specifics.

He pretended to moan. “Hurry. I want your cock in me.”

A growl. “I’m trying.”

Despite everything, Charles had to bite back a snicker. Even when Erik spit on his hole again, started nudging his cock there again. Bull’s-eye.

“Could you …”

“What.”

“Could you – relax for me? Or something.”

“Or something?”

He felt Erik knead his arse again, pushing. “You’re closed.”

“Bloody hell, man, I’m not a sweet shop.”

“Please.”

Charles sighed. “Be patient.”

Not that it should be so difficult, relaxing, but his position – arse high, face mashed into the mattress – was undignified.

Which brought back the memory of the one time Richardson had tried to top. There had been a mirror in the sacristy, and even bent awkwardly over a bureau, Charles had been able to see St. George huffing and puffing. But then Charles had handed the chrism back over his shoulder – he had thought he was doing him a favor – and St. George had stopped, scandalized.

After that, and given a little time for a social coda, they were through. Years, that had been, but Charles had liked Richardson enough to be kind. Or at least grateful for a good anecdote. Geoffrey had laughed when he had heard the story, later.

“Oi. Be careful.”

“I’m trying!”

“Well, try harder.”

Try harder, Charles.

Geoffrey, now …. A better memory; a much better lover. Charles summoned up Geoffrey, layering his charming talk over the liniment he was massaging into Charles’ bruises after a mission gone awry – poor brave boy, sweet boy, pretty boy – you know you’re pretty, don’t you? You’re better, now; you’re grand. And – London Bridge has fallen down, so loosen up and let me in, my fair lady. Breathe deep. Try for me.

Charles’ eyes widened.

Because – there. Erik was pushing in.
Should he clap? But applause would not go over well, surely. And it had taken long enough: ten minutes of poking and prodding … All that time without coming, which was commendable. Only just in. The tip. And Erik’s moan would have been funny, were it not for the fact that Charles was … being stretched, and it hurt a little … Rather more than a little.

He swallowed, and regretted it, because his throat still hurt too, damn it.

“Charles.” Erik’s voice was thick. “May I please move?”

“Let me.”

Charles pushed back. Eased forward, pushed back – damnnn, it would have made more sense to move forward first, since that cock would have gone straight back out. As it was, the stretch hurt, dry like this – even with all the saliva and Erik’s cock wet from earlier. But Charles knew he could bear it. He moved again – heard Erik wheeze, and felt strong hands clench on his hips.

“Ow.” But at least that had done the trick – the head all the way in, jammed up tight. “Spit again.”

Erik spat. Once that he could feel – wait, why more, for God’s sake? “You’re not a – sprinkler.” That was the term, in the greenhouse. “That’s enough.” Why was he even –

Charles jumped.

Erik’s hand, palm slick, had taken hold of his cock.

Charles hadn’t been enjoying any of this, even if he was half-hard – but now it would be more difficult to feign – indifference – “You don’t need to,” he said, as Erik began to jerk him off.

“I can’t,” panted, “for much longer.”

A twist of the hand made Charles’ shoulders twitch. Erik did it again – and, after spitting, eased forward – Christ, three things at once, and Charles fought to keep from an abject groan.

“Like that,” Erik rasped, and rocked his hips. Kept pulling on Charles’ cock. “I’m going to come, fuck, Charles – I can’t stop –”

“Don’t want you to stop.” The faster Erik went, after all, the faster this would be – this would –

Charles caught the rhythm, moved into it: skin slapping on skin as Erik did his best to fuck deeper into him – one inch forward, half an inch back – but faster, that was good. Charles spared a moment to be amused at himself, tight as a schoolboy, not that he had ever – there were lines even he would not cross –

Oh. That last push had been – exactly right.

“Harder.” It wasn’t a whine, but it was close. “God, Erik. Fuck me harder.”

“Yes,” a deeper rasp, almost a rattle, and Erik’s free hand took firmer hold of his arse cheek – shook him, even whilst fucking him harder. Undignified – a dog with a bone, and those fingers would bloody well leave marks. Charles felt his whole body ripple with goose bumps. Might as well keep saying what Erik surely wanted to hear.

“I’m cold. I need you on me – I can,” he put a hand beneath himself, grabbed at his own cock. Their fingers brushed. “Let me –”

It took some time, as Charles wanked and Erik kept moving – but then Erik thrust forward, slowly
… thrust deep, and Charles almost cried, it felt so good. It hurt, but as fine a hurt as he had ever had.

Erik didn’t go back as far. Just started the same rhythm there, almost all his cock in, each snap of his hips smacking Charles on the arse. Charles blinked his watering eyes clear and concentrated on getting himself off, *by himself*, he didn’t need any other rhythm, even as Erik braced both hands on the rags, hunched over him, thrust faster. Charles opened his mouth. Reconsidered. Any words would just give – *pitch* – to his being fucked.

He sped up his left hand on his cock – had to spread all five fingers of his right, grab hold of some rags and claw at them so he wouldn’t make noise, even if Erik punched out gasps from him with each thrust. But when Erik slapped his own hand down, working his fingers in between Charles’ fingers to take hard hold, curling down into his palm, Charles cried out anyway.

“*God!*”

It felt as though he had been hit in the head with a brick. And in the gut with – he didn’t know. Erik was coming, though, surely, squeezing Charles’ hand in a rhythm, and with final, shallow movements of his hips … each time, he pressed Charles’ palm into the mattress, so hard that Charles thought his wrist would snap.

Then he went still. Breathing on Charles’ ear in great, damp gulps.

Charles stared at their interlocked right hands, dazed. He hadn’t come yet. The thought wandered through his mind – should he be upset? Or something? *Selfish*, he wanted to say, but only managed to pant.

“Charles …”

He drew in a ragged breath. “What?”

Erik kissed his nape, and said nothing more.

For a long moment, they stayed still – Charles felt Erik’s cheekbone between his shoulder blades, dragging back and forth as he slowly rubbed the side of his face there, kissing him.

Then Erik brought Charles’ hand to his mouth and pressed another kiss into his palm – with a flick of tongue to it – it tickled, and proved a bit of distraction from him leaning back and pulling his cock out. Charles let his whole body flop onto on the mattress, not caring about his own left hand, trapped now. Not caring about anything but –

He blinked. Should he be angry? Erik had just patted his arse. As if he were a horse, Charles thought, who had done well – so well that he could carry the weight of the rider again, as Erik slumped forward too, and made himself comfortable on Charles’ back.

Charles shifted his weight under Erik’s. Tried to wriggle, to make room – just so he could start on his own cock again. But he felt dizzy and boneless.

“*Schatz.*” Erik’s voice was muffled in Charles’ shoulder. “What is it?”

“Give me a minute,” Charles had to clear his throat. “Some of us want to get off, too.”

A pause. Then Erik mumbled something else. Ran his left hand under their bodies, to Charles’ left. Grabbed it, wrested it away from his cock.

But Erik brought it up to their faces instead – left hands intertwinined, like the right – and started –

“Oh, don’t lick.” Charles tugged at the grip. “No. You’re not an animal, but if you –”

Erik kissed him right on the mouth, and Charles blinked slowly, as he realized: he tasted come. And, given where Erik’s hand had just been, it had to be his own.

He let Erik kiss him for a while. He did not really care how deep it went: his mouth felt pulpy, and his throat hurt more than it had before. But his mind was clearing, even before Erik broke away with a sigh. Nuzzled closer, let go of his left hand to find Charles’ hair again, and started petting him, slowly. Charles felt the rhythmic scrapes of the ring. First horse, then dog, he thought, distant. It was one thing to think of the other as a beast – but quite another to feel treated like an animal himself.

“Go to sleep,” Erik said in his ear.

“It’s the middle of the afternoon.”

“Then rest.” He felt Erik’s jaw crack in a yawn. “It’s getting on to night anyway.”

Charles opened his mouth to protest, but then, surprised, had to swallow his own yawn. Erik nosed along Charles’ jaw. Charles felt his smile.

He let them rest in silence for a while. But then, since nothing would be accomplished with an early-evening cuddle, Charles poked at Erik’s shoulder with one finger.

“Shh,” Erik mumbled. “You’re tired.”

“You’re tired.”

“Mm-hm. Rest.”

“I did already.”

“Rest more.”

“Well, we could rest more, but I’d like to talk to you.”

“What about?”

First and foremost, he wanted out of such a dark, dank room. And perhaps, Charles thought, some politesse on his own part would not hurt. He could get some information from Erik; it would be amusing to watch him try not to fall asleep whilst talking.

“What not about? Conversation: where you’ve been, what you’ve been doing, what I’ve been doing. We could talk over supper. I need to use the rest of the eggs, anyway.”

Erik kissed his cheek. Clean-shaven, his skin felt like silk. “I brought you some more food.”

“And wood for a door – how did you manage?” Charles moved closer, seeking warmth.

“It was difficult,” Erik conceded.

“I should imagine so.”

“But I did it.” And a brush of lips against his mouth – and there was Erik’s tongue again.
Charles relaxed into the kiss, murmured in his throat as he let his mind wander. *I did it* – Erik had done it with his ability, of course, even if the veil had been just as strong at the end point, keeping the resonance of his own blood concealed. *Blood* … Charles sighed. He would have to check his arse – not that he had felt anything painful enough to be a tear, but just to be sure.

The kiss stopped. Erik whispered: “All right?”

“Mm.” Charles stretched. His whole body thrummed in contentment. Aside from being somewhat fast and filthy and in the middle of the afternoon … this last fuck had not been so bad. He rubbed at some of the stickiness on his face.

Erik plucked at his wrist. “You want to wash?”

“Oh. Certainly. Just a splash – nothing much.”

“Water’s this way,” Erik said, before moving.

Charles shivered as Erik’s warmth left him. He reached for his jeans. His legs did not ache quite yet – not as much as they would, soon. He put out of his mind the thought of the come streaked on his thighs and arse; tucked his cock away, zipped and buttoned –

Light flared from the far side of the room. Erik had opened a door there.

Charles felt his jaw sag. Falling in a beam over dusty flagstones, the light showed him nothing but junk: broken furniture lying overturned; torn books covered in dust; cobwebs, dirt, and God knew what other filth. *Disgusting* – but his mouth opened on the first glib words that came to mind:

“If there are mice here, they might get into the library. We’ll have to deploy Princess Alexandra.”

The dark silhouette tilted its head.

“That’s what Jean named the kitten.” Charles got to his feet. He snatched up his sweater; slipped his shoes onto his feet. “What are you waiting for?”

“You.”

“That’s *who* you are waiting for.” He strode over to the doorway. “Or perhaps your clothing, Erik, really.”

It was warmer where they stood – Charles remembered the heating in the West Wing. Perhaps that explained Erik’s grin, perfectly visible in the crackling florescent light of the hallway. “You wanted to wash, and you’d be cold in the kitchen. This way.” Erik pointed.

Charles stared at the lion tattoo, at the hair under his arm matted with sweat. “You’re not really going to go naked, are you?”

Broad shoulders rolled in a shrug. Erik yawned, stretched, and started walking.

*Oh.*

The way he walked …

He could stare; it was permissible, Charles told himself. Erik had a tattoo on the lower left of his back - faded, but obviously Cyrillic. Charles could not read it from this distance. He would ask later, maybe, and in the meantime …
It was human to stare. Especially at the bunch and flex of the muscles in that arse.

He would look away.

Any second now.

Erik turned on one bare heel. “Are you coming?”

Charles shook off his daze; walked after him. “How far?”

“Not so far.”

“ Aren’t you cold?”

“Not so cold.”

Charles kept walking in silence. They came to a turn in the hall. Then another, and more – until they were faced with a dead end.

“We were beneath the long hallway, correct? Through the West Wing door, from the library.”

A hum of agreement.

But where had they ended up? Charles tried to remember all the times he had counted his steps, blindfolded. His catalogue obligingly presented him with an image – but then Erik gestured at the dead end. It folded in on itself – metal – and Charles stepped into what he had seen, in his mind, and thought … too bizarre a coincidence.

_The infirmary._

He edged inside. There was the familiar bed. The IV holder was empty. The chair and the cupboards were clean and bare.

He did not see the Seeker.

“There’s water there,” Erik said, waiting in the hall. He made no gesture, but a door in one corner of the infirmary opened – and Charles hurried towards the sink he saw.

After, the water dripping was very loud in the silence. He dried his face with his sweater. “Erik?”

Erik was leaning against the folded metal, eyes closed. Completely relaxed. Charles cast a look down biceps and abdomen … the proportion of chest to waist … the sheer size of that cock, even now …

He shook his head, hard. “Erik.”

Even half asleep, Erik tipped his face towards him. “Yes?”

“Your room, such as it is, connects directly to the infirmary.”

“So?”

“So .... It’s strange, is all.”

Erik yawned again. “Are you finished?”

Charles looked round the room. The bedding had been changed since Pinkner had died there. The leather straps showed dark against the sheet.
Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to leave.

“Yes, I am.”

He crossed the room; entered the hallway. Erik caught at his wrist, pressed his face against the side of Charles’, inhaled. “Should I wash too?”

Erik smelled like sweat, but Charles did not care presently, not when he needed to get away. He urged Erik into a walk – difficult, since he was now clinging to Charles like an affectionate sloth.

“Clothes first,” Charles said, “and supper.”

Erik’s stomach growled; his breath huffed over Charles’ ear. On Geoffrey, that would have been an embarrassed snort.

“You see?” Charles touched his waist. *So thin.* “You’re hungry. It’s from all the exercise, no doubt.”

“I like this kind of exercise.”

“So I’ve gathered. Come on. I’ll make you an omelet.”

“And then?”

A choice: the dark lair with all its dirty clutter, the rag bed now smelling of come – or his room …. Easy enough.

“We’ll go upstairs. I’ll see just how good you are at hanging a door. And could you thaw the water pipes? I’ve been waiting for the chance to use the bath oils that you brought me last week. You could try some too.”

Inconsequential chatter to cover his own confusion. For, clicking away beneath it all, his catalogue had concluded: it would be easy to drag a body down the hallway after an interrogation, to dump it in the library basement … for Erik to play with.

But something made him doubt that conclusion.

Charles could not say what that something was – as he watched Erik close doors, gracefully, and heard him stop to dress before continuing. Perhaps his second thoughts were sown by the fact: before, by candlelight, there had been no sight of blood in this otherwise disgusting den.

“*Gehen wir?”*

“Lead on,” Charles said.

No, there had been no sign of violence. So perhaps, Charles thought, his unease was from how Erik had folded back a metal wall as easily as he would fold paper … but had not put so much as a toe into the infirmary itself.

By the time they reached the kitchen Charles had stopped talking. He swallowed against the throb in his throat, opened the icebox, and looked down at the two remaining eggs. Build a fire, fry the eggs with the small bit of butter that remained – no suitable vegetables to tear with his fingers; green peppers had not been on Logan’s list, it seemed, and Kurt had gnawed through the rest of the carrots just that morning. And all that effort with Erik hanging on his every move; staring hungrily, and not at the food. Charles knew it would be so.
Charles did not turn, even though Erik had walked up right behind him. Nor did he flinch, even though the metal icebox hinges squeaked as the lid closed, gracefully – by itself.

"Why don’t you let me cook? You could go take a bath.” Erik brushed a kiss over his temple. “Hm?"

“What a splendid idea.”

Charles left. Not halfway up the stairs, though, he turned and saw Erik following him.

“You can thaw the pipes from down here.” Charles felt chilly, even with his green sweater. “Can’t you?”

“Not today.”

"You levitated the chess piece -" 

"And that took some doing." Erik paced up the stairs and took his hand. Charles made no protest.

“You see,” and they kept walking, “some days are better than others, and in those days, some hours –”

“And today’s a bad day.”

“Today,” Erik squeezed his hand, “is good. For me, I mean. I missed you.”

“So I gathered.”

Charles let himself be led to his bathroom. He saw Erik’s brow furrow and, self-conscious, he looked round in the fading light: at the streaked and dusty mirror, the streaked and dirty porcelain … Perhaps the bathroom looked unsanitary, but then, Erik wasn’t one to talk.

“Give me a minute.” Erik sat on the side of the tub. He put his hands on the metal taps and frowned at them. “My power was fine at Albuquerque. It will be more reliable with rest.”

_Frost is doing that_, Charles thought, weary. Turning it on and off, just like Erik turning the taps. But why bother telling him again? He had been shagged so thoroughly that Charles was surprised he could string two thoughts together. _So_. Far better, to do something to keep him happy as a child at play …

Certainly the way he was testing the water, flicking at it with the fingers of one hand, reminded him of Raven preparing to bathe her latest pet, the poor things. He dismissed the memories and pulled out the basket from the cupboard beneath the sink. “Those glass bottles are bath oils. Pick one for me, won’t you?”

Erik dried his fingers on his trousers; took the basket handle with a smile. “Did you like them?”

“I haven’t had a chance to use them.”

Erik _tsked_, and made a show of unwinding the ornamental wire on each bottle; uncorking them; sniffing gravely. “This one,” he decided.

Charles took it; sniffed. “Roses. Why am I not surprised?”
“Because I like it when you smell like them?”

“That was a rhetorical question.”

Erik tipped his head to one side, and hot water suddenly gushed out of the taps. Charles could see the steam. He closed his mouth on another bit of sarcasm –

– and was all the happier it was closed, since Erik uncoiled to his feet, cupped Charles’ chin in both his hands, and kissed him again.

“Mmph.”

Erik stroked both thumbs down either side of his jaw in reply – and something about the movement made Charles inhale and drop the bottle. He broke the kiss. “Shite – I didn’t mean – oh.”

The bottle was floating above the floor tiles, caught by the wire.

Charles saw Erik’s smile out of the corner of his eye. “Feeling better already?”

“My control is better when the metal’s this close.”

Charles held his breath, eyes fixed on the bottle twinkling at his feet, as Erik kissed his cheekbone softly. “There, Rabe. Take a bath. I’m sure you’ll like it.”

– Thank you – caught in Charles’ throat. He made a noncommittal sound.

“I’ll bring you some food. I won’t be long.”

The bottle floated back up to Charles’ hand. He took hold of it, determined not to react. Except with: “No powers in bed,” to Erik, as he walked out of the bathroom.

Erik turned on one heel. “Don’t you go falling asleep in there, now.”

He sounded like Geoffrey. Something about the lilt in his voice – it was familiar, that was for god damned sure. Charles shivered. “I’ve said it before, but it bears repeating: take your time.”

Erik grinned, and left him there alone.

Finally.

He did not fall asleep. Instead, Charles scrubbed every inch of his body with the fine-milled soap. Including his arsehole, of course. He didn’t look; he didn’t want to. Besides, if Erik were to catch him at it in the bathroom mirror, he’d probably take it as a special invitation.

But Charles didn’t think about that.

Instead, he ran more water and ducked his head beneath it, again and again. Then he tipped in the rose oil and sat for quite some time. Take one Charles Xavier, boil in roses for a delicate and delicious dish. The scent cloyed, but the hot water was relaxing all the same, so Charles took hard hold of both his shoulders to massage the tension away – at least, until Erik came back …

That thought sent him slipping and sliding out of the tub and scrambling for his clothes. He wouldn’t let Erik come in for a gawk; he would remain in control.

So when he left the bathroom and closed the door behind him, he allowed himself only one shiver of
surprise, before he put on a look of indifference at the sight of candles floating above his bed.

“Erik –”

“Yes?” Erik was sitting on the hearth, placing another piece of wood on the fire.

“How did you do this?”

Except Charles could see how it was done. Erik was not making candle holders float – instead, he had sent wrought iron climbing like ivy up the wall, holding lit tapers in every tendril.

How the hell had he recovered so quickly? Or perhaps, Charles thought, he had far more of an affinity for all things ferrous …

He shook off his fascination. “You’ll get wax on my bed. And – oh. I got those in Albany. I need them for a birthday cake, you idiot.”

“Would an idiot bring you chocolate?” Erik mused. He held out a plate.

Charles took it quickly, but saw only fruit and pastry, nestled alongside a fried egg. “Liar.”

“I’m not. You eat that, and then I’ll give you a truffle or two.”

“As long as you didn’t kill anyone for a box.”

Erik paused, reaching for the other plate on the hearth. “Why would I do such a thing?”

“You did for that basket you brought.”

A longer pause. “How did you know?”

“Blood on the label.” Charles flopped on his bed, elbowing the wooden box out of the way. He would ignore both it and the constellation of candles behind him. “Tacky, in more than one sense of the word.”

Erik scowled. “You would have killed her too.”

“What? No – absolutely not.” It was difficult to speak around the orange in his mouth, but he managed. “What do you think I am? I’m not like you.”

“Don’t underestimate yourself.”

Charles swallowed his mouthful; ignored the churning in his stomach at the thought of Raven sneaking off to Brussels, running into Erik in an alleyway, getting killed – except: no. She would have rolled her eyes at a hotel with such ridiculous toiletries; rolled her eyes and left. She was safe at home. She had to be –

“What was her crime, anyway?” Charles toyed with another slice of orange. “Impugning Frost’s fashion sense?”

“There is a group called Zolotaya Orda.” Erik settled his plate on his knees. “That woman used to be one of them, but then she sold information to an enemy, and …”

Charles looked at him. “And now she’s dead.”

Erik took a bite of pastry and looked straight back.
“And your interests, and those of – Zolotaya –”

“– Orda. You would say: Golden Horde.”

“Your interests coincide completely?”

A shrug. “They’re allied with us. My lady knows Leonid Ilyich – he’s their leader.”

“And he asked her to kill someone, and she told you to do it, and so the wheel turns. I see how it is.”

Finishing his pastry neatly, Erik made no answer.

Charles pushed away his tired disgust and made a deliberate mess of eating his egg – easy enough without silverware. “So, in Brussels, what did you do, besides frightening Stryker’s daughter and killing people?”

“I took care of Jean.”

“Very domestic. What did she like to do?”

“We went to the park.” Erik flicked crumbs into the fire. “She liked the playground. And I thought she would like the horses.”

“She didn’t?”

“Not that. It’s just … They weren’t there.”

Charles finished his egg, nonplussed. “They were there before?”

“In Brussels, yes. I remember them, from when I …”

“You remember them from last year? Or from further back?”

“Much further back – but that’s the thing. I don’t remember much.” Erik folded his hands over his knees. “The horses were grey. One had a white blaze,” he drew his hand down his face, “there, and ate an apple I gave it. That’s all.”

Charles ate the rest of his pastry, chewing slowly. Then he gave Erik his plate, watched him try to wipe it clean – and snorted, because Erik promptly took off his shirt to finish the job. “Very subtle.”

“I need to polish it.”

“Oh, I know what you like to polish – and believe me, it’s nothing ceramic.”

Erik grinned. “I’ll make this door for you.” He unfolded from the hearth and took the large piece of wood propped against the chair. “You rest.”

When Charles lay down on his side, the edge of the small wooden box nudged him. “May I see what you brought, Erik? For the token, I mean.”

“Of course. It’s yours now.”

Charles slid back the top of the box. Inside was a heap of pale beads. He touched one. “A necklace. Made of?”

“Ivory.”
“Very pretty.”

Erik looked up from the wood plank, now balanced on his lap. “You like it?”

“Mm.” Charles stirred a finger through the beads, and tipped them onto the blanket. “There’s no metal in it, is there?”

“None.”

“But what besides wire can hold the whole thing together? String’s too fragile.”

“Some sort of synthetic. The Free West makes it.”

Charles plucked out a bead in the middle, much larger than the others, and intricately carved. “And this part is …”

“Where you put the jewel. It opens.” Long fingers left off touching the plank, and mimed. “At the sides.”

There must have been hinges in miniature, for Charles realized that one face of the large bead – more like a rectangle, really – could indeed open. “Who made it?”

“Someone from Galut.”

Charles’s head jerked up. “You’re in touch with them?”

“No.” Erik flipped the wood over; examined it. “But I know they’re the best at that sort of detailed work. Little carvings; calligraphy. Knots for blankets. I found a shop in Brussels that made things like that. There was a man there who worked with ivory.”

“Did you talk to them in Brussels? Besides making this commission.”

There was no reply. Charles stared at Erik – at the confusion clouding his face. “Erik.” He sharpened his voice. “Did you talk to anyone from Galut?”

Erik shook his head.

“Why not?”

A pause. Then a shrug.

It was on the tip of his tongue, to ask about the synagogues in Albany, about their reaction to the gifts. But Erik’s eyes stared from his face – bewildered, pained – and some instinct warned Charles off the subject. It would keep for now.

“Thank you again for the necklace. It’s very cunningly made.”

“… You’re welcome.”

Charles opened and closed the hinged side once more. He could drop the jewel in straightaway, if he felt like stirring himself to fetch it from the coffer. Which he didn’t.

“Will you put it on?”

“The sapphire’s not in it.” Charles placed the beads and their box on the floor. “I don’t like doing things halfway.”
“Will you put it in?”

_So to speak._ But Erik wouldn’t know a double entendre if it met him arse-up. “Maybe later. You keep on with what you’re doing.”

The fire was burning steadily, but rather small. So Charles made himself comfortable with blankets and bedclothes, and lay on one side to watch Erik work.

He might have dozed off, or he might just have lost track of time. For when he opened his eyes again, Erik had wrought iron twisted around his hand.

“Where did you get that?”

Erik gestured above Charles’ head.

_Right._ A glance behind him showed that the iron tracery growing round his bed had disappeared. Some of the small candles had burned down completely. Others had come to rest on the bedspread. Enough, he was relieved to see, for a decent showing on a birthday cake.

“I thought it looked darker in here.”

Erik lifted one shoulder. The firelight gleamed red on his hair; gold on the lines of his cheekbones and jaw.

“Aren’t you the least bit chilly?”

Erik smiled up at him and shook his head.

“So talkative. _Fine._ It’s your funeral.” Charles nestled further into the blankets, swallowing against the ache in his throat. He waited until Erik was concentrating again, to pick up the ivory necklace and tuck it under the covers with him.

A log collapsed in the fire with pops and snaps, sending up sparks. Erik leaned away from those landing on his back. The wide plank of the door should have made a louder sound slipping forward off his knees, but Charles supposed Erik controlled all the iron tracery now crawling over the wood, for it landed gently. Erik sighted down the side, placed a hinge plate, adjusted it, and – licked a finger? _Ah._ He reached to the hearth, dabbed up ash, and touched along the plate’s edges.

“Why not just heat the metal and burn the wood away?” Charles said.

“Tricky. It’s mesquite, you see.” Erik rapped a panel with the knuckle of one hand. “Hard.”

“Where’d you get it?”

"The wood’s from Dallas. I checked the warehouse in Albany last month, and then I had a carpenter make,” he drummed his fingers on the panel, “this.”

"Oh."

Beneath the blankets, Charles rubbed over the ivory with finger and thumb. He watched Erik touch another piece of wrought iron. It writhed in mid-air, curling round and then lengthening until one bit resembled the working end of a chisel. The rest was a mess, but the whole began shaving away at the door neatly enough to make a mortise.

“The metal in the mortar feels all right.” Erik tilted his head towards the empty door frame. “Those pieces. I didn’t touch them.”
“The pintles?”

“Is that what they are?”

“Yes, those are pintles. I’m sure they’re grateful for your consideration.”

“You’re upset.” The chisel floated down the door lying at his feet. With a wave of Erik’s fingers, the remaining hinge plate and barrel clattered to the stones and the scraping recommenced. “Why?”

“I’m just remembering when you tore down that door in the first place.” Charles forced a smile. “Very dramatic.”

“I was –”

“Certainly unaware of your own strength. Like you didn’t know your own size just now, downstairs?”

Erik’s color was high, even in the firelight. “You don’t need to be strong to take down a door.”

“No? Is there a trick to it?”

A nod.

“Well, that’s wonderful, but I’m not interested in learning it just now.” Charles made a show of massaging his throat. “You won’t be so careless in future, will you?”

“I’ve promised already – I’ll never hurt you again.”

“If that includes your cock, you’re a bit of a liar.”

“I said I was sorry. I just …” Erik’s blush intensified, “I didn’t know you could do that. With your throat, I mean.”

“It is a rare talent, I’ll admit. No, you’ll never hurt me again … even when I tell you that I propositioned Azazel?”

The metal still floating in air – dropped. Along with Erik’s jaw.

“You’ll catch flies like that.”

“What …. When?”

“Earlier this week. Sunday, maybe? After we kissed.” Charles flicked fingers at him. “You and I.”

“But …”

Charles waited him out.

“But – why?”

He shrugged as best he could, lying down. “Variety? I don’t know.”

Erik looked crushed.

“Nothing came of it; don’t you fret. You know what he said? He said that he doesn’t play ‘with other people’s toys.’ Is that how you see me, Erik? A toy? Are you sure you didn’t tell him anything?”
“I –” Erik’s voice cracked. “I told him nothing. He asked me about you. He told me I was being a fool – but I said nothing.”

“When did he tell you that?”

“After …” Long fingers flexed where Erik gripped his knees. “He brought back my hat.”

“Oh, bless. You left it behind.” Charles stretched, rolled, and propped his chin on his hands. “I forgot about that.”

He let the silence stretch, and watched Erik closely. Opportune: to see if he would throw another jealous tantrum … or just sit there and look betrayed, this time. *Ridiculous.* Charles rubbed his face against the back of one hand. Erik’s eyes followed his every move.

“Nothing else to say?”

“Azazel would never take you from me. He’s my friend.”

As if he were a thing to be *taken.* Charles snorted. “You? Friendly?”

“I can be friendly.”

“Right. I think –”

“I *can!*” Erik snarled.


The look in Erik’s eyes almost made him choke. A flash of intent, and Erik set down all the tools, leaned forward across the wood –

 – and *prowled* towards the bed on all fours. Charles scrambled backwards but hit the wall fast. He untangled himself from the blankets in time to grab a pillow and wrench it in front of his chest. As a shield against – against –

Now kneeling at the edge of the bed, Erik tilted his head to one side.

“That’s close enough,” Charles said.

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Like hell.” That look had been the same when Erik ripped out his tooth, when he pounced and bit and mauled – when he tried his best to fuck him through the mattress, that whole lovely honeymoon.

“*Rabe …*” Erik reached out and touched the pillow gently. “You’re safe. This afternoon …. I didn’t know you were hurting.”

“You really couldn’t take a hint –”

“Sometimes I don’t understand you.” Erik inched forward to rest his chin on the pillow. “But I’m sorry.”

“That’s …” Charles swallowed bile. No lethal temper tantrum, even with the revelation of his little pass at Azazel. So now – would he have to play nice? It appeared he would. “That’s all right. I did egg you on a bit. I suppose.”
Erik tipped up another smile at him. Then took hold of the pillow and tugged it away.

“Um.”

A hum in reply. Erik hooked his fingers in the bedclothes and peeled them back.

“Oi. I need those. For sleeping, you know. To stay – warm? And the clothes – don’t you touch,” Charles slapped Erik’s broad hands, “I want them on.”

“I want them off.”

Charles stared. The stupid sod couldn’t be thinking – oh, it appeared he could. Damn. He began wriggling out of Erik’s grasp.

“Shh,” and fingers closed round his wrists like warm shackles. “Be still.”

“Erik,” Charles stared up at the ceiling. “I can’t. I mean – after such a lovely afternoon romp, I need time to recover.”

Another hum, as Erik went for his jeans.

“Please.” The rough material stuck to his skin, then flew off, and – then cotton, for there went his briefs. “Erik – please stop.”

Erik stopped. A callused hand and warm forearm came to rest on Charles’ bare kneecaps. “Why?”

“Because my throat hurts. Because – my arse. Hurts. In all your nights of fantasy, did you assume I had some sort of magic, elastic arsehole?” His voice skirled up. “Never sore, always game? That’s somewhat thick, even for you.”

Erik put one long finger to his lips. “Shh.”

“Who’s here to hear?”

“It’s not that. I just don’t like it when you insult me, Charles. I’m not stupid.”

“Erik … I know, Charles’ mind finished. But he refused to say it.

“Do you know what I do like?”

He sighed. “What do you like?”


“Did you?” Charles croaked.

A nod. And another smile.

What to do?

Erik hoisted himself up and sat on the bed. He moved both hands to Charles’ knees – one on each. Squeezed, gently. His grasp was warm.

Charles tipped his head back, and stared at the ceiling.

He could – let it happen, his mind whispered. Or he could stick to his guns and order Erik up and
off. For there was no knowing that he wouldn’t get carried away and hurt him, regardless of intent.

He pressed his lips together as Erik started stroking his knees, tracing delicate patterns. Restrained of him. Very polite, when all he wanted to do, surely, was wrench Charles apart at the legs and eat him alive.

_So to speak._

“Please? Charles?”

“Yes?”

“Please. _Please_ – let me taste you. I promise,” and there was the warm press of a kiss on one kneecap, “I won’t bite.”

Charles sighed. “Fine. _Ah_ – but first,” he nudged Erik’s face away, “put that door up? Please?”

“No one’s here,” Erik whispered. “You said so yourself.”

“It’s the principle.” He straightened his legs out past Erik’s bony arse, and started shoving the rest of the bedclothes down. “Some things are best done behind closed doors. As are some people.”

But Erik wasn’t listening. He rose, and extended one palm above the door lying between bed and hearth. Charles watched it rise into the air and float over to the door frame. All the metal ornamentation was enough, it seemed.

He put the ivory necklace away, carefully. It would not do to have it broken. Then he willed himself calm and peeled off the rest of his clothes. The fire was burning well, and surely Erik could shove sweaters and trousers beneath the door for insulation. He seemed to want to keep Charles so very warm. Charles could put up with that.

He could put up with anything except Erik taking his bloody _time_ about it all.

“What,” Charles said, voice waspish, “have you found that’s so interesting? The eighth wonder of the world?”

He felt the hum in reply vibrate through Erik’s throat, mouth, lips …. Felt it, because Erik had rested his head on Charles’ thigh, content to just – _lie_ there. Breathing. On his cock.

And – lower, Charles thought, half hysterical. _Mustn’t forget – orb and scepter. Orbs._ Erik’s breath wafting over his balls was ridiculous, not least because Erik had licked them earlier, _tasting_, and Charles had almost jumped out of his skin.

“What would you just get a move on?”

“Move on with what?” Erik murmured.

“You tell me. I can’t see your thoughts. No powers, remember? But whatever you plan on doing, fucking _do_ it, and let me get some sleep.”

“Go to sleep, if you want. I don’t mind.”

Craning his neck to see, Charles caught a glimpse of Erik’s grin – a slice of teeth glinting in the dark, as he said, “I’ll just make sure you have a good dream.”
“I can’t sleep,” Charles hissed. “Not with –”

*Not with you distracting me*, he thought, and Charles bit down hard on his tongue. He would not admit to Erik any possibility of being distracted.

Even when Erik started brushing kisses over his thighs. First one, then the other – warm breath moving between them. And then *staying* between them; *shite*.

Charles willed his cock limp. He would not give Erik the satisfaction, the knowledge of how to please him, and even if Erik was tugging at his waist, bringing his hips over the side of the bed, Charles would focus on the awkward angle – how he had to look ridiculous – and not how Erik had managed to maneuver both of Charles’ legs over his shoulders.

Only to let one slip off when he leaned forward to start licking at Charles’ thighs.

“*Erik.*”

The licking stopped. “I didn’t bite you.”

“I know.” Charles dug in with his elbows, trying to hitch his weight back on the bed. He was sliding off, listing to one side – the very picture of – farcical –

Erik grabbed him. “Stay.”

“It hurts my back to stay this way. And you may not have noticed, but I’m falling off the bed.”

“So?”

“So, how do you propose to move on to your favorite lolly with me all folded up, you idiot –”

The move happened faster than he thought possible: Erik snapping up Charles’ errant leg, one hand beneath his knee. “Who’s the idiot now?”

But even with that hand holding him, the angle was such that he was sliding further, and Erik was letting it happen, sounding amused: “Where are you going, Charles?”

“Isn’t it enough that you have me here?” His voice caught. “Must you humiliate me as well?”

Erik made a soft noise in his throat and took tighter hold of him, stopping his fall. Then he let Charles’ other leg slide down from his shoulder, and caught it in the crook of his elbow.

Charles could hear the wheels in his head turning. He stretched out a small bit of power – the most subtle: his owl on silent wings. Just a brush over Erik’s mind, to see all the *want* sweeping thought down channels of intent, Erik’s thoughts focusing how easy hands on legs made things. Hands – pushing –

The strong grip shifted. And with hands beneath both of Charles’ knees, it seemed Erik could push him back up onto the bed and spread his legs at the same time.

*Clever*, Charles wanted to say. But his tongue wouldn’t really move.

And speaking of tongues ...

It was strange, Erik’s fixation on licking …. His determination, against all odds, to get his tongue up Charles’ arsehole. He was going at it with lavish enthusiasm, even at the present angle, which could not be comfortable.
Charles lifted his head to look. The low light from the fire turned them into some misshapen thing: his legs and Erik’s arms askew, and Erik’s back hunched over –

“Straighten up,” he coughed to clear his throat. “Erik, let me move a little.”

Erik drew away slightly, and Charles tried to wriggle out of his grip. “Let go.”

A growl.

“All I want is to turn over. It’d be easier that way, you must see –”

“I want to see you.”

Charles sighed. “You’ll see plenty.”

“But I need to see your face.”

“That’s not necessary –”

“It is,” Erik whispered, urgent. “Then I can see if you like it. What you like, I mean.”

Charles bit down hard on:

I don’t like any of it.

“Then I’ll put these under you.” A pillow nudged his face. “You wanted them earlier, downstairs – and now I remember: I did this before. With the pillows, I mean.”

“The night you left, yes, and then it reeked until I could clean it.”

“You smell wonderful now,” Erik said, peacefully. “All of you. Washed in rosewater.”

That was a thought – he could – “Speaking of washing,” he said, quickly, “I think you need to –”

“I offered already. You said I didn’t have to.”

Charles took hold of the blankets with both hands as Erik took matters into his own. So to speak. He hoisted Charles by the simple method of getting to his feet. Which made him loom considerably, which was not considerate in the least. Charles gritted his teeth and looked away from the hulking shadow moving to place pillows beneath his hips, kneeling back down, rearranging his legs. And if he looked ridiculous before, Charles thought, surely now he looked doubly so: propped up and parted and … open. To whatever Erik wanted.
He brought one wrist to his mouth and bit down as Erik went directly to business – but then felt a tug on his hand.

“Charles.” Erik sounded muffled, before lifting his head. “Stop that.”

“Why?”

“I told you. I want to see you.”

“And I told you,” he slapped his hand down on the bed, “that I would make some noise, but you aren’t satisfied with that, are you? Part and parcel with all your greediness.”

There was the firelight glinting on Erik’s teeth again. “I haven’t had many chances to be greedy with you, Rabe … but go on and make noise, if you want.”

Charles blew a wet raspberry as obnoxiously as he could. Not that one could pick up on nuance with such a childish retort, but he didn’t care.

“Please don’t,” Erik started, but then broke off with a curious snorting chuff.

What … It was the same strangeness as earlier that afternoon, up at the library door. Charles blinked as he realized: Erik was laughing. Trying to keep it quiet, but laughing all the same. Why would –

Then his mind caught up. “Oh, for God’s sake. What are you, twelve?”

“You don’t understand,” Erik said in between gasps. “It’s point-blank range.”

“You are twelve. Arrested development.” Charles swatted at him. “It wasn’t that funny. Stop it.” For his lips were starting to twitch. “Stop. Erik.”

Erik shoved his face down on Charles’ stomach, still laughing, and Charles couldn’t help it: he had to laugh too, as he covered his own face with his hands. “God, I’m fucking a twelve-year-old.” Helpless laughter – hopeless, his mind whispered to him. Enough. He took Erik’s hair in a tight grip and shook him. “All right. You’re amusing; I’m laughing. Now stop it.”

“Can’t –” Erik wheezed.

“Try. It’s only courteous: I want to be awake for this next bit, and if you keep laughing I’m afraid I shall nod off.”

“Wait – you want it?”


Erik obeyed him.

Good. Charles let his mind drift as he relaxed. He gathered handfuls of the blanket and released them – the wool was slippery. The pillows were soft beneath him. He wasn’t going to think about how he was spread wide and vulnerable, or about how Erik was licking him with such gusto that a wet spot was forming on the pillowcase. Instead, Charles took in a deep breath, let it turn into a yawn – and then scowled as Erik slid a hand up to his chest to pinch and roll one of his nipples.

“Don’t do that.”

Erik stopped immediately. “Sorry.”
“It’s all right. I know you like it, but I don’t. At least, not as much.”

“What do you like, then?” The words brushed cool over the spit drying on his thighs. “What can I do?”

… Why not? Charles arched his back as he stretched again, took Erik’s hand, and guided it back down. “Here.” A bit more steering, straight to the perineum. “Press here.”

But no sooner had he taken away his own hand than he had to roll his eyes at Erik prodding him with what felt like an index finger. “It’s not a button. Try more of a gentle motion.” Professor voice. “Like a massage. Have you ever had one?”

“No.”

“Then … like you’re polishing a knife, with your thumb in a cloth. Try it.”

Erik’s breath was warm on Charles’ cock, as he tentatively circled his thumb, and pressed –

Charles controlled his twitch of surprise. “That’s right. Keep doing that, and start sucking my cock – just the head.”

And there was instant wet heat pulling at his cock. Charles hiccupsed, “There,” and coughed. “Good.”

Erik dragged his tongue over the slit; then drew back to whisper, “That’s what you like?”

“Did I say you could stop?”

With a pleased hum, Erik started sucking him again.

There was no one to see, so Charles let his mouth fall open as he tightened his grip on the blankets. He kept himself from thrusting – only courteous, really – and tried not to dwell on Erik’s calluses, of all things, brushing over his inner thighs. One hand gliding up and down, slowly; the hot, wet slide of tongue moving over and around his cockhead in between hard sucks; the thumb of the other hand pressing more firmly after Charles gave in and moaned after all.

It felt so good …

He knew it shouldn’t feel so good.

It was because he had been deprived. Charles breathed faster as his hips jerked: damn. Stay in control. Erik coughed before licking up and down his cock, then spread him further and moved fingertips, now, beneath his balls, circling, pressing harder and then softer, alternating – humming around the glans as he latched onto it again –

“Fuck,” Charles gasped.

“Oh.” Erik sounded delighted. “That?”

And when he repeated the hum and press, the sloppiness of it all was outweighed by his enthusiasm, and by the callused fingers of his free hand digging into Charles’ thigh and twisting.

The whole thing was ridiculous. Erik, who had conquered cities on the steppes, if that Galuti vid was to be believed – who had bloody well leveled Washington, D.C. that Was a second time – that same Erik now wanted nothing more out of life than to suck his lover’s foreskin clean off. It was having an effect, too. Panting, Charles took hold of the base of his cock – then bit his lip as Erik cried his
fingers off and held onto his hand.

There would be bruises on his thighs. He writhed as Erik slid his lips down, taking in more cock, throat fl uttering. And with the same rhythmic press, and now strong fingers squeezing his hand ... Charles needed a moment to breathe, and rather act than ask: he snapped his hips up – Erik gagged and pulled his head back, coughing loudly.

“Let’s take a pause, shall we?”

“No,” Erik rasped. Then moved his hands and grabbed. “Turn over.”

“Why?”

“I want to lick you again.”

“You have been –”

“My tongue,” and Erik hoisted himself in one swift move, placed his mouth right next to Charles’ ear, “your ass. You said: whatever I wanted, we could do.”

“What you want, fundamentally, is to get off.” Charles shoved him away; kicked and rolled when Erik was still surprised. Finally. He got off the bed and stood; his legs wobbled. He knew he did not want to get off. See if he would give Erik that power a second time, after – his face burned – after squealing, wailing, coming hard on Erik’s cock downstairs in that pigsty –

Erik was growling, and turning to grab him again. Charles pushed his hand off. “Lie down.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so. And you want to get off, so I’m going to ride you until you do.”

“But you’re hurt.”

Charles was rummaging through the wardrobe for the grease. “It doesn’t signify.”

“You told me yourself,” Erik insisted – although Charles heard the rustle of bedclothes. Ha. Erik had obeyed him anyway. “You said you were hurting.”

“I feel so much better now. I suppose a bit of cocksucking is good for more than is dreamed of in your philosophy.”

“It was – good, then?”

There. Charles tugged the wooden container out of a jumble of socks. He was glad he did not have to use Ororo’s moisturizer – it would be a shame to desecrate the gifts of more than one person. That and he’d be damned if he put something perfumed up his arse; he’d never get Erik out of there.

He placed the grease on the hearth and strode back to the bed. The fire was dying; he only saw Erik as a dark silhouette. Charles reached down casually, to find his cock.

And when he did …

“Good lord,” he said. Laughter bubbled up; he throttled it. “All this time?”

Erik only panted in reply.
Poor thing. Why didn’t you tell me?” Charles spat onto his palm and slicked up Erik’s cock; once, twice .... Quite warm, really: it could finish melting the grease. All he’d have to do was balance the container on the tip.

He got up to fetch the grease. Glanced back. The shadow that was Erik had braced itself on both elbows to watch. And since he didn’t have a crooked knee at his waist …. Charles swallowed. If he didn’t know better, he would think it impossible to get that cock all the way up his arse.

He squared his shoulders and strode back – straddled Erik before he could have second thoughts.

“Wait,” Erik said. “I don’t want you to – you don’t have to –”

“Whatever you want, we can do. Remember? So I’m doing what you want.” He would not think about being sore; he could recover later. At least he was cleaner now. “Do you think you can be patient? This might take a while.”

Erik inhaled, raggedly, but went completely silent as Charles focused on lubrication, being generous with the grease, alternating between using his fingers and the tip of Erik’s cock - though the latter seemed to cause Erik a bit of discomfort, if the shifting beneath him was anything to go by. Impressive, really, that Erik had lasted through all his rubbing and licking, kneeling at the altar of Xavier. He had probably humped a hole in the bedframe. Charles was sure he would find it in the morning.

“Charles –”

“Shh.” He greased a finger and pushed it up his hole, breathing hard through the sharp twinge. “I’ll take care of you. Calm down.”

“I can’t,” Erik sounded unhinged. He was shaking, and not just from the effort of staying half upright. The muscles in his abdomen were clenched – Charles had felt them while positioning himself. “I can’t – not come, I’m going to –”

Exactly. “Good practice, then, isn’t it?” Charles got them lined up and settled, then started bearing down. He winced. Too much – but he was relaxed; it was less painful than he had expected. Really, just an ache. And it would be over soon.

From his muffled whine, Erik had to be gnawing on some part of his own mouth. Charles reached out to caress his hair before focusing on taking in more cock, inch by incremental inch.

“Charles …”

Erik slowly sat up all the way. He brought trembling hands to Charles’ face; touched him as though he were made of glass. Charles decided to allow it.

“Yes, my darling? What is it?”

He could feel Erik’s every breath on his own lips.

“… Am I?” Erik whispered.

Charles waited for him to finish.

He felt the words shaped again, over his mouth: Am I?

Asking what? Am I … your darling, Charles realized, and decided to kiss him before Erik said it and
made everything more awkward. He leaned forward to take Erik’s lips, to suck him close and bring
him closer to the edge; then to push him straight off and finish it all.

Erik’s mouth quivered against his own. The hands framing his face smoothed over skin and hair. As
though he were not just glass … but a treasure. Schatz, Charles remembered, closing his eyes. He
deepened the kiss, and started rolling his hips down rhythmically. Up and down, sinking further.
More time to adjust, ignoring the hot throb, and then he started to move back and forth on Erik’s
cock, swiveling a bit, *grinding* –

“Ah.” Erik sounded drunk as he broke the kiss to drag in air. His head sank to Charles’ shoulder; his
hair tickled the flesh on Charles’ neck – or caught, where it was damp with sweat. “Please, Rabe.”

_God._ Charles knew he had to bring this to an end, even with Erik whispering – _please, please_ – so
quietly that Charles could imagine the words winding into his thoughts, from where they touched his
skin.

“Yes.” He kissed Erik’s temple; caressed the wet tufts of hair with both hands. “Go on, come in me.
You’re right there,” for Erik was thrust deep, and it felt like being impaled. He hissed through his
teeth, _grinding_ harder. “Give it to me, Erik, I want you. Come in me.” Another kiss, placed this time
on Erik’s brow. He tasted sweat. “Do it.”

Erik tipped his head back. Let his mouth fall open. Charles could imagine kissing him hard, so he did
– sucking his tongue in the same way he should have sucked the come clean out of his cock that
afternoon.

But for all his failure earlier, he won this time.

Charles felt Erik’s arms tighten around him; felt his hips try to jerk – once, twice …

He broke the kiss; felt a string of saliva fall on his own chin. Charles ignored it and stared at Erik’s

Erik’s face contorted as he thrust up.

“*More,*” Charles hissed.

“My _God,_” Erik groaned, and clung to him. “God, Charles …”

Charles tightened his hands in Erik’s hair and yanked. It helped that his own cock was
uncomfortably mashed between their bodies. No, he would not be coming any time soon – not like
Erik, who was shoving his hips up, moaning, and shuddering, again and again … before he slowed,
gasping for breath. Slowed – and stopped.

Charles waited it all out. Then he smoothed his hands over Erik’s hair again. “Shh.”

Erik made no reply. Just let his head droop until it thumped against Charles’ shoulder one final time.
Hot drops of what had to be sweat hit skin and started trickling down to Charles’ collarbone.

“Shh.” Charles patted him. “Good, Erik. That was very good.”

Erik slid his brow over Charles’ shoulder, back and forth, sweat-slick. Charles felt what might have
been spiky hair from Erik’s brow, wet – or eyelashes – move over his skin.

“Shh. Close your eyes; go to sleep …”
“Charles,” Erik choked out.

“Hm?”

“I love you.”

Charles froze.

“Do you hear?” Erik rasped.

Control. Charles made his hands move again, automatic: smoothing over Erik’s hair, caressing, scratching in the way that Erik had so enjoyed earlier. Just that afternoon. It felt like a week had passed, since.

“Du,” Erik mumbled. He was shivering. “I …”

Love you, Charles’ mind finished, and it was nonsense.

“No, you don’t,” he whispered to Erik’s hair. He pushed at Erik’s shoulders; caught and braced him as he fell backward. God, he was heavy as hell – and his body didn’t even twitch, going back down to the mattress. “You love sex.”

Erik’s breathing was coming more and more slowly. He was truly falling asleep – Charles shook his head – with his cock still balls-deep. Ridiculous.

“It’s all right, you know,” he continued, softly, brushing a hand up and down Erik’s sternum. “You can have a good deal of excellent sex and think you’re in love. But it’s a chemical cocktail,” he shifted his arse, “turning your brain to mush. Or … to more mush.”

… Though part of him thought: perhaps that was an unkind thing to say.

No guilt. He wasn’t the one sprawled over a bed, well on the way to sleep, without enough courtesy to offer his so-called Geliebter a wipe down. Charles gritted his teeth and moved up and off Erik. His hips ached as he closed his legs; he turned, sat, managed to set both feet flat on stone –

– and, trying to stand up, he promptly fell onto the floor.

“Ow.”

Erik snorted awake. “Charles?”

“Go to sleep,” he said, voice cracking. It was humiliating –

“Are you all right?”

“Perfectly fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.”

“Erik.” Charles reached back, found one strong hand, and squeezed it. “I need to go wash. Give me a moment.”

“You and washing.” There was a tug on his hand. “Stay,” Erik murmured.

“I’ll only be a moment.” Charles twisted free, and stood. The stones were freezing on his feet. Forget washing – it was slow enough work to find a pair of thick socks and to bend over, rolling them on.
He shoved another log onto the fire and turned.

Erik had managed to pull a blanket halfway over his body. Charles shook his head and hobbled over to tug it up to his chin. Erik stirred awake. “Finished?”

“Mm.” No need to say that he couldn’t manage it. And he needed to get away. “I need some tea,” Charles said, flatly. “Do you want any?”

“If you’re making … But I want to …”

“Make it for me? I’m sure.”

There was only a sleepy mumble in reply.

Erik looked to be warm enough. Not that it mattered, Charles thought, as found his clothes. He bent to light a candle in the fire, and then, wincing, walked slowly down to the kitchen. He stoked the fire, filled a saucepan with a clatter, pulled down two mugs, and frowned at the water to get it boiling faster. No, there was no need to fret about Erik. Shagged out, he would sleep through the apocalypse.

Or: through another one.

The water took its time. Charles watched the candle burn down, little by little, tilting it to avoid dripping wax on his fingers. He saw a small pastel box on the counter – a peek showed chocolates inside. Charles slapped it shut and pushed it away, irritably. He only wanted tea.

When he caught sight of steam, he took the metal tea box and tugged at the lid.

“Damn it. Come on, you.”

It was awkward with one hand. Charles swore again as lid and box clattered apart; as he bent to the floor to pick up the teabags and –

– Armando’s bag of opiates.

“Erik.”

He shook Erik’s shoulder.

“Erik, wake up.”

“What’s wrong?”


A groan; Erik scrubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands. Then he tugged up the covers again, shivering.

“Are you cold?” The mugs clinked as he set them on the floor, far apart. Right, left – keep them separate, keep them – Charles set his teeth and stripped, then pulled back the covers. God, the smell – he could almost see the reek of sex unfurl from the bedclothes.

Charles slid beneath the covers and yanked them up. Erik’s yelp of surprise at his chilly feet changed into a pleased – moan? Something incoherent, anyway, and Charles hissed at the strength of those arms, looping round him again and squeezing tight.
Erik kissed him on the nose.

“I’m glad to see you, too,” Charles said, “but I made some tea, just for you and me. Don’t you want it?”

“We can be civilized.”

“Exactly.”

“Fine.” Erik nuzzled closer, sticking a hand out from beneath the covers.

“Yes.” Charles reached for the mug. Before it had been his left, so now it was at the foot of the bed – yes. “Here.” He gave it to Erik, biting down on his tongue to keep in: don’t spill it, take care –

A warm rustle. Erik had propped himself up on one elbow, for Charles heard a sip from slightly above.

“It’s sweet.”

“Oh. So’s mine.” Charles fumbled for his own mug; took a hasty slurp. Bitter heat seared his tongue. “Ow.”

Erik made a soft noise of concern.

“Don’t worry about me,” Charles said. “You drink all of that – hell, we can drink to Jean’s birthday.”

He heard a swallow. Then: “February twenty.”

“You know that?”

“Yes.”

“And you remember it.”

“Yes,” and was that a slur in Erik’s voice? “I remember. I thought … When my lady found her, and brought her here, I thought …”

He paused, and drank.

Then said, with more difficulty: “When she was born.”

“February twenty.” Charles curled his fingers around his own mug. “You said so already.”

Erik rolled, and reached out over Charles, leaning low, to place the mug on the floor, “But she was four, then. And I thought…”

“What?” Charles twisted, not listening. Had Erik finished it entirely? He winced at the hot spatter of his own tea on his bare chest; wrestled round to set his mug, half-full, on the floor as well.

“What did you just say?” he whispered, aiming for Erik’s ear.

But Erik made no reply.

Charles started nudging Erik off him and to the side. Perhaps the drug was instantaneous – he was limp as a corpse. “And maybe,” he murmured, “you’re all set for a sleep –”
Erik made a cross sound in his throat and grabbed him again.

“Then again, maybe not.”

Charles twined his fingers together on Erik’s back, and waited.

He did not have to wait long.

Charles knew he had no way of predicting how long the sedative would last. And if Erik woke alone, he, Charles, would be instantly missed. And tracked. A motorcycle versus a man on foot, even given the ice and snow – unless he were to make it to the convoy road, and that was forty-five miles ...

No. Instead of running, he would explore what he had long wanted to see without fear.

For all that, though, Charles felt frightened as he stood on the forested side of the river, in the man’s mind. Erik’s mind. Now that he was in it, his memories of all his … visits there were coming back in fits and starts.

Erik tended to lurk by the river, he remembered. Or in it.

He squinted. All was dark and quiet. He could not even hear the roiling sound of the river. But then, perhaps that only happened when the water glowed green.

“Erik? Are you here?”

Of course there was no answer. Nor should he hope for one, Charles realized. Not if he wanted to remain undetected.

“Raven?” he whispered.

No answer there either. But the raven had flown straight to the castle, once, so Charles resolved not to worry.

Despite everything, excitement prickled over his skin. The castle. Now he had the chance to investigate – to see everything he could see, without the distraction of shock and fear. He adjusted his sword and shield, made sure his cape fell out of his way, turned his back on the river and peered into the forest.

It, too, was quiet. The metal trees were still – and since there was no moon, the faint light gleaming off their trunks and branches had to come from someplace else. He stepped closer to look.

It seemed as though the light shone from the metal leaves themselves. It was faint but warm, making everything glow silver.

Cautiously, Charles touched a leaf.

Nothing happened.

He brushed one gauntlet over the leaves of a low hanging branch, with more confidence. And then almost jumped out of his skin as something touched his neck.

Turning round slowly, he saw: a twig had uncoiled narrow leaves and trailed them through his hair. His longer hair – “That’s right,” Charles said. In his projections, it was back to normal. Frost liked it that way ... and so, apparently, did this tree.
The twig had obtained several strands; they showed dark against the silver.

“Um.” Charles blinked. “Could I have those back?” Every instinct told him: he could leave no trace of his visit. “Please?”

He heard noise in the forest – his heart shot into his mouth. But Erik did not come surging out of the river or crashing through the trees. Instead, with quiet clinking sounds, the leaves unfurled their grip, and the strands of hair floated to the ground.

Charles scuffed them into the dirt, doing his best to cover them completely. He checked his arm guards – there were no tokens of concealment there. Damn. A lesson: he should prepare completely before trying this again, and he didn't want to chance bringing another bird in - what if Erik woke up? Already the trees were leaning close, rustling.

Perhaps it would be best to say: “Cheers.”

There was no reply.

Of course there wasn’t – he was talking to trees. But if he were acting like Apollo to Daphne, why not continue? “Please, may I pass through?” said Charles. “To the castle?”

There was a pause.

Then, with only the softest rustles and chimes, the undergrowth, twigs, and branches drew back from where he stood, offering a way in.

"Thank you,” Charles whispered.

And he walked into the forest.

Charles thought that the walk had taken less time previously – but he had been running full pelt through the trees, then, and fighting them off with his sword. Now he had to wait occasionally, as trees, bushes, and even one softly glowing metal fern took time to creep out of his way. But he found he didn’t mind so much.

It appeared Erik would not be leaping out to surprise him. Perhaps he was sleeping – perhaps he was …

“There,” Charles breathed, stepping into the clearing where the castle stood. “My god.”

He had forgotten how big the damned thing was. It took up as much of his view as – Charles turned to look – as the mountains in the distance, coldly white in the dark, blighted and oozing their runoff to the river. If he had taken time to look up at them at the very first, Charles thought, he might have fled back to his manor room – reality – immediately. As it was, he turned back to the castle. Would his luck hold? He walked to the gates cautiously, and looked for the gatehouse door he remembered. There. This time, it had no lock, and opened easily to his touch.

Charles passed through the door. It was so dark in the gatehouse that he had to walk with shield outstretched to find the open door frame into the bailey. Once he was through, light returned – colder. Charles shivered at the sight of huge doors of the keep, the light dizzying. He remembered that light, whatever its source, reflecting off the angles of the bunker in the middle of the bailey …

“That’s right,” and he jogged towards it. The bunker, which – the monster, the thing that was Erik, here, had tried so desperately to open. But he couldn’t, because –
“I knew it,” Charles said, staring. “Son of a bitch.”

For the bunker’s doors, in addition to being battered, dented – even welded shut in places ….

Were wrapped round and locked tight with diamond chains.

“My lady.” Charles inclined his head towards the diamonds. “Caught out. I knew it.” His breath came faster. “I knew she had to be doing something drastic. Look at this.” He knew he was telling no one; his raven had flown God knew where. “Look.”

For he remembered, now. Diamond chains on the bunker, diamonds on a hundred different doors inside the castle …. Different things locked away: Erik’s mind full of holes. Like granite after a mortar attack.

Except that granite could perhaps be repaired, and Frost’s touch looked permanent. The bunker, for example, had seen heavy use; the steel was scorched around the diamonds, blackened and warped. But the chains seemed terribly strong.

“What’s in there, Erik?”

Charles was so tempted. He raised his sword, gazing at the chains – but caught himself. “No trace.” That had been close. “No matter how curious you are, you idiot,” he laughed, shakily. “Leave no trace.”

Into the castle proper he would go, to keep from temptation. The wrought-iron handles on the keep’s massive doors showed no trace of diamonds. As before, they opened to his touch without a sound. And inside …

Everything was the same as he remembered.

Awestruck, Charles gazed up into the shadows of the keep. Tattered red banners were still fluttering down from the darkness; red tapestries were still hanging on the walls. He inhaled and walked forward. There had been a blue tapestry by a broken fountain. In an antechamber? No, in the main hall – but walking through it, more and more anxious, Charles saw nothing but red – red – red –

Like one mammoth tapestry, showing a city on a hill. Very similar to the one he had given the rabbi in Albany. He had to walk closer to see it in the gloom.

“Ir Tzedek, isn’t it?”

Perhaps it was. But the city’s walls were spiked, and the hill was teeming with – things that could have been men. On horses and on foot, charging at tanks, mortars, and machine guns: everyone trying to kill each other in threads of carmine and gold.

“Oh, Erik. What a way to remember.”

Charles tore his eyes away and kept searching for the unicorn. “That’s right …” It had been a unicorn, pure and lovely: ivory on blue, balm to the viewer’s eyes –

There was the fountain. It looked well: cleaned of silt, and – functional. Charles stared at its bubbling water, and then looked at the wall behind it.

He saw nothing there.

“It can’t be gone. Erik – what happened?” It had been the most beautiful thing …. “Where is it?”
He examined the wall carefully. There was no sign that the tapestry had ever been there, save for some blue threads trailing down and fluttering in the breeze. Oh. Charles hadn’t noticed any draft, but he took a calming breath anyway. It was pleasantly cool.

And the fountain was working again, which was lovely. Charles walked back to it. If he focused, he could hear the sounds of the water, quiet and delicate, echo off the stone wall. He gazed at that same wall, peering through the darkness, dipping his fingers in the square pool.

Odd, that the tapestry was gone. But at least ...

Charles held up one of his hands, and smiled wryly as he shook the water from it. At least his gauntlets were clean.

“Well,” he told the empty wall. “I’ll be going, then.”

And he had better keep his cloak out of the fountain. Charles looked back to make sure of it. If the cloth – whatever type – got soaked through, it would take Jean’s fire in his own mind to dry – Jean’s fire.

“She’s hidden it,” Charles breathed. “Of course. All the memories you especially enjoy, Erik.” He could not say how he knew the tapestry was connected to him. Perhaps because of its loveliness. Charles lifted his chin and smiled. “It’s safe. But where, I wonder?”

Even with Jean’s power. And talk of that power .... Perhaps, he thought, walking towards the Imperial staircase, perhaps that one insignificant exchange, about Raven … perhaps Jean could keep it safe.

Or perhaps not.

No. He could trust Raven to no one else; he had to retrieve the memory. And he would, as soon as he got Jean alone.

Charles paused at the right foot of the double stairs as something jabbed at his memory – sharp and painful. “That’s right.” There, in the darkness between them, was the strange cloth – red, silver, black, all twisted together. Covering a mezuzah, and bizarre relics … and the door to Erik’s most secret memories …

Secrets …

It was an ornate peacock of a temptation, served up on silver platter. Charles sighed.

“I don’t have time, now.” No trace, he knew. Last time he had left banners, and look where that had landed him.

No, there was no time now – but he could return, someday soon, with enough tokens to cover any incursion. For if all went well, there were a good half-dozen bottles of opiate for the future. All he would need was for Erik to drink deep and drop off next to him again.

Neither would be difficult to manage.

He paced up the stairs. Everything was as dusty as he remembered: the carpets, the stones. The double flights met on a landing – one that stretched deeper back than he remembered. And there was a flat expanse of wall that he had not noticed before. Directly above the secret door one floor down.
Charles narrowed his eyes.

Then – “Just once. No trace.” – he drew his sword, walked forward, and touched it to the wall. Something flared into his sight; burned. He dropped the sword with a yelp and clatter.

One flash of flame tore round the outline of a rectangle before vanishing.

“Another secret door, and concealed much better than the one downstairs. Well done, Jean.”

Although it wasn’t that well-hidden, Charles thought, if he had found it immediately. Still, Jean was only seven – as good an excuse as any for a slapdash job.

The wall looked perfectly ordinary.

… Was there enough time?

Charles scooped up his sword. No. How long had Erik been asleep? He had no idea. But he would not take chances.

The rest of the stairs were the same. The gargoyles, the arcades; the yawning, dark halls; the iron doors stretching into infinity; three quarters of an infinity glittering with Frost’s diamonds. As he looked at them, Charles’ heart sank. Had he all the time in the world, how would he even begin?

But that was a thought for later, perhaps. He pushed open the yett. The night air was refreshing, and Charles inhaled deeply, staring down at the distant bunker. The same optical illusion as before …

All of his memories of his previous incursion had returned, including the most shameful. Poor Erik. Even the stunted version of him dwelling here had been a virgin, it seemed – or somehow traumatized past repair by the thought of sex. Charles should never have kissed him, nor tumbled him to the bed in the dungeon. He sighed. There could be little atonement for that. Except … more patience, perhaps, in bed now. Even if he had been coerced into the entire situation.

He walked up a stairway to one of the corner bartizans. Then started up the stairs to the immense bastion at the top of the whole.

Some sharp instinct made him slow and draw his sword.

“That’s right …”

For atop the bastion, gazing out over Erik’s mind, stood Frost.

Or: her statue.

Charles was not afraid. He walked straight up to that statue and stopped in full view, for even if she stood within reach, her eyes were carved to look at the mountains in the distance – and here, anyway, she was all unknowing stone.

“My lady.” Here he could make his smile a mockery as he bowed. “Why am I not surprised to see you?”

The diamond in the hollow of Frost’s throat shone in the gloom, but with a reflected light. Charles looked round for the moon once more. He saw nothing. It had to be light from the metal forest, then, so far below – or from his sword, which was shining. He was shining, like a star in the darkness. Charles smiled. He supposed it suited him.

He sheathed his sword. “I’m not afraid of you, Emma,” he told the statue of Frost. “Not here.”
For if he snapped his fingers, Erik could very well come to help him. Erik – Charles glanced round, and jumped in his tracks.

Erik, who was lying at the foot of the center statue.

His own statue. Charles gave it a brief glance as he stepped over Erik’s body. The stone was as he remembered: worn down – or, at least, not as well-carved as Frost’s face, or as the face of the man at Erik’s right, holding the strange helm. Charles peered closer; memorizing the stranger’s features for later reference. The ruby on the helm gleamed at him.

Then he looked back down at Erik.

He looked the same as he had before, here in his mind. Black trousers and turtleneck; elegant hands tucked under his strong-boned face; his auburn hair in a normal cut. If he were to wake, Charles was sure he would see the scar between his nose and mouth. As it was, he was very deeply asleep, curled in on himself like a cat – making no movement and no sound.

It made sense for him to pick the center statue’s base for a nap, Charles supposed. Like to like. And Erik would not have to see anything too terrible as long as he stayed asleep. Charles hoped he would find his way back to his metal forest when he woke up. Perhaps he was happiest there.

The statue of Erik did not look happy. But then, it did not really have any expression: just its hands folded over the hilt of a sword, and its blank eyes facing the terrible mountains dead on. And though it was perhaps meant to be a king, it had no jewels, and wore no crown.

Charles had forgotten that.

He shivered, staring. How could he have forgotten?

A croak rattled over the battlements, and a black flurry on the statue’s shoulder made Charles jump.

“Fu—” He snapped his mouth shut, glanced down at Erik, and whispered instead of shouting: “Fuck. You scared me!”

His raven flapped its wings, and flew straight from the statue to him.

“Thank you,” Charles said. He tried to get his breathing under control. “I suppose I’m glad to see you.”

Raven ran its beak through his hair. Then pecked him, gently.

“I also suppose we should be going, hm?” The statues were making him terribly uneasy. He could not say why. “But there is one thing, my dear.”

Another croak, as if to say: What?

“I can’t forget this,” Charles said, slowly. “I need to find out who that is,” he tipped his head at the statue he did not know, “and I need to remember everything Frost has done. The hold she has here …” He turned his head to her statue. “It’s terrible.”

The raven did not move.

“And I want to open Jean’s door. A fine project for a rainy day, hm? Or a snowy one.”

A sharp peck made him wince. First Jean, with her scowl and her: you didn’t ask! – and now Raven. Charles supposed he would take care to keep his projects to himself in future.
“But I want answers. And since it will take subtlety to get them from Frost without her knowing, I cannot forget. Remember how we forgot before? I thought it was trauma, or fright, but my dear …”

He reached up to his raven; stroked its feathers, and placed a hand on its ruff. “It had to be something more. One does not clean forget everything from a visit in a mind upon leaving it. I remembered Angel’s, and Sean’s … and Jean’s. Help me, please?”

There was a rattling sound from the raven’s throat. Then Jean’s tea light dropped from its beak into his hand.

“This?” Charles frowned. “It’s not mine, it’s Jean’s. Don’t I have anything that can keep me from forgetting?”

The raven fluttered its wings.

“Quite a puncture for the ego.” Charles held out the light. And then shivered, angling it away, for Frost’s statue had gleamed, and in the light the smile carved on her face had looked ghastly. Far better to stare at one of the bastion’s walls. “How is this supposed to …”

He trailed off. For in all the mortar and in every stone, the fire showed him glittering flecks of mica or crystal. “Or diamonds …”

Instinct made him look down. The same glitter dusted his sabatons. He held the tea light down between his feet, and the glitter vanished. “Or ice.”

*Fire and ice.* Charles straightened and clutched the tea light close. No wonder Jean was able to conceal things so easily in Erik’s mind – at least, as it was now. God, he would pay to be a fly on a wall in the Hive when she hit adolescence. Something told him Frost would not find her so dutiful then.

He passed the tea light over every part of his armor. Finished with it in front of his face – and if the motions seemed foolish as any religious claptrap, Charles refused to feel ridiculous.

“How is this supposed to …”

He passed the tea light over every part of his armor. Finished with it in front of his face – and if the motions seemed foolish as any religious claptrap, Charles refused to feel ridiculous.

“Will that do?” he asked his raven, quietly. “Only that? Will I remember everything?”

A *crrrr.*

“Right. Then we can go.”

The raven was still.

“Darling, I can’t do anything more now. Unless you want me to burn this castle down,” he tapped the tea light with one armored finger, “and something tells me that would not help Erik.”

… Since when had he wanted to *help* him?

A flutter of wings. Charles ignored it, staring down. *Erik.* He acted on instinct again: knelt and looked at how Erik was curled up at the statue’s feet, sleeping like the dead.

He tried holding the candle close.

Erik flinched away from the heat. Charles jerked away in turn. His raven beat its wings faster. *Too much* -

“No,” Charles said. He made sure he had the tea light; his cloak, shield, and sword, all with him. “We have to go before he wakes up. Come on.”
A cry.

“Do as I say.”

And the raven did.

For one moment he was standing on the bastion, facing all three statues and Erik sleeping there – and the next, he was staring at Erik sleeping in his bed.

Charles willed his heart to slow. Adrenaline was making him dizzy – it would be some time, he thought, before it cleared out of his system. His raven had surely gone to rest, carrying Jean’s fire to safety. And Erik looked fast asleep.

Just in case …. “Erik,” Charles whispered.

Erik did not stir. Good. He would remember nothing.

Charles remembered everything.

It was cold in his room; that was why he was shuddering. The blankets were tucked in tight, so he had to inch closer to Erik. Just to get Erik’s body heat: like a furnace, as usual.

Charles thought about that. He remembered everything – there was no lingering sabotage from Frost – but he was very tired, so perhaps that was why the thought hurt so much.

“I don’t understand you,” he whispered, helplessly. He laid one hand along Erik’s face. So warm. Fire in his body; ice in his mind …

“Erik. How are you even alive?”

There was no answer. But even asleep, Erik turned into Charles’ touch. His breath was warm and the pillow was soft. So Charles kept his hand there as he fell asleep.

Even having been drugged, Erik woke before him the next morning. He tried to be quiet, but Charles felt his warm weight leave the bed when it was still dark. In between periods of sleep he sensed different things: water running, cloth rustling – Erik lifting him out of bed with disturbing ease, settling him in the chair, and then putting him back in between clean sheets. It was a bit of stretch to pretend to sleep through that little shuffle, but Charles thought he managed it.

He even kept pretending when he felt Erik settle back down with a sigh. Next to him, wedged between him and the wall, but on top of the blankets. And … Charles blinked in the dim morning light. Fully clothed.

Erik smiled at him, warmly, and then moved in for a kiss. Charles parted his lips, kept his tongue pliant – tried not to think of his own morning breath, since Erik tasted like toothpaste. He hoped Erik would enjoy himself. Would not remember –

With a last touch of tongue, lingering, Erik drew back. “Good morning.”

“What is it good?”

Another smile. “Very good.”

And Erik kissed him again.
It was very quiet. The only sounds in the room were those from the fire and the … noise … from their kiss. Charles did not mind the heat and the wet, but he did feel a flash of anxiety as Erik sighed, placed one hand against his face, and kept slowly licking into his mouth. What if someone returned? Frost, or Logan – or one of the children –

Perhaps Erik sensed his unease, for he brought the kiss to a gentle close, moving back again, eyes half-lidded. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” said Charles. He ignored the way his blood was sloshing in his veins. “I just wanted to tell you ‘good morning’ again.”

Erik caressed his hair; then moved down to cup the base of Charles’ head in his palm. “You slept soundly.”

“Until that racket woke me up.” For even if he had only just noticed, Princess Alexandra was meowing loudly enough to be heard across the hall – quite impressive, for a creature as small as she.

Tipping his head to one side, Erik stared at the new door. It opened without a sound.

“Make that metalwork less showy. I won’t have Frost finding out that you gave this to me – she’ll know something’s up, then.”

The metal started to writhe up and down the wood as Erik kept stroking his hair. The meowing still carried: a bubbling cry quite different from the rumble in Erik’s chest, of, “Do you think she’s hungry?”

“Perhaps.” Charles kept his voice calm. “Or just lonely.”

“Then may we let her out?”

Charles shrugged.

“She hasn’t done anything wrong,” Erik persisted.

“And you only lock up those who have done something wrong?” He smiled a thin smile. “That’s new.”

Erik did not try to counter him. Only laid his head down – Charles twitched – on his shoulder. The blanket was there, thankfully, but still …

This close, and even in the dim light, he could see the lines in Erik’s brow. Charles had not thought to look as closely at Erik asleep in his own mind. Was the scar still there?

Not on the statue, he thought, and with a wash of energy: I still remember …

There was a plaintive meow from the side of the bed. Erik stirred, and looked. “She’s too small to jump.”

“She has claws – she’ll just have to practice. How did she get out, anyway?”

“I opened Jean’s door.”

And Erik moved over Charles’ body and reached down with one hand. Charles twitched again. The warm weight was lovely, and the smell of soap mixed with musk was …

He swallowed hard, reminded himself of how he ached all over, and glanced at Erik’s hand. Princess Alexandra looked like a ball of fluff cradled in it. She batted at Erik’s thumb. Then she bit him.
“Ow,” Erik said, mildly. “Kätzchen, behave yourself.”

“Put her here.” Charles patted the pillow on the other side of his face. Erik obeyed, rolling off him, and watched as he focused on petting the kitten’s silky white fur.

Petting her took up all his attention. She would need regular brushing; there were strands already starting to tangle. Perhaps he would use Ororo’s old combs. The kitten clambered onto his sternum, and Charles thought to try something different – and smiled, because the simplest rubbing at the base of her pale-fuzzed ears sent her into a fit of ecstasy, flopping down onto his hand and purring.

Erik breathed out a soft laugh over his ear. “You’re good at that.”

“Aren’t I just?” Charles murmured, turning his head.

This close, he could see the grey striations in Erik’s eyes. The green looked particularly pale. Quite like … sea glass, really.

Geoffrey had given him a piece, once.

– Don’t you go falling asleep in there, now – echoed through his memory, and Charles said, abrupt: “Sometimes you almost sound Irish. Why is that?”

Lines formed at the corners of Erik’s eyes. Charles did not look down at his smile.

“Schöner Lehrer. I only became fluent in English in Galut – and the one who taught me there was … I think she called herself the only Irish Jew left in all the world. If I sometimes sound like her,” Erik shrugged, “I don’t mind.”

“What was her name?”

“Esther. Or Hadassah, or - I'm not sure. She died just before we raised Ir Tzedek's walls.”

What had he even thought? To send a message to Albany: contact Galut, send help, can anyone help? But - and Charles remembered, suddenly, the envoy at the victory celebration in December. Who, it seemed, had said nothing - done nothing. Charles sighed, looking away and sinking his fingers into the kitten’s fur.

“Rabe …. Please look at me?”

Erik sounded serious. So Charles compromised. He leaned his head back, feeling Erik’s breath wash soft and warm over his ear.

“I’ve forgotten so much,” Erik said. “You keep asking me about different things, and … then I know I’ve forgotten them. So much of Eretz Galut, and my journeying – Europe Before, Europe After; where I’ve gone, and what I’ve done …

“… But I swear, I will never forget what I’ve promised you.”

Charles pressed his lips together.

“All right?” Erik kissed his cheek. “Charles?”

“All right.”

“Good.” Another kiss. “I should go.”
“Yes,” Charles said. “It would never do for Frost to find you here. Your talk of helpful Esther is all well and good, but our dear Emma started you on your English, didn’t she?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Just … answer me? Please?”

“My lady added English to my studies a year or two after we began, I think. She was very patient with me.”

“I’ll wager she was,” Charles said – or tried to say, but his voice cracked. His throat still ached terribly; his eyes should not sting, god damn it –

“Shh …” Erik wrapped Charles in his arms. The kitten squeaked, affronted, and hopped back to the pillow. “You’ve nothing to fear. I’ll protect you; I swear it. Charles …. I –”

God forbid he start with declarations of love again; Charles would have nothing so embarrassing. So he silenced him in the most efficient way possible, morning breath or no morning breath.

When it was over, Erik was breathing heavily, eyes closed. Charles pressed a kiss on each eyelid. “You may go, then. Try not to kill too many people.”

Erik’s eyes opened. “Will you think of me, Charles, from time to time? Not me killing people. Just me.”

*That is you.*

... Except … he knew that was unkind.

Tiredly, Charles put that truth away. He tried to smile. “Why not? I’ll think of you at Lake Mead.”

“What’s at Lake Mead?”

Charles shook his head. He gave Erik’s hair one last stroke, and pushed him away. “Stern duty calls. *Au revoir,* Erik.”

“À bientôt,” Erik replied, and kissed him, and left him there.

*All alone,* Charles thought. *Well.* All alone except for Princess Alexandra, which he supposed was something. He stroked her again, let her purr clatter through his cheekbone, and only kept cursory track of Erik’s mind: through the manor – fetching various things, surely, preparing – and then moving through the West Wing to what had to be the garage.

Charles made a careful note of its location.

Erik stayed there only briefly; and then moved outside – and moved faster, which surely meant he was riding his bike. Riding away, back to … *oh.* He had forgotten to ask where, since it seemed Albuquerque was over and done.

Next time, perhaps.

For it was enough in that moment, Charles thought, to touch Erik’s mind until it reached West King Road, and then leave him there to be alone in his turn.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

This chapter is brought to you by: etxaberri & aeirik, for going above and beyond with the Russian; crownedinwood, for a read-through & some excellent catches; and innocent-smith, for all the details about Las Vegas & Boulder City an author could need. Thanks!

Thank you as well for keeping on, gentle reader! This is plotty, talky, world-buildy ... and half of what the chapter was originally; look for the second half very, very soon. (It's almost completely done, and then maybe - just maybe - we'll get some pr0n for New Year.)

Also, while you are at AO3 - visit Secret Mutant 2013, and enjoy all the goodies there! Click, for Secret Mutant, and Secret Mutant Madness.

ETA: forgot that, in this chapter, there is a line that I totally stole from "The Princess Bride." :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Charles could hardly breathe.

“Didn’t I tell you?”

Frost’s voice seemed to come from a great distance. It was the wind in his ears, perhaps, or the vertigo. He tried to nod.

“I said,” and she walked up to him, “didn’t I tell you? ‘Come with me, Charles, and you shall see great things’ – and now …”

“I had just not thought I would see them quite so soon, my lady.”

Frost laughed, throatily, and threaded an arm through his.

Charles felt dizzy. Not from her presence, of course; perhaps it was just that he was not good with heights.

Had he even been on a height like this? Ever? He had not climbed the wrecks of various towers in London; Geoffrey had been more daring – or perhaps more foolhardy. Or more protective of those as young as Charles had been. Stay back, Charlie lad; a bit too far to fall …

“Nothing more to say, Charles?”

He found he could shake his head perfectly well. So he did, and kept staring at the distant Colorado, foaming blue-green as far as he could see it from the top of the Hoover Dam.

Charles had stayed in bed long after Erik left on Sunday – had nipped out only to don as many clothes as possible. Then he had tried to keep warm, shivering beneath the mounds of clean blankets,
and had stared at the arrow windows – and then at the beam of light that had gradually slanted over
the flagstones.

If it stormed, Erik would have a hard ride to Albany – but Charles had decided not to think of him.
He had huddled further in; tugging a corner of blanket over Princess Alexandra – who had purred: a
buzz against his face, and then a dim echo of the same sensation as Charles leaped into his own mind
and flew out again with Raven, fast and far. Just to stay warm.

“Northeast,” he had whispered, as the raven had arrowed up Lake Cayuga. “Not Albany.” And:
faster …

North, north by northeast; far above the blunted forms of mountains; the long stretches of grey void
that could have been forests, Before; now dead sticks smudges on the stone. Or perhaps, Charles
told his raven: deciduous, and storing up their life for the spring …

Raven had croaked into the headwind, and had flown on.

He had not known why they were going so far.

A test .... Emma’s eyes glittering, and I want to train him like a rapier through his memory – Charles
exhaled and knew he could see his breath in his room, but his thoughts only flew faster, because:
testing .... He could feel the words reverberate through his whole mind.

An excellent test, since the raven was flying faster yet, wheeling northeast by east, and sudden gleam
of ice-light flashed across his thoughts – he gasped, but it was – far below – and – long wide water –
too large to be anything like Frost’s mind, so he knew it was a lake, albeit one to the north, frozen
through and through. “Not Ontario; that’s to the west,” he told himself, dreaming – Professor voice,
and: Five Great Lakes; remember?

Michigan. The memory of movement slow, even with Raven fast as light: himself in a lecture hall,
pointing to a map of the United States that Was. Chief exports, iron ore and lumber. Fruit, Before,
but not now –

And the memory of his finger traversed five blotches of blue, in order. Lake Huron rolls – Logan
singing under his breath in the cab of the truck, as he himself had slept on the way to Albany: Raven
must have listened to – Superior sings / in the rooms of her ice-water mansion – but the lake Raven
had seen was the other direction, and there was his finger stopping on a smaller bit of blue – in
Vermont’s Lake Champlain, and north through Québec in the War of 1812 –

“North,” he whispered.

But Raven had flown ahead of him, sharp eyes lighting on the myriad sparks that had to be …. 
“Alive,” Charles croaked, and he had flown lower, “right there.”

Not Montréal, to his students, which was – can anybody tell me? Which was razed in Canada’s civil
war, 1952 to 1958, but – “Québec City,” he said now and remembered Logan: just like Vieux-
Québec, give people a bluff over a river – and Hank: a big group from Québec – and – the
Québecois joined us, as did the Maritimers and those of the Plains, Erik had said that – Erik, Erik –

Charles knew: in his room, in the cold, his body had arched into: Erik. His head had kicked back and
dislodged the kitten, who gave him a stinging scratch on his ear, but he hardly felt it. Because his
raven hovered over Québec City, gazing down at the constellation of people glowing against the
darkness, and then shot northeast up the St. Lawrence River and descried an arc – so fast – like
lightning, he was like lightning crackling and streaming electricity behind him; a comet lighting up
the void that was a mind’s-eye-view of the north Atlantic Ocean.

In his physical room, in his reading room, and flying far above the void – Charles opened his mouth to say something.

But there were no words.

As far as the raven could see, turning and turning in a widening – no, no need for that.

“Because you can hear me, darling,” said Charles, far away. It echoed through the complete emptiness. “Can’t you?”

The ocean was an absence of light, and feathers that were black in ordinary now shone iridescent against it.

“Come back to me. Unless – could we feel the mind of a whale, from this vantage, do you think? Though they're probably all gone.”

Whether or not there were any whales left, Charles had to smile as Raven turned to fly back to him, pulling behind it … the projection? Reality? His mind’s intersection with the world entire ….

“Whatever we may call it,” Charles said to the empty room, to his reading room, to the ocean, “you have to leave it behind, my dear, so do.”

Silver and blue and grey fell from the wide wings, first in splinters and then a cascade that turned into a whitewater roar. Which lasted for one breath – Charles saw it cloud in the manor room – and a second breath – he inhaled the scent of fresh air and bookbinding glue in his reading room – and then Raven’s image appeared against the great round window, and passed through the glass, effortless, to spiral down and land on the golden chair.

It hopped to the seat cushion with a croak.

Charles stared at it.

The black head tipped. Bright eyes flashed at him.

“Well done,” he said. “That was … amazing.”

Raven ruffled its feathers, proud. It looked larger than life, wings displayed sable on field or –

“And any mention of Québec and its denizens, you caught up in your net and brought to my attention.” He pressed his gauntlets together. “Brava.”

The raven set to preening. Charles watched it for a few moments.

“May I ask, darling … Those memories, all brought to the fore …. Could you do that for other things?”

He had an eidetic memory, yes, but there had been certain things mentioned recently that had … echoed. “Emma’s lover,” Charles said, pacing towards the hidden corner.

And instinct added: “Stryker’s son.”

He turned to look at his raven. It stared back, its feathers puffed out. If a bird could be said to look grumpy, then … it did.

“Whenver’s convenient,” he said, hasty, “or one of the others could do it.” His penguin, swimming
down to tug books from the atrium’s pillar – like Jean, pulling them from the library mantel to herself with her power, with: read to me? echoing from her mind to his.

Raven looked up and clacked its beak.

Mr. Xavier?

The voice was coming from his room.

In the real world, Charles reminded himself, and he forced his eyes open.

He saw nothing but the plaster of the ceiling, grey in the dim mid-morning light, and – a flash of white fuzz? Arcing over his eyes; once, then again.

Then a bright and eager face leaned into his vision. Charles sputtered in surprise. “Jean!” He battèd the kitten’s tail away from his nose. “You startled me.”

Sorry!

“That’s quite all right.” And it was, but thank goodness he had gone back to sleep fully clothed.

Jean’s thoughts bubbled with laughter as she sent the image: himself, ruffled and squinting, the fluffy kitten wedged beneath his chin. Was Princess Alexandra good?

“She was very good. And you? Logan’s not here, is he?” For he would immediately pick up on the scent of sex, and the repercussions of that would be –

No, but Mr. Muñoz is downstairs, and Hank’s coming tomorrow. Can Scott and Kurt come in, please?

Charles craned his neck to see Scott and Kurt hovering at the threshold of his room. What had they been doing, again? Oh – right.

“Happy belated birthday, Scott. Eight years old; three loud cheers. Did you enjoy the play? Come inside.”

“Pirates!” shrieked Kurt, and ran to jump up on the bed.

“What about them?”

Scott reached out to find the bedpost, then moved to sit next to Kurt. “They were in the play.”

“But …” Charles blinked. The blindfold. “Did you enjoy it, Scott? That is: how did you enjoy it?”

“Jean sent it to me so I could see. In my mind, I mean. My favorite part was the Indians – I played Westerns and Indians when I lived with Grandma.”

“Mm.” Charles uncoiled Kurt’s tail from where it had taken hold of his wrist, and gently pushed him to the foot of the bed. “Mustn’t wake Princess Alexandra; she’s sleeping. And, Jean,” the memory came to him in a flash, “I thought Lady Frost said: no visitors allowed, in Scott’s mind.”

She said I could. It was pretty easy.

“And you asked?”
Jean smiled at him sweetly, and nodded.

“It was great,” said Scott. “And we talked before we went home: we can play it. I get to be Tiger Lily!”

“That’s a girl,” Charles murmured.

“So what? Jean’s Peter.”

“Is she? And who are the Lost Boys?”

“They’re boring. You can be Captain Hook, and Kurt can be Smee. Princess Alexandra can be the crocodile, as long as we play where she can go to the bathroom—”

She can wear my washcloth for a costume! It’s green and brown, and–

“Do you see any hook?” Charles held out his hands. “Because I don’t.”

“It’s pretend.”

“Yes, I know, but I could be Peter, and– well, we need a Wendy. Why can’t Jean be–”

“Me!” Kurt bounced to the floor and back. Princess Alexandra woke up; Charles winced as she dug her claws into him; he sat up and she promptly jumped on his shoulder and then slid down his back with a hiss, and Kurt kept squealing: “I want to be Wendy!”

You can’t be our mother. Mr. Xavier can be Wendy, and Jean beamed. That’s perfect!

“Oh come now, I’m no one’s mother–”

“So then Mr. Muñoz can be Captain Hook,” Scott decided, “and that’s good, because Smee always goes along with him, right?”

Jean sent a – Right! – loud enough for all, and Kurt wailed: “But I want to play with you!”

Charles reached back to detach the kitten from his sweater, claw by claw. He deposited her in his lap – and, relieved, saw Azazel stroll into view and lean against the doorframe, grinning. “What’s all this, meloch?”

Kurt jumped from the bed to Azazel and started whinging in Russian. Azazel frowned – and Jean sent something loud again, also in Russian –

But at Azazel’s glare, she looked glum and ducked her head.

All right, dear? Charles sent, quietly, tuning out the noise of the others.

All right. I just forgot. She sent the image of Azazel: in fluid motion, baring his teeth and disappearing into his cloud of black smoke, his lashing tail vanishing last. He doesn’t like me to talk to him. In his mind, I mean.

Even in Russian? It was amazing of you. And it was easy to project wistfulness. I wish I could do that.

I could show you, Mr. Xavier!

… Really?
Yes!

It seems awfully difficult to me. I’ve been trying to learn Russian with my birds, you know.

I know: I saw. I can give it to you really fast! It can be a Christmas present – really really late, though.

Charles’ dismay at Jean remembering his Cyrillic shelf, his churning excitement, his glee: he masked it all. You don’t have to give me presents, Jean.

Except: that memory – the chance thought he had of Raven, and Jean’s hearing it … he wanted that back –

But I want to. Can I do it right now?

Hm …. Let’s wait until this evening. He kept his face carefully blank as he watched Azazel swing Kurt up in the air; such was his focus that Kurt’s delighted flailing was completely silent. You can visit my mind – Scott too.

But he’s not allowed there, Mr. Xavier. Remember?

Thanks to Frost’s petty little rules - but he throttled his reaction. Fine, Charles sent, and gave her a smile.

“Right,” and Azazel tossed Kurt onto the bed; he bounced, laughing. “I’m off. And back to get you,” he pointed one claw at Charles, “tomorrow noon.”

“For …”

“Lake Mead, remember? Despite all good sense, Emma wants you there.” Azazel turned to Jean. “Now you, little lady Grey, and you, little Summers – don’t you bully my Kurt, you hear?”

“We don’t,” Scott started, but then gulped. Charles stared, shocked, at the red tip of Azazel’s tail flicking to Scott’s throat. The tough edge had to be keratin, or something honed sharp, because there was a red mark –

“How dare you?” He jumped to his feet and faced down Azazel; the kitten scrabbling to grip his trouser leg and then sliding to the floor made the gesture rather less impressive. Azazel’s lips twitched at the sight; Charles’ anger doubled. “How dare you threaten a child?” He swatted at the sinewy tail. “Get out of here.”

And then he froze as the tip swung round to his throat instead.

“Maybe I’ll get out and go talk to Emma. Would you like her to pay you an early visit, Xavier? Or maybe …” Azazel leaned in and pressed the edge – serrated – against his flesh, “I should hook you up to the Finder right now, and save her the trouble of a tech.”

“Do you even know how?”

“Oh, yes. Slide you down the slab; tie you up tight. You think you’re so special; the only one –”

“But that’s not in your orders.” Charles pretended to breathe faster – fear. “It’s not.”

Pale blue eyes glinted. “Smart.”

“Very,” said Charles. “Feel free to leave. Down the hall, if you will; your teleportation has an
unpleasant stench.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know.” He stayed put.

“That I think you have intelligence enough to do as I say, this one time. If only,” Charles ground out, “to set a good example.”

“Hm.” Azazel inclined his head, and flicked his tail away. “Children? Do svidaniya.”

He left. Charles tried to breathe. But he did not relax until his power felt the flickering spark of Azazel’s mind disappear.

“Mr. Xavier, make him stop!” Scott cried.

Charles turned. Kurt was giggling, and poking Scott in the throat with the blue tip of his tail.

“Kurt! That is not acceptable behavior.”

“Papa did it,” came the reply.

“That doesn’t matter. If you can’t keep your – tail,” he stumbled, “to yourself, I …”

All the children waited.

“… I won’t give you your present at the party.”

The blue tail shot away from Scott. “Sorry!”

“Good. Now let’s go see if Captain Hook needs help with dinner.”

“Fly, Peter!” and Scott scrambled off the bed. “Fly!”

All of us! Jean took Kurt’s hand in her right, Scott’s in her left, and started running.

“Careful!” Making sure the kitten was secure in his hold, Charles followed the noise and laughter.

He had not quite missed the children, he realized; they had hardly been gone so long. And – mind on other things – but he dismissed that thought, and the memory of Erik, as soon as it came. Other memories would surface soon, more important ones – leaving his body’s aches and pains as sufficient memorial for Erik’s visit. “And those too will pass,” he told himself, and opened the kitchen door.

The wind whipped at them, fluttering the jaunty little feather in Frost’s white hat.

“Consider this an impromptu lesson, Charles. There are several men walking some distance beneath us. Reach now, and focus. Can you feel them?”

Truth be told, Charles could hardly tear his eyes away from the river foaming so far below. But he stretched out his power –

– and the minds in the great dam works beneath his feet flickered: dim individual lights, spaced regularly. A cluster, though, focused on machinery and sparking with intent.

“There,” he said, touching Frost’s mind with the distance in between, stretched out like a silk plumb line.
“Indeed. It won’t be long.”

Charles concentrated on the movements of the men below. And so he did not even twitch as the jet flow gates of the Hoover Dam creaked, groaned, and fountained great plumes of white water with a roar and crash.

The delighted cries from behind him sounded tinny.

“What do you think?”

“As impressive a spurt as I’ve ever seen. And from me, that’s high praise.”

Frost wrinkled her nose. “How very lewd of you. Thank goodness those children are out of earshot.”

Charles glanced over his shoulder. The cluster of Free West ... tourists? Dignitaries? Whoever they were, they were standing closely bunched, chattering loudly. At least – he squinted – the women had clustered together, some with attendant children. Their men had dispersed, walking to the bizarre statues flanking the flag; to the mortar battery; to the rail itself.

The height was not so terrifying anymore. Frost released his arm when he shifted, freeing him to move to the rail, and lean, and look. The light made a rainbow through the water droplets in the air, beautiful against the grey ochre of the cliffs.

Frost stepped forward to look with him.

The water fountained again. The women behind them applauded.

“How long,” Charles said, quietly, “until they figure out who we are?”

She did not answer.

Armando had vetoed his new role. “Find someone else.” So the children had relegated him to John or Michael – Charles wasn’t sure which – and had started to squabble over who would play Captain Hook.

Charles had wondered, briefly, if Armando had met with something in Albany, to put him in such a grim mood.

Then all thoughts gave way to the excitement of dispensing with the children – “To bed, all of you – quick march!” – and then closing his new door behind him, and settling on the hearth.

Thence to his reading room, to sit dignified in his golden chair by the great round window. Charles gazed up at the symbols etched into the panes of glass; some familiar, some not. He could decipher them, he knew – this was his mind, after all – but,

“Another rainy-day project,” he whispered to his birds.

All except Raven were circling through the reading room, bypassing bookshelves and weaving beneath tables and benches. The penguin had planted its webbed feet firm on the carpet and was swiveling its wings.

“She’ll come soon,” Charles said, “and we’ll finish learning some Russian, my friends. Won’t that be nice?”

Too small a word, for the chance to hear everything Frost said to her trusted lieutenants, to know
what she really said to Erik –

But how could he take back his words about Raven – here in his mind, and not in Jean’s? Could he follow her back and break in? Find the memory in her forest and take it from under her phoenix’s nose? Beak?

His penguin squawked, sharply, and dashed away.

“What is it?” Charles got to his feet and jogged down the carpet runner, following; in the corner of his eye he saw his cloak flickering and flaring with iridescent power. “What’s wrong?”

The penguin flapped its wings at him. Then it pecked the carpet.

“That’s the seal, my dear.” A stained-glass rondel, he remembered – Greek key, and his raven – blue on green …. The smallest birds had woven the carpet back together.

Except now, hummingbird and sparrow were gone; and his diamond bird was grotesquely changed. What could he do without the three of them?

“The same as I’ve done so far,” Charles told the carpet. “It’s my power. I could bring it back right now, if I wanted to.”

All was quiet.

“Couldn’t I?” he snapped.

A distant rumble echoed him.

“Exactly.” He strode to his golden chair again, and gripped its back. “I won’t do it now because it would not do to show our hand. You realize that, don’t you?” he called out to the birds, now flying faster and faster round the room. “If Frost finds out –”

His owl cried out; it flew high up into the rafters and circled there, bits of grey down floating to the floor.

“What is it?”

Mr. Xavier?

It was his mental equivalent of a doorbell, apparently. “Yes, Jean? I’m here.”

Sorry I’m late!

“That’s no problem. Where are you now?”

My room. The words flickered with light, as though she were giggling. Like you are in yours.

“I mean: when shall you come to me, my lady?”

Although now the words stung; no doubt from all the bowing and scraping, now a feature of his life. He stared up at the huge glass window –

– and shivered as it flickered and he remembered: Erik, staring down at him from that library chair, eyes hooded. Far back … before he knew the body in that turtleneck and trousers … his face set like stone. Jean Grey belongs to my lady -
“Lady Grey, isn’t it?”

Yes!

Erik had told him the family name, so long ago; Azazel had jogged the memory loose. Charles frowned – but then wreathed his face in welcome, as – *Ready or not, here I come!* – rained down into his mind in red-hot sparks.

He would never get used to the way Jean could appear without fanfare: one moment absent and the next moment waving at him as she dashed up the carpet runner. The light from the oculus made her hair gleam orange-red. She twirled as she rounded the corner of a table; her phoenix swooping alongside her. *Mr. Xavier!*

He would be kind, here. For he had to get that memory back … but the phoenix had a terribly sharp beak. Charles forced a smile at it. “Catch your breath, darling.”

Jean flopped into his golden chair. The phoenix embroidered on the front of her robe wrinkled with the fabric; its counterpart flexed talons into the chair’s back and exhaled a cloud of steam right at his eyes.

“Tell me how you really feel, why don’t you?”

What?

“Nothing, child. Would you care for some tea?”

Oh! Yes, please.

“And something to eat, I think,” Charles said. He opened the storage closet and obtained some cardboard; set about turning it into a tray and teapot, hot water and plump scones. It gave him considerable satisfaction to see dust shimmer into clotted cream. He put the tray down on Jean’s lap with a flourish. “Voilà.”

She picked up a scone and took a bite. Her brow puckered.

“Too dry? There’s jam, you know.” Charles hovered; tapped the jam jar that had appeared on the tray. “And try it with the cream first.”

Jean watched gravely as he prepared another scone for her. Then tried it, and gave him a close-lipped smile around her mouthful. *It’s good.*

“Well, I hope so. It took me all of thirty seconds to make, you know.”

*If you took a bit longer …* Jean trailed off.

“What?” Charles felt nettled. “What would that do?”

The phoenix gave a low croak. Jean jumped in her seat.

*Never mind.*

“But –”

*I’ll give you the Russian present now, if you want.* Carefully, with a rattle of china and silver, she moved the tea tray to one of the long worktables.

“Surely your telekinesis works in the mind as well,” said Charles. “Or did I just imagine you flying, in Angel’s?”
That was a really long time ago.

Which was not an answer, Charles knew, but he followed her to his Cyrillic shelf without further comment. Foolish, to feel patronized by a child – especially a child engaged in an intent, silent conversation with nothing more than a flammable overgrown pheasant.

Mr. Xavier? I kind of … have to start a fire here, she pointed at the shelf, to bring everything over. Is that O.K?

Every part of him should have run mad at the thought of a fire in a library. But, “I trust you,” he told Jean. “Do what you will.”

She gave him a bright smile.

And the bookshelf promptly exploded.

“God!” Charles yanked his shield from over his shoulder, wrenched it in front of his face. “Be careful!”

I’m careful! Jean’s words crackled with the flames. It’ll only take a little while longer – and I won’t burn you, I promise!

“Yes. Fine.” He peeked out from behind the shield. The phoenix whirled in and out of the fire: a Catherine wheel faster than the eye could see in an inferno that somehow did not hurt, until – he gasped – it did, though with the smallest sting, right before wings and beak and long feathered tail flashed into themselves like a flame through paper blackening at the edges – and completely disappeared.

Charles waved his hand to clear the smoke. “Good lord.”

Did he hurt you? Jean was wringing her hands. I’m sorry! He went faster than I thought he would.

“Not very considerate, but for such a gift, it’s quite all right.”

More than all right. For his shelves all grew and flourished like trees, Charles knew, but the Cyrillic one now looked magnificently wild: tangled and grown back into the wall as well as up. The spines of books glinted red-gold; he could hear the crackle of paper though all the pages were still.

“Can you hide this from Lady Frost, dear?”

I already did, Jean sent. No one can see it but you and me. And other people – but only if you want them to.

So the fact that he could see the hidden door in Erik’s mind …. Charles hugged the revelation to himself. “She’ll see nothing. And it has to stay that way, hm? Don’t tell anyone you’ve given me this ability. It will be our little secret.”

You like secrets a lot, Mr. Xavier.

“I do indeed. Promise not to say anything?”

I promise, Jean sighed.

His raven swooped in front of him, wings whirling – Charles batted it away. Whatever the matter was, it could wait. He walked to the bookshelf, fingers itching to touch. A quick glance showed his other birds hopping and fluttering closer with eager chirps. “Shall we practice, then? A new language
Jean looked puzzled. *It just will.*

“I don’t have to do anything? I just have to open my mouth, and presto: Pushkin? Let’s try it in the real world. Come to my room.”

From where he was tucked in on himself on the hearth, Charles shook his head hard and sat up. “Ow.” He tossed more wood on the fire and hobbled to the door, wincing at the pins and needles in his limbs, then looked into the hallway. “Jean?” he whispered. “Are you there?”

*Yes.* Her door swung open silently. A scuffle: Princess Alexandra, Charles realized, trying to dash into the hallway. *Try saying that in Russian.*

Charles concentrated. If he were to say it in Russian, he would start with her name, of course, so: “Jean? Are you there – ow.”

It felt like a headache from too much of a cold sweet: the English running through his mind, but his lips shaping: -Jean? Ty zdes’?-

*I’m here! That’s wonderful!*

“Really, it’s just a little question,” he said – but his mouth had moved in: -Da ladno, eto vsego lish’ korotkiy vopros.-

He touched his fingers to his mouth. Chose: *English,* and said: “Is that really Russian? You’re sure?” *Yes.*

“I feel strangely out of phase.” As apt an analogy as any. “Between what I think I say and what I say, like: Jean, this is wonderful.” He pressed his lips together. -Jean, eto prosto zamechatel’no- had sounded familiar, but had felt so strange ... “Or somewhat mad,” twisted into: -Ili chto-to dikoe.-

*You sound fine.*

“So if I were to say,” running over -Esli by ya skazal,- “‘defenestrate’ ... huh.”

Nothing had come out of his mouth. *I don’t know that one.*

“It’s just a fancy way of saying ‘throw out a window’. Let’s see. Illustration –” illyustracija “– yes; Belgium –”Bel’giya “– yes; discombobulate – ha, no!”

*Shh!*

Charles winced. His voice had carried down the hall. *Fine.* He would communicate in the best way. *So: I suppose I know what you know, now?*

Jean nodded.

*And is this in Russian too?*

In the hallway’s gloom, he could only just see the dimple in Jean’s smile. *Thoughts can’t be in anything, can they?*
I never gave much thought to it, I suppose. He was glad to see her smile widen at the admittedly infantile pun – but then the smile turned into a yawn, and Charles tutted. Bed time for you.

All right, Mr. Xavier.

“And I would read to you in Russian, now, but…” He paused. Jean had – winced? What is it, dear? … I can’t read yet, so I can’t give that to you. I’m sorry.

“And you almost seven.” Charles shunted aside the twinge of disappointment. It would have been so helpful … but he was well on his way, really, what with the memorization he had already done.

He caught sight of Jean’s lower lip trembling.

“Oh, my darling, clever girl. Come here.”

All it took was his spreading his arms, and Jean pelted forward and hugged him. Charles hugged her back, tightly, and patted her head. Thank you so much. I’m so pleased, so grateful to you – truly, I am.

Really? she sent.

“Yes,” he said. “And so, for your birthday, you know what we’ll do?” He leaned back, to bump his forehead against hers. “We’ll start reading lessons.”

She beamed from ear to ear. Promise?

“Absolutely. Unless you want to take how to read from my head. At least, how to read English.” Charles waggled fingertips near his temple. “I suppose you could take Spanish from Armando, if you asked.”

Take echoed through his mind.

No, thank you. I want to learn it myself.

“All right, then. On your birthday. February twenty, we start to read. Shake on it.”

He held out a hand. Jean shook it with aplomb.

Now. He could strike out and take the memory now –

Charles shook his head.

There would be time when he returned from Lake Mead. Frost would be there, after all. She wouldn’t have a chance to hurt Jean, not if he kept her occupied.

“And now it’s off to bed,” he fluttered his hands, “off to bed.”

With one last smile, Jean scampered away.

Charles waited for the door to close. He kept a light touch on her mind, to make sure she had gone to sleep. Then he paced back to his own room, shut the door and curled his hands around his elbows. He felt as though he could run to the library ten times and back in as many seconds. He could jump from the manor tower to the forest without a scratch. He could –

“Lie down on the bed,” he told himself, wry, “and rest. Tomorrow, after all, is Lake Mead.”
Charles did his best. His mind would keep racing, though, and in the end he conducted experiments with his newfound ability, just to lull himself to sleep.


… Iskatel’ …

He grimaced. “Yes.”

Words Jean had spoken, so it stood to reason: she had done so with Frost. Or overheard her; little pitchers ...

“Battlefield – hm.” Slower to come, but – pole bitvy – there, which … perhaps she had overheard Frost, rather than said it herself. “Dallas – the same. Nuclear – yes. Terrorist – no. Plutonium – yes. Princess.” His eyes were closing. Snegurochka, which Azazel had used once, so perhaps that was a qualified, “Yes. Prince – yes.”

… Moi princ …


... Ya tak lyublyu eyo - ya toskuyu po nei ...

And he drifted off, his mind playing his mouth in a lullaby: “So. Sister - yes. Mother – yes …. Mama – no. Papa – no, but …”

… but out of phase was out of phase, and all his own languages were running together like syrup: the memories of tutorials and readings; his adolescent voice cracking on Latin in choir; his own small hands on the golden eagle wings of the church lectern, and his childish voice – whereby we cry, Abba, Father – and the memory of sweet smoke – incense – curling round his face, sending him at last to sleep.

“How long, Emma?”

Suddenly, startlingly, she swooped to his ear, so close he could feel her breath. “Remind me,” she said, “when I gave you permission to call me Emma.”

In for a penny. Charles whipped his head round and looked straight at her. “I beg your pardon, Lady Frost. Do you not care for it?”

Her breath was warm on his mouth. Her eyes were wide. A perfect scene of turnabout being fair play, except for the brim of her hat tickling his brow. Charles did his best to keep a straight face – it kept tickling – and then he had to lower his head and pull back. “‘How long?’ I said. Apologies, my lady.”

“It’s all right, Charles. I should be the one to apologize. I’ve been short with you.”

What the hell? They were close to the edge, and thus to a rather fatal drop, Charles knew. He sneaked a look out of the corner of his eye. Very close. That could be why she was playing nice.
“I’m just not accustomed to men using my first name.”

“Azazel does.”

“Mm. He really shouldn’t.”

“And – President Almaz? What does he call you?”

“He calls me, ‘My lady.’ I allow him some liberties, but not that one.”

Would you allow me this one … Emma?

It was a risk, Charles knew.

Her eyes on his were very clear. Measuring. As she sent: Why not?

He blinked.

I did tell you when we visited Pinkner: we’ve been in each other’s minds. So when we communicate this way, you may call me Emma. And as for speaking aloud …

One corner of her mouth curled up, like the tendril of a fern.

… Do call me Emma, but only when we’re alone.

Very well, Emma. Charles made the words as warm as he could without hurting her. So. How long do you think it will take before they figure out who we are?

Let’s see, shall we? She turned away from him, her face eclipsed by the broad brim of her white hat. Twenty dollars, Eastern, says: not until we get off that ridiculous bus in Boulder City.

You bet Azazel five. On Pinkner’s death, Charles remembered.

High-pitched noises broke the unpleasant memory as a woman called after a child who had scurried to the rail. The child was wearing a sailor suit, its fabric vividly blue in the bright light. He peered down, then ran again – stopped next to Frost and grabbed the bars with his chubby hands.

Frost reached down to pat his golden hair. How adorable.

I didn’t think you were so fond of children, Charles sent.

Every so often, I can make an exception.

Jean, Charles thought to himself, but: the slim hand kept patting. And Frost’s hat tipped, just so.

She had to be looking over the edge of the dam.

He shivered at the sudden image: a dark speck against the dam’s pale cement – the child flailing and falling, a fat Icarus in a sailor suit.

She wouldn’t. Surely she wouldn’t –

– and indeed, Frost drew the child back, smiling, and fished a peppermint out of her purse for him. She sent Charles a pulse of amusement: the child’s worshipful look as he shoved the candy into his mouth.
Charles could not help but feel unexpected warmth: the child safe and adoring …. How bizarre. Frost and a loving child – there were some things his mind should refuse to accept.

She waved as the child was herded away amidst a whirl of apologies and thanks from – the mother? Charles saw two gold medals winking from a plain blouse, and her grey skirt outlining her broad arse for one startling second, as she stepped on the hem when she turned.

“Such a beautiful child,” Frost murmured, “from such an ugly mother.”

And that put paid to his warmth.

She smiled and waved to the child again; the woman, back in her cluster of friends, did not notice. Their voices were shrill in conversation; their hats bobbed. And the Free West men strolled back from where they had clustered further along the rail. Some were laughing, some gesturing at the spume – all looked like they had stepped off an advertisement from Before for something wholesome. An outdoor sport, perhaps, or toothpaste.

*Blind fools, all.* Frost sent. *Shall we have another gamble? Which will be the first to harass me?*  
*I would not dare wager on that.*

Her mind caressed his. *I do so like to win, Charles. And that’s an explanation for you: by now, Azazel knows better than to bet anything significant against me.*

“You would have such cheap gallantry?”

*I enjoy it at any price.* Frost took his arm again.

Charles focused on the view.

Scott’s smile had been the sunniest part of Monday’s breakfast, as Charles made him a birthday cup of cocoa. Jean’s smile had run a close second. That and her feeding egg yolk to Princess Alexandra – and the resulting sneezes, squeaks, and yellow droplets shaken off whiskers.

“Me, now!” Kurt clattered up on the table and shoved his spoon at the kitten’s face. “I want to try!”

“Now come, Smee. Wendy says: sit down.” Charles put out a finger and pushed the spoon back. He gave Armando a significant look.

Armando rolled his eyes. “Michael says the same thing.”

*Ha.* He wouldn’t be alone in his present suffering. Charles continued: “Only Peter Pan gets to feed Tinkerbell.”

“I still think she should be Catspaw,” Scott said.

*Princess Alexandra!* hit them all like a sledgehammer.

“We hardly need Frost with a wake-up call like that.”

Charles narrowed his eyes at Armando and turned to Jean. “No powers in the kitchen, dear. Or in your case, nothing excessive. Remember what Ororo said? Would she want you to give everyone a headache?”

*Sorry, Mr. Xavier.*
And though breakfast continued, Charles had only time enough to eat half a slice of toast before Hank walked in. “Armando, do you mind if I borrow Charles a second?”

Armando shrugged.

“How about: ‘here I am, back again, how are you all this fine winter’s day?’” said Charles, nettled. “And I’m eating.”

“All that. Charles, I need to talk to you before you go.”

“I’m going at noon, Hank. Really, I –”

“If we don’t see you before you do go,” Armando said, “travel safe, and come back safer. Right, guys?”

*How long will you be gone?* Jean bit her lower lip – with the gap in her teeth, it looked more adorable than anxious.

“I’ll be back well in time for your party. Here’s a project: you think of cards you could make for each other. You’d have to choose materials by texture, Scott, but I’m sure you can find some interesting ones.” Did they even have any glue? Charles had no idea, but it was Armando’s problem now.

*I can help!*

“I know, Jean. Be sure to let Kurt help too. Good-bye.”

“Bye, Mr. Xavier!” Kurt shrilled. Scott tried to say the same through a mouthful of bread. Jean waved without a word and picked up a paw to make Princess Alexandra wave too.

“And good-bye from me,” Hank said. “I’m back to Durham after the Finder prep,” he told Armando, “so I’ll see you when I see you.”

He walked out to the hallway. Charles patted Princess Alexandra, brushed Jean’s braid away from the egg yolk, and stepped quickly to catch up with him.

“What’s all this? Why drag me away from –”

“Let’s get out of earshot.”

“Azazel said noon. It can’t be later than nine.”

“He just dropped me off, and he said he’d be back soon.”

“But I’ve had no chance to pack.”

“She won’t care.” Hank looked Charles over. “Besides, she’ll have packed for you, and better clothes than what you’ve got.”

“I think I could create a new Free West fashion with some of mine.” The indigo robe, his green sweater, or Erik’s favorite: nothing.

“Just trust me: she won’t want you to have a whole lot of time to prepare. Otherwise you might do something she doesn’t like.”

Charles sighed. “As she pleases. Why are you here? Finder prep, you said?”
“For the spring. But for you – I told Azazel I wanted to ask you about Scott’s present.”

“Which is that?”

“You had that idea a few weeks ago, that Forge and I make something for him to channel his power. Like Alex’s disk.”

“Right.”

“Well, we’ve started it.”

“Oh! He’ll be thrilled to have anything of the sort. When will you –”

– have a prototype, Charles meant to finish, but Azazel’s mind appeared around the corner, by the door of Hank’s lab. By the door, he remembered, to Erik’s room. “Shite. Here he comes.”

Hank whirled, looking. Then reached behind to push a folded piece of paper into Charles’ hands. “That’s classified, so keep it hidden, please.”

“All right.”

“I need to talk to you about it when you get back,” Hank whispered over his shoulder. “It’s a blueprint, and I know it’s an amplifier layout. But I don’t know if it’s a Free West plant or the real thing. You’ll meet them. See what you can find out for me.”

 “… Right?”

“Hide it,” Hank said, craning his neck to look for Azazel.

So Charles smoothed the paper flat and secreted it in his underwear, since he had no pockets. He immediately felt ridiculous. “What next?”

“What?”

“Never mind. You’re not being subtle, you know.”

“Sorry,” Hank said. He turned back to Charles and plastered a smile on his face. “So I dug out the design for Alex’s disk, and Forge and I started work two weeks ago. We might bring it by for a fitting when you have the party.”

“If you can, by Saturday.” Charles caught sight of Azazel rounding the corner. “Thank you again for the presents you’ve already bought.”

“No problem. Hello, sir.”

“Hello, sir’; how are you, sir; you should really sleep, sir. Hey!”

“You ... should? If you’re going to be teleporting so much during one day?”

Charles could have elbowed Hank hard for his tentative tone.

“I know what I’m doing. You,” and he clapped a hand to Charles’ shoulder. “Let’s go.”

They teleported. And Charles supposed Azazel did know what he was doing, for he felt the same hellish energy as before twist him like a rag, only to shake him out and toss him aside as soon as they surfaced.
“Ten minutes, ladies and gentlemen!”

Frost sighed. “Anything else, you think?” *To make a persuasive picture?*

*That statue*, Charles sent. *Some of them were touching its feet. We might try it.*

They started to walk. *Two statues*, Frost mused. *Does it matter which, I wonder.*

Charles tossed his indifference to her mind like he would a shuttlecock. She squeezed his arm through the suit sleeve.

The bronze statues loomed in front of them, elongated and bizarre, their arms morphed into wings stabbing the sky. Reading the inscription, Charles saw out of the corner of his eye Frost tilting her head to gaze at the flag.

*Dedicated in 1935.* “The flag of the United States that Was,” he said, sending an image of it rippling far above them. Not the orange on blue of the flag he had seen, folded, at the victory celebration in December. “I suppose the Free West still clings to it?”

“It’s displayed at certain sites - thought it’s not at all accurate these days.” She pressed the flag’s stripes into his mind, bleeding red and draining white out of the eastern seaboard.

*The thirteen colonies.* “Yours now, great lady.”

“Along with the original Declaration of Independence, which irritates them considerably.” She touched one of the rightmost statue’s feet and raised her voice. “What do I do now, honey?”

Charles covered his start of surprise, only to hear, “Why, you wish for good luck at the tables,” from further to their right.

“Oh!” Frost jumped and fluttered a hand over the front of her suit jacket, where her breasts strained the fabric. “Oh, *sir*, do you mean gambling?”

“Pretty little lady, indeed I do.”

Some of the Free West men had turned toward them, and one had walked close. He was wearing a cowboy hat – Charles remembered it from the pre-War vids – and the fabric of his own suit was perhaps straining in its own way, if Charles judged his tone correctly.

“Gambling. That’s what Vegas is all about. You go on and forget what they taught you in school,” with a juicy laugh, “you can learn a lot more right here.”

“Oh! Honey, is that true? Did you go to Las Vegas?” Frost turned her wide eyes on him. “Before we were married?”

… *What.*

*Just play along!* she sent – *and watch your accent.*

“Well,” he said, flattening his voice, “darling. *You* know these things aren’t for women.”

“You *always* say that –”

“But I’m always right. Don’t you remember, Em – ily? What they taught you in school?”
No one would ever believe it, he thought, panicked: except for the man in the hat, apparently, who laughed. “Guess she doesn’t.”

“Not a word of it. She never does,” Charles said, and smiled as he strolled up to them. “The name’s Francis.”

He held out a hand; the man in the hat shook it. “Joe. Nice to meet you, Frank.”

‘Francis’ has one too many syllables, I suppose, he sent Frost. Blinked at the crackle of ice that was her only reply.

“So, Frank. You and little Em’ly here – you’re not from these parts?”

Shite. “Really, how’d you know?”

“Here, you want to keep your wife’s hat on her head, son.”

Charles glanced. Emma had shaken off her hat – he bent to retrieve it. …

And saw, from where he knelt, how she mirrored the statue – but how her pale hair was trailing free from its knot, and how she had placed her free hand on the statue’s foot again.


“Little lady, all you really have to do is rub.”

A meaty hand swallowed her own and started to move it back and forth. In a regular rhythm, Charles saw. Frost’s hands were really quite delicate: her wrist looked especially fragile in the fat grip.

“Like that. Rub up and down. Good job – good little hand you’ve got.”

It went on for a moment. Until:

“This is,” she said, panting, “for good luck?”

One of the Free West onlookers snickered. Charles saw that a semi-circle of men had formed.

“Something like that. You think you’ve got enough luck now?”

“… I don’t know,” Frost said. And the waver in her voice plucked at his instincts, even though he knew it had to be fake, damn her eyes.

“Emily,” Charles breathed, rising to his feet, “here, now.” He laid a gentle hand on her forearm where it was being jerked back and forth. “Come away from these men. Come here.” And he cast a glare at the others over her bent head. The man named Joe released her arm with a smirk.

“Darling,” Charles said. “Come to me.”

Frost was playing the part to the hilt, for she let herself be drawn close to him. He felt her trembling as she did. Like a little bird –

It took you long enough, she sent lancing into his mind, like a bloody ice pick.

Charles did not show the pain. “Emily,” he murmured into her hair. He brought another arm round, and – this had always worked a trick in Oxford – he touched the point of his chin to her temple.

“You don’t need these others when you have your husband here. Do you?”
The gesture had been well-timed. In his arms, Frost had gone very still.

“Do you?”

“No,” she said, voice soft.

But into his mind came scintillating, cold and clear: *Methinks the professor doth presume too much. Bastardized ‘Hamlet’,* he sent, and: *You started it.*

*True.*

One of their observers coughed. “Think it's time to get the bus.”

“We’ll be along,” said Charles.

“You’re really not from these parts,” Joe said, grinning, and there was laughter as the crowd of men dispersed.

*Have they figured it out? That we’re – Eastern?*

*I doubt it,* sent Emma. *They’re just not used to public displays of affection.*

*Even faux displays.*

*So it seems.* She sighed. *We should go with them.*

*Do we have to?*

*Yes.*

Her brow, smooth, had come to press against his cheek and jaw; her breath warmed his throat. So he hummed, and felt her start before she controlled it.

“Really, Emma,” he whispered into her ear. “All these boors are your idea of good company?”

After a moment, Emma leaned back to look into his eyes and sent him the image: the statue’s foot as she had seen it, jolting somewhat as – Charles shivered – she had been yanked around like a rag doll.

The image was layered with her cold amusement. *The things I do for good luck.*

*Quite,* he replied, retreating.

She plucked her hat from his grip and set it back on her head. *Good luck, one hopes, at their expense.*

Charles escorted her back to the autobus and saw her seated before settling himself next to her. He followed the example of the Free West men and shrugged off his suit jacket; leaned back to look as though he were relaxing.

The leather of the seat felt clammy where he had sweated through his shirt.

*“Finally,”* Frost had said that morning when they appeared in front of her, and: *“How much did you drink?”*

Bent double to keep from vomiting, Charles barely registered that she was speaking in Russian.
“It takes more than one drink to get me drunk.” Azazel yawned. “McCoy misses you.”

“None of that,” she snapped. “Is he going to be sick?”


Those words were in English. So Charles wavered back upright. “Ah. My lady.” He tried to bow; lurched to one side.

“Talk of drunk, eh?”

“He hasn’t had alcohol for weeks, though being drunk could explain that hat, certainly.” Frost’s Russian was crisp and controlled. God, it was working – Charles felt hot and cold in alternation. *Shock*. “Just drop him on the couch and go check with the scouts.”

“Right. Professor Xavier,” and Azazel’s accent in English really was atrocious, “you sit here,” a push, “and await our lady’s pleasure.”

Charles sat. And coughed, to cover the crinkle of the paper hidden in his pants.

He watched Frost warily. She was wearing a dress jacket and skirt, both tighter than usual. An elegant white hat with a band of lace rested on her desk – she reached over it to stack paper into her white leather carrying case. Papers from the desk. A desk in …. He blinked, looking out the window. Grey clouds; white sky; no clue there. Nor from the room itself.

Charles’ eyes rested on a vast painting in oils on the wall opposite, rich colors glowing in the electric light. Perhaps Frost had nicked it from a museum. A vivid scene: not dark enough to be Rembrandt. Diana and Actaeon – the latter’s face halfway from man to animal …. Not Rubens, even though the goddess looked to require a lever to leave her bath; nor Titian, since that was safe as houses in Edinburgh.

Hadn’t he seen a tattoo, once –

“Charles, I’ve prepared a suitcase for you. Necessities, regular clothes, some formal wear …” Frost’s glance flicked over his shabbiness. She made a moue, walked over to him, and plucked the bobbed hat off his head. “You’ve quite enough hair to dispense with this.”

Charles said nothing.

Frost's eyes narrowed. "All this preparation, and not a word from my esteemed professor?"

“Thank you.”

“That’s better. Go wash and change: the linen suit, I think. It’s in the next room.”

Charles stayed where he was, staring at her shoes. If she caught sight of the outline of the paper, wearing sweatpants as he was –

She hadn’t. Instead, Frost was striding away from him, slender fingers pale against the red-and-pink knit bunched between them. Charles kept his eyes on the dust gathering where the floor met the wall. Then, from the shuffle, he would guess that she had kicked the hat beneath her desk. And finally went back to sorting papers, though not without pitching her voice to cut:

“You wouldn’t believe who reported to me in Boston this past week, Charles. Someone we both know. And he’d be all too overjoyed to see you again, if I decided you were misbehaving.”
Erik. He was supposed to be afraid of Erik. Charles leaped to his feet and made for the door, fumbled with it to distract her from his pants, closed it as quickly as he could.

There was the linen suit, lying neatly on a wide bed. *Take one gentleman,* he thought, *and peel.* But he didn’t care much about it, nor about the airy, elegant room. Instead, Charles went to the window – and sighed as he recognized the grand stone stairway.

“The capitol building. Albany – all right. You’re all right.”

Was it the teleportation, or the translation without the accompanying blanket of images, that had him dizzy? *The translation,* he decided.

“Raven. Could you soften it a little? And – *ah.* Don’t let me reply to anything in Russian, whatever else happens. Stop my tongue in my mouth if you have to.”

For if Raven could shut down pain receptors and create all and sundry in his mind, it could work with the language facility quite easily. Charles hoped the first would never be needed again.

It certainly wouldn’t help if he gave himself paper cuts on the arse. Grimacing, he plucked out the blueprint. And then he brightened. All this time without wearing a suit, he had almost forgotten: there would be at least one inner pocket.

Ten minutes later – clean, dressed, and with the blueprint carefully concealed in that inner breast pocket – Charles folded up his old clothes into a neat pile. He placed his worn shoes on top and slid into the new-looking pair left for him; the leather creaked. He took clothes and suitcase into the next room. “Ready.”

“Without shaving? *Again*?”

“Lady,” and he set the suitcase down, “again, I have no razor.”

Frost flicked a finger at the clothes in his arms. “Leave all those here.” As Charles set the heap on a chair, she rummaged in her desk. “And use this.” She slid a straight razor across the table to him.

Taking it, he caught sight of the drawer’s contents – scissors, small glass bottles, and … something plastic? – before she shut it tight.

“Don’t take too long. Azazel will return shortly, and then we’ll leave.” She held out something small – a peppermint. “Start on this now; it will reduce the nausea later. Traveling in other dimensions always takes some getting used to.”

Charles took both sweet and razor, and shaved as quickly as he could without nicking himself. Then he started sucking the peppermint for lack of anything better to do. *Other dimensions;* a joke, surely.

And when Azazel did return, all he said was, “Nice suit,” before taking both of them by the hand and teleporting for what felt like the longest ten seconds of his life.

And now, only two hours later, they were rattling in a bus back to Boulder City.

Charles gazed past Frost to the ochre rocks and brown dust, to the distant grey mountains that looked like a freshly painted backdrop to a stage play … to the sky above: a flat, unrelenting blue.

Its vastness had been the first thing he had noticed when Azazel had released their hands and he had swallowed his sickness. That and the dry air.
His mouth had felt immediately parched. The inside of his nostrils had started stinging with each breath. Everything smelled different, felt different – and his brain had almost refused to register that there was no snow.

“Lovely sunny day,” he had croaked.

“February, and we don’t even need our coats.”

“I didn’t know we had any.”

“They’re with the rest of our things.” Frost sighed in satisfaction. “And from here on out, don’t talk in company unless I give you permission. Now, we’ll be trying a bit of an experiment, Comrade,” Tovarisch – he knew it had sounded familiar, “so keep everything on schedule, and I will see you and Pryde at noon, Western time.”

Azazel had bowed and vanished.

“We kip out in the desert, is that it?”

“There’s a car coming.”

Charles had reached out with his power. There were two minds there, one focused on the road. “What will we –”

“Hush.”

So Charles had watched, as Frost stretched out her hand when the car came in sight. Perhaps, he thought, Erik would do better – since the car stopped with a prolonged squeal of brakes and a vast plume of dust.

The driver’s eyes, staring ahead, were glazed, as were those of the woman in the passenger seat.

“We have a chauffeur. Hop in,” Frost had said.

“I don’t feel …”

Right, Charles wanted to say. Taking advantage of hypnosis without so much as a by-your-leave – Frost had laughed, gently, sliding through the open door, and then had stared up at him, her heart-shaped face alight. “Come with me, Charles, and you shall see great things.”

Anything great about the back seat of a car, on the tip of his tongue, believe me, I’ve already seen. But since he did not want to be abandoned in the desert and die of thirst, he got in, and shut the door behind him.

And so they had reached what Frost told him was Boulder City.

Then they had left the couple in the car, in an alley strewn with trash, and had walked to the dingy awning of a drab little hotel, outside which an autobus rumbled. Frost had smiled up at an official and had waltzed right up the bus’ steps, towing him in her wake.

They had been driven to the Hoover Dam. They had seen what they had seen: on a tour, no less. Charles had heard the twittering of the others as a wash over his ears; he had nodded with no attention whatsoever as the guide outlined, in a self-important voice, all the details of construction - the columns, the cooling, the steel pipes lacing every single block of concrete. Yes, they had seen what they had seen, and heard what they had heard. At great length.
And now they were being driven back.

What they would do when they reached the hotel again, Charles had no idea. But this time, he told himself, he would not gawk, however many people there were, and however new and strange – no snow – the little town seemed.

Once back in town, their luck lasted approximately twenty-six minutes.

“Marriage license?”

“Free West or foreign?” Charles said, glib.

The fan in the hotel lobby whirred in the silence. They were last in line. Frost had been of little help, staring absently into space, a smile on her lips. Charles had ignored the gestures of various women to – have her put on her hat. The thought blared from all their minds, cresting each time Frost started to fan herself.

The clerk’s head came up. “Your federal marriage license, sir,” he said, slowly. “Francis and …”

“Emily,” Charles said.

“Francis and Emily …” A questioning look.

“King,” replied Charles, just as Frost came out of her reverie and said, “Winter.”

Shite.

… Dear me. I’m so sorry.

You did that deliberately.

“That’s because I’ve had enough of this. Really,” said Emma to him, “Emily?”

“It’s close enough.”

“Too close. Why not something interesting? Bathsheba, Delilah, Jezebel; the names I’ve been called …. It’s Emma,” she told the clerk. “Emma Morozova, and Charles and I are not married.”

The clerk ducked his head. “Then I’m afraid the rules of this establishment prohibit me from offering you ….” He frowned over her shoulder. “What?”

“Not that bright, is he?” Frost said, sotto voce.

One might think you want to be overheard, sent Charles.

One might think correctly. Look at him blush. She kept fanning her cleavage with her hat.

Charles caught sight of the mirror behind the counter. Behind them, the Free West tourists were staring. I think they’ve figured it out.

If not, they’re even more stupid than I thought. Take a deep breath, Charles, with your mind.

Think of inhaling smoke or incense: a draught, but not so fast that you choke. You ought to be able to pick out emotions. That one blaring bit of dismay, her mouth curled up, there, back corner to our
right, means that at least one of our present company is Free West Intelligence.

Charles flicked a glance at the mirror again. Sandy hair; brown suit?

As I said. Now: “You owe me twenty dollars, Eastern, Charles,” Emma murmured, and Charles saw the bystanders twitch at the non sequitur.

There’s no need to unsettle them that much, surely?

No need … but amusing nonetheless. Ah. Do you feel that, from outside? Someone has hit a panic button somewhere, and local law enforcement is on its way. Their Free West taxes at work.

The clock in the lobby struck the hour. Frost shook a delicate watch out of her sleeve, and sighed. Handbag under her elbow, she flicked the watch off and held it out to him, along with her hat.

Charles had to admire the audacity of it all, even as he took the accessories and started adjusting the watch to, “Free West time?” he murmured.

“Indeed.” Frost’s face was serene; even when she sent him a sharp, Now, don’t speak unless I speak to you.

You’ve said that already. The dial on the watch was miniscule. Charles gave all his attention to it.

The front door opened. There was a clatter of boots – he glimpsed five pair in formation.

“Emma Morozova?”

“That’s what I told this clerk. Mr. Reed, is it?”

“P-please to meet you, ma’am.”

“Miss,” said another voice. Deeper. And there was a click – Charles looked – of heels together.

Lord. The Westerner who had spoken was wearing a full dress uniform. Charles’ fingers stopped on the watch dial as his eyes traveled up, and up, from polished boots to lantern jaw. And said Westerner filled out the uniform more than well. Sword and scabbard and all …

But he looked a complete dullard.

“You are welcome to Las Vegas, Miss Morozova. However, you are currently in Boulder City.”

“Oh, yes. I wanted to have a peek at the Hoover Dam, you see. I’ve heard so much about it.”

The silence of the onlookers was absolute.

“We are more than happy to offer you transportation into the city, as long as you –”

From outside, a car horn honked.

“Oh!” Frost smiled dazzlingly at them all. “That will be for me. It was a pleasure speaking to you, gentleman, but you may step aside.”

She wasn’t holding them; Charles could feel no ice. Just military discipline, then ….

… which did not take long to crack. One soldier broke ranks – another swatted at him, and the dullard in command clenched his jaw. Perhaps not so stupid after all. Charles couldn’t care less, as he
heard the horn again. “Excuse us, please; coming through.” He nipped around one soldier and wove through the others; flung open the door. “Lady?”

“Running away with my watch,” she tsk’d – and had followed on his heels, for then she took his hand and they made tracks for a car idling in the road. “Give it back.”

Charles hardly noticed as she plucked it from his fingers. He stared at the gorgeous white car instead. “How on earth did that get here so quickly?”

“How on earth did that get here so quickly?”

“Kitty Pryde,” Frost said, “transports items rather larger than Azazel can manage. He sets the limit at weapons and the wash.”

“Weapons?”

Frost had never looked more like a bloody Cheshire Cat. “His swords, of course.”

He had thought it was Erik and swords. But there was Azazel himself, rolling down the passenger window. “Right on time, little one!”

“You’ve no business calling me that,” Frost laughed. “Open the door for me, Charles. Be a gentleman.”

He tried moving his tongue. It turned out he could, so she had ordered him in English. “As my lady wishes.”

The people had crowded to the hotel’s windows. Charles saw the soldiers clattering down the front steps. “Miss Morozova!” one shouted.

She slipped inside. “Here, sit next to me. Azazel, can you manage it?”

“Whenever we’re ready.”

Frost dragged him in. Charles slammed the door, and only had time for a glimpse of the driver – Kitty Pryde, that’s right, dark tousled hair and rather thinner than he remembered – before she leaned to adjust her side mirror and threw the car into gear. There was no sound as they sped away.

“On the count of three,” Azazel said as they turned a corner. “Your hand, Xavier. One.”

Kitty braked and grasped the wheel with both her hands. Charles laid his own hand on Frost’s. Then he could see neither, under red fingers taking tight hold.

“Two.”

Kitty took a deep breath.

“… Two and a half.”

“Azazel.”

“Ha. One, two, three.”

He was getting used to this teleporting. Still, it seemed odd that transport to a city close by should take longer than New York that was to Nevada. Except: when they appeared in the car seats again, and Charles noticed Kitty’s wheezing, he put it together: car and people, simultaneously, had to be quite fiddly to time –
“Nice.” Azazel clapped Kitty on the shoulder. She waved him off and started the car again.

“You see, Charles, go about that in the wrong way and passengers materialize before the vehicle. And if that is the case, either Azazel has to move again – quickly – or …”

“Or?”

“Remind me of the consequences, Miss Pryde?”

“Depending on the material,” she rasped, turning the wheel, “crushed or sliced.”

“That’s right. Excellent work, my dear.” Frost reached forward to pat Kitty’s leather jacket sleeve.

“My lady?”

“Yes?”

“Where am I taking you?”

Frost blinked.

Emma … Charles sent. Did you even ask?

Be quiet.

You didn’t, did you?

I said, be quiet! She sent, of all things, a mental pinch. Then: Give me your power.

Charles choked. What?

We’ll have to find out where we’re staying, won’t we?

Her fingers came out of his blind spot; pressed against his temple. Charles flinched.

None of that. Open to me.

Cautiously, Charles felt for her touch on his veils. He allowed a small opening to form; visualized gauzy fabric spilling out –

There, now.

And it was cold. Not sharp-clawed like the Finder – God, that he remembered – but still, just like he remembered her touch. Frostbite, Charles thought, bleakly, and pretended to wince.

Emma was pulling power from him like a child pawing through her mother’s silks. He caught the memory of enamel figurines on a chest, and small hands clutching, before they flashed up, up to – Denver – as if they had the Finder and were honing in on a mind that felt familiar to her, and now to him through her. The mind was shielded, just as others had been, with –


Emma laughed. He could feel it splinter on his veils, as she brought his power to bear, punched through the shield, dragged out the information. Someone gasped in pain –

Caesar’s Palace, Emma tossed to him. “Well, that worked,” she said, brightly. “Where are we now?”
“Paradise Road,” Pryde said.

“We need 2570 Las Vegas Boulevard South, so turn left on Tropicana and then right on the boulevard itself. We can’t miss it.”

“My lady,” Charles snapped. “Who was that?”

“That was former Vice President Kelly. He’s always home in Denver these days. And he never had much of a brain to worry about, so don’t bother.”

Charles looked up. Kitty and Azazel were staring into the rear view mirror – at him.

“Xavier,” Azazel said, touching beneath his own nose.

“It’s just the dry air,” Frost said briskly. “Here, Charles.” She took a handkerchief from her purse; folded it and pressed it to his nostrils. “Hold that there. Tip your head back, and please don’t drip on the upholstery.”

*Just a nosebleed.* “Yes, my lady.”

He spared a thought for his aviary – all seemed well – pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand, and then closed his eyes until he felt the car stop.

Kitty opened the door for him. “Are you all right, Xavier?”

“I might ask you the same thing,” he grunted as he climbed out.

Frost had swanned into the lobby from the front drive, Azazel by her side. “He can get her out of the way,” Kitty had said, driving into the parking garage, “if they start shooting.”

Now, she smiled at him with little warmth. “Sure. But I transport cars all the time. When did she – start –”

“Using me as a battery?” Charles dusted off his suit. “With the Finder, in October. Mind to mind, more recently. Has it stopped?” He waved at his nose.

A nod.

“Well then, Kitty, shall we –”

“Pryde,” she said.

“Sorry, Pryde. What next?”

A shrug. “Free West fun times.” Her look round the cavernous garage, cracked concrete pillars and sand accumulating in the corners, was dubious.

“I can hardly wait.”

Pryde unlocked the boot and took out suitcases. She rolled her eyes as Charles picked up two and tried for the duffel bag remaining. “That’s mine. I can handle it.”

“Sorry.”

They stayed quiet as they walked to the hotel; silent, striding through the grandeur of the lobby.
Charles kept his eyes firmly on his shoes. Ferns, fountains, pointless statuary …. Mere luxury did not impress him. Besides, he was sure Erik’s jewels could buy up the whole place.

“Hey,” Pryde walked to Azazel, who had slouched by an elevator bank, arms crossed over his chest. “She’s gone up, sir?”

“Da.” He hit a button with his tail and turned his back on the lobby.

Charles flicked his eyes over to the broad marble counter. Men in suits goggled at them from behind it. And – he nudged Azazel. “There are soldiers coming inside.”

“I see them.” Azazel was watching their blurred reflections in the elevator doors. He watched until the ornate metal opened two, silently. “In you go.”

Charles walked in, affecting nonchalance. In truth ... he had seen an elevator at Coventry, once. The Queen had walked out of it, hand in hand with the Duke of Edinburgh.

Azazel was silent until the doors closed. Then he punched another button – Penthouse Suite, Charles read – and dragged horned claws through his goatee. “I told her this was a terrible idea. Security will be impossible.”

Pryde said nothing. Merely looked between the two of them.

“Never mind him,” Azazel said.

“He’s not Sworn.”

“Does it matter? The day Emma lets him go on the battlefield is the day she lets me go, full stop. But tell me what you think: we split guard duty down the middle, or do I call in Yuriko for three?”

“Lehnsherr’s staying in Albuquerque?”

“All I know is that I’m not picking him up, even though I’ve been every fucking where in the last day. I need a nap. Hell, I need a vacation.”

“Poor baby.”

Charles smiled to himself as Azazel bristled, and as Pryde added: “… Sir.”

“A vacation. Someplace nice and sunny. Someplace with a beach, and music, and women.”

“You see plenty of women every day.”

“Let me sum up: women who will actually –”

Charles coughed. “You realize we’re probably being recorded, don’t you?”

There was a pause.

“And this is a very slow elevator.”

Pryde shook her head, but Azazel snorted. “Yes, then, a vacation. Free West,” he raised his voice, “hello, hello. Please tell Mademoiselle Madeleine Stryker that Erik is not really a nice man, but I, I am very nice. I like long walks on the beach and playing tennis with myself. She could come with me to Jamaica –”
“– what’s left of it,” Pryde muttered.

“– and we could have a lovely time, what,” he said to Pryde, “come on. It would be fun. Or you could come with me instead.”

“Give up, sir.”

“This is because I don’t have a cape, isn’t it?”

Pryde’s eyes looked ready to roll out of her head.

“Enlighten me?” said Charles.

“Their vids,” she started.

“And the newest release on the screen downstairs. Red Sky in the Morning. Erik always gets a cape. Why do I not get one? I look better in red than he does,” he grumbled, “and the actor’s Russian is terrible, and if you are translating this now, Free West, you can all –”

Charles blinked. He had hypothesized lacunae in Jean’s vocabulary, and here was proof.

“– with my tail.” Azazel switched back to English. “I do not understand why I am cape-less.”

“It would probably get tangled in the tail; it looks fake enough already. On the actor,” Pryde said, “not on you, geez.”

“If the actor were any good –”

“Don’t know if you noticed, but he’s not. Besides, just like you said, their Lehnsherr has a cape, but get this: in real life I wouldn’t touch him for all the tea in China.”

“Zhōngguó,” Azazel corrected.

“Whatever.”

The elevator kept moving up at a snail’s pace. At the eleventh floor, Azazel heaved a sigh and teleported.

“Shit,” Pryde said, coughing. And that was all until the elevator bell rang; the doors opened, and she led Charles out. “Where do we even go – oh.”

There was one wide set of double doors at the end of the short hallway. She knocked.

They waited.

“Oh, come on. One second.”

And, taking her duffel under her arm, she walked right through the door.

Charles gaped for what felt like a whole minute. Then there was a rattle of locks and she opened the door wide. “Come in, come in.”

“With pleasure. That’s a fascinating thing you do,” he breathed. “How do you even walk on a floor without falling through it?”

“Practice. You’d better give her suitcase to me – and is this one yours?”
“I suppose so.”

“… Right. I’m not sure which room –”


“There’s not enough alcohol in the world, sir.”

“Speak of the devil,” Azazel crooned, and unzipped the duffel bag.

“Hey, that’s mine!” Pryde snapped.

“Your bag,” he shook a bottle at her, “my booze. Hope you don’t mind that it tagged along. Now, for a glass.” And he made a beeline for a bar in the corner.

In one corner of the vast … living room, Charles supposed. Well. A main room, perhaps, since a living room could not have double staircases, Persian carpets and leather chairs, and one whole wall of floor-to-ceiling windows. He shook off his disbelief and strolled to see the view.

Behind him, an inside door clicked. “What did I tell you, Charles? Come with me, and you shall see –”

“– great things; yes. With all due respect, my lady, you’ve said that already.”

Silence. He had the impression of Pryde holding her breath – but Charles heard only liquid splashing in a glass.

“Put that away,” Frost snapped.

Russian. The translation was still working perfectly.

“But Emma -”

Hilariously, Azazel’s whinge was similar to Kurt’s. – No Papa –

“I won’t have you drinking. You haven’t slept in days –”

“– and whose fault is that?”

“– one drop and you’ll fall down drunk in front of our hosts.”

Silence.

“And just for that, we’re walking. Throw it out.”

“Fine, fine.” Liquid splattered. “See?”

“Fine. Charles,” her English was cold, “you’ll be staying here for the next little while; you too, Kitty.”

“Oh.” Pryde sounded drained. “Thank you, my lady.”

“Just keep an eye on him.”

“When will you be back?” Charles said to the view.
“Past your bed time, I’m afraid. Yours is the room off the south balcony.”

Her heels clacked towards the main door – Azazel grumbling to catch up – and that same door slammed shut.

Kitty Pryde whistled. “Wow.”

“‘Wow’, what?” Charles growled, still staring out the window.

Frost was off to explore the brand new city spread out before him with all its buildings and streets. It was sparkling, and beautiful – flourishing, even after nuclear war, which seemed impossible.

What seemed very possible was a return to the same old story: himself, left in a corner just like her Ladyship’s suitcase, all because of one flash of sarcasm. *And we were getting on so well.*

“A place this big might actually have a doghouse, Xavier, so you’re all set.”

“Taking what rightfully belongs to Lehnsherr.” His conscience twinged; Charles ignored it. “I wouldn’t dare.”

“I suppose if he does show up, it’ll be on her leash. God help them all.”

“Who?”

“The Westies. If I take a bit of a nap, Xavier, you won’t do anything stupid, will you?”

Charles made no answer.

“Promise?” Her voice was dragging with fatigue. “Do you … promise …”

Turning slowly, he saw how she had curled up on the couch: boots toed off and legs drawn up. She was using her leather jacket as an upper-body blanket.

Too small a blanket, really. He would go fetch her another.

The main room was fifteen paces wide. Charles counted them off. Then he slipped out of his new shoes and placed one at the left-hand side of the shadow cast by a lamp. He climbed one flight of stairs up, noted the view from the difference of half a floor, and paced down the other flight to try all the doors. Except for the largest pair – to the hotel hall, and the elevators – they were all open.

The locks of that pair were impenetrable, so, fifteen minutes later, he went back to his shoe. The shadow had moved to the right; thus, at present, the sun would set at his back. Charles shrugged. He put his shoes back on, opened the door leading east, and turned into the first bedroom he could find – his room, he supposed. He considered the plush bed in the center, the solid walnut desk, the glazed watercolors on the wall next to to the balcony door – securely locked.

There was an equally luxurious en-suite bath. Charles gave sour thought to threading the penthouse labyrinth with toilet paper – he could tie it on one of the bedframe’s brass spindles – but dismissed the notion with a snort and set off to explore.

Directly across from his room was a small door. Some sort of closet. He tried it – locked. “Fuck me,” he sighed, and tugged at the handle, with no joy in the end.

All the other inside doors were open. And the last room off the fourth branching of the east hallway contained a grand piano. Half-heartedly, Charles tapped out a few notes. They echoed off the ornate walls, trailed after him as he started to retrace his steps … until their sound faded for good, and the
quiet whispered of wasted effort.

It was helpful, he told himself, to know just how ridiculously large this penthouse was: the warren of some fabulously wealthy rabbit. That, and just how many of the doors were locked: all the exits so far. He tried not to look too closely at his reflection in the mirrors that lined the hallway as he strolled on. … Except.

He blinked. His hair was still quite short, but the cut was … respectable. Some of his weight was coming back; not enough to obscure the sharp contours of cheekbones. He was pale from being inside for months, but it made his mouth seem all the more red.

Charles tried a smile at himself. Not bad. Perhaps the suit accounted for it. He straightened his shoulders, and his tie.

Back in his room, he took a blanket from his bed to bring to Pryde, still fast asleep on her couch. She did not wake, even when he tucked it beneath her stocking feet.

There had been no books in the entire southern portion of this place; there was no sign of any in the main room. Charles went to pour himself a drink – he took Azazel’s whiskey, made a show of washing out the glass. A show for himself; the best audience.

Then he strolled back to the huge window to consider the view. The sun had perhaps moved an hour’s worth along its path; the distant mountains did not look much different.

Suddenly, and fiercely, he wanted his father’s watch. Odd, how he hadn’t even thought of it in so long, and now …

He rested his brow on his fist, leaning against the window. “You had better take care of it, Erik,” he whispered to his glass – please, take good care – before downing all the alcohol in one burning gulp.

The drink helped him relax, sunk into the overstuffed chair opposite Pryde. Charles tracked the sun and idly considered the day thus far; Scotch helped there, too, for staving off retrospective shock ….

It could not have been another hour, though, before Azazel returned.

“Wake her up,” he growled at Charles after he wove back to his feet. He had stumbled, materializing.

“Are you all right?”

“I said –”

“Miss Pryde,” and Charles shook her shoulder, not taking his eyes from how Azazel was swaying where he stood. “It’s time to wake up.”

“All right,” it was a groan, “fine. Ugh.”

She pushed herself off the couch and got up in fits and starts. Her face was creased where it had pressed against her jacket; she blinked at Azazel. “Time already?”

“Not yet. But for our switch – yes.”

“Oh. So you can –”

“Take a nap, please God and all his demons and his saints. Now, before they figure out she’s alone –
come on.”
“Right. Xavier? Thank you.”
“… For what?” Charles said to an empty room.
He did not repeat the question, even when Azazel reappeared, looking pale. Well, a strange shade of light salmon, really, until only his oily hair was visible as he turned his back and made for the stairs.
“What’s happening now?”
“Now, Emma is taking the grand tour. Bodyguard switch in the fitting room.”
“Right. And now what?”
“I need to sleep.” The voice sounded thready. “Please, just a moment.” Charles’ skin prickled. Azazel had lapsed into Russian. “Just let me sleep.”
“Sweet dreams,” he called out to him. English.
“Fuck you.”
“Exactly.”
“Ugh.” Azazel’s face came into view from the landing above. “I’ll take a nice warm woman over you any day of the week.”
“Your loss.”
“I’m not going to gamble. I’m going to buy the first one who’ll fuck someone looking as I do, and then I’ll bring her back here, and Xavier.” Azazel made an obscene gesture. “Then we’ll see who wins.”
“Who wins? Since when have we been in a contest? Unless I can go with you,” he drawled, “to find someone … for me?”
“Psh, bad idea, bad idea.”
“Go to sleep. You’re tired.”
“I am tired. You are not your own anymore. So watch out. Oh, come to me, my love, my darling,” and from the creak of springs, Azazel had thrown himself onto his bed.
Not his own? Nonsense. Given opportunity, Charles Xavier would fuck whoever he wanted, and Erik could go hang.

Three o’clock. Charles sighed, and opened the door leading west. He catalogued all the rooms leading off the hallway. More than a dozen, a mirror image of the east … except for what had to be Emma’s room, which was larger and even more splendid than his. He did not see her suitcase. Sensible of her.

But there was a kitchen, and Charles’ stomach rumbled as soon as he registered it. Small wonder: it had been hours and hours since one piece of toast that morning.
“Let me see, let me see.” He laid out a plate, buttered a roll, and took a sparkling jar of peaches from the refrigerator. Canned peaches, but still – he hadn’t had any in –
Charles paused.

*That jar …*

He tried the lid; it was firmly sealed. But then he held the jar up to the overhead light – and saw the fruit halves obscured by the cloudy juice.

“Bread, and butter, and ethylene glycol masquerading as spoilage.” Charles placed the jar in the sink. “Not today.”

Or perhaps it was paranoia. A poisoned larder; it seemed all too ridiculous. His stomach twisted as he remembered – he had tried a drink already …. Azazel’s, though.

“So I’ll have another. If I die,” he told any recording devices present, “I want to die happy.”

The sun was setting as Azazel prowled downstairs, freshly showered and sleepy-eyed. Charles felt as though he had paced a worn stripe in the carpet. “Would they poison us?”

“… What?”

“Our hosts,” Charles ground out. “I was hungry –”

“So am I, come to think of it –”

“And some fruit in the refrigerator looks dubious, to say the least. I’ll show you.”

“Ah-ha.” Azazel looked oddly happy as he followed Charles down the hall. Explained by: “I haven’t seen a good poisoning since Markhof got stuck with ricin. Another of these conferences, just two years ago.”

Charles rummaged in the refrigerator; brandished the jar. “Look.”

Azazel dragged his eyes off the door to what Charles assumed was a freezer room. He looked. Stroked his goatee. “You know what I think?”

“What do you think?”

“I think that this – is a job for …”

“For God’s sake,” Charles snarled around the foul smoke – and around more, as Azazel puffed back into view, with, “Logan?!”

“Hey, Chuck. Mind telling me what the fresh hell is this?”

“Enjoy!” Azazel shoved the jar in his face.

“Oh.” Logan sighed. Then unscrewed the lid and took a gulp of peach juice. “Ugh.”

“‘Ugh’ – poison ‘ugh’?”

“No. It’s just,” his face twisted, “weird.”

“Now we wait a little while,” said Azazel, cheerfully, “just to see. You wanted a bit of a break,” he wagged a finger at Logan’s frown, “so here it is.”

"And what time is it?" asked Charles.
Azazel shook a heavy watch out from beneath one cuff. "Just after noon."

"Then we'll give it about an hour." Charles said. "But if it's food poisoning, it might take more than a little while to manifest."

“… Damn.”

“And me being me,” said Logan, “it might not have any effect at all.”

A flick of the tail opened the refrigerator again; Azazel peered inside. “Any other candidates? Let’s see. Sealed, sealed, but see that rubber? A syringe could get through that …. ah-ha. Pretty, pretty almond cake,” he flipped the top off a pastry box, “to me, says pretty, pretty cyanide. Have a bite.”

Logan stuck out a claw to slice a piece and licked the icing off before retracting it. Then he scooped the piece up with his fingers. “Here we go.”

He chewed and swallowed. Nothing happened.

Azazel sighed. “Well, come and sit down, anyway.” He gave Logan the box. “Just to be sure – don’t touch anything in here, Xavier. I’ll bring some supplies tomorrow.”

“All right.” Charles knew he had survived worse. But his mouth still watered as Logan kept eating cake, following Azazel out the door.

“Nice digs.”

“Where have you been?” Charles said.

“Albuquerque.”

“I’m detecting a bit of a theme,” replied Charles. “Everyone’s there, and everyone’s – hey!” Azazel had lashed his shins with his tail. It had felt like a bullwhip.

“I’m not tired at all.” Turning round in the main room, Logan whistled. “Nice view. Oh, and Chuck …” He grinned. “Nice suit.”

“Both you and Azazel must be jealous. And don’t change the subject.”

“Say instead: don’t talk about anything important. This place probably has more wire than Southern Solar.”

“And here I thought I was being paranoid.”

“Paranoid is as paranoid does. This is really good.” Logan flopped onto the couch, licking icing off his fingers. “So, how’s things?”

“So,” and Azazel picked up the whiskey bottle, “someone went and helped himself to my whiskey.”

“Someone has tasted my drink, said Father Bear.’ And luckily, I washed out your glass – or, I should say, their glass.”

Logan’s dark eyes surveyed the glittering ranks of glassware behind the bar. “Better make that a habit for the time being.”

Azazel was silent.
Had he truly come so close to … death, surely not. Melodramatic as well as paranoid, to think of such a beautifully useless hotel room as a death trap. Charles turned to Logan. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Good to see you too, Charles, but I –”

Logan paused. Then he put the cake box down.

Charles felt a chill. “Logan?”

“Shit.” He coughed. “Shit, here it –” He slammed one hand on the couch armrest, doubled over, and fell forward, spasming.

“Bozhe moy – Howlett!” Azazel shoved the table aside and scrambled to slap his back. “Howlett, say something!”

Logan’s seizing slowed down enough for him to drag in another breath. Then he gurgled and spat onto the carpet. “Fuck. Don’t touch that cake.”

“To leave you time to talk …” Charles considered the cake left in the box. “There must have been only a grain of cyanide in your very last bite.”

“God, it hurts –”

“Cyanide shuts down oxygenation in every cell. I don't know how your ability works, but you’re probably going to feel ill for five minutes at least.”

“Bathroom?” Logan croaked.

Azazel glanced at the bar – oh, the sink there – but then his tail pointed up the stairs. “Through my room.”

The gurgle of Logan’s gut sounded very loud to Charles. “Better hurry up, man.”

“I’m hurrying,” he choked, as he darted towards the steps and took them two at a time.

Azazel and Charles looked at each other, wordlessly.

“Do you think he’ll be all right?” Charles said.

“I …”

A shout echoed off the walls of the distant bathroom. “You’d better not tell Marie!”

“… think he’ll be fine,” Azazel grinned. “I could fetch her,” he shouted. “I’m sure she’d like to help you – except I can’t,” he added to Charles. “Orders.”

They heard furious cursing from upstairs.

“I’m sure she’s heard –” Charles pulled a face at the next sound, “worse?”

“Here’s hoping they’ve bugged the toilets. They’ll get a great show with that one,” they heard another retch, “doing his duty to the Queen.”

“For pity’s sake, what could they possibly learn from a powder room recording? Anyone with half a brain knows that the least likely place is now the most likely place.”
Azazel examined his claws. “And nothing takes someone down a few notches than a recording of him – or her – in that least likely place.”

“Ah.”

“It would be some vid, though, to feature all the sounds of our lady.”

“You don’t sound too appalled.”

“You forget that I’ve known her all her life. And in a place like Stalingrad,” Azazel shrugged, “you get to know everything about your comrades, very well.”

Stalingrad … From the Finder materials, to his old textbook, Wars and their Leaders … “What was it like? Stalingrad, I mean.”

Azazel was quiet for a moment. Then he shrugged again. “Like hell on earth.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sure.” He got up easily. “I’ll go check on Howlett. That last sounded like his whole small intestine.”

“What about this?” Charles pointed at the mess on the floor.

“I’ll go ask Emma; I’m sure she’d be interested in knowing. And if anyone West comes up before I return, just make them eat the rest.”

He twirled his fingers next to his own temple, winked, and went up the stairs.

Charles busied himself with helping Logan, after Azazel had moved him out of his room and gone.

“Doesn’t usually last this long,” he had muttered, laid out on Charles’ bed, sweating and pale.

“Poisoning, I mean.”

“Shh.” Charles held out the glass. “This whiskey’s safe.”

He watched until Logan slept, still looking ill. The two maids that later edged through the huge double doors looked worse, though. Meeting them, Charles offered a polite smile and a tip – he had found a roll of money in his suitcase. Generous of Frost, indeed, just as long as there was no poison on the bills.

Then he veiled himself after retreating to the hallway, and returned to watch a third person – another woman in the same uniform – walk quickly in … from the door to the west hallway, and wearing gloves.

She tipped the cake into a large plastic bag. The three of them cleaned the carpet and polished the floor, fast.

Just to amuse himself, Charles strolled back with the remnant of the whiskey, stood behind the bar, poured himself a glass – the clean glass; God, he would never let it go – and dropped the veil as he took a sip.

He tapped his fingernails on the glass. The sound made the three jump and turn.

“Do you know what else is poisoned?” He gestured with the drink. “In this place?”
They said nothing. Merely threw the cleaning supplies together, turned, and flat-out ran.

The door slammed. He glared at it. But then Logan groaned from his room, and Charles shook off his distraction and went back to him. It would be a long afternoon.

As night fell outside, Charles found himself wishing – not for food, not for escape, but for Logan to rest. His sleep was disturbed; he muttered words that were unclear. It was clear that something was very wrong, considering how quickly he usually healed.

And as if to answer, Raven presented Charles with an image: the cloudy liquid in the jar of peaches.

Charles folded the washcloth he had been using and laid it on Logan’s forehead. Then, quietly, he got up. He tried the mysterious closet door across from his room – no joy, of course. Then he paced through hallways and rooms to the west kitchen. He opened the refrigerator door; blinked at the shimmer of light spilling over floor tiles and stainless steel.

It took him a moment to realize that the jar was gone.

He opened his mouth – some exclamation, she took it, the third cleaner had taken it – but remembered the recording devices, and shut it without a sound.

The refrigerator door was very cool as he rested his brow against it. His breath sounded very loud, in the quiet. And so focused was he on the silence, that at first he thought the faint sound of music was just a different electric hum, blending with that of the refrigerator.

Instead, there was music, beautiful in the dark. He turned to walk towards the main room, and then down the east hallway, following the flowing, rippling sounds. Someone was playing very well. He could guess who that someone was.

He saw the mirrors reflecting him – he could have been a ghost, eyes wide and shining eerie blue in the dim light.

But … perhaps he had fallen asleep, and this was a dream. That would account for Emma being so lovely in the dim light of the lamp – seated at the piano, shining soft as a pearl, as beautiful as the music being made.

*Good evening, Charles,* she sent.

It felt like silk.

Not a dream, then. He felt disappointment grab his gut and twist – for if he were asleep, he would wake up at home, Jean dandling the kitten in his face, Kurt and Scott eager to play – anywhere but in this honey-trap, with Logan still coughing up poison six doors down.

“My lady,” he said, woodenly. “May I sit?”

*Of course.* One delicate hand flicked to the upper register; a shimmer of notes followed her fingers back down. *Though we had best converse silently, here. Discretion is everything.*

*Discretion* …. She had to know of the poison. Azazel would have told her – and maybe she would know what to *do,* to plan, to retaliate, to keep them safe.

Charles sat down with a thump on the divan behind the piano. *Emma.*
And he must have felt wretched to her mind, for she turned her head. What is it?

Charles compressed all the events of the afternoon and sent them to her in a torrent.

In profile, she looked like pale marble – corn silk for hair, perhaps, and diamond chips for eyes. Optical illusion: she shook her head and her eyes were blue. They dared. Azazel told me everything.

He nodded.

Charles … I’m glad you’re all right. And Azazel, she added, playing a quiet arpeggio, and Howlett. Let’s make a pact not to eat anything in this place, hm?

He was so hungry …

Ah. She tipped her head to the side. I have macarons in my handbag. Do eat – I’ve had my fill.

Charles had to kneel to fetch them, but for once he didn’t mind. His mouth was watering.

The vodka is there too, if you’d like some.

Sure enough, there was the metal flask. He saw his hand trembling, reaching for it –

– and then gritted his teeth. Kneeling as he was, all he could see out of the corner of his eye was the white silk of her skirt and one slipper on the pedal. She had given him that flask when she had felt him sufficiently cowed, before. And now she wanted to play him just like she was playing that bloody piano.

Charles snatched it up; tipped his head back and pressed it to his lips – not letting a drop past them. Erik, he thought suddenly, would do well to do the same.

Not that Charles would tell him so.

I think that’s enough, sent Emma.

Thank you. He watched until her head turned to follow her left hand through the bass register; then tipped some vodka out onto the luxurious carpet and put the flask back in her bag.

Do be seated.

Retreating to his seat on the divan, now with macarons to nibble, Charles considered. Frost was dressed in a ball gown: the bodice molded to her body, the diaphanous skirt strewn with tiny jewels and stirring with each pulse she gave to the pedal. So: judicious flattery, but in a roundabout way. You’re very accomplished, my lady.

I certainly worked hard to become so, a long time ago. She played a final cadence, slowly. What a waste of my youth …

I thought you were occupied. With the Finder, and the war.

I had some time to myself. Emma started another piece. I suppose I enjoyed Chopin; this one is a nocturne. And I’m glad you can’t quite detect how – ah, there – how I’m faking the most difficult passages.

He laughed.

It surprised both of them – Emma’s shoulders, bare above her gorgeous dress, twitched, and Charles
coughed on a crumb. *Sorry.*

*It’s all right.*

*Where did you get such a beautiful dress?*

*Would you believe me if I said …* She lingered on a complicated ornament. Repeated it, practicing. *From my fairy godmother?*

*No.*

*No, indeed. I picked it out at a boutique here in town. Just today.*

*… And the tailor had no poisoned needle, I hope.*

*No.*

Emma played the passage one last time. The cascade of notes shimmered in his ears; he saw her nod to herself and continue.

*He certainly was very frightened. Do you know, he had a female assistant come in, so he wouldn’t have to touch me? And both seemed to think I would leave without …. I did pay for this dress, Charles. In Western currency.*

Something was lurking beneath the words. Charles chose his own carefully. *Why wouldn’t you have paid for it, lady?*

A shrug. *They have strange ideas about me. As though I would take a dress without paying for it. As though I would go to a ball without an express invitation.*

There was the needle – that thought stung.

*… Did something happen, then? With this ball?*  

*Tonight. Yes.*

She kept playing, the gentle sway of her body counterpoint to the jarring cold on his veils, as she sent him –

– the echo of a more distant music, not just of a piano. A revolving door, thumping; people seen through an array of windows, chattering and laughing; and his heart beating in his chest – *eagerness* –

– a round, foolish face, fluffy mustache moving over: *I’m sorry, miss, but only those invited may* –

– faces at the window, turning to look at – red and pink, white teeth – fingers pointing and a camera flash –

*Oh, Emma.*

She had not lost a beat’s worth of time. Her head turned briefly again. Then back, the better to watch her fingers float over the keyboard. She had taken off the steel ring and bracelet; they looked bright against the ebony – but the necklace she had kept on. Charles saw it glinting on the nape of her neck.

*That was terribly rude of them. You know that; I know that. They’re pathetic, trying to insult you that way.*
She sent another image: in front of \textit{Riviera}, he caught, it had to be the hotel name – from where she had stood, she had turned and saw a drape being pulled, to reveal, next to her …

Charles gulped.

It was a set of statues, flush against the wall next to the front door. A line of women. Long disordered hair, seven shapely bodies … naked. And seen from the \textit{back} –

How could they have been so stupid? Especially if they had photographed her – oh \textit{shite}, they had photographed her next to those statues, and \textit{that} would be on tomorrow’s front page of every \textit{Free West} newspaper.

\textit{Lady, what are you going to do about it? There’s impolite, and then there’s impolitic.}

She lifted one shoulder.

\textit{I’m serious. It’s an insult to you. And they may think –}

\textit{They think I will retreat, to weep and rage. They have always thought that I am just a woman. Tempermental, greedy, petty, short-sighted … and vain, above all.}

Charles stayed quiet.

\textit{I can guess what you’re thinking. In truth, I suppose I am some of these – aren’t we all, in this world? We have to take what we can, Charles. But that fact does not make us any less fit to rule, does it?}

\textit{I –}

\textit{But apparently my being a woman … does.}

\textit{I don’t think that, my lady. I never have.}

\textit{I know.}

She kept playing.

\textit{It was the same way in Europe that Was. I took time from searching for a home of my own, to negotiate peace between the Russian Empire and Eretz Galut. They paid attention to me, \textit{honor} to me, when Erik was by my side – but not before then, and not after I left him in his precious city, either …}

She sighed.

\textit{All I ever wanted, Charles, was a home.}

\textit{A home to rule}, he pointed out.

\textit{Not at first. Would you believe that I offered my abilities to the United States that Was?}

She left off playing and turned to face him. Her eyes, large in the warm light, looked liquid.

Charles felt blank. \textit{You … did?}

\textit{There were different factions in Harper’s Ferry, then. That was where the government retreated, while Washington D.C. was being decontaminated and rebuilt. Stryker had not yet fully taken}
power, but I had read his writings, and touched his mind – I knew him for a threat. President Barkley had taken over from Truman; he was weak and ineffectual. I contacted General Eisenhower – I remembered him from Frankfurt. Her thoughts slowed. I wanted to speak to him; to anyone. America was so large … there would have been room.

But they did not speak to you.

No. She closed her eyes. Opened them, and her mouth turned up in a small smile. Though MacMurphy, of all people, was very gallant towards me.

Hell – of all the revelations to digest. A macaron crumb stuck in his throat; he had to swallow hard.

I asked him to join me, you know.

What? Charles coughed. When? Was he one of us, all this time?

Mid-1954 – and of course not. Emma turned back to the piano. It’s a weakness of mine, these handsome men. I told him he could atone for China by helping us.

How does that follow?

I haven’t the time to explain. It hardly matters: he was very handsome indeed when he wept, but he still said ‘no.’ I don’t blame him. After all, what could a woman do, in this brave new world?

She began a new piece in a major key, lilting and sweet.

Sebastian had told me it would be so. I didn’t believe him.

Who?

Sebastian Shaw.

It was the most difficult thing in the world, to keep the sudden scream of his instincts muted. Charles managed it.

And sent a mild: … Shaw?

I loved him, once.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck - If she twigged to his making the connection, the game was up. Charles slammed the door shut on - Schmidt, Shuvalov, Shaw - and sent instead, Love?

Yes.

Charles crossed his legs; laced his fingers round one knee. Love is not worth much, I find.

… Really? Why not?

Pleasure is one thing, Emma. He made the words a caress – and smiled tightly, to see goose bumps prickle on her upper arms. But love makes people into fools, and since we none of us can afford to be fools in this brave new world, as you say … it’s not worth it: love, and all its limbs and outward flourishes.

She was silent. Then, What about marriage?

Charles bit back, What the hell? – and kept his mask of amused disdain in place. Can you imagine
spending so much time with a single person? How tiresome it would be.

I find certain liberties can always be arranged, Professor.

Good lord. Almaz, the poor idiot – or maybe … yes, the mysterious Shaw was much more likely. Charles sent, guileless: Did you marry Sebastian, Emma?

Oh, Charles. No. Though … I might have, early on. But then I would not have become what I am today.

And what a pity that would have been – but Charles gave her a self-assured nod. Perhaps she would mention the Third War.

It’s possible, she mused beneath a sparkling passage, that you haven’t really fallen in love with anyone.

Or perhaps not. Damn it, he was on a divan, not a couch.

Now that I know what you think … You sound like a certain type of adolescent: worldly-wise, so confident in flinging back Cupid’s dart –

Do I? he sent, sharply.

Yes. I was one such myself, if you could believe it.

So, this Sebastian. Was he worth your time?

I was a child. For all that I had seen and done, I had no idea of what it would be, to love him.

And?

And it turned out, in addition to knowing everything, and letting me know that he knew everything …. He was quite mad.

Charles blinked. That would put a damper on your relationship.

I did not realize the extent of it. Not until it was too late.

They were edging very close to the Third War, to Ch’ongch’on; he could feel it. He wet his lips.

But I disposed of him, and all was well again. Or as well as it could be.

You … Charles flashed to an image: himself, crumpling up the macaroon bag and tossing it to the floor. He kept it hidden. When was that?

November 1, 1951. My 23rd birthday.

… Many happy returns, I suppose.

Don’t laugh. Although it was not so difficult, really. Erik took it more to heart and mind than I did.

Erik. God, Erik had said that he had killed – Schmidt, Shuvalov, Shaw – they had killed him together, Erik and Frost. They had been working together, not just student and teacher – before Galut? And then after? And then – what had happened?

You look serious, Charles.
I just …. I realized, my lady, that I missed your birthday. I’m sorry.

She shook her head.

I mean it. Happy birthday, Emma.

Frost did not reply. She brought the piece to a close, quietly. Sat for a moment in thought, then shut the keyboard lid. Thank you, Charles.

For what?

For listening, I suppose. She sighed. I’ve had a very trying day.

Then don’t dwell on it. Rather, he sent, playfully, how old are you?

She busied herself straightening her gown. That’s not your concern.

Maybe not, but I can count. 23 in November 1951, so you, my lady, are forty-one.

… What of it?

He smiled, as winsomely as he could. I just had thought …

That I was younger? Am I so decrepit?

You know you’re not. But that, Emma, is why they kept you from such an inconsequential party. All the boring little flickers in the firmament hate to see the full moon show up unescorted. Who knows who she would eclipse, left to her own course?

Do you think I should call Mars to my arm?

The red planet? He made a moue of distaste. Leave Erik out of this, please.

Emma laughed. Then go back to complimenting me. You’re very good at it.

And she was just as susceptible as any barmaid in Oxford. Charles covered his amusement. I’ll give you some Shakespeare, shall I? Would you like a sonnet?

Oh! Yes, please.

He began reciting – Let me not to the marriage of true minds / admit impediments – wafting the words to her mind like feathers on the breeze. Inconsequential fluff, all of it, and there perched the White Queen on her piano bench, eating it up with a spoon.

It was too much to hope she would choke, so Charles kept the lyrics proceeding, automatically, and considered her face. There were some lines when she was smiling as brightly as at present, true – but as for the rest, the stresses of nation-building surely came second to those of popping out children like peas from a pod, so she had done well to steer clear and thereby keep her immaculate good looks.

If this be error and upon me proved, he sent with a final flourish, I never writ, nor no man ever loved, and remembered Anna Weiss. Look at what a picture she was, now, after only two –

What are you thinking, Charles? You’re distracted.

Nothing. Would you like another sonnet?
You had a dull afternoon. I apologize. He felt cool pressure on his veils. Are you not enjoying yourself now?

Well, he scrabbled for a topic, I am enjoying myself – but wondering what you will do about this snub. Rather impolitic, as I said, but even more impolitic would be to let it go unchallenged.

You don’t think I should rise above it? Show myself too dignified to take eye for eye, tooth for tooth?

I think one can have due recompense and stay dignified.

Good. Because that is exactly what will happen. Just how much blood will be involved … well. The jury, as they say here, is still out.


Shhhh. Emma held one finger up to her pink lips. It’s a secret.

But. He swallowed hard. But – you’ve signed a treaty. I thought that was the whole point of your negotiations in Brussels.

And I would never break a treaty, Charles. I keep my word. No .... The secret is this.

She had sent him the image of the flag of America that Was, just that morning. It had bled into his mind, past his veils. Now, she did the same with a faded map. And she was good at it, Charles thought – much like himself and Raven. We are our own Finders. He could see the hatch marks of mountains, the dots of deserts; winding rivers and straight highways, their post-War changes a tangle of blue and red.

He winced. For if the map were a pinwheel, Frost had just blown on it – it whirled into sepia chaos before resolving itself into: Albuquerque.

… What about it? he sent, cautiously.

Look very carefully, Charles. What do you see due north?

… Denver.

Yes. The Free West capitol, ten hours by the old highway from Albuquerque; the wink of an eye for Azazel and Pryde. They were never going to let us keep it, my dear Professor. The only question is how much they are prepared to sacrifice to get it back. Maybe a division or two .... Maybe their safety, this holiday week. She smiled. In Las Vegas.

You’re being clear as mud. Explain, please.

With pleasure.

She swept up from the piano bench and sat down gracefully next to him on the divan. Charles tried his best to fit into a corner; kept his shoes from her skirt.

You see, Charles, the Heirs of Aztlán have their heart set on Albuquerque now. So I thought to myself: why not leave that fight to them? I’ve had Azazel and Pryde, Lee and Quested – and Munroe, and all their subordinates … and Erik … working overtime to do many things.

Like?

Evacuate our people and supplies, cover that same evacuation with an illusion of combat readiness
... and set some traps in the city, respectively. That way, when the Free West attacks Albuquerque later this week, they will find the most ferocious part of the Heirs of Aztlán ... and no one else.

He made no reply.

The trick, Charles, is letting them think they are weakening my forces by their own doing. That is why they asked me here. That is why they are making a show of politeness to Azazel, when they would as soon burn him at the stake. And ... that is why one of them will give me permission to bring Erik here. Tomorrow.

... He’s coming here?

Her lip curled. I hardly need permission, do I? But don’t you see? I am without the Finder. Erik will be away from the battlefield. They’ll spring their little trap and retake Albuquerque. And they’ll be stuck in an urban guerrilla war with the Heirs of Aztlán for the next month, at least.

Charles shook his head. You away from the Finder; Erik from the battlefield – surely they see that Azazel can bring you back and forth, instantly. That’s the weakness of your argument.

He is rather a trump card. I’m surprised they haven’t attempted to neutralize him already .... Unless you count the cake.

Do you count it?

Well. Both he and Erik have a sweet tooth. She frowned. Azazel is too wily to be tricked, though, and Erik eats nothing without my permission.

Charles thought of the cloudy jar. ... Emma.

?

What if .... He bit his lip. Double-checked.

Was his raven silent, or merely wary? Not afraid, no, but if it made no protest ....

What is it?

It’s something else. We found a jar of preserves that looked odd, Logan drank some of the juice, and he’s still somewhat sick. What sort of thing could incapacitate him, however briefly, given his ability?

Watching him, Emma did not blink. Quite like a beautiful lizard.

You ought to get a team to analyze everything in that refrigerator. The Free West has developed a shield against telepathy –

– and I felt some shielded minds, even from outside, at the ball. At the windows – she broke off.

Never mind the ball, Emma. Consider this: what if they’re developing other such useful devices? Do you know if they have any programs like that? Experiments, designed to see how to neutralize us?

The telepathy blocker is thanks mostly to their experiments on Armando.

Charles felt sick. I didn’t know that.

It’s true. And he told me that he was one of the most popular prisoners in Dallas camp ... but also,
that there was someone else. Someone they moved to Denver in the last week of that siege.

... Shite.

“Indeed.”

Having said so much, she let the quiet settle again for a moment – that stretched into several. Charles wished for the squeak of mice, or the tick of a clock. The dead silence of the suite was unnerving.

Finally, Frost rose and smoothed her hands over her skirt. “Well, Charles. You’ve given me quite a bit to think about.”

He stood. “Likewise, my lady.” And he sent her the image of the faded map, the old Gothic letters labeling the past. I prefer this way of communicating.

She sent in reply a pulse of … a strange feeling: diamond-bright, scintillating like the pinwheel. So do I. And, brushing the steel bracelet and ring from the piano lid into her palm: Walk with me?

Charles held the door for her and followed at her left hand. You think there’s something, to this antidote idea?

Don’t call it that, she sent, sharp. We are not a disease.

This draining – poison, then. It’s just a hypothesis, but –

– it makes sense. She stopped at the door to his room. The labs that we’ve found this past month … I had thought they were too large for just one project. I think you’re on to something, Professor. And so I think we’ll have to be very careful over the next few days.

I’d say ‘especially with Erik here,’ but ...

He will not harm you. Emma lifted one pale hand to touch his cheek. If.

Charles inclined his head. The gesture pressed his cheekbone into her fingers. My lady, he sent. You need not remind me.

Slowly, she took her fingers away. Very well. Sleep, Charles. Tomorrow is a busy day.

Would he get to leave the hotel – to accompany her? Some of his eagerness must have shown in his face, because Frost smiled, gently. We’ll go someplace else for breakfast. I’ll brief you then.

Someplace without audio recording.

“And video,” she said, “I can only assume.”


“What low standards you have.”

“Then … fetching enough – for others? With eyes? Who are present?”

Emma tipped her head. “I think Logan’s still asleep.”

“Well, I need sleep too. What if he snores?”
“He won’t. Good night, Charles.”

Charles watched her leave. The white silk of her gown disappeared last, slipping round the corner to the main room.

He exhaled, jittery – the adrenaline leaving, he supposed, little by little.

Shaw. "God," he whispered. But he would have to consider it later. Otherwise he would run mad, and Las Vegas was not the best place to do it.

Turning back into the room was easy; finding his suitcase and toiletries and preparing for bed by the bathroom light, with its door cracked open a notch, was more difficult.

Through it all, Logan stayed fast asleep – which was just as well, since had he been awake, he might have questioned such comfortable tête-à-tête with Frost. And Charles didn’t really feel … right about it. Even if Raven had been silent.

He climbed into bed and pulled over his share of the comforter.

Silence …

He was glad Logan was there. Otherwise the bed would have felt far too big.

Raven brought to his attention one final thing as he fell towards sleep – a memory that sent Charles lurching out of bed to fumble with his suit. For when he had undressed, the silence had been broken by the crinkle of paper in his breast pocket.

Hank’s plans. He retrieved them, and folded them away into his pajamas – god, he hadn’t had pajamas in months, and these with pockets. Tomorrow, then, in a place where he could have a think with no spy in sight.

He woke up twice in the night.

The first time was when Logan stumbled out of bed and staggered to the shower, and then flopped back down with a sigh. “Sorry, X.”

“Don’t worry,” he mumbled to the pillow.

“And thanks,” Logan yawned, “for your help.”

“… Don’t mention it.”

The second time was when he shivered awake at –

A long, lingering scratch from the balcony door.

Charles shoved himself up on his elbows. Turned his head round to stare, but it was too dark to see.

... And there it was again. His skin crawled. It could be nails on wood, metal on wood, oh God.

He tightened his death grip on the comforter.

The room was so dark and quiet, Logan’s breathing so peaceful … had the sound slithered out of a dream? Except he had no recollection of what, precisely, he had been dreaming. And nothing now
except fear clawing its way up his throat.

*You’re not in the manor; you’re not chained -*

After a moment of tense staring, he hissed between his teeth. Even if he were back in the manor, he had absolutely *nothing* to fear from Erik; not anymore. That sort of scratching was just – like a cat on a doorpost, he thought, fiercely, looking for a cuddle. Announcing itself beforehand and all.

… If the sound had even been Erik. It could have been something else.

*What* then, he had no idea, but Charles did not want to give any sign that he was awake, so he kept his power close. And he stayed alert as long as he could, but he heard nothing more.

Chapter End Notes

The wreck of the SS *Edmund Fitzgerald* I put earlier than 1975, since I wanted Logan to sing a bit of the Gordon Lightfoot ballad.
Charles groaned when someone shook him awake the next morning.

“Up, Xavier.”

He squinted; then gulped. Azazel was staring down at him, not six inches away.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“You think you’ve seen sore?” The scar twisted as Azazel raised an eyebrow. “Do you want to eat or not?”

“Yes, please.”

“Then get up and get dressed.”

“Where’s Logan?”

“Waiting to go, unlike some lie-a-beds.” He breezed out the door. “Five minutes.”

Charles scrambled to get ready, picking another suit and secreting money in his pockets, checking for Hank’s plans. He made it quite within time. And then the breeze returned, doubled: Azazel and a
man with glossy dark hair falling to his shoulders.

“Janos Quested, Charles Xavier.” and Azazel leaned back into a full-body stretch – even his tail quivered. “Ah. Who wants breakfast?”

“Pleased to meet you,” Charles said, extending his hand. Quested shook it without a word.

“Come on,” Azazel caroled, “it’s Shrove Tuesday, and I want something tasty –”

“Where’s Lady Frost?”

Azazel looked at Quested, who still made no sound. But raised one hand, and flipped a lock of hair back over one shoulder.

“Well, whatever her morning routine –”

“We wait.” As he herded them out to the hall, Azazel plucked a knife from some hidden pocket. Charles watched him start tossing it in the air, catching it by the handle – and would have shivered, except that Logan was watching from where he leaned against a wall. He caught Charles’ eyes and rolled his own. Charles smiled back at him.

“She shouldn’t be that long,” said Azazel. “It’s not like Brussels.”

Logan snorted. “You’re the one went through all the pomade in Brussels market.”

“Well, that was just the one thing. I comb it through my hair; sst, I’m done. You – you roll out of bed and you’re done. But she takes a bath in mare’s milk –”

There was the click of shoes around the corner, and then: “Really, Tovarisch, you shame me.”

“Just joking.” The knife went back into its pocket. “Though you have to admit: that morning with the treaty? You kept Stryker waiting while you finished your hair.”

“That’s enough out of you.”

Frost came to a stop in front of them. Her outfit looked less revealing than the two of the previous day, but the greatest difference was that she was now wearing an impish grin. “Pretty is as pretty does. And drives.”

Azazel sighed. “You?”

“Me.”

Charles had his veils ready as soon as they stepped out the elevator door. Still, the buzz of so many Free West minds raised his hackles – from the lobby to the car, through the city to a tiny bistro. And the thoughts in that same were a hum of breakfast – meeting – children – Saturday – Valentine’s Day, he remembered – until, one by one, they snapped to focus on Frost. It disturbed him: her image walking through their minds as jagged and sharp as broken glass, even as she strolled across the patio.

“Who’s cold?” she sang.

Though the dry air made everything chillier, “Not I,” Charles said.

“Not me, Professor,” Logan grunted, and pulled out one of six chairs at a table.
They sat. Frost tugged him into the chair at her right, and, under the broad red panoply of the umbrella, chattered about inconsequential things. At least, until a waiter – terrified, Charles realized – entered orbit nearby.

“Here, my dear young man,” and Frost gestured. The steel bracelet round her wrist glinted. “We’re ready to order.”

“‘My dear young man’ can –” and there was something more to Azazel’s muttering in Russian, but Charles did not have the words for it. That, and Azazel broke off as Frost elbowed him, hard.

“I’ll have the yoghurt and a cup of tea. Gentlemen?”

They ordered. Charles submitted to having his eggs replaced with oatmeal. “Are we on that strict a budget?”

“Oh, no. We merely have to restrict ourselves to liquids.” She smiled at them all. “Don’t we?”

“Some special EBS diet, to keep us regular –”

“Charles,” she tsk’d, and:

“Harder to poison,” Quested said.

“You do talk.” Charles looked him up and down. “I had wondered.”

“When I have something to say.” A slow quirk of Quested’s lips made him look rather handsome. Huh.

“And that’s uncommon – let me tell you about the time,” and Azazel launched into a story featuring himself, Quested, a St. Louis musical ensemble, and a streetcar. Charles fixed skeptical interest on his face, but kept his focus on Frost. And on Logan, to his own right.

Logan, who gave him a small wink, and deliberately looked back at Azazel.

Frost was gazing over the street, amused at something. Perhaps – and he passed over the minds of their observers again, and almost reeled at the fear – and anger – radiating from them like heat. And in several minds, near-panic … focused on the empty chair straight across from her.

Instinct drew his eyes to her necklace.

Had it changed? Bloody hell, he could swear that it had – a different fall to the metal, and he sent to her, before he could take it back, a sharp: Was Erik here last night?

… Beg pardon?

You heard me, Emma. Was Erik here in Las Vegas, last night?

Why do you ask?

Which was enough of an answer, and anger clenched his gut for a moment – he hardly saw that the waiter had set a cup in front of him. Coffee. He reached for it –

“I can’t take you anywhere, Xavier; give me that.” Logan plucked at the china cup and took a sip, waited for a long minute – and shrugged. “Seems all right. Now for the food.”

He had tested the others’ while Charles was gathering the usual wool, thorny and thick with
frustration. Perhaps Emma saw his expression as fear, for her smile at him was secret.

*Never mind if Erik was here, Charles. He won’t touch you.*

*I thought I heard something on my balcony last night.*

*Nonsense. I’ve forbidden him from coming so close. This is the last time I’ll repeat it: you need fear nothing as long as I am with you, and as long as you behave.*

Charles gave her a day, at most, before she reminded him again. “Yes, my lady,” he said, docile.

Azazel heaved a sigh. “I forget this about telepaths: while I have a fascinating tale to tell, you two are talking over my head —”

“You never complain about Elizabeth or Jean, friend,” Frost murmured to him over her tea.

“Well, Princess,” replying in kind, “Jean is a sweetheart, and you only give Braddock orders. This one is untrustworthy. I’ve told you a dozen times —”

“Yet you’ve never offered any proof I don’t already have. So until you do, you’ll just have to obey me.”

Azazel growled and upended the sugar bowl into his oatmeal.

“And now I have to taste that again,” Logan sighed. "Thanks, bub."

Charles ate quietly, thinking. He would accompany Emma to her meeting; do his best to glean what information he could, and then see what the rest of the day held. He wondered what the Westerners would be like; his only interaction before being MacTaggert and company.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Logan’s nostrils flare – and how he turned to look over his shoulder, casually.

Azazel's hawk profile was motionless. He was slowly stirring his tea with a spoon.

They were both looking at the bistro door. And Charles realized: they had seated themselves to watch all entries and exits. Frost was the one with her back to a corner of patio’s artful brick wall.

His own back felt uncomfortably exposed. Behind it, there was just a metal rail.

“Here we go,” Azazel said, and Frost touched his hand, murmuring, “Just drink your tea, Comrade.”

“Lady Frost,” a light voice said. “May I join you?”

“Feel free,” she said. “Agent Spencer, isn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The man – rather young, Charles noticed – pulled out the chair across from Frost and sat. Logan and Azazel gave him nothing but silence. Quested the same, but curious rather than grim.

“Nice to meet you,” Charles offered.

“Welcome to Las Vegas.” A smile in return. “Lady Frost, there were some misunderstandings yesterday, which led to that rudeness on Colonel Hendry’s part at the Hotel Riviera – I apologize on behalf of our entire government.”
“How sweeping of you.”

“Please accept our apology,” Spencer said, earnest. “My apology.”

Frost considered him. So did Charles. Young indeed … but rather good-looking, too, if one went in for delicate features and curly hair framing the head in a halo. And Frost gave a wonderful impression of going in for all of it, as she smiled. “For what it’s worth, apology accepted.”

The lie clanged through Charles’ mind like a cymbal.

What about the poisonings, lady?

That is not breakfast talk, Charles. Besides, this one has absolutely no seniority; his comments on it would be useless.

“I met Mr. Quested yesterday, I know Mr. Neyafim by sight – but I don’t believe I made the acquaintance of …”

“James Howlett, of Québec.” Frost gestured with her teacup. “And Charles Xavier, of Great Britain.”

Spencer’s eyes snapped to him. “A new ally, then –”

“Really, Mr. Spencer, Free West Intelligence Agent at large – or may I call you Edward? That is your name, isn’t it?”

“You’re very well-briefed, lady. Yes, you may use my name.”

Charles awarded him a point: unflappable.

“Edward, one does not comment on diplomatic workings after just sitting down to breakfast. Have some food; talk with us. And mind your manners.”

“Or I can always drop him in the lake,” Azazel said in Russian. “What do you think?”

“I think –”


“– I think,” Frost said with a smile, “that this sort of thing was awkward enough when it happened in Brussels. Remember that, Comrade? Madeleine Stryker there, meek as milk, and my prince has to open his mouth and say –”

“‘But she speaks Russian, my lady’ – yes, I remember that, and the royal goose-chase after.”

“What an evening for my friend here,” Frost told Spencer, sipping from her tea. “Calling back one squad, heading off another – canceling the entire operation on the strength of one possible telephone call. I never did confirm it: did she call you? From the hotel in Brussels … where she was my guest?”

“Does it matter?”

“Indulge me.”

“She did.”
“What a clever girl!”

“– but she had no idea Lehnsherr was … who he was, when she met him in the street.”

“I’m surprised your security had no idea. Unless they did, and for whatever reason –”

“They didn’t. Both of you …” Spencer stared at the silverware. “The soldiers who haven’t been in the field find it hard to believe that you exist. They’ve mostly just seen the movies.”

Frost burst into laughter. “And you trust them with your security?”

“Believe me, they were fired.”

“I believe you.”

She reached to pour another cup of tea.

Charles watched, fascinated. The entire byplay was like a dance, with the lady all grace, and the gentleman all comely, well-concealed wariness. Especially when Frost reached into her handbag and plucked out a small package.

“If you cross paths with Madeleine, could you see that she gets this?”

He could not stare with any discretion. So Charles focused on his oatmeal, and perhaps on Spencer’s mind –


Perhaps if he concentrated his power, he could be discreet in finding his way inside. Charles dabbed at his mouth with a napkin; focused on the blocks of concrete and the cracks between them.

“… but if it’s inappropriate –”

“Credit me with some sense of the appropriate, Edward. Open it if you must – I suppose you can always rewrap it later.”

“If that’s what this is supposed to be.” Long fingers plucked at the rough twine twisted round paper.

“It’s a good thing Erik isn’t here to hear you.”

The cement shivered. Charles kept his focus; *there*, a sliver of space in the wall, and he darted his raven in quick as light.

A distant part of him saw Spencer’s fingers go still, holding what looked like … a brooch.

Frost sighed. “How lovely.”

“It’s …”

“Silver, I believe. And he found some turquoise for the feathers – I think he saw indigenous jewelry in your Albuquerque treasury. Anyway, he made it, and just for her. Please do send it along.”

The brooch clattered to the table. “Madeleine Stryker is highly valued by her father, and as such, gifts like this are the definition of inappropriate.”

“I can’t very well have Erik go speak to him, can I?”
Nestled in Spencer’s mind, Charles caught the panic flashing beneath the rippling surface. He sensed fluttering flags everywhere: perhaps a parent had been a semaphore operator. Then Raven saw something especially shiny; screeched and flew after it – he plucked out a piece of information at random as he followed –

Then Charles stiffened, pulled his mind back to reality, and looked down. Azazel’s tail had stabbed through the fabric of his trousers, digging into his calf.

“Ow,” he hissed.

One corner of Azazel’s mouth twisted up as he drew his tail away and took a loud slurp of tea. Quested was looking at Spencer. Logan too. Both with similar alarm on their faces.

“… Are you all right, Edward?”

“Fine. I just felt something strange.” His curls looked a darker blond – or perhaps he had just lost all color.

“Well, it wasn’t me. And it wasn’t anyone at this table. Unless …” Frost turned to face him. “Charles. Have you been rummaging in our new friend’s head?”

Shite.

Raven was thrumming in his mind, a powerful presence hovering on his shoulder; enough to alert even Frost? Or perhaps it was a lucky guess. Charles shrugged. “I was just curious about his thoughts.”

“Were you?” Frost smirked. “What is he thinking?”

“This and that.” He retrieved the scrap of thought he had stolen. “For instance … about the pie they’ll have at lunch today. It’s apple pecan.”

Spencer stared at him.

“I wouldn’t touch it if I were you, my lady. You saw what happened with that cake.”

“Charles, be diplomatic. Although that is good advice …”

“This is outrageous,” came the splutter, “I – this is a violation of our agreement of non-aggression towards all concerned parties in –”

“Calm yourself, Edward. Charles has not yet been sworn to my service,” she touched her steel necklace, “so I am not accountable for his behavior. Think of him as a free agent.”

Charles could have burst out laughing as chairs scraped back from the table – Logan and Quested jumping to their feet at the same time as Spencer. He caught a glimpse of the brooch before Spencer shoved it into his pocket.

The argument had spilled over into something else. Oh. The talks to be held over lunch.

“I do have that authority, Lady Frost. You are permitted, and whatever of your security you require, but this sort of intrusion is not, and so his invitation is officially rescinded.”

“Spencer, whatever Xavier can do, I can do. The only thing that has been keeping me from it is good manners.” Frost tossed some currency on the table. “Walk with me.”
Azazel pulled him to his feet. Charles did his best to keep the pace, and to keep from limping with
the new throb in his leg. That tail – blimey, some part of the tip had to be razor-sharp. Frost kept
talking, sounding cool and official …

… but into his mind, she pressed a pulse of – approval?

Its chill throbbed more strongly than the wound from Azazel’s tail. Charles gulped.

They had reached the car. Frost stopped – and pointed. “Good manners are everything, Spencer.
Civilized behavior. Look at this, and tell me that I am as welcome to negotiations as you seem to
think I am. Tell me that I am safe here.”

Charles looked. The side of the car had been terribly scratched – he caught sight of SNOW BITCH.

Behind Spencer, Logan cracked his knuckles. Quested had moved to the hood of the car; he looked
up the street.

“I … can only apologize, Lady Frost. I can offer you a mechanic?”

“I can have this fixed in thirty seconds or less, if I call Erik to me. What do you think of that?”

“I think that Mr. Lehnsherr is not quite welcome, per se, but if you need him here … as security
detail? Feel free.”

“Really? You’re not concerned for the safety of your citizens?”

“You’re accountable for his behavior. I’m sure you have perfect control over him.”

“During the day, yes. But he’s often nocturnal, Mr. Spencer.”

They stared each other down.

Then Frost turned away. “We’ll discuss it more over lunch. Who knows? Maybe Erik could do your
agencies a favor. There’s a considerable methamphetamine problem here, isn’t there?”

“There is.”

“Well, we’ll see. Howlett, hop in. You too, Azazel, and – Edward? May I offer you a ride?” She
smiled. “I do need directions.”

“Certainly.” Spencer said, back rigid. He hardly unbent, even when he climbed into the passenger
seat.

What about me? Charles sent.

I’m sorry, Charles. Thanks to that little stunt – very nice, by the way – you are no longer welcome at
the diplomatic table. I do apologize. But perhaps Janos can take you someplace interesting.

Oh.

Poor dear. The car started. Did you catch that? Erik has been dubbed security detail. They’ve
sprung their little trap.

I heard.

I have to admit, I pre-empted them. He’s gone to earth for now.
This city is riddled with tunnels. I sent him to sleep down one of them. But there are others at the hotel, now; they'll be glad to see you.

... Was that true, lady?

Was what true?

Have you broken one of those shields, he sent the sensation of the concrete blocks, before?

I was busy in the new year, rooting out a Free West cell in Boston. That’s why Pinkner caught me by surprise. But Charles ... it took me quite some time to break down their shields. Your raven is faster than ice, I suppose.

He was silent.

I’m very impressed with you. We’ll have to find a use for this talent. She sent him a laugh – How you’ve frightened him! – and the image of Spencer’s face: the polished, diplomatic mask fracturing in slow motion as horror came into his eyes.

Charles coughed in the exhaust as the car sped off. Then dust lodged in his throat – or perhaps it was the dry air, because he had to cough harder.

Silently, Quested walked over to him.


A nod. Then Quested held out a plastic bottle of water.

“This is yours? Not theirs?”

At the second nod, Charles flicked the top off, had a drink, “Thank you,” and blotted his mouth with his palm. “Now what?”

‘Now what’ turned out to be a museum, only notable from the outside for being the single high point in a sea of dust.

Charles paid for them both at the door after Quested turned out his pockets. Then he picked up different maps. Gave the floor plan to Quested and followed him to the main exhibit: Alphonse Capone. Organized crime, of course – and the museum a pre-War one, what with the obvious age of most of the displays.

Still, propaganda would have been far more central to the National Atomic Testing Museum. Though it was much closer to their hotel, Charles was glad they had given it a miss.

They had walked north a long ways, and past various establishments – some polished, some grubby – on their way there. The streets were almost empty; the only people outside were drunk. He considered the conundrum over the course of the whole museum.

“I suppose the place only comes alive at night,” he said to Quested as they passed into the last exhibit: the triumph of law enforcement.

Quested flipped the map out of his hands; folded it. Charles looked. One square thumb lay right in the middle of –
“The red light district. Right by our hotel; fancy that. But they’re so puritanical – why publicize prostitution?”

Another shuffle. The map’s key now caught his eye, front and center.

“‘W’ is whites only. Well, however backward, that was a policy of parts of America that Was. I’m not surprised that they’ve carried it over.”

Quested tapped the key again.

“And the arrow is … men only. Ah.”

There were two such on the map’s title, growing out of the ‘V’ in Vegas. Charles smirked to himself. The entire city, unfit for delicate feminine sensibilities – what would MacTaggert think, if she saw?

Quested had walked to the window. Charles went to join him.

And blinked at the sight of snow falling.

“I didn’t think there was enough moisture in the air for that.”

“Which means,” Quested said, softly, “that it’s a job well done.”

“Three answers spoken aloud in only one day. I’m flattered.”

A half-smile, and Quested tipped his head towards the exit.

It took them quite some time to reach Caesar’s Palace again. They left the museum behind – it seemed to be situated in a small cluster of official-looking buildings – and first walked down a boulevard, the cold wind kicking up dust around them. Charles held his suit coat closer – and hoped, watching the flurries, that it would not get too cold too quickly. Quested did not appear to feel it; his head and hands stayed bare.

“Do you think anyone’s following us?”

Quested shook his head.

Charles supposed surveillance would be difficult, with the wind starting to pick up behind them – odd – but perhaps the two of them were just that discreet. Certainly Quested did not call attention to himself, loping along silently at his side.

His hands were numbed through and his mouth parched – they had finished the water – when they reached a crumbling monorail station an hour later: the northernmost on a very short line. “Sahara,” Charles read. “Fitting.”

They had to wait a while for the transport. The station was empty except for a tired man at the ticket office and a few beggars clustered together, worrying loudly about the snow. But it finally came, and as they boarded and the car creaked along, Charles tried not to look down. He gazed instead at the empty lots, the wind kicking up dust – and the gradual replacement of rusted and broken lampposts with functioning lights.

It was getting dark. He peered through the window behind them as best he could; vast plumes of dust were rising and falling in the wind, and the snowflakes were white against their grey.

“What time is it?”
Quested showed him his watch. Twelve noon. Charles shook his head as the wind whistled outside. As more and more people boarded the monorail, he heard increasing, nervous talk. About the cold, about the snow … about a rumor that there, in Las Vegas, someone had seen –

And then the bell rang for their stop, and Charles could exit without anyone noticing him, Quested at his side. A shame – part of him had hoped for a bit of drama.

“Christ,” he gasped at the cold.

A hand grabbed his shoulder. “Name in vain,” a bored voice said, and, “That’s a dollar. Pay up.”

“What?”

“Your fine.”

“I didn’t – excuse me, I apologize. I didn’t know.”

“Right. Let’s have your papers, buddy.”

The hand in his face was attached to a uniform – the local police?

“I don’t have papers,” Charles said.

“That’s bigger than a fine. How about the lock-up; it’ll be warmer there. Unless you make it worth my while. What’ll it be?”

Wordlessly, Charles fished a few bills from his pocket and held them out. The policeman looked at them – and frowned.

“Is that not enough?” He added another.

“No, it’s …” The policeman took the money. “It’s Christmas in February.”

Charles elected not to mention sacrilege, and made for the station exit. He caught up with Quested there and looked back over his shoulder.

The policeman was watching them.

Quested looked at Charles and shrugged. A sudden gust sent his black coat billowing as he paced away.

“You’re dressed for the weather,” Charles groused, following. “Try taking that luck to roulette.”

Jessie was busy in the penthouse suite when they finally came in, Charles shivering.

“Ten cameras; and twice as many audio taps,” she snapped. “Whatever you do, don’t touch the freezer door in the kitchen.”

“Why not?”

“I hotwired it. It was a secret entrance; I caught housekeeping going in and out, on my video.”

At that, Charles couldn’t resist walking to the kitchen to take a look. There, he saw tape criss-crossing the metal. Danger, and a crude skull-and-crossbones. As though that would last, since the Free West bloody well had the key to the front door.
“I cut their cameras before I set it. And they can’t read that sign from the other side,” Jessie said, when he returned to point out the weaknesses. “It’ll catch them up at least once. Here, have a sandwich.” She tipped her head at a picnic basket perched on the coffee table. “I’ve got work to do.”

And she took her toolbox, and left.

Charles ate a sandwich, thinking; found a plaster in the suitcase and doctored the wound in his leg, thinking harder. The kindly Jessie had a cruel streak. The snow was swirling faster and faster outside … and somewhere in the suite, he had lost Quested.

He unfolded Hank’s plans as quickly as he could, while pretending to stare out the window. Surely his body would shield him from any new cameras. For Charles would not put it past Frost to order her own put in place. Jessie was certainly taking long enough.

Charles memorized the plans and put them back away. Then he sat, to stare at the snow from the comfort of a chair and to let his mind wander.

“I don’t like it,” he told raven in the reading room. “An amplifier,’ Hank said – but we’ve seen it before.”

With a croak, Raven hopped on a book. One of many; piled on a tabletop. Charles sighed, and took them to his golden chair to read – stroking the birds that chose to nestle close to him.

He opened the books one by one. His own memories, of –

Logan’s voice: You catch him, there, X man? Their telepath. See?

Hank’s voice: This is for a telepath, a goddamned telepath. They’ll screw you into it and make you scream –

and Logan: You want baby Jean to get her back broken, get stuck in a tank, get wired up to take Stryker’s place?

and his own voice: Where will you get the power to run this? And is it a variation on an MRI, or a cryogenic tank, or what? And how will you use it?

and Logan: He did that to his own son, X man. You on his side, or on ours?

“It’s – their telepath. It’s whatever the Free West has rigged to their telepath,” Charles told his raven. A strange energy crackled outside the great window; he pushed himself up from the chair, ignored the cascade of books to the floor. “That’s it, exactly. Isn’t it?”

A hoarse crahk.

“Well done, by the way. Two – problems,” Charles amended the saying, “with one stone. That’s what happened to Stryker’s son; he’s not dead at all.”

He had known that already, yes … but had buried it. And he wasn’t the only one to do so. “My dear Erik, Madeleine Stryker is a liar, if she was the one to tell you her brother was gone.”

For it could have been Frost who had told him, Charles realized.

“What does she mean by all this?”

He paced to the circle of light beneath the oculus, and tilted his face to feel the warmth.
“There are branches of questions here,” he told Raven. “Is it the actual Free West layout, or a plant? If the latter, what interest does it serve? Perhaps they hope that we’ll design something that will fry your brain, my lady … but that assumes McCoy wouldn’t notice. So: wrong.

“But if it’s the real thing …. Cui bono?”

Charles walked to the far wall – or, at least, he tried. It kept getting away from him. “If it’s their amplifier, either we use the plans to sabotage their telepath more effectively, or we recreate it on our side. And … who?”

He had heard another telepath mentioned: Elizabeth, Frost had said this afternoon, and Elizabeth Braddock a month ago, and Moira in her mind: I thought you would send illusions first, like Braddock –

“Nicely done, darling. Like those books, only,” he snapped his fingers, laughing, “you’re a marvel all by yourself. So. Braddock. Jean. Or … me.”

Charles gave up on the distant wall; turned in place.

“Braddock’s on the front. So, Jean or myself. Food for thought, wouldn’t you say? I’m perfectly capable of protecting myself –’you’re stronger than she is,’ Logan had said, and a rumble came from beneath his feet ‘– but Jean. We have to make absolutely sure that nothing happens to her. All right?’”

The raven landed on his shoulder; preened his hair.

“All right, then. Now: this.” Charles gazed at the expanse, in the round, of white wall. “I don’t like this. Too much like her ladyship’s snow. You know what we shall have, Raven? Something beautiful.”

He closed his eyes.

And thought of the most beautiful things he had seen, since …

“Since coming to this place,” he whispered. “Because I have you, my dear, as the most beautiful.”

After some time – he could not say how long – Charles opened his eyes again.

He saw stars. Constellations, the Milky Way, the distant light of planets – all in a dark blue sky high above him. And a silver sea, waves like mercury and molten silver, washing about down below.

“Presto. Bravo.” Grinning madly, he blinked hard against the sting in his eyes – salt, perhaps, from the ocean. He had to laugh. “Let that phoenix come and outdo this.”

Raven pecked him.

“Fine. No one else will see: it’s yours and mine. A fine balance to what you made, hm? A pillar of books by day; the sea and the stars by night.”

He floated over the water. Far away, he saw a flicker that could have been his reading room – or perhaps it was another star. “A dome that stretches into infinity is enough, I think. Sufficient to my mind are the decorations thereof. … I would hate to get lost here.”

He floated for quite some time.

“But if we ever do wander too far …” Charles saw the beam from the oculus make contact, a perfect
circle of light glimmering on the metal water. “We’ll just follow that back to higher ground.”

And he would hurry now, for someone was calling him: Charles. Charles –

Charles snorted himself awake; then promptly fell off the chair. “Yes? Whossit?”

“Where the hell’d you go?” Above him, Logan looked worried.

“Just a jaunt down memory lane.”

“Right.”

“We have to talk,” Charles said, scrambling to his feet. “It’s important. Hank gave me –”

“Shh!”

“What? Jessie disabled the recording devices.”

“That the Free West planted, sure.”

“If our lady is listening, Logan, you’ve just undercut yourself by pointing it out. I – wait. What time is it?”

“You gotta get yourself a watch, Chuck. It’s six o’clock. Good nap?”

Charles choked down his disbelief. “Very good, thank you.”

“It’s stopped snowing.”

“Good. It made travel terrible this morning.”

“Yeah. But – you helped me last night, Charles –”

“Don’t mention it.”

“– and I need your help again now.”

They tiptoed into another bedroom, two doors down from Frost’s. At the side of the bed, Quested rose from a chair, and turned to look at them.

“O.K.,” Logan whispered. “We got her.”

With a nod, Quested left.

“Who? I – Ororo,” Charles said, “is that you?”

“Don’t wake her!”

“What happened? What’s she doing here?”

“She’s got a migraine or something. She was puking before, and – I haven’t.” Logan crossed his arms over his chest. “I haven’t had a sick kid for a while. What now?”

“You make a pot of tea,” Charles ordered. “And get me some aspirin, and a washcloth in cold water, for when she wakes.”
Logan dashed out the door.

Charles stared. The pillow and sheets here were cream-colored, so Ororo’s dark hair made a striking contrast. As did her skin – but in the dim light of the bedside lamp, Charles saw that it looked ashy.

She stirred in her sleep. Soundless. The pale streaks in her hair had – *expanded*, if that could be said. And she only sixteen, at most.

Charles sat in the bedside chair and waited for Logan to return. And when he did, Charles motioned for him to put the teapot, bowl, and cup on the table, and followed him back into the hall. “What was she doing here, Logan?”

“Need-to-know basis –”

“Oh, don’t *start* –”

“– and you need to know, now. That snow? She brought it.”

“I’m sorry?”

“*Weather*, X man, that’s what she does. Thunder’n’lightning, the wind and the rain. And the snow – but it took some doing, since there’s hardly any water here. Once Quested got back, it got easier, but …. The whole thing gave her one hell of a headache.”

“Does she do this often?”

“They call her Storm for a reason.”

Charles stared at the wall. There was something there – *hell*. Perhaps he just had to process this latest revelation, since …. She had saved Erik’s life. She had given him maps, and of course, they had been made bird’s-eye view, because she could fly.

She could fly. There was something there. *Raven*, he whispered – *find it*.

“And I’m due back at Albuquerque,” Logan said, “since we’re finishing up tonight.”

“Can you get Archangel’s blood there? Is there any of it –”

“Shit, *no!*”

“Be quiet! It was just an idea –”

“Archangel gets to her over *my dead body*, you understand?”

“… Logan, what on earth?”

Logan looked away, jaw flexing.

“It’s just his blood. In a little plastic packet – nothing so fearsome that –”

“No, Charles.”

“Fine. What ideas do you have?”

“Just to let it pass. Can you watch her? Make sure no one tries anything; help her out if she wakes up and can’t quite make it to the can.”
“All right.”
“Thanks.”

“Logan? We still need to –”

Logan made a sharp motion with one hand. Then twirled a finger through the air. *Audio* being recorded then, at the very least. Charles heaved a sigh.

He sent, carefully: *We still need to talk.*

Logan’s mind was like a thorn bush; but the message must have snagged somewhere, for he nodded.

“We still have to hunt, you know. After you’re back, and next time I get leave,” he gave Charles a tired salute, “we won’t come back in until we get that bear.”

As the hours crept by, Charles kept careful watch over Ororo. The little pool of lamplight was strong, but at a strange flicker from outside, he paced to the one window the room had, drew the curtain to look out – and saw a section of the city lose power.

It stayed lost for half an hour. Then it flickered back to light, and another – precisely next to it – lost power in turn.

*Rolling brownouts.* “Well. Anything to conserve electricity, I suppose.”

“Hello?”

Charles turned, and beamed, and remembered to keep his voice down. “You’re awake!”

“Mr. Xavier?”

“Yes, my dear.”

He walked back to his chair, sat; leaned forward. “Do you feel any better?”

“I missed you,” she croaked.

“Here, have some water. Can you sit? Try to drink.”

Shakily, Ororo pushed at the blankets, and pushed herself up. She immediately brought her hands to her eyes, groaning.

“Is it the light? I can –”

“No, leave it on. I’m O.K.”

“… All right. Here’s some tea for you.” He took the pill bottle. “And aspirin – they’ll help.”

“My headache’s a lot better,” she said, but took the aspirin anyway.

She finished swallowing, set the cup back down on the table. And stared at him solemnly. She looked *older* – a grand old eighteen at most – and tired.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey yourself. How are you?”
“I told you. I’m better.”

“Better enough for a hug?”

Ororo blinked. Then, wordless, she nodded.

And kept nodding, even as Charles carefully put an arm around her shoulders and drew her close. Into a hug, and patted her back – and he controlled his dismay as she inhaled, raggedly, and coughed into his suit jacket.

But then she started to cry.

Frantically, Charles looked round for a handkerchief. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “Child – let me just – I don’t have anything. Here,” and he grabbed a washcloth, “wipe your eyes. Or press this against them – the coolness will help. Try it.” He folded the cloth and pressed it close. So now he had cold water and tearstains, both, to worry about … but the suit would wash. “Shh,” he whispered. “It’s all right. Everything’s fine.”

“It’s really not,” she choked out.

“Let me tell you: Jean is fine. She went to see Peter Pan in Albany; she’s made friends with Alex’s brother, Scott, and with Azazel’s Kurt.” He wove calm with his voice. “She has a kitten now, did you know?”

“Who’s the Monitor?”

“I suppose … I am. And Armando Muñoz – he’s very kind. Things have changed a little, since you left. I suppose we’re more lax now. We adults gather all the wood, and the children get to watch a vid a day, and eat anything that’s not nailed down. I wish you could be there for their birthday party. It’s this Saturday.”

Ororo snuffled into his lapel. “I could never give her a party.”

He remembered: “You took her to see the waterfall, once, didn’t you?”

“How’d you know that?”

“Child.” Charles smiled into her hair; patted her back. “You made a note in a book you gave me.”

_Your maps._ “Remember?”

Ororo was quiet for a long moment. Then she sighed. “I remember.”

Wrangling children of all ages had taught him when to let things peter out. Charles patted her again, and made no protest as she took hold of the cloth and eased out of his arms, pressing it under her nose.

“Blow,” he said.

She gave him a tired glare. “That’s disgusting.”

“Then let me get you some paper.”

His fetching enough from the bathroom gave her a moment to control herself. Sure enough, when he returned, she had lifted her head high. Her eyes were swollen, but otherwise, no one would ever guess she had wept.
“Here.”

She took the toilet paper and folded it into her lap. “Thanks.”

“No trouble. I’m so glad to see you, and to see that you’re all right. Jean would be glad to hear it.”

“Tell her, would you?”

“I wish you could tell her yourself.”

“I won’t get leave a while. I don’t have much,” she spoke carefully, “seniority.”

“You’re damned good at pulling people out of harm’s way, from what I hear.”

“Language, Mr. Xavier.” She shook her head gravely.

“And no powers in the kitchen, yes. I remember *that* quite well.”

“And I’ve started to swear a bit. So I guess we’re even.”

“Who’s to blame for that?”

She grinned; then winced and touched the base of her skull. “Logan.”

“Of course. He’s to blame for everything.”

“Pretty much.”

The silence stretched. Charles offered Ororo another cup of tea; she took it and drank, thirstily. Then she lay back down and tugged the comforter up around her shoulders. It wasn’t as nice a blanket as his, Charles saw. “Are you warm enough?”

“I guess.”

“I’ll get you another blanket, shall I?”

“No – I mean,” and Ororo drew back, from where she had flailed out to grab his sleeve. “Could you stay here until I fall asleep?”

“Absolutely, if you wish it.”

“It’s just,” and she yawned, and winced again. “Sometimes I have bad dreams.”

Charles looked at the aspirin bottle. Sure enough; in the small print: *soporific*. “Damn,” he whispered.

“What is it?”

*I wanted to ask you questions.* “Nothing,” he said, quietly. “You had best get some more sleep.”

“I’m glad you’re there to watch Jean.”

*I’m glad you saved Erik at Dallas* – but he would have bitten his tongue clean through before saying it. “Thank you again for your present to me.”

“Those.” Ororo brought up her hand to wipe her eyes. “They’re pretty useless.”
“Very pretty, though. And accurate. I think I dreamed you flying, once – but only now did I have it confirmed: you can fly?”

“Yeah.”

“Picture me absolutely green with envy.”

“Sure you are –”

“No, I am. It must be a wonderful thing.”

She sighed into the pillow. He could hardly see her nod – but she did.

“And the book, Ororo …. I kept it, if you want it back.” *Let Rain Come Down*, he remembered, *the Life of Haile Zänäbä*.

– a figure in its pale robes, rising into the air on an old black-and-white vid, and the rain pouring down.

*Mr. Zänäbä*, a voice in his memory, *has signed articles* –

Frost caught in a photograph, smiling at a slender, turbaned man at the peace talks in Brussels.

“Ororo,” Charles whispered.

She looked up at him.

“Are you the Weathermaker’s daughter?”

This time, she nodded with her eyes open.

Charles knew his jaw had dropped. But she did not seem to notice, or care. She stared ahead at nothing, and did not cry.

“Ororo, why did he ever let you go?”

For Charles knew: Frost could not have taken one of the Weathermaker’s children with impunity, not even if she brought all her power and trickery to the task. The rain would have come down, and put her in her grave.

“I don’t know,” Ororo said – mumbled, into her pillow. “I don’t know.”

“You must realize that this makes you a princess.” He reached to tuck the comforter closer. “You should tell Jean. All her stories; all those fairy tales …. She would hang on your every word, even more than she already does. You must miss her. I miss her, and I’ve only been gone a day.”

“I do. So much.” Her voice was thick with tears. “But I didn’t want to talk to her about … princesses. She’s just a kid.”

Both taken away from parents so young …. Charles patted the comforter again, regretting his reminding her. His mind was still coming to terms with it: a child of the Weathermaker, still crying onto the pillow, right in front of him.

“Do you remember your father? I don’t remember mine that well.”

Ororo did not answer.
And since she could not have fallen asleep so quickly, Charles knew she was making a show to get out of further questions.

He knew, because Raven would have done the very same thing.

In his doze, he heard Logan say, softly, “Hey, Charles.”

“She’s sleeping,” he slurred.

“That makes two. How’re you?”

“Frost,” he shuddered, “where is she?” It had hit home: surely Ororo had been tricked away from her family somehow, stolen from her powerful father. *Frost’s a liar, she’s a thief—*

“Out for a walk.”

“In the bloody snow?”

“C’mon. Thanks for watching her,” and Logan tugged him out of the room, “but you need to sleep too. I’ll clean up the tea and stuff.”

“She went,” Charles stumbled in the hallway, “for a walk in a fucking snowstorm. She’s mad—”

“No shit, walking out all dressed up. But then, two’s company.”

“She had Ororo make a snowstorm, just for scenery. She—”


Charles was more than half asleep on his feet, so he let Logan push him beneath the blankets in his own room – *my own, no chain thank fuck* – and he only had one glimpse of Logan dragging the heavy couch to the balcony door before his eyes closed.

And it seemed only a minute before he woke with a start, and sat bolt upright in bed.

*What was that?*

It was quiet and dark in his room, but he thought he had heard something.

He shivered. There had to be a draft – he felt frigid air skate along his skin – and they had just had a desert snowstorm, so he should not be surprised, except:

Perhaps the chill was from seeing that the couch was back in place, on the other side of the room.

And the breeze was picking up strength.

And then Charles saw it: one of the floor-length gossamer curtains by the balcony doors unfurling full width into the darkness of the room.

The curtain was fine white gauze in the daytime, Charles remembered, his breath coming faster. So it made sense that it was an insubstantial reflection of distant outside light now, rippling in and out of shadow.

*Rippling –*
“Oh, that balcony door is wide open. Oh, joy.”

The silence in the room was absolute.

“Who could have opened it, I wonder?”

He was in control. He was, perfectly so.

So very controlled that he would not scream.

Not even when part of the darkness peeled off the wall and leaned forward, a tall shadow in the room’s corner. Only visible behind the fluttering curtain, and then not at all, as the shadow moved away from it and slid into the gloom.

“Who’s there?”

There was no response.

But Charles saw a pale cloud of breath in the dark. Halfway into the room – aligned with the foot of his bed.

He reached out with his power.

The slightest touch confirmed it: there was the slow grind of metal on metal, powdered with shards and splinters, bringing with it the battlefield. He could practically smell it: ash, smoke, blood –

“Anything you do will be recorded,” he hissed. “There’s audio. There might even be –”

A sudden snap and crackle stopped his words in his mouth. Charles smelled something burning. Then he saw blue-white sparks fountaining from a branch of the chandelier and the bathroom doorknob; saw and heard the bulb in the desk lamp shatter.

All the devices, apparently.

“Erik, you’re very rude.”

There was a low rumble from the dark. Much like a big cat. And instead of snapping up his power this time, and consuming it with relish, the dark tangle of Erik’s mind pressed up against the touch of his own.

Nice cat, Charles thought, wildly, good cat: leaning into a caress, the rhythmic prickle of its claws slow and sensual –

“It’s impolite to lurk in someone’s room without arranging it beforehand.” Even if that did sound supremely stupid, Charles supposed it could be done. “Tomorrow night, maybe. I’ll pretend to sleep, and you can – come exhale over me as much as you please –”

A chuff of breath, and the shadow moved again, gliding forward.

“Stop right there.”

There was no reply. Only a silhouette more defined as it approached – was that an arm – stretching –

“Erik, I mean it.”

The shadow stopped.
Charles supposed his eyes were adjusting, because now he could see the arm, and what had to be the darkness of a hand, only just touching the bedframe. The – brass bedframe, shite. He licked his lips; opened his mouth for another protest.

Except then he felt something vibrate.

The comforter rose up into the air, held up by pieces of brass glinting in the dark – oh, Erik’s power had taken hold of all the little posts and plucked them out of their moorings, and, quite a few of them, his mind offered, glib – it’s a big bed.

He could fly into a panic, Charles supposed, but he could also watch, mute, as the comforter floated towards him. Incongruous: it was white and squishy, but gliding as easily as the gauze curtain, towards him and then around him, wrapping him tight.

He was immediately warmer.

One orbit later and the brass pieces met in front of him; some floating in air, others slithering closer to his skin. But he would not show any fear. Charles moved a hand out from between the folds of comforter; plucked at a floating piece. “Even though I’ve told you many times, no powers in bed … Thank you. Now: all of these,” he snapped his fingers and turned his palm up, “here, please.”

The bits of brass flew to his hand, piling up with soft clinks. All together, they were surprisingly heavy.

Part of him supposed it was … marvelous. There, in his hand, rested a makeshift orb as solid as any a king or queen might possess. Cold, though. Charles worked his other hand out into the chilly air, covered the metal, and gently rubbed.

Erik’s other hand came down to the bedframe. Perhaps he was bracing himself.

Charles gave the orb another lingering caress, and heard the brass rail creak.

“Now,” he said, “please put the frame back the way it was.”

Were they working the security cameras would be having quite a show, what with the orb floating away and splintering into a dozen pieces. Charles strained to see in the dark. The thin posts jumped back into place with a flurry and glint … except for two in the middle.

“All of them,” he sighed.

The air was cold on his feet; he had tugged the blanket up too high. Well, let Erik make his exit and he could be as comfortable as he –

Charles’ heart shot into his mouth as he felt strong fingers take hold of his ankle.

And then he went absolutely still as he felt hot breath gust over his bare skin.

The best strategy: no sudden movements; no struggle. He would just wait, calmly, until the shadow, now stooping, had finished … … licking his foot. God.

Or it was Erik’s usual kiss, maybe. There was something damp smearing across his sole – saliva – and Charles heard a growl that was somehow wet.

Charles tried tugging his foot back. He felt a sharp nip to the ball of his big toe. “Erik –”
Another lick. It tickled.

“That’s enough.” If Erik started sucking his toes, Charles did not know what he would do. “We’ll have time enough to explore this new little – inclination – of yours later. Let go, darling. Please.”

Erik obeyed instantly.

“Thank you.”

He heard no reply. It was so quiet in the room that the sounds of one car – perhaps two – from the distant boulevard were perfectly clear. Those, and the Doppler effect of a distant siren … but Charles heard no footsteps as the shadow moved away.

The last two pieces of metal flew back to the bedframe; quivered and stuck.

“And thank you for that, Erik. Close the door behind you when you go.”

The shadow curved down - and glided, practically fluid, to the balcony doors.

Charles saw it against the pale curtain, tall and thin, trailing darkness like – a coat, a long ragged coat –

– and then it was gone.

The door shut with a click.

The room was very chilly. He was glad he did not have to get up to close that door himself – Charles twitched all over, and pushed himself as far back in the bed as he could. It was difficult: he was swaddled tight in the comforter, and had to roll back and forth like – Raven, he remembered, wrapped in a sleeping bag and laughing, inching down the hallway of the house –

Charles heard his breath coming high and fast. His foot might still have been damp; it was hard to tell. “Bad cat,” he choked, and finally worked his arms loose enough to yank the comforter over his head, where it stayed as he turned over, pressed his face into one absurdly plush pillow, and tried not to scream.

He must have fallen asleep again. For he blinked awake at a knock on the door. The thought-fire there glimmered; the mind was none he knew. And: shielded.

Free West. Charles cleared his throat and pushed himself up in bed. “Come in.”

The bolt slid back, and the door opened. A large man in a black suit walked in – unfamiliar face, dark hair neatly combed, rather more bulky than Charles would have expected anyone in – Free West Intelligence – his instincts whispered, and rather sharper than Spencer.

Why, Charles could not say. At least, not yet. The catalogue at work – he spared a smile for his raven, inwardly, as the large man said, “Charles Xavier?”

“The same. I apologize for my dishabille.”

“No, I apologize: I’ve caught you early. The name’s Black.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Charles said, “Agent Black.”

He hoped to hell that Ororo had left without being seen. And that Erik had left no trace –
Dark eyes behind thick glasses blinked. Like currants in dough, and it seemed his guess was correct, for Agent Black cleared his throat. “How’d you know?”

“The suit. The posture. Your shielding is quite effective, but rather a giveaway. Pick one.”

That, Charles realized, and Raven presenting him with the way Black’s eyes had flicked from the bathroom doorknob to the chandelier. Ha.

“And you were looking at the security cameras, weren’t you?”

Agent Black shook his head, slowly. Then he smiled. “Good eye.”

“Thank you.”

“You want another job, Professor Xavier? We could give you one.”

“No, thank you all the same.” Charles carefully felt for Emma’s mind – shite, she was awake, and engaged in something orderly. So much for any subterfuge. At least this could be a demonstration of his supposed loyalty. He sent a thought her way. Come here, please?

– Good morning, my lady – she sent with a cold sting.

There’s a Free West intelligence officer in my room, he sent, politely.

A pause. Then Emma cut off the contact.

“– Xavier?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Sorry. My lady will be here shortly.”

Black grimaced. “Did you have to?”

“Why, yes.”

“I wanted to tell you about –”

“Good morning,” came Emma’s voice from the hallway. Charles waited for the sound of her shoes – and he blinked as she came into view, in a bathrobe, her feet in soft slippers, and her hair, wet and dark, lying on the robe’s plush collar. “Terribly sorry, Robert, you caught me in the bath.”

“You know my name.”

“Credit me with some preparation. I never forget a face. Ah, Charles,” she said, smiling, “did you sleep well?”

“Tolerably. This mattress is softer than I’m used to.”

“Tolerably. This mattress is softer than I’m used to.”

“Very soft, out here. Was there something you needed, Agent Black?” asked Emma. “You are rather ahead of your time.”

“Yes. You asked for security cameras in this room, ma’am, and I came to find out why –”

“What?” Charles interrupted.

“What nonsense; I would never do that, Charles. What were you going to find out, Agent Black?”

“Why the cameras all malfunctioned, Lady Frost.”
Emma raised an eyebrow.

“Just last night,” Black continued. “I wanted to see –”

“I can’t account for the faults of your technology. But I ordered the cameras in my room – and the listening devices, and in the powder room, Agent Black, really – anyway, I ordered them neutralized yesterday. And they were.”

But Black made no reply.

He was staring at the floor.

Marble, Charles remembered, and shifted to try and see for himself. Except: Black was moving over to the balcony door – and he took out a handkerchief, covered his hand, and grasped the handle. He opened it.

“If that’s what I think it is, I do apologize,” Frost said, to the bulk of suited back, practically wedged in the balcony doorframe, and completely still. “Let me see.”

She picked her way over the floor – with a wink at him, Charles saw – Christ. Because he had a sneaking suspicion of what was on the balcony. If …

… and he pushed himself forward and gazed at the floor by the foot of the bed.

If the rust-colored smears on the marble were any indication.

Black had retreated into the room. Frost peeked out to look at the balcony, “Oh, dear.”

“Excuse me,” Black said. The handkerchief was balled in one fist at his side, Charles saw. “I have to make some calls.”

“I could bring housekeeping up here; save you some trouble. I’ll even give them another tip. Would ten dollars Western be enough?”

“This is beyond a ten-dollar tip,” Black said, voice even, “don’t you think?”

Frost merely smiled. “Do see yourself out, Agent Black. Good morning.”

“Actually, I’d like your permission to page security.”

“Do whatever needs doing.” She yawned. “It’s your hotel.”

Black strode out the main door; Charles heard a rattle – of a key in a lock. Then a voice. “Put through a call. Yes.”

“Such a start to the day. My goodness.”

“My lady,” Charles said, “what’s out there?”

“Take a wild guess, Charles.”

“Animal, vegetable, or mineral?”

“Oh, it was animal. But now it’s in pieces. It seems my prince still likes you.”

Charles knew his breath could be a rattle, if he allowed it. And …
His ears pricked up, at Black’s muttered, “Operator.”

So he let his breath come out in a cough that was very loud indeed. “You promised me,” he rasped.

“He won’t harm you; I keep my promises. He’s just paying a visit to destroy this lovely city’s recreational drug industry. You remember the conversation, yesterday, don’t you?”

“I didn’t think he would pay that visit so soon.”

“Neither did they, I’m sure.”

Charles heard, “– code one, four, one, six, gamma – Bob Black.”

All Frost’s attention still glittered on him.

“– connect me to the Federal building –”

So he forced out a whimper.

“Poor Charles. Don’t look out at that balcony, whatever you do. I’ll be in my room –”

“ – yes, this is Black. We’ve got a situation here. I need team three, and I need them now. Penthouse suite –”

“ – if you need me for any reason.” Frost strolled out of his room and closed the door, cutting off Black’s voice.

No matter. Charles knew he would remember perfectly. He would be obedient, and Frost might just let him alone if her guard slipped.

So.

No looking at the balcony; no thinking of that hallway phone.

If only Black had left the door unlocked ….

He pushed his way out of bed. No distractions. Not even the sole of his foot, and on it, the stain of dried blood.

He washed and dressed as quickly as he could. Black was gone, damn, when Charles dashed into the hallway.

But Frost was waiting for him in the main room. Seated, a travel kit on the coffee table in front of her, and mostly dressed – but with both hands in her hair, a hand mirror on the table, and pins showing black against her pale skirt. She had chosen modesty again; bully for her.

“Did you have a pleasant walk, my lady?” he spat. “Last night?”

“Don’t get into a lather, Charles. Erik will –”

“It’s not about him, it’s not about me – it’s Ororo. Your demands gave her an incapacitating migraine.”

Frost pulled her hair into a French twist and slid the first pin into place. “I had daily migraines when I was much younger. She needs to toughen up.”

“Where is she now?”

“Albany. She’ll visit a doctor there; I don’t like to take chances. Satisfied?”
Charles silently watched her progress through the hairstyle. He was not satisfied. Moreover, he
would not take a bite of any food she offered; he would not be polite; he was not her little trained
poodle –

“Please hold this mirror for me, Charles. I can’t see the back.”

He did not move.

“Now,” Frost said, voice like flint.

“Fine.” He grabbed the mirror and dangled it in front of her face.

She snapped her fingers and pointed. “Kneel.”

His face burned as he obeyed. She adjusted the mirror’s angle in his hands. Then she took out the
pins and started afresh, brushing her hair and smiling as she gazed at her reflection.

“What a mood you’re in this morning! One adolescent tells you her troubles and you throw your
own type of temper tantrum. I was going to compliment you on your handling of Spencer; I was
going to tell you: there’s another sort of ball, Charles, and we will be holding it here in Caesar’s
Palace. Tonight.”

“But there’s no time to prepare, my lady.”

“A unique sort of party,” she continued, ignoring him, “to show those in the West, and the worst of
them in Las Vegas, that they have no idea what decadence truly is.” She adjusted a pin. “What do
you think?”

“Of having an orgy for the benefit of the cameras, or, of your hair?”

“My hair.”

He shook his head. “It’s fine.”

“Good. Ah, Black – your team may go right in.”

Charles gritted his teeth as heard boots clatter behind him. The whole god damned Free West would
see him humiliated, it seemed –

“I heard your last,” Black rumbled, walking into the room.

“Did you?”

“A party, Lady Frost? With what resources?”

“With my own, of course.”

“I don’t recall our discussing it –”

“That’s because we didn’t. It will happen here, Agent Black – and any Western is of course quite
welcome. No invitations, in fact, will be required. Though I reserve the right to toss the riff-raff to my
prince.”

Charles looked to see how he took it. Black, in turn, looked faintly nauseated. “Your Majesty –”

“It’s about time someone called me that. There’s no use protesting. Here.” She plucked an envelope
from beneath the travel kit and held it out. “Your list.”

Black made no move to take it.

“Go on.” Frost shook it at him.

“I had nothing to do with this. I was against it from the start.”

“Ah-ha. Do I detect factions in the intelligence community?”

“You know very well that Spencer’s green. You knew before you came here that Slade has been purging MacTaggert’s followers –”

Charles did not let the mirror move.

“And you come here to try and play them for –”

“They were the ones who saw fit to allow Erik here, and had me pass along a list of items for him to destroy. Which, I think, he finished – even the headquarters of that drug ring. He had a busy night.”

“Where is he now?” Black said. Calm. As he took the envelope.

“He likes feeling the trains come and go. You might try the station.”

“You know where he is –”

“Of course I know. I know wherever he goes, whatever he does, always. And I know now that he needs a little rest, and if you think,” Frost whispered, “that you can come here and throw your considerable weight around, and expect me to cringe and reveal all, you are mistaken. Leave.”

Black bowed, stiffly, and turned.

“Perhaps I’ll see you tonight,” Frost said. “Though I do hope you own a nicer suit.”

Her lips curled up in a smirk as the front door slammed.

Charles felt light-headed. *Fuck* courage and cunning: he wanted to crawl beneath the bed and not come out. “May I be excused, please?”

“No,” Frost said. “I’m not finished with you.” She took the mirror back from him and placed it next to her kit. “Fetch me a glass of water.”

He took a glass from behind the bar. Drifted towards his room, “I’ll just – go to the sink.”

“He called.

Out of her sight, Charles stopped in front of the closet door. He tried the handle.

And did not drop the glass when it opened. Instead, he ran his eyes over the telephone, grabbed a card and a small key from where they were wedged beneath the base, and – *instinct* – used that same key to lock the door before he closed it.

In his bathroom, he ran a glass of water. He put card and key in his breast pocket and returned to Frost. “Here.”

She narrowed her eyes at him and pursed her lips … round a thermometer? *What the hell?*
“Are you –”

She held up a finger.

Charles waited until she plucked the thermometer out and held it up to the light. She nodded at the table. “There.”

Charles set the water down. “Are you ill?”

“I don’t get ill.” She rinsed the thermometer and blotted it on a handkerchief. Then put it away, took out a small book from the inside pocket of her dress suit, and made a note.

Secrets. Charles looked on, sour. He had transferred Hank’s plans – what are you planning, lady? – and the blueprint was keeping key and card company now. He was above groveling for information. And what did he care if she were sick? She obviously didn’t care about Logan, Ororo … or anyone.

The key was not burning in his pocket. He knew it wasn’t.

“Are you going to be polite, Charles – or at least, of service? I could use your assistance this morning, and then running logistics for this little party. Otherwise …”

Erik was sleeping off his rampage, he knew. So Charles met her gaze with nothing but sullen defiance.

“… well. I suppose I will go to the meeting with Pryde this time. You can help Azazel when he returns. He’ll be fetching some entertainment for tonight.”

“Entertainment?”

“Oh, yes. If Ororo’s headache can wrench your heart, just wait until you recruit from a Free West brothel.” She gathered her accessories and glided away. “Do make sure they’re clean.”

Charles only waited to hear Frost leave before he sped to his room. Then, gritting his teeth, he had to retreat and wait … for the team of Free West police to leave their gruesome study, to leave him alone.

Azazel was coming. “Hurry,” he muttered at the window, peering to see from the main room east to his balcony. “Come on.”

Inspiration struck.

Slowly, Charles sent tendrils of fear creeping towards them. He didn’t need eye contact. He needed nothing but their thoughts – vibrating with fright, rippling with sickness, since – oh, that was something severed, wasn’t it?

It was easy to heighten the fear already there.

“You know who did it. Just check Black’s list – your victim will be on it. Pack up the leavings and go.”

Ha. There went a few of them, scurrying out the door. Their heavy-duty combat gear looked all the more ridiculous in the posh interior. Another few followed. And two – medical personnel, with a covered stretcher.

A final soldier caught sight of him. Brandished his gun with a glower, and backed out the door,
“Kiss my arse,” Charles muttered, and ran for the phone in the hall closet.

The key turned easily in the lock. He took a deep breath, brought back the memory, and grabbed the handset. Faced a blank for a moment; and then tugged the dial round.

“May I help you?” a voice crackled.

“Please,” he whispered.

“What?” It was a man’s voice, tense. “Speak up.”

He focused; flattened his accent, and said: “Operator,” loud and clear.

“All right – one second.”

A fizz of static. Then: “Free West Operations: Liberty in Security. May I have your identification, please?”

“It’s – code one, four, one, six, gamma. Bob Black.”

There was a pause. Charles heard clicks and whirs.

“All right, Mr. Black. Where shall I connect you?”

*Whither*, he thought, but said: “Oxford. In the Kingdom of Britain.”

A crackle. “Do you mean Great Britain, Mr. Black?”

“Yes, that’s it. That’s precisely it.”

“That comes to ten dollars for a base of five minutes; one dollar per minute ensuing.”

For a moment, Charles froze. Then he said, glib: “Charge it to my account.”

“Certainly. One moment, please.”

He waited.

“Mr. Black? The connection is shaky; I’ll try to put you through, but –”

“I understand. Just,” he placed his hand flat against the phone’s small table, pressing, “please, try.”

“Hold on.”

A long wash of static. Much longer than before, Charles thought, and closed his eyes: *Please. Please.*

Then the phone started to ring. Charles jerked to attention.

“Good afternoon. Purity in All; how may I help you.”

*Purity in – fuck*, of course the Free West would put him through to the Party of Purity in Oxford; now out and maneuvering in the open, it seemed. His tongue felt heavy. “Good afternoon.”

“How may I help you?” The voice was now pointed.
“I’m afraid I dialed the wrong number. Could you redirect me to the switchboard, please?”

“Who is this?”

“This is St. George Richardson,” Charles said. “The Christ Church curate.”

“How did you get this number?”

“Many things emerge in confession, my son.”

“Listen to your mum when she tells you not to prank, son. Do you know how important telephone calls can be? Especially given the rules. Do you know how worried I was?”

There was a pause. “And now – do you know how high the fine has got, if I disconnect before you do? Of course you do. That’s what this is all about. Again.”

“… I’m sorry?” Fuck you, Charles thought, wildly. You stupid Western stooge – put me through.

“Rules are rules, so I’ll transfer you. If this is a prank, never do it again.”

The clicks of a transfer echoed down the line. Charles’ mind scrabbled for the places that he knew had phones – Christ Church, the Provost, the Dictionary, the Rose in Bloom – the Provost, definitely. He could leave a message for Weiss – but was her leave up? – for Geoffrey – but would he be visiting? – for Benson –

“Oxford Switch!”

Benson, he would leave a message for her – she knew Raven, she loved Raven.

He let his accent out. “I’ll have the Provost’s Office, please; double-quick.”

“Right you are. Who’s calling?”

Who was recording him? He couldn’t know for sure – and he winced as his catalogue wrenched his attention round to Benson’s book of poems, “Songs for Penelope,” he mumbled, “Odysseus, of course.”

“Spell that?”

“It’s a joke, it’s Noman. N-O-M-A-N.”

“Ta.”

He put a hand over his mouth. Ta.

He hadn’t heard that in –

Charles shivered, and forced his power through the whole penthouse; cast it down the hotel and to the lobby. No sign of Azazel. No sign of any mind he knew.

“Good afternoon. This is Office of the Provost; how may we be of service to you?”

Help. You may help me, but all Charles said was, “I need to leave a message for Sylvia Benson, of Queen’s.”

“I can send a runner to check if she’s in College –”
“No,” he snapped. “I don’t have time.”

He could almost hear the perturbed expression on the other end. “Is something the matter?”

Yes. “The message is as follows. Do you have a pencil?”

“I do. And – let me write this down. Do – you – have – a – ha, sorry. Joke?”

It was Huntsman. Practical joker Huntsman, secretary who fancied himself a strategist, the official water cooler thief.

“This is Odysseus. Tell Benson … Calypso has grown quite cold, and I’ll be leaving soon. Tell her to – to tell Penelope to be safe. To stay home; stay safe.”

The other end was quiet.

“Did you get that?” Charles snapped. “Do you have it all?”


Charles slammed the receiver into its cradle.

Hands trembling, he shut the closet door. Locked it. And backed away, as though he could erase what had been said … with distance.

He walked to the main room.

Nothing incriminating. Nothing revealing – except to those with access to Black’s account; to those with half a Classical education; to those who knew who was in the penthouse, and when …

And Frost could have asked Jessie to record everything.

Charles buried his face in his hands. Ta, he sent to Huntsman, even though it would dissipate by the time it reached the Hoover Dam. If he gave it any force, he thought, dully, it might reach Dallas.

Or it might not.

He lost track of time. But at least his hands and face were dry when he caught the flicker of Azazel’s mind arriving in the upstairs room.

“Ready to go?” Azazel clattered down the steps.

Charles thought briefly of Kurt, making noise just because he could. “Go where?”

“Out. You are my official helper this morning – or, this afternoon.”

“… It’s noon?”

“Well past it. So, if you feel like stopping the sulk, please get up off your ass.”

Charles dragged himself to his feet. Focused on the toe of a black leather boot, newly shined, tapping impatiently. “I’m up. See?”

“I see. And I know that I’ve had a much busier night than you, so look alive, Xavier, and get your coat.”
Fine. Charles walked to his room; got his coat. He checked to make sure of the three in his suit pocket – Hank’s papers, the key, the card …. He took the last out to examine; he had snatched it without so much as a glance.

It was done up in tawdry gold and silver. *Pearly Gates Gentlemen’s Club*, he read – and on the back, *Mary Mack*, written in a looping hand.

“I’m waiting!” Azazel shouted.

“Is this our little contest?” he called. “I haven’t so much as seen a woman here that I’d take to bed; not yet.”

After all, last night all he had seen was … *Erik*. He tucked the card in his pocket, still crammed with the maps and brochures from his walk with Quested, and thought fast as he hurried back.

“Not our contest. Although – come on.” Azazel opened the main doors. “Lunch. I didn’t get breakfast and my night was insane.”

“How so?”

“Running Erik round town.” He grinned. “Having fun.”

“Ah.”

Azazel wanted eager questions, he sensed. He would not give them. Instead, they waited for the elevator bell; it rang and they got in.

“Why aren’t we teleporting?”

“I’m tired again.”

“You seem energized to me.”

“Then maybe I just don’t feel like using that energy on you, Xavier. Or …” and he pressed the button for the lobby, “maybe things can look a bit different on the ground. It’s important for me to keep my hand in, getting around normally. Isn’t it?”

Charles did not believe him. And with good reason, for the vid screen in the lobby explained it all. A police report was playing, the audio crackling alongside a stream of security images.

“… Abduction and arson under cover of snow last night, and if you, the viewer, see either of these individuals, call 9-1-1 immediately and do not engage. Suspects are armed and extremely dangerous, and reported to be in the area of …”

He raised an eyebrow at the grainy image of Azazel twisting in mid-air, tail an arc behind him – above Erik, whose feet were planted firmly on the ground as he brandished – some sort of gun. *Damn*. He should have paid better attention to the museum exhibits. And it seemed he would recognize that lean body anywhere, even with a trench coat –

Charles willed his prickling arousal away. Said only: “Nice suit.”

“That’s fair, I must say.”

“So now you’re walking right out the door in broad daylight …”

“Because who, my dear Professor, is going to stop me? You? Them? Good morning!” he called to
the staff at the desk.

They flinched, and Azazel cackled as he leaned on one of the hotel doors. “See?”

“What if someone shoots you?”

“They can try. I’m too fast.”

“… What if someone shoots me?”

Azazel looked him up and down. “You’re not armed or dangerous, are you?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you’re dangerous, Xavier,” he said, easily. “I’ve told Emma so. I don’t know what game you’re playing with Erik – but she has her own game, and she won’t play any others.”

“I’ve asked you to keep it a secret –”

“And I heard you the first time. You just protect my Kurt, and I protect you. The minute you stop …” Azazel drew a claw over his neck. “You know.”

“What a charming person you are.”

“Everybody seems to think so. Look around!”

Charles looked. The sidewalk was empty in the day’s glare; no trace of snow remained. Even given the slowdown he had seen the previous morning … He winced. Foot traffic was diverging in front of them, fleeing to the other side of the street.

“And I took a shower and everything, after.” Azazel yawned. “Let’s walk – but coffee first. Do you want some?”

“Why not?” Charles managed.

They took a turn and stopped at a street vendor. “You buy it,” Azazel said, handing him money. “I’ll watch. And read his mind, just in case he plans to poison you.”

Except the vendor was a child: a girl with a pink ribbon braided into her hair, staring terrified at the back of Azazel’s head. Charles couldn’t do it. “Two coffees, please,” he sighed instead. “And – those.” He pointed at two apples and a cinnamon roll.

“What the hell - fruit? Do I look like one of those children of yours?”

“Language, please. And just save it for later, why don’t you.”

Azazel turned and leaned to the side of the cart, to wave at the girl where she had ducked. “Thank you for your help, little one.”

“Stop it.”

“Fine.” Azazel put an apple in his pocket; grimaced at the pastry. “That icing there. That might be dangerous.”

Charles shoved bills into the tip jar. “Watch me live dangerously.”
They walked the streets for quite some time. Early on, coffee dispatched, it remained for Azazel to watch as Charles ate a third of the cinnamon roll. Then he growled, “Give me some.”

Charles did, and had to smile as he snapped it up like Princess Alexandra with a sardine. “Ah, that puts life back in me.”

“Pure sugar?”

“Pure happiness.”

“No wonder Kurt loves it.”

Azazel laughed. “My little backbiter –”

The hell? But … moj spinogryz, of course.

“– he’s a good boy, a happy boy –”

“There’s happiness, and then there’s hyperactivity.”

“Fine, have your rules. I’m just glad he’s looking well.”

And with that, there had been quiet - the traffic dwindling to nothing, and Azazel whistling from time to time as they walked. He peered into the dusty windows of hotels and casinos; considered shop displays decked out for Valentine’s Day. They both watched a game of stickball, the boys playing it laughing until they saw them and scattered. And Azazel looked coolly back at the grown men – and even the occasional escorted woman – who stared at him everywhere … before, Charles saw, they scurried along to the nearest shop and hid. All of them.

“Do you think they’re calling the police?”

Azazel shrugged. “Police have a choice; chase Erik or chase me. And since they can’t catch me …” He tossed his apple in the air, caught it, and took a bite.

Charles only cast out his power once. The explosions from all corners of the city – anger fear confusion – was enough to make him withdraw, wincing. They walked for quite some time, the light refracting in dust; the dust clinging to their clothes. Eventually Charles had to eat his own apple, only for the juice. But then they were interrupted by a distant clamor. Azazel squinted down the street.

“Excuse me, one moment.”

He vanished, leaving Charles alone. Swallowing, Charles blurred his image, I’m boring, I’m dull, nothing to see here – and stepped off the sidewalk to let a group of policemen pass.

They were heavily armed and racing down the road. At the intersection they started shouting at a group of squad cars that had just screeched to a stop.

Time to leave. Charles sped up, rounded a corner – and breathed out as Azazel reappeared.

“Good job. See? Nothing to be afraid of.”

“Which is why you ran away –”

“Xavier, one must be practical. I can’t drop them in broad daylight; not if we want any people to attend our party.”

“That’s right. Tonight, is it?”
“Tonight. Everybody from Albuquerque, relocated to party duty. So I suppose we should get on with it - our lady gave me more money than God. Ah!” They turned another corner. “Here we are.”

Heart sinking, Charles looked down the street: at the ornamented buildings, the strings of dead lights and lamps, and the megalith men at every door. “The red light district?”

“Not so red-lit during the day, is it? But we’ll ask at a few places. Where to start?”

Charles took the map from his pocket, wordlessly, and unfolded it. The district had its own magnified subsection. “What street?”

“Siren’s Cove … hm.”

“Boulevard,” Charles said. “That’s the abbreviation, there on the street sign.”

“I knew that. What’s listed on that map of yours?”

Charles’ eye immediately snagged on: Pearly Gates GC. He calculated. It was close – a bit further up the curving road, and on the right. A three star rating.

“Well, we don’t want to make any snap decisions. Let’s walk and see what looks nice. And here –” he gave him the map. “The Lady said ‘clean’, so nothing below three stars, all right?”

“You’re pretty calm about all this. Emma told me you might fuss.”

“I’m acting as a procurer … of course I don’t want to, but what I want doesn’t matter, does it?”

“To me it does, Xavier. So you see, I hope to convince you to help me, not order you.”

Charles looked at him, startled. He covered, fast. “Can a man who looks like Satan be so sensitive?”

“None of that.”

They walked in silence for another minute.

“That’s the difference between Emma and myself. I’ve lived very long, and I believe you catch a fly with honey. She’s young, and she believes you catch a fly by swatting it.”

“The two don’t line up –”

“Yes, you’re very smart. But even someone so smart could not have resisted the White Queen coming down to Oxford in a cloud of beauty, and … say, holding a contest for recruitment to the EBS. What do you think of that?”

Charles said nothing.

“Whoever is the most powerful; whoever is the most capable … even if you have been hiding in a little British cave for so long – because she desperately needs your help. And did she mention that you will live in a palace, and dress in all the old Romanov finery, and eat off gold plates?”

Azazel took Charles’ crumpled coffee cup from his hands and tossed it at an overflowing bin.

“Well, Cinderella? How quickly do you think you would have come running had she done just that? Only you can help her; only you are as wonderful and beautiful as she is; and she reels you in with a wedding cake on a hook.”
“… a wedding cake?”

“That’s the fanciest I can think of.”

“Well, none of that pageantry would have worked. I love my country. I would not have left her willingly.”

“Well, Emma didn’t try it that way, so it doesn’t matter, does it? Here we are, here. I’ve had enough walking. So I’m Satan, am I? You know where Satan likes to go? Straight up to heaven.”

They stopped. Charles looked at where Azazel had struck a pose – and then up at the awning above, with Pearly Gates Gentlemen’s Club flaking gold on scarlet.

“You can stay out here if you want.” Azazel took out a dagger; checked its edge. One of the security guards ran inside.

“No – I’ll come in with you.”

“And now you’re done with your sulk. See? It worked.”

“Yes,” Charles said, walking up the stairs. “It appears it did.”

After an initial panic, Azazel was greeted with strained courtesy. “We’ll work out a deal,” said the proprietor, sweating, “we can work with you.”

“First things first,” and he teleported away – and back, before people had time to work up a proper stampede.

“Must you?” Charles sighed. “There’s no need to stink up the place.”

“I’m afraid must. See you in a bit, Professor. Call me if there’s trouble.”

Stretching his mind over the building, Charles sensed nothing but gradual sparks of shock, fanning into a blaze of – fear, yes, but also … interest? How that was possible, he didn’t know.

He heard a creak of gears from the dismal sitting room off the base of the stairs, and then a cuckoo clock went off with the hour. Four. He strolled in its direction. The room looked rather like it had escaped from a faded Victorian album: doilies, brasses, dried flowers in vases. Charles turned slowly on one heel; halted. Then moved from where his shoe had snagged in the threadbare Persian carpet, and completed the turn on hardwood.

The adjoining sitting rooms looked similar, though some had disreputable photographs on the walls. The whole seemed both more opulent and more ominous than the Rose in Bloom; he caught sight of at least one hanging garland covering an iron ring.

When he retraced his steps to the main room, he heard doors creaking above. Then he saw dust puff from the plaster ceiling, and, reaching the stairs, saw one pair of bony legs, and then another, and more – all in in fishnet stockings – edge to the gilt balcony rail.

And sensed a spike of anger from the security desk, as a uniformed man tried the phone; slammed it back into the cradle. “Where are they?”

Mary Mack, Charles thought, passing him, walking through a beaded curtain to – ah. A bar. “Never too early to start,” he told the barkeep.
A grunt. “What’ll it be?”

“A Bloody Mary.” And Charles slid two fingers to his right temple. “Don’t even think about poisoning me.”

Mary – it had worked, for from the soused thoughts bubbled the name Mary Mack, and an image – Charles inhaled.

The face belonged to Moira MacTaggert.

His mind grabbed the first thing he saw: she was blonde, now? He had to talk to her. Focus, and he wrested his old methods to the fore. “Thank you,” with a bill placed on the bar. He took a long drink, just to make it convincing, and then said, “Tell me, what does a man need do here, to see the merchandise?”

“Thought your friend’s taking care of that.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t take care of myself.” He floated a thought to the other mind. Mary Mack. Send this one to Mary Mack.

“What’s busy?” and a cabinet door, swinging open, showed a good two dozen keys dangling and rattling together into chainmail. “Let’s see. Blonde, brunette, redhead?”

Charles took another gulp of his drink. “It doesn’t matter.” For he had caught a twist of dislike, and Moira’s thin face, snarling – get your hands off me, flashing like neon in the welter of the barkeep’s thoughts. “Just as long as she’s not too tall. And not too fat.”

“Believe me, mutie, the last thing we do here is fat. Weapons?”

“I don’t carry any.”

“Sure. Boyd? Frisk this one, and take him up to Mary if he’s good.”

“I’ll call ahead –”

“No.” The barkeep glared. “Phones are down.”

Charles ignored their conversation. He finished his drink, went to be frisked – and floated up through the brothel, looking for Moira’s mind.

He found it –

Captain MacTaggert? It’s me.

– and he bit back his smile at her mind going off like Independence Day, or whatever the West called it now.

Charles didn’t listen to the spotty boy – Boyd – droning about rules, regulations, and risks of bodily harm. He just tipped him at MacTaggert’s door, and waited until it closed behind him.

“Um,” he said –

And then … didn’t say anything.
He had expected a certain eagerness – to talk. Not eagerness to kiss.

“Mmph,” he tried, and tugged at MacTaggert’s wiry arms where they had latched round his neck. He finally succeeded in detaching her mouth. “Miss,” Charles gasped, leaning back. “Um. May we discuss this, first?”

She was wearing a curly blonde wig, knocked slightly askew. Her face was gaunt; her scraps of clothing hardly deserved the name. The flowers tucked into the top of her corset, Charles saw, were dead.

But her eyes were shining with fierce life. She dove for his ear, and whispered: “Cameras.”

Then she bit him.

It should have gone straight to his cock; he rather liked teeth and tongue on an earlobe. But nothing set off any spark, even when she started kissing him there, before tangling her hands in his suit coat and shoving him back onto the bed. Bloody cameras everywhere – he could think of nothing else. The mattress sagged; the duvet foamed up around him, lace and more lace. “Miss,” he tried again – but then followed her lead, and took hold of her waist as she straddled him.

And sat down. On his lap.

Charles spared a moment for worry. A beautiful woman, wriggling … and … nothing? Hell, his cock still worked; Erik had gotten him off in a spectacular way not two days ago. Perhaps it was that she was so thin.

“Hey there, handsome.” MacTaggert - Moira - raised an eyebrow and rocked her hips. “Should I be insulted?”

“We’ve only just met. It takes me a while to warm up to strangers. Why don’t you go back to what you were doing to my ear? I liked that.”

She smiled again, tightly, and leaned in to whisper, “Good to see you, Xavier.”

“Likewise, Captain,” he murmured into the wig. “My note – did you get it to Mallory Darkholme?”

“… What do I get if I tell you?”

“Oi,” he said. Loudly. “Who’s paying, here?”

Her lip curled, but she started trailing her hands up and down his sides. “They found me out as soon as Frost sent her broadcast,” she whispered. “And they strip-searched me as soon as we switched helicopters.”

Christ. But then the meaning sank in. “So they found …”

“The note. And the crystal. I’m sorry –” and she pressed a dry kiss against his ear. “I’m so sorry. Slade took it; I couldn’t stop him.”

He heard absolute truth in her voice, and so he bit down on his rage. “What else?”

“I didn’t tell them anything; not about you, and not her name.” She set up a rocking rhythm; he felt nothing. “And – they gave me my phone call at HQ. I had Bob Black scramble it, I called Oxford, and told them to find Mallory Darkholme, and tell her what you wrote.”

It was better than nothing … but no better than what he had done not two hours ago.
“Thank you,” Charles muttered.

“Lie back, lover,” she purred, and –

– he only just caught the flash of Azazel’s mind before he heard an odd beep.

“Sorry, that’s from downstairs. Let me just –” There was a little ivory phone on a nearby table. Moira got off the bed to grab the handset, listened – then frowned, and checked the attached cord.

“Wait,” Charles said. “I know what it is – he’s coming, he –”

But she wheeled, cat-quick, at the crackle of energy and the sulphurous smoke; then ducked between the bed and the wall.

Out of sight? He couldn’t see –

“I leave you alone for five minutes,” Azazel snapped, “and you – hey!”

Moira screamed. Charles didn’t blame her. Azazel had snatched her forearm as she ran through the door – but with his tail, which would be a surprise to anyone.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Nowhere!” she gasped.

“Nowhere.” He dragged her back inside and slammed the door. “Good answer.”

“What are you – what …”

Azazel looked at her for a long moment.

Then his mouth twitched. “Poor thing. Poor, pretty little thing ... watch out for your wig.”

It was slowly slipping from Moira’s head. Then it landed on the floor, limp, like a dead blonde animal.

Charles felt his throat close up. For, beneath the wig, Moira’s haircut had been cut shorter than his own. The dark strands pressed flat made her zygomatic arch, of all things, look very fragile as she stared at Azazel. Her eyes were huge.

Azazel stared back. Then he murmured, “Hello.”

She was silent.

“I haven’t seen such hair on a woman for a while.”

Still no answer.

“Tell me, pretty. Who did this to you?”

He slid his tail slowly off Moira’s forearm. Charles saw the tip glide up, tap her shoulder, and then touch a lock of hair.

“You …” Moira whispered, “How are you …”

“See?” Azazel showed her both palms with a smile. “No hands.”
She froze as the tip of his tail nudged her temple; and stayed frozen, even as he casually turned to face Charles again.

“As I was saying, Xavier: I leave you alone for five minutes, and you decide to taste the delights of the city early.”

“You’ve finished, then?”

“Also early.” Azazel tossed him some papers. “There’s our contract – twelve, which should be manageable, once the rest of us get here.”

“To manage women – starving women – bought to be used for a night? Jubilation Lee, Kitty Pryde: they’ll be just fine with this?”

“Humans. Westerns. They use us for their experiments, so I say: payback is a bitch. Besides, Xavier, you’re the one on the bed.”

“I’m done,” he muttered, sitting up.

“So, I’ve paid, and we can go. Funny, how a little bit of money makes people so friendly towards a person.”

“Even after that person’s murderous rampage, you mean?”

“It wasn’t murder, Xavier, it was another contract.”

Azazel’s tail was still stroking Moira’s hair.

Charles felt ill, especially as the blithe words kept coming. “Emma gives it to me to pass along after her meeting yesterday. Someone in the West wants a cartel taken down? Well! We take it down, and then we burn their house down for good measure, and faster than they thought possible.”

“Do you enjoy frightening helpless women?”

Moira glared daggers at him, but then made her lips quiver as Azazel turned to look at her.

“Your tail,” Charles snapped.

“Do you not like this, kitten?”

It had to be some sort of trick, Moira making her eyes look like a fawn’s. She brought up a thin hand to touch her hair, self-conscious. “I just …”

“Hm? You just?”

“… didn’t know men could have tails.”

And she took it in her hand.

Azazel’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline.

Charles felt a headache coming on. Just what he needed – Free West Intelligence trying to get at them another way –

“See? She doesn’t mind.”
“Fine. You burned down a house? A residence. In the midst of all this glitz and glamor.”

“Warehouse; same difference. Erik blew the gas main, and,” he flicked all ten fingers out. “Anyway, nobody’s called the police from here —”

“Because you cut the phone lines.”

“This is true. But they have security, so they must not mind. Especially if they … oh. You had better not,” he breathed, turning back to Moira.

Who, Charles saw, had touched her tongue to the tip of Azazel’s tail, moist pink on red.

“It’s warm. I didn’t think it’d be warm.”

“Darling, you don’t know where that thing’s been.”

Moira said nothing. Just licked again – along the middle of the underside, Charles saw, and Azazel hissed through bared teeth.

She flinched. “Sorry!”

“No, that’s all right.” He whipped his tail away, and prowled closer. “That is more than all right. You know what? I think I like you. What’s your name?”

“Mary,” she whispered.

“Would you like to leave here, Mary? Why don’t you come with me?” Azazel lowered his voice. “Why don’t you … talk to me a little while, tonight, and then you can go anywhere in the world.”

“How?” It was a quaver. “D-do you have an airplane?”

“Just trust me. But it’s your choice, isn’t it? Come with me, or stay here. Think about it, maybe —”

Someone shouted in the street, and there was a commotion at the front door.

“ – actually, think about it now.” Azazel darted across the room; looked out the dirty window. “Huh. That was quick. You ready to travel, Xavier?”

“I’ve bloody well been ready,” he growled as he scrambled off the bed. “For a while.”

It was unpleasant, for him to realize: he had thought of no plan to get Moira out.

“Fine then. Up. Arm, please. Well, pretty?”

“Mary,” she said.


“Can I get my things? Please?”

“Fast.”

Moira dove for the floor, and – Charles blinked. Ripped back a corner of the carpet, and tugged at a floorboard. “Shit,” he heard her gasp –

“Stuck, is it? Move.” Azazel stepped to the corner, and brought one boot heel down with a crunch.
“Thank you,” she said through chattering teeth, as she rummaged through the splintered wood and grabbed a purse.

“No shoes? No coat?” Azazel took hold of her wrist. “You’ll be cold, and you’ll definitely need some shoes. I’ll see if I can –”

–and they teleported.

“– find you some – oh.”

For Moira had clapped her free hand over her mouth.

“Emma!” Azazel flicked a salute at – Frost, Charles saw, turning to them from the window. “Signed, sealed – and soon to be delivered. Mary,” he said, and pointed with his tail. “There’s a sink right behind the bar.”

Charles helped Moira stumble over to the sink – she took the purse along – and he rubbed between her shoulder blades as she promptly retched. “Logan could have used this, yesterday,” he told Azazel.

“Not for two hours, he couldn’t. Sorry, kitten,” he called, “it can be bad, if you’re not used to it.”

“Who is that?” Frost said, disgusted.

“Her name is Mary. She’s rather brave. And she,” Azazel switched into Russian, “is going to keep me company tonight, with your permission, my lady.”

“You can take your turn with the others, can’t you?”

“Emma, be reasonable. What haven’t I done for you, Albuquerque and all? Why can’t you let me have this one thing?” Azazel paced over to the bar, peered over it. “Getting better?” he asked Moira, English. “No, I see. Emma,” and Charles had to control his own nausea at yet another switch, “she hasn’t eaten in days. Why can’t you let me have a little sweet? I could bring her dinner, even.”

Emma stared at him. Then she laughed. “If it works for Erik …”

Azazel said nothing.

“I love symmetry, don’t you? Or do you just love playing the gallant, my old friend? You’re very convincing.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Moira was more convincing, Charles thought, fiercely. There was little vomit, because by now she was faking every single heave.

“Fine.” Emma reached out for Azazel’s hand; squeezed. “I do reward my friends. Heap up the gallantry, Comrade; make her comfortable, and then have your fun. Maybe even … see that she enjoys herself? I must speak for the ladies, you understand.”

“Of course.”

“Don’t make me record you.”

“Go right ahead, if you want. I only wish you’d started yesterday.”
“God, no. Two hours of Howlett turning inside out would have soured even my stomach.”

“There, we agree.”

With a sniff, Frost took her hand away. “Whatever you do with her tonight, tie a rock round her feet for the lake – you understand? And be on time tomorrow, please. I can’t have this morning repeated.”

Charles’ stomach pitched. He focused on a drop of water pearling at the end of the faucet.

“I had good reason. We had a hard night’s work of it.” Azazel hesitated. “Where’s Erik now?”

“They’ve brought out bloodhounds, if you believe it.”

“He’s not too badly hurt, is he?”

“He’ll recover. In the meantime, it’s good practice.”

“… Emma.”

“Ah. None of that. You have your little sweet,” her lip curled, “and that’s enough for now. The rest is mostly arranged; good work on the whores. I’ll join everyone there at midnight.”

“Why is it always midnight?”

“So that the stupid can be impressed. How did he behave?”

“Fine, I suppose. Talk him round and he’s good as gold.”

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“Too much talking, by God, if you enjoy shoveling that much flattery down his toothpick throat, I say you’re welcome to it.”

Azazel strode round the bar again very quickly indeed. The drop of water fell with his footsteps.

Charles lowered his eyes. His blood was pounding in his ears. What did they mean – had he translated correctly? Because it couldn’t be true. The lake. Moira. They wouldn’t – Azazel wouldn’t –

“There, now,” came the murmur. “Better?”

Moira coughed wetly.

“Phew, I’m sorry, sweet. Keep an eye on her, Xavier?”

“Keep an eye on him,” Frost snapped.

They both looked round; Charles had to fake incomprehension. She was pulling on a pair of white gloves. “I have an emergency police meeting,” her voice dripped scorn, “to attend. I’ve promised my help. And in the meantime, he’s to be guarded, always.”

“Right, fine -”

“He might try something.”

“He is a tricky little rascal.” Azazel shrugged. “I’ll see if there’s kitchen work.”
Frost smiled, tightly. “Excellent. Until later, Comrade.”

“Comrade,” Azazel bowed.

Charles kept rubbing Moira’s back as the door closed. She shivered over the sink, even as Azazel peered at her bowed head and clicked his tongue. “This might take a while, eh, Xavier?”

“You would know better than I. You’re the one dragging people through the ether, or hellfire, or whatever it -”

“All right, all right. Emma’s in a bit of a mood, as I’m sure you could see, so I,” his gaze lingered on Moira’s bare back, “am going to go out and get a few things. If I can trust you to watch her. Come here a minute.”

Charles left Moira with a final pat, then went to where Azazel was leaning back against the banister.

“Put her in my room, all right? Tell her she can take a bath, and lock the bathroom door.” He held up a key. “Some of the rooms can be locked from the outside; fun little Free West quirk.”

“Are you mad? I won’t.”

“Then I will. And what’s more, I’ll lock you in yours, and there you’ll stay until we leave. What do you say to that, Xavier?”

Nothing could be said. Charles merely held his hand out for the key.

“Good. And you do know that this whole place locks from the outside as well, hm? Just so we’re clear.”

“I gathered that. And I suppose the freezer is still booby-trapped?”

“Yes.”

Charles tried to speak. And … couldn’t?

Azazel looked at him, exasperated. “Da means ‘yes’, Professor. And here I thought you had half a brain.”

“Sorry.”

“So don’t try anything smart, is what I’m saying.”

“… And what if I did?”

“Then I’d say: You had better run fast, you White Knight,” Azazel whispered. “Because Erik chases students in the woods, but I chase enemies of the Morozov all around the world. And in all my life, I have never lost a one of them.”

He bowed, ice-blue eyes glittering; then turned and walked where Emma had walked, out both double doors. Charles did not bother to check them, after.

Thank you, I suppose, he sent to his raven.

It fluttered its wings, miserable. Well, he said. Think of something for her, then, if not for us.
In response, Raven set thought-fires throughout the hotel.

*Oh.* Charles blinked. *That was quick.*

There was a groan. "Ugh," Moira said from behind the bar. “I –”

Charles waved her silent; twirled a finger through the air. *I think,* he sent, as carefully as he could, *that Frost might have bugged this room. Not your people; not anymore.*

She blinked at him, face pinched.

His raven then brought to his attention: *Don’t make me record you.* – *Go right ahead, if you want.* – *God, no* – and there had been the echo of truth beneath it all.

Charles beckoned her. *Follow me.* *Hurry.*

And when they reached Azazel’s room, Charles let out the breath he had been holding. “Here.” He ushered her into the bathroom and turned on the water in the tub. It crashed against the porcelain. “This is safe.”

“How do you know?”

“They have an agreement, Frost and Azazel – she doesn’t record him. And even if she decides to, she wouldn’t do it here.”

“But how you be sure?”

“Trust me. It’s the truth.”

He could hear it now, clear as music had ever been – the vast difference between Frost lying, or prevaricating, or obscuring, and her telling the truth. He had heard the clang of her lies ringing down all their changes over the past few days … but her voice in his mind, rippling over Chopin: that entire conversation had been the truth. And her Russian with Azazel had only a few times been shaded with deception.

It was funny, in a way. He hadn’t quite thought her capable of such candor.

*I know you better,* he thought, *than you know yourself. Lady.*

“Xavier –”

Charles focused back on Moira in an instant. “What can I do?”

“Are there other ways out of here?”

“The freezer – but it’s a trap now. Electrified.”

“What?!”

“It wasn’t my idea! Apparently that’s how your people came and went, to stock the fridge with poisoned sweets. So you can’t point fingers.”

“They didn’t.”

“Oh yes, they did.”
“Slade. *Slade*, oh, that stupid …. What the hell does he think he’s doing?”

“Vice President Slade, as I understand.”

Moira shook her head, staring grimly at nothing. In lingerie and fishnet stockings, her corset hanging loose and her hair close-cropped as straw – naked as she was, she looked ready for battle.

“Listen, Captain.”

“It’s Moira, remember?”

“I haven’t ever met a better Captain, but as you will. Do you understand Russian?”

“Only bits and pieces.”

“Well I can. Don’t ask how – I just can. And what they were saying …. Frost told him to *kill* you, Moira. She said,” and it was clumsy, translating, but he did his best. “‘Tie a rock round her feet for the lake’ – do you hear?”

“And that’s not Russian for pedicure?”

He spluttered.

“Obviously not, Xavier; I get it.”

“Charles.”

“Charles. And it makes sense. Bodies eventually float.”

“I …. Listen, Moira: we’re supposed to be enemies, but I don’t want you *dead*, for God’s sake – and I didn’t want you –” he tried for words, “with this hair. In a brothel. What the hell happened?”

“This is what happens, Charles, to women who don’t toe the line, after all the chances they can get. The third strike, you know?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, it’s baseball. And I used up all three, all at once.”

“That’s ridiculous –”

“I know it is. I know there is so much that my West does wrong, but our sides are just about even when it comes to crime and punishment, don’t you think?”

“The East doesn’t have internment camps, and doesn’t run experiments on Westerns. Or does it? What have I missed?”

“What do you call what Frost did after Dallas?” she spat.

“One person compares to a culture? And speaking of which, is this hotel meant to be men-only, Moira? *White*-only? *Human*-only? However righteous you are, must admit –”

He was expecting a slap. So she caught him off-guard – *again*, Charles thought – with the punch she landed on his stomach. Then as he went gasping to the floor, she kicked out – but he dodged, and she promptly howled, “*Fuck* my life!”
“No shoes,” he wheezed.

“Ow, fuck –”

He choked, coughing – perhaps laughing. “You stubbed your toe –”

“I jammed it, you bastard, it was for your ribs!”

“Well, you got the wall – oh. Oh, God –”

“This is ridiculous,” and she sank to the floor next to him. “Charles. This is –”

“I’m glad he’s not here. Azazel, I mean,” Charles said, catching sight of the skylight through watering eyes. “It sounds – as though we’re – making violent love – oh.”

“It’s not funny.”

“You don’t think?” he wheezed.

“No. I don’t.”

He moved his gaze back down. From where he lay, he could see the jut of her left hip, and collarbone – and the frailty of her arm as she stretched to turn off the water. Then she looked up in turn, gazing at the ceiling.

“You’re right. I didn’t mean to laugh. I was just …” Reminded. He shivered. “I’m sorry.”

Moira did not say anything. Her eyes were fixed on the skylight.

“There,” he gasped, “why not go through there? I’ll lift you as far as I can and then you can find a bar to help haul me up. Or – if I climbed on the sink, I think I could reach. There has to be a way down from the roof. We can –”

“It’s locked.”

His head was spinning with adrenaline – and now with disappointment. “The bloody skylight? You can tell from here?”

“I know Free West windows.”

“Breaking and entering with subtlety? Why wouldn’t exiting be included in the standard intelligence training?”

Moira kept staring. Not answering.

“Slade must have failed time and again,” Charles muttered.

She nodded. Then her eyes filled with – shite, with tears, and Charles fought for clarity. “There’s no time. Listen – you can call the lobby. There’s a phone downstairs in a closet; I have the key. Someone will come and get you.”

“And go right back to the Pearly Gates? I can’t. It doesn’t matter,” she gulped, “how well-placed – I – I just –”

“Then call Agent Black. Why the hell hasn’t he sprung you already?”
“He can’t; otherwise he’s finished too. And Slade and his agents will have tapped the phones. They’ve had plans for Frost’s visit for a long time.”

Charles gritted his teeth. “Has Slade read *The Odyssey*?”

“What? No. He hasn’t even read *Green Eggs and Ham*.”

“What’s that?”

“Children’s book.”

*What next?* “Then Moira, what will you do? What can I do?”

She wiped her eyes. “It’s all right. If it’s my time, that’s what it is – and I’d rather go out in a fight than any other way.”

“You fought Creed, and you won.”

“I sure as hell did. And that’s the thing about Neyafim. He likes to fight. He likes,” her face twisted, “to *play*.”

“… with his food.”

“I’m not food.”

“No? You’re not … edible?”

It took her a moment, but then her face twisted as she stood. “Never change, Xavier.”

“I’m serious: make him pull out all the stops.” Inappropriate? But he couldn’t stop the words as he scrambled to his feet. “Wear him out. The *things* one can do, when one’s lover is in a satiated sleep – I ought to know.”

“That’s the last thing I –” Moira covered her mouth.

“If I can do it, you can do it, surely.”

“How is the Red, then?” she hissed. “Still himself? Still such a sadist –”

“I should have told you: my friend Howlett gave your Commander a funeral pyre. His ashes went to Brussels; I don’t know what happened after.”

He saw how she clenched her fists on the sink.

“I don’t know if the word got back to you –”

“Howlett. Give him my regards.”

*Ah.* It seemed some enmities, besides Frost and Erik, Captain MacTaggert held to heart. Charles backed towards the door. “Is that all?”

“I think it is. I’m going to take a really long shower, and I’ll come up with something.”

“Like what?!”

“Get out.”
“Let me help you – I can keep in touch with you.” He pressed his mind against her thoughts; warm.

“With Frost here?”

“Even then.”

“No – Charles, you told me what needed knowing and then let me handle the rest back in Ithaca. I’m asking for the same thing now.”

“But if I can help you with the freezer –” Two of his thought-fires went off. “Shite, here he comes. Lobby. Somewhere else … fuck, he’s fast. One more and he might –”

She pushed him away and stepped into the bathtub. “Give me some privacy.”

“Can I help –”

“No.”

And he stumbled back over the bathroom threshold.

“Really,” Charles said, half to himself. He watched garments land on the floor – the corset, a scrap of brassiere, a garter belt. They covered Moira’s purse.

“Close the door, Xavier!”

“Fine,” he said, “fine.”

He did. In fact, he sat with his back against that same door, guarding – and so only flinched once when Azazel appeared in the usual way.

“Why, Professor.” A grin. “So dedicated.”

“I didn’t want to lock her in.” He held out the key.

“Quite the White Knight.” Azazel dropped a monogrammed bag – paper, Charles saw – and shoved it beneath the low table with one foot. He draped a white bathrobe over a chair; tossed a pair of soft white slippers on top of it. “How’s my little cat?”

“Taking a shower.”

“So I hear. Let me through.”

Charles stayed put.

“Fine,” Azazel said, nettled – and Charles gagged as noxious smoke rolled over him from so close. Teleporting straight into the bathroom would surely have … some result.

He waited, tense.

And – ha – the result served Azazel right. Charles heard a shriek, then a yelp, and Azazel reappeared with water dripping from one sleeve. “Holy –”

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to surprise a woman in her bath?”

“What mother?” Grinning, Azazel let fall Moira’s clothes – and her purse, Charles saw with a pang – on the same table. “She’ll have to come out in a towel. Just right, for a hellcat; I thought I found a
kitten and all."

He flopped into an empty chair and flipped the brassiere to himself with his tail. Examined it. Hummed. Then shot it into a corner of the room like an elastic.

"Really," Charles started, but Azazel next took Moira’s purse, and, matter-of-fact, emptied it onto the table.

"Let’s see. Kitten has spearmint gum," he flicked it to the side; "aspirin," the same, "and seven dollars, Western; oh – Kitten has a datebook, with weight marked weekly," he scanned a few pages, winced, and flipped through the rest – "and nothing else. … Wait. What’s this?"

Charles rose to his feet, staring, as Azazel examined something that caught the light.

"Well, well. Kitten has a hypodermic. Take a look."

The needle was capped. But the barrel was full of a cloudy grey liquid.

Azazel whistled. “That’s the size of a measles booster.”

“A - what?”

“Never mind.” Azazel thumbed off the cap and flicked the needle. A bead of the liquid landed on the table; it shivered oddly, like mercury. “What do you think it is?”

“I have no idea.”

“Did you see any track marks on her, earlier?”

“Well, it’s not heroin, you ass –”

“Obviously not. But the Westerns sometimes come up with …”

Their eyes met.

And they both jumped as the bathroom door creaked. “I – oh!” Moira gasped at the sight of them, and ducked back inside.

“Hello there, pretty. Here, now.” Azazel smiled; held out one hand. “Won’t you come out?”

The other hand, Charles saw, slipped the syringe up the sleeve of his jacket. Just how many tricks had he taught Erik?

Moira peeked around the door. “C-could I have my purse? Please?”

“I must have accidentally gathered it with your clothes. Here,” Azazel said, soothing, as he uncoiled to his feet and slid round the table, “there’s nothing to be afraid of –”

“What is he doing here?” came the tearful reply.

“Good question. Xavier?”

“I wanted –” Charles’ eyes snagged on Azazel’s tail, which had looped round the carved wood handle of Moira’s purse and was – putting the contents back in, the tip like a spatulate third hand – “I wanted to see if you were all right, miss. You were quite ill, not even an hour ago.”
She did not reply. Really, the sobbing and shivering act was getting a bit much; he was surprised Azazel was still convinced.

Or perhaps not surprised. For there was a particular gleam in Azazel’s ice-blue eyes when he passed the purse up to his hand with his tail. The tip flicked from side to side as he prowled towards Moira. “Here you are. See?”

With one thin hand, Moira clutched a towel where she had wrapped it round her body. She looked at the purse – and then hunched her shoulders as Azazel moved it just out of her reach.

“Why don’t you say ‘good evening’ to me, kitten?”

“Good evening,” she whispered.

“Fair enough. Now, why don’t you apologize for splashing me?”

“You took my things.”

“Also fair.” Azazel sighed. “Then … why don’t you …”

It was almost as awkward to watch as it would have been to enact. Charles knew he would have reached up more smoothly, brushing the back of his fingers over … say, Erik’s face … and from there, he would have drawn him into a kiss with a practiced curl of his hand.

Moira was clumsier. She had to press a palm on Azazel’s shirt and take hold for leverage; had to stand up on her toes to reach his mouth.

Charles gave them a minute. Then he coughed.

There was a wet sound – UGH, tongue already, he wouldn’t have done that –

“If you have a moment,” Charles said, cuttingly, “before I leave, I wanted to ask –”

“She’s fine,” Azazel replied, as his tail uncoiled from her ankle; started to trail back and forth over the carpet at their feet. “Unless – are you cold, sweet? Here.” Two steps and he snagged the bathrobe; two back and he held it out for her to slide her arms in the sleeves. “You finish up in there, and then come have some food, hm?”

Then he bent forward to listen to Moira’s whisper. “Of course,” he murmured, and skimmed the claw of one thumb down the curve of her neck. “Time to go, Xavier.”

“But –”

The bathroom door clicked shut; Moira had gone back in, holding her purse. Azazel bounced where he stood; like Kurt. “Come on – what now?”

“… What am I meant to be doing?”

“Watch some television; take a dip in the pool through our lady’s room; I don’t care.” They both heard the shower start again. Azazel blinked. “I’m not that dirty, am I?”

“We both know the answer –”

“Just make yourself scarce.”

“I – now you listen to me: don’t you ask for anything she doesn’t want to give you.”
“Who are you to talk? You were well along that path yourself –”

“Can you imagine what it must be like? You can see her skull; you can count her ribs. Give her some food, for pity’s sake –”

“I will.” A boot nudged the paper bag. “I brought some. See?”

“– and then, try not to make her sick. And if she wants to go anywhere, take her there. If you hurt her, I will personally –”

“Should I be writing these down?” Azazel said.

Charles glared at him as he folded his long limbs back into his chair and put his boots up on the table. The smug look turned into a frown, though, as Azazel drew the syringe out of his sleeve. “Sharp,” he said. And placed it under the chair.

“You –”

“Just a little prick.”

Charles raised his eyebrows.

“Right, fuck off, Xavier – or just think,” he smirked, “what she might do to get hold of that needle. Depending on what it is.”

“That’s terrible of you.”

“I’m joking, I’m joking …. Really.” He had interlaced his fingers over his shirt; they rested in the scoop of his abdomen. “I’ll try to be nice; I promise. And in the meantime, you can wait for Emma. She’ll take you downstairs if you want; she’ll leave you here if you want. You’ve been good enough.”

“I’m so glad to hear it,” Charles sneered. Then he realized: “Downstairs?”

“Lobby? Casino? That’s where they’ve been swarming all day. Up here’s too small.”

Charles coughed.

“All right, you’re such a smart man, now get out – unless you like to watch? Is that it, Xavier?”

Before he could retort, they heard a thump from the bathroom.

Charles was puzzled. The shower was still running. But …

He stretched out his power. Moira’s mind was – moving. Moving from higher up – diagonally, up and away, away.

Shite – she couldn’t fly all this time, could she?

The bang of the door slamming open jolted him out of his trance. And a snarl –

– and Azazel’s ferocious curses, as he swept in and out of the bathroom – and back in, and the water shut off with a screech.

“What happened?”
“What does it look like?!”

It looked, Charles thought, like the bathrobe’s belt, hanging from the open skylight.

“Son of a bitch,” he breathed. “She –” said it was locked –

“She went to the roof.” Azazel took a deep breath; exhaled and growled a laugh.

Charles stared as he started to stretch. “What are you doing?”

“Brave girl, running barefoot in February …. You know the only thing that’s better than sex, Xavier? A nice, long chase.” Azazel gave him a wicked grin, arching backwards with a crackle of vertebrae, “and sex at the finish line.”

“Before you talk to the Olympic Committee, you should know that civilized people have a different word for what you’re describing.”

“Shut up. She’ll have gone for the fire escape, and so …” Azazel tugged the bathrobe belt back down and wrapped it slowly around one arm. Strode back into the bedroom, considered, and picked up the slippers. He winked at Charles as he slid them into the pockets of his jacket. “Have fun at this party, if you go. And Emma doesn’t need to know about this whole situation, does she?”

“I –”

“Does. She.”


“See that you don’t.”

Without another word, Azazel teleported away. The smoke was the worst it had ever been – bitter and foul – or perhaps, Charles thought, it turned so when he heard Azazel kick the skylight shut.

It only hit him fully when he faced Frost five minutes later.

Moira had run without him. Again. But this time, when she could have far more easily taken him with her. What had she thought? That he would be a liability?

He had been prepared to go back and throw furniture at the skylight until it shattered, to find Moira’s mind and pulverize it, when he had felt the crystal of Frost’s thoughts swooping up in the elevator.

“Goodness, Charles, you do look pale. I know Azazel is busy for the evening,” she smirked, “but there’s no need to be envious. Go change your suit – the black, I think – and wait for me.”

For she was strolling towards her own room, coat over her sleeve … and undoing buttons down her front.

Charles obeyed.

But first, he went to Azazel’s room – retrieved the syringe from beneath the chair, wrapped it well, and hid it in his suitcase.

“What do you think?” Frost purred, turning in the middle of the room.
“Not much,” said Charles.

She glared.

“I mean that – there’s not much there.”

For he did not quite know where to look. Frost wore a long, trailing robe of … ermine, he had thought, until he had seen the furs were all pure white. *Mink*. She had not yet done up the robe’s ties. And beneath it, she wore …

… nicer lingerie than Moira’s, that was certain.

With certain other attributes … much nicer than Moira’s.

“It’s very striking.” Charles shifted where he stood. “I’m just –” and his gaze landed on her shoulder, “not used to seeing you this way, I suppose.”

Laughing, she walked up and plucked his sleeve. “Let’s go make a grand entrance.”

*Is it midnight already?* was on the tip of his tongue, but Raven stopped him. A distant part of him felt relieved.

“Comrade, are you – ah.” Frost sighed. “It seems he’s out and about. Perhaps he took her to the beach.”

“A beach?”

"Well, he has to have gone somewhere."

There were not linked, then, telepathically - Charles filed the fact away and tried to distract her further. "May I ask where, my lady?"

“You may ask, but I do not know.”

“Can’t you check?”

“Some things really shouldn’t be interrupted, should they? Enough of this. Let's go.”

Woodenly, Charles opened and closed doors, escorting her to the elevator. Once inside, she coiled one gloved hand round his arm. “Send your power down with mine,” she whispered, smiling. “Let’s cover the entire hotel. I’ll have no one sneaking up on either of us.”

Charles obeyed. Ice truly moved faster when given wings.

They left the elevator on the second floor; walked hand in arm to the balcony overlooking the first.

The party took up the entire lobby and stretched into what he could see of the casino. Charles looked round, head already pounding with noise and light; the pressure of scores of minds crammed into one building. There were so many people – where had she *gotten* so many people –

Too loud?

He closed his eyes. *How did you know?*

*That expression* .... Frost’s words rang with quiet truth in his mind. *You look how I used to feel.*
When, lady?

*When I was first put to the Finder, Charles.* She paused. Then sent, *Here.*

And Charles felt her hand against the side of his face; fingers sliding up his cheekbone to his temple. She had taken off her glove.

Her touch was the only thing cool enough to numb the hot crush surrounding him. He bit back a sigh of relief – so no one heard it. No one, he was confident, saw his expression change. The only one to detect any difference was the Queen.

And though she sent a pulse of sympathy to his mind, he saw, on opening his eyes, that she was the cold and beautiful picture of discretion to everyone who turned, and pointed, and applauded.

The rest of his time at the festivities felt only surreal.

He had memory to help him – his exchange year, and the image of the Duke of Edinburgh handing the Queen down the last few stairs into the Castle courtyard. Charles had been there with the people; had watched and cheered from a battlement. A step to the side, and turn … and his left hand out to extend her right, and bow the head. He saw the back of Frost’s hairstyle as she turned to wave; the steel and diamonds coiled over her long glove sparkled in the lights. Her furs looked like snow.

*Keep buttoned up, your Majesty,* he thought, taking his hand away and leading the fresh round of applause. He gazed over the crowd, their noise removed from his ears. Why were they clapping so? There had to be just as many Westerns here as mutants …

He had no idea.

Strong fingers dug into his arm again; he covered his wince. “Thank you, Charles,” Frost purred. “Let me introduce you to Leonid Brezhnev. Leonid Ilyich! This is my new friend, Charles Xavier, and he’s as safe as Erik,” an aside in Russian, and then the switch back: “Do shake hands, Charles.”

Charles shook hands with a man whose eyebrows looked ready to take over his face; made rote answers to pleasantries. His memory searched; gave him Erik’s murmur: *Golden Horde. He’s their leader.* Really, how charming.

“And this is Richard Slade, newly elected Vice President of the Free West. Richard! It’s been too long. Please allow me to introduce Charles Xavier, academic and telepath.”

Surrounded by agents – security – Slade looked … not quite well, Charles realized. Overflowing with hatred, clear enough; it oozed from his mind like radioactive waste. He had a cane at his side, but made a show of not leaning on it, as his face contorted at the sight of Charles’ outstretched hand.

He did not take it. “We’ve met,” he sneered instead.

Next to Slade, Agent Black went rigid.

*Oh, no. Oh, no – no –*

“… When?” Frost said. Charles felt it – a flash of suspicion from her. Panicked, he scrabbled for an image that would convince. And sent, blurry and jittering, the image of Free West soldiers making his bed with crimson sheets; himself, panicking – Frost snapping her fingers, *Tighter corners –*

*Ah. Poor Charles.* She caressed his mind and turned to Slade. “He’s had a haircut since.”
“Your gathering is most festive, Lady Frost,” Black said.

“I’m so pleased by your attendance. Do make sure to have some cake, Richard,” she murmured. “It’s to die for.”

Charles would have rolled his eyes to himself, but he was too busy with shaky relief. *Frost can be fooled* – at least for now, at least until she considered the slip-up with more attention. If only Slade would do something else just as stupid, to distract –

“I bring word from President Stryker, who –”

“But how is Lady Stryker?” Frost interrupted. “She hasn’t replied to my note.” She looked with interest from face to face – a spectrum of unease and confusion, ringed around her. Spencer was nowhere in sight.

“Charles, please fetch me a glass of wine.”

“White or red?”

“Red. Nothing too sweet, please.” And Frost brushed the location of the bar against his veils.

Back in Oxford, Charles reflected as he bowed and walked off, he would have known where the bar was before the party started. He avoided each cluster of people, Western or Eastern or … *others*, perhaps there were more from United Europe, or Mexico … and made it to the bar without anyone speaking to him.

“Red, please.”

“Charles,” Logan said, cautiously, “are you all right?”

He blinked at Logan, an island in a sea of bottles.

“I mean, you didn’t even wave ‘hi’, X man.”

“Sorry. I’ve had better days.”

“You and a lot of people – look over there.”

He turned to look at tables near sagging under the weight of delicacies, and surrounded by people … who, Charles saw, were politely pretending *not* to be ravenous. Mostly women, some very scantily clad indeed. Those with purses were placing wrapped pieces of food in them.

His mind flashed to Moira.

“I just need a glass of red,” he said to Logan’s silence. “Then I’m going to leave, I think.”

“Sure, leave us all the clean-up.” Logan poured him a glass, dark eyes worried. Then took a sip; swished it through his mouth.

“How uncouth. And who would try poisoning these bottles, with you right here?”

“I’m not taking any chances,” came the reply, as Logan handed him the goblet.

Charles elected not to tell him it was for Frost.

“See if you can hang around tomorrow, Charlie. I’ll be going back later; maybe we could talk.”
“Far better that we do so away from recording devices of both sides.” He raised the glass in a toast; sent: To the woods, and their health.

Logan said nothing. One day, Charles thought as he walked back, he would see why the two of them could not communicate well by mind. The exception being that time with Logan in Albany, himself at home … perhaps it had been adrenaline, or the distance. Moira and Armando, at least, could send words back to him.

“Raven,” he whispered. “Why don’t you find her for me?”

And he wondered if the teeming people could feel the strong fast movement of wings as the raven soared from him. Probably not – “Your wine, my lady” – for if Frost gave no indication of sensing it, he could not expect any from them. “May I please be excused.”

“Why, you’ve only just arrived.” Her color was high; she took a sip of wine without her eyes leaving his face.

... I don’t feel well.

That memory? Poor, poor Charles – and she did a poor job of covering her amusement, the bitch. Frost gave him a dazzling smile. Perhaps she thought he did not sense any deception. You may go. I assure you, Erik will not trouble you tonight.

Although he himself had given Erik permission …

With a smile, she handed him a key. Charles could not spare energy to be elated. He dragged a nod to her, and did not think again until he had reached the elevator – and then it was: Moira –

– and his raven snapped him to her mind in the blink of an eye.

She was hiding, that much was clear. In … he could hardly sense it. He searched for other minds; there were only two of them. Raven, flitting from one to another, two floors removed from each other, sent him the impression of pushing brooms round corner after corner – a maze – “An office,” he said to himself.

The elevator door opened, and he got out -

- just as Azazel’s mind appeared in a flash. Next to one of the sparks that had pushed a broom – Charles gasped at a flare of panic, catching like fire. And felt the spark run, stumbling … in a straight line. And then round and round, which had to be stairs.

Azazel’s mind was vibrating with another sort of amusement. Quite different from Emma’s.

Moira was on the same floor. Sweating, Charles waited for her to move.

She didn’t.

The second spark – another janitor? – had a mind in turmoil. It was easy to skim the surface – a silhouette against a window, turning slowly – and something slithering behind it that did not exist except in vids, and Charles received a torrent of images that would have been amusing at any other time: an actor with red face paint, twirling a lasso perhaps intended to be a tail –

- and thanks to the janitor, he realized that this was not like the vids, as something caught in his throat and – a jagged cough -
Through the janitor’s eyes, he saw Azazel swoop into a turn, grin like a wolf –
– disappear – the vapor swirling like oil on water –
– and then ice-blue eyes appeared in front of his and he had to scream, too –
Charles scrabbled with the key to the door. He forced it open, coughing just like the janitor had been
coughing, stumbled inside the suite.

*Moira*, he brushed her mind, *can you hear me?*

Terror felt so similar, he realized. The janitor’s, Moira’s … his own. He pressed a quick warning into
her mind, and looked through her eyes –
She was hardly breathing; the cloth of the bathrobe did not stir. She was huddled beneath something
– a desk, in a cubicle –
– and he watched what she watched. Past the lines of a chair, and perhaps two aisles down, Azazel
was walking slowly. *Silently.* Coiling down to look beneath a desk – then up again without breaking
his stride.

Charles withdrew and sent: *I’ll distract him. Get ready to run.*

A sharp surge of intent – the question *left or right?*

“*Right,*” he whispered. *Go right, as fast as you can. On three.*

He found Azazel’s mind - Schrödinger’s Mutant, thoughts revolving over each other in different
layers of reality.

*One*, he sent Moira. *Two.*

And he threw the image of a window in front of Azazel straight into his mind – any window, *that one there* – showing the flash of someone running in front of it – *Three!*

Azazel’s mind sliced through space – first gone, then back – and Moira’s exploded into movement.
Heart hammering, Charles followed her dash to the right, straight – faster and faster –

“*Shite, keep it quiet,*” he gulped, stumbling to his bedroom.

– and she cannonballed through what had to be a door, for she was circling - and sending off shock
waves of dismay – running down a stairway?

Had it been the slamming door that had tipped him off? For Azazel’s mind re-appeared on the one
side of that door. *Stairs.* And thus the dismay: for a teleporter, stairs would be like a cricket dash.
And indeed, the flicker began: first low, then high up, then low – But then a clatter and wailing siren,
a stab of pain through the flickering mind – had Moira pulled a fucking *fire alarm,* and it gone off in
Azazel’s ear? Charles could not account for it.

He felt a cool brush over his mind – with a gasp, he yanked all his power to himself, and concealed
it.

… *Charles?*

With a faux groan, Charles sent back a surge of *fear, confusion* – and above all, fatigue.
**Shh. I’m sending Logan to you. He’ll be there to guard you when you sleep.**

Which was very kind of her … Charles had no idea why she would do it, though. Perhaps trying to trap him into saying something for the audio devices. Perhaps she was concerned for his safety, which would be a first.

Perhaps, he realized suddenly, because she remembered she had sent him up there with the suite key.

Logan …

*I need you to know,* came Logan’s gruff voice from his memory, *some day, maybe soon, you’re going to have to make a choice.*

Charles sat down on his bed. He turned onto his side and curled up, clenching his fists – putting one to his mouth. He had helped Moira again; why, he had no idea, since she hadn’t helped him.

And Azazel was one thing, but on their side stood Logan, Ororo … and all the children, too.

He could not bear to reach out to Moira again, even to check. Nor to speak to anyone. So he stayed on his side, back to the door, and said nothing to Logan – who walked into his room and settled on the couch with a sigh.

Charles smelled a cigar. And if Logan could smell his fear, he was kind enough not to mention it.

That night was the worst thus far. No gloating from Frost, or violence from Azazel … nothing from Erik.

But Charles had a terrible dream.

It contained nothing but the sight of a shadow gliding away from Frost's balcony. Perfectly ordinary; shadows flew through dreams all the time.

Except then this shadow rippled like a manta ray, visible from his own balcony, gliding in slow, methodical circles, with the occasional movement to it like a vast bird flapping its wings … until it flew into a square where the power had gone out.

It did not reemerge.

Charles had not been a praying man for quite some time. He had not been a praying youth after the War. And even Before, his parents had been lackadaisical, and he had only ever petitioned the deity for the happiness of his pet rabbit.

But *this.* He was afraid in a way he had not been afraid when he walked at Azazel’s side, or even when he learned Erik was loose.

In his dream, saliva pooled in his mouth, sour with bile. *All those people. Dear God. Please. All those people in there.*

Surely it would be too much for Frost to have a pact with Death. Death, flying high above the city, nothing escaping its gaze in the dark. It would fall on its prey from a great height, a terrible angel – as cold and cruel as Frost … as fast as Azazel …

... whose voice scratched on Charles’ ears. “I need him.”
“No,” Logan’s voice swam into his consciousness, gruff. “He’s tired.”

“I’m tired. It’ll take me half an hour, at least, and you could get thrown off the roof.”

“And he has no way of recovering if he gets beaten to a pulp.”

“Cheyarafilm hasn’t left yet. Maybe we could -”

“Hell, no! You know what I -”

“Logan?” Charles croaked. He sat up with an effort; ran one hand through his hair. *Ugh*; he hadn’t brushed his teeth before falling asleep.

“I’d say ‘nice suit,’ Xavier, but …”

Charles turned to look at Azazel, as calmly as he could. “But?”

“You’ve gone and wrinkled it.” Azazel shook his head at him, smiling. “Don’t let Emma find out.”

He forced a smile back. *Best friends, are we? You psychotic murdering –*

“Hey, Chuck. How’re you feeling?”

“Better than I was. A combination, I think, of too many minds, too much rich food. I’ll be fine,” he finished. “I just need fresh air.”

“What a coincidence – that’s what I need,” said Azazel, bluff. “And your help.”

Charles looked at Logan. “Mine?”

A flick of tail. “If you have a moment.”

“Where’s Frost?”

“I took her back already. Playing goddamned taxi all morning,” and Azazel strode out the door. “We’re the last ones here. Let’s go; give me your hand –”

“No, I – I mean, I’ll be sick.”

A grunt. “Probably. Meet you up there?/” he said, nodding at Logan.

“Why the fuck not?”

“Good man.”

Azazel teleported away. Logan walked; Charles followed him, after almost tripping over his suitcase. He had to admit he was curious; and even more so when they went into the elevator and Logan turned a key in the lock above the button marked *R*.

“The roof?”

“Roof.”

That was all, until the doors opened on an expanse of blinding light, blue sky – frigid air – Charles shivered –

“X man?”
– and looked back. “Yes?”

Logan sighed. “Be careful.”

“Be careful of what?”

Logan looked over his shoulder. Nodded. So Charles turned, and saw Azazel hunched over … a body.

“Wonderful. Who’d you kill now? I –”

The words caught in his throat.

“… Erik?” Charles said.

Azazel glanced up. “Come here, please?”

Please, echoed through his mind. Cautiously, he walked closer.

“This is how this is going to work, Professor. I have you,” a red hand closed round his wrist, “and if he goes for your throat, I’ll take you away, safe. Understand?”

“No,” Charles stammered. “Why would he go for my –”

His eyes caught on flashes of body – the perfect lines of chest and shoulder, the tattoos – the gold glint of hair, in a line, disappearing at the waistline of Erik’s trousers. He shook off the distraction. “At least you got clothes on him.”

“I didn’t take them off in the first place,” Azazel slapped Erik’s face with his free hand, gently. “Come on. Erik – come back.”

“What happened?”

For Charles now realized: that lovely expanse was covered by tight-stretched lines – visible as Erik mumbled and rolled – the white-pink of new skin.

“Busy few nights.”

“I felt something,” Logan called.

Azazel had not let go of Charles. But he reached for Erik’s hair; took hold and shook. “Erik. Come on, my friend. We’ve got things to do. Hm?” He shook again. “My Yerka, wake up.”

Russian, Charles realized. He blinked as Azazel turned Erik back over, pushing, and – Charles clenched his teeth as Azazel pulled his arm, and draped it over Erik’s face.

He felt breath puff against his dress shirt.

“Definitely felt something,” Logan called again.

“Not fast enough. Skin, let’s have some skin – roll your sleeve up, Xavier.”

“What?” Charles jerked away. “I’ll do no such thing.”

“Trust me,” Azazel said, “it’ll be … fine?” he breathed, easing backwards as Erik mumbled again and – sat up. “Hell. Howlett?”
“Nothing now.”

“All right, Xavier, just let him – ah, there we are.”

For Erik had tipped forward, one arm falling with him – and a hand reaching out for Charles. He grabbed; growled; yanked Charles close.

“Oi.”

“… Good,” Azazel said. “Let’s see how long it takes, this way.”

Charles hoped no one heard the squawk that came from his throat as Erik slung another arm round him and nuzzled into his chest, breathing in his scent. “Do you mind telling me what the hell this is?”

“As I said, he’s had a long few nights. It takes him a while to come back after getting put back together. Body, mind … and I wouldn’t care, but while we’re still here,” Azazel’s hawk profile turned, scanning other rooftops, “I don’t like it lasting so long.”

“Why not just teleport him someplace safer?”

“He panics.”

“Then … what do you normally do?”

A shrug. “Hold him underwater.”

Charles went still. It was difficult, since Erik was running hands over his back and leaving a wet mark on the front of his shirt, rubbing his mouth over him. He held tighter to the solid warmth of muscle, petting. “That’s terrible.”

“One might say …” and Azazel folded his hands where he sat, cross-legged, “Erik and I? We’ve enough due for what we do, to stand a little recompense.”

“I might definitely say that. Did you kill her?”

“… Kill who?”

“That poor woman, yesterday. Mary Mack.”

A hum. “Is that her name? Miss Mack.” Azazel stretched again; smiled off into space.

Charles waited, pushing occasionally at Erik to keep him from bearing him down to the gravel of the rooftop. He was practiced now, wrangling; that did not mean that he wanted an audience for Erik rutting against him and diving for his tonsils.

“Whoa,” and Logan’s voice came from further back, “elevator time. He’s coming.”

Hurriedly, Charles checked Erik’s trouser front; no wet spot, so – ah. Perhaps Logan had just meant ‘coming back.’

“Coward,” Azazel hooted after Logan. “See you downstairs. And to answer your question, Xavier … I did not kill her; brave Mary. Not that she did not richly deserve it.”
It rang with truth. Charles hardly dared believe it. “How so?”

“Don’t ask.”

“I’m curious.”

“Long chase, right? I just wasn’t expecting a tripwire in the middle of it. Trip. Wire.” Azazel took off his boots and stood. “I took a fall, and I still have whiplash.”

“It hurt?”

“Just aches and pains. You tell anyone, I’ll have your head.”

“My lips are sealed.”

“About this, too. Yes?”

Charles blinked at the change in his tone. Then – blinked again, as Azazel sighed, tipped his head back up to the sun … and stripped off his shirt. His steel necklace glittered against his muscled chest. Hello. Perhaps, Charles thought, he could be persuaded to leave a record of rights and wrongs at a bedroom door.

Erik growled.

“All right, sorry,” Charles whispered, stroking his hair. “I’m just playing. I don’t really like him at all.”

No one was there to see. So he brushed his hand down Erik’s nape; placed his lips in the hinge of his jaw. Inhaled. He had to swallow, since beneath the smell of soap – one lesson that took – Erik’s scent was just as he remembered, from just a few days ago.

He tried a brush with his mind. Erik’s own mind leaped for the touch, tried to latch on – tried to cling to Charles’ power, desperately, with all his own strength.

“Easy,” Charles whispered into his skin. “Shh.” He tightened his grip – Erik was shivering, even in the sun.

“Yerka, look here,” Azazel called. He took a bag from one pocket, and tipped its contents onto the roof. They rattled.

Erik lifted his head. This close, in profile, Charles could see the lens of his eye and the red-gold of his lashes. He tried pressing a kiss to Erik’s temple.

A snort. Erik shook his head; blinked dazedly.

Leaning back, Charles saw bits of – something, lying on the rooftop round Azazel. Then he saw them rise into the air and start to circle, slowly. Bullets.

“That’s it!” A handclap; then a rhythm, starting. “Let’s go! Get up!”

And Azazel bounced on the balls of his bare feet – teleported and had to have grabbed some limb, for Erik was torn out of his arms, and Charles could only watch the two of them, as they rolled to a stop near the edge of the roof.

“Be careful!” he shouted, scrambling to his feet.
“I know what I’m doing!”

Another burst of vapor – they reappeared on the building’s opposite side. Heart in his mouth, Charles watched the bullets – now a cloud – whip through the air in their direction.

Azazel let Erik go with a laugh – emerged from thin air in a somersault, far away again.

Erik stood.

The bullets moved round him like electrons in an atom.

“Over here!”

And bloody hell, Charles could see where Kurt got it. Azazel was tumbling head over heels like a gymnast, right on the building’s edge – taking care, each time, to whip his tail out of the way; snapping his fingers with each flip.

He teleported once more. To another roof.

“What the hell?” Charles shouted.

Azazel made no reply; just started up the gymnastics again, the bloody show-off. Then Charles sucked in a breath as Erik turned, raised a hand to shadow his eyes, and rolled his shoulders. “Erik. You can’t think of doing – you can’t –”

But he broke into a sprint, pelted across the roof – leaped –

“Erik!” Charles screamed.

– and landed gracefully, on the other side of the chasm.

The bullets flashed after him.

Charles knew he was gaping. But it was difficult not to. What he had just seen was impossible.

Azazel whooped and started flickering in and out of sight – teasing, running Erik round in circles. They leaped to another building, and then started to run in earnest.

If he had been pressed, he supposed he would admit … that it was –

“Pretty impressive.”

Charles controlled his jump. His bloody power, completely distracted by the beautiful thrum of Erik’s mind …. He turned to see, behind him, Agent Black, framed by the door of the elevator shed. “What are you doing here?”

“I might ask the same.”

“I’m watching morning calisthenics.”

“It’s –”

“Noon, is it? Again? My sense of time is off, and Erik took my watch, so please don’t gloat at me -”

"- it's," Black continued, "a nice morning. You missed a good sunrise. They don't happen as fast as sunsets, but they're a pretty sight; all the birds singing."

Black hummed and took off his own. He handed it to Charles. It was oddly light. Plastic? "If you had flown here, I’d have said you were jet-lagged. Maybe ... teleporter-lagged."

“What do you mean by this?”

“Well. You want a watch, and there’s one.”

"But it's yours."

"It's fine." And - Black fished another watch, identical to the first, of his trouser pocket. "I have backup."

"That you just happen to carry around with you?"

Black sighed. "You know, there's such a thing as over-thinking, Xavier."

"And over-thinking a kind gesture, to boot." Charles put the watch in his own trouser pocket. "Thank you."

“No problem."

They both watched Azazel and Erik run and tumble, leap and pounce. Charles sneaked a look at Black out of the corner of his eye. If he knew anything about intrigue, he’d expect a play made for his loyalties … any minute, now.

But Black seemed content to say nothing.

“Is Captain MacTaggert all right?” Charles finally said.

A nod. “She ran her feet raw, so she can’t really stand, but she’s watching. Binoculars.”

“Really?” Charles grinned. “Where?”

“I’d tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

“You’d have to try.”

“Mr. Xavier …” Black started. Then he frowned at his shoes.

“If you’re going to seduce me to your side, double-time it. Logan – James Howlett – might come back up that elevator any minute."

“I can two-time with the best of them. And the Wolverine …. Can’t you just let me know when he’s on his way?”

“I think I’ve done enough for your side, recently. Tell MacTaggert she owes me double now.”

“Will do. I’m not going to make any offer, Mr. Xavier. But I just want you to know that there are other options for you.”

Charles stared. Then dredged up a laugh. "Really? Because I don’t see many.”

“In the West, you could –”

“Get wired up to some machine or whatever you do to telepaths. I’ve seen the blueprints.”
“I wonder if your people came by those honestly.”

“Does it matter?” And Charles smiled to himself; the dismay seeping through the cracks in Black’s shields, truth on all frequencies, was enough confirmation for Hank.

“Never mind that. I don’t agree with a lot of what my current government does –”

“With MacTaggert, that makes two of you –”

“There are more of us. And we’re working together.”

Charles felt his skin prickle. “… Are you?”

Black took out – a spray bottle, what the hell? – and started spritzing himself with it. “I had better go, before Howlett gets back. Just remember our name –”

“… which is?”

“The Feds.”

He snorted. “That’s it?”

“Here’s our phone number.” Black flicked him a card. Then, smiling slightly, misted some of the spray over him.

“That had better not be poison!”

“Just to throw Howlett off my scent.” A distant shout – and a whoop from Azazel – made Black huff in surprise. “I’d really better go.”

“You don’t want to drop from a very great height.”

“Not my idea of fun, no. Call us, if you need to, Charles. Use the name Dr. Noman.”

“… You were listening in on that, too? Is there a god damned Free West party line?”

“We have to keep track of Slade, too.”

“Tell Moira good luck with that, or – do something about her, man. Keep her off the front line for a while. She’s going to get herself killed.”

“I can’t.” Black pressed the button for the elevator.

“Why not?”

“Because, Xavier …” He put his hands in his pockets. “I take my orders from her.”

They waited for the elevator in silence.

When it arrived, Black got in and fixed him with a serious look. “Don’t go sending Lehnsherr after us, all right? Neyafim was bad enough.”

Charles watched the doors slide shut.

… Why anyone would think that …

Moira, Azazel, himself …. He cast his mind back over their interactions. He hadn’t had the chance to
keep Azazel from snapping up Moira like he had the cinnamon roll.

… Had he?

It was more restful to watch Azazel and Erik leap from roof to roof, silhouetted against the sky, than it was to consider this endless intrigue. His empty days at the manor would give him time enough to brood; the children’s party aside. Saturday. It was Thursday morning now, and he had to make two cakes.

… He had to get the memory back from Jean. This time, Charles knew he would.

He closed his eyes, enjoying the crisp air, the light breeze, the warmth of the sun on his face. And he felt the prickle of Logan’s mind, moving up in the elevator, before he heard the growled, “X.”

“Mm?”

“Got a hanky?”

"A what?"

"A handkerchief, Professor, câlic de crisse."

“Oh. No. You could have my jacket, though.” Charles took it off; handed it over. “It needs a wash anyway.”

“Thanks.” Logan wiped sweat and grime from his face, grimacing. “I’m ready to leave here.”

“Yes, you’ve had a rough week so far. Poison tester; punching bag –”

“And Lehnsherr’s personal jingle toy.” He sniffed, and then groaned, bending to touch his toes. “This air’s too dry. Nosebleed city.”

“I understand - I had one earlier.”

“Doesn’t look like they’re done yet.”

“No.”

“When they are, I told Azazel to take you first.”

"You'll stay?"

"Yeah - I deal with Lehnsherr for a bit, 'cause you don’t need a reunion. Do you?"

“Not on a roof, certainly. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Charles let the quiet settle. Soon enough, there would be the noise of home and routine. For now, he listened to the ongoing chase and watched the two shadows flitting across grey-white rooftops. And if he sent his thoughts out to fly alongside Erik – silver-gold to his raven’s eyes – he was safe, for there was no one in the West who could see them.
Spoilers for the circumstances of dubcon & sex trafficking:

Moira has been imprisoned in a brothel: punishment for refusing Free West rehabilitation. (Yes, this is a pulp/fanfic/lowbrow version of Atwood's Jezebel scene in "The Handmaid's Tale.") She takes Azazel's offer to help her leave, gives him a kiss that has dubious (at best) consent ... and then breaks out of the penthouse and runs for freedom.

She and Azazel play out this chase/race/cat-and-mouse game ... offstage. Whether or not they actually have sex, and what they think about it if they do, I leave to you to determine.

... and if someone were to write me ANY version of the chase (think the raptor kitchen scene in Jurassic Park), for a happy New Year? I would be so, so grateful! :D
Thanks to:

Everyone, for your patience and for following, still!

Irena, Rena, Kernezelda, and etxaberri, for read-throughs of various length, and for all your feedback!

Rena, for Erik’s Hebrew; Gier00 and daenerysstubborn for the Spanish; etxaberri, for the correct Latinate version of Erik’s tattoo; miss-jinx, clarounette, and wesker, for the French; and finally, riasfallingpieces, and oxy-mora, for a bit of German – though one did not end up where I thought it would. :D

I am still overwhelmed and exceedingly grateful for the creative works made for this fic. Thank you so much, all creators. I’ll update the compendium soon – in the meantime, please check out this awesome video, made by etxaberri and Aeirik.

... seriously: wow!

I watch this on repeat. A lot. And I’m still finding details I missed before. Thanks, guys, for your amazing work!

So, away we go. Hope you enjoy this – yes, it’s long, but 1) there’s pr0n, and 2) there maaay be a few reveals. :D

ETA 6/8/14 - thanks to Tigist for help with previous chapters’ Amharic, and a better name for Haile (a)Zänäbä. :D

ETA II 7/11/14 - thanks to Molly and etxaberri, for the catch and confirm: Emma’s surname should in fact be Morozova. Retconned! :D

The manor library materialized in front of his eyes, wreathed in the smoke of Azazel’s power.

Clutching at the table for support, Charles stared at the frost etched on the library windows. He tried to stay with the memories of Nevada: the wind chapping his lips at the top of the Hoover Dam, the dry dust of Las Vegas, the sunlight beating down on the three of them – Azazel, Logan, Erik – on the hotel roof.

And Agent Black.

He shoved his hands into his pockets, concealing the plastic watch. His fingers brushed the card Black had given him - shite.

“That’s that.” Azazel snapped his tail through the air and sauntered over to the West Wing door. “You’re welcome.”
“Thank you,” said Charles. His tongue felt like lead. “But –”

Azazel stopped, turned, and leaned his shoulder against one door.

He looked well, Charles thought, wildly. No sign that whatever had been in the syringe had affected him. A long chase of a night and a short one of a morning had made his vermillion skin even more vivid than usual.

At least he had put his shirt back on.

“What is it, Xavier?”

“What happens to Erik?”

The last Charles had seen, Erik had been staring up at the antenna on a building roof. Then Azazel had teleported him back to – he looked towards the cold library hearth, shivering.

“Erik? Professor Xavier, you’ve kept your head on your shoulders and your blood in your body. What do you care about him?”

“I’m just curious.”

“You know what they say about curiosity.” Azazel rolled his shoulders, caught his hands behind his head, stretched. “He’ll go up to Wyoming. We have a lead on a lab there; he and I get to do the reconnaissance. Anything else before I go?”

“Where’s my suitcase?”

“Ask Pryde, not me.”

“And where’s Fr – our Lady?”

Azazel smirked. “Mexico.”

“Let me guess why.”

“You go back to babysitting, Xavier. And if my son –”

“You don’t have to threaten me. I swear he’ll be fine.”

“Good.”

“Don’t you want to say hello to him?”

Azazel’s mouth thinned, and he vanished.

“… Well.”

Charles felt blank. He drew his hands out of his pockets. Looked at their backs.

Then he turned one over, and uncurled his fingers to look at his new watch.

It was flimsy. The strap was thin – another form of synthetic. Charles had never seen anything like it. He would figure out how to adjust the hands, but for now he changed the time mentally. It was enough to know that it was nearing one o’clock in the afternoon.

*Mr. Xavier! You’re back!*
Jean’s mind was approaching at a rapid clip, a shimmering coal rolling down the hallway. Charles dropped the watch back into his pocket and walked to the library door, the better to open it and surprise her with a hug.

Oh! She wrapped her arms around his waist. We missed you.

“Did you?” He leaned into the force of her thoughts, smiling: fire-bright joy. “What happened to ‘the cat is away and the mice will play?’”

Princess Alexandra’s still here.

“Of course she is,” Charles paused. There had been a burst of heat from Jean’s mind at the thought of the kitten. “Where is she now?”

We’re playing circus and she’s the lion. Was it O.K. that we went into your room, Mr. Xavier?

“I’d far rather you didn’t, but what’s done is done.”

We didn’t mean to! Princess Alexandra ran under your bed. Jean gave him a reproachful look. A drawing I made was there.

“I’m sorry, dear.” He quickened his steps towards the dormitory. “Circus, you say?”

Scott’s the ringmaster and I’m the lion tamer. Kurt will go on the trapeze as soon as we figure out how to make one. We found a circus book in the library – that’s how we learned it all.

“I see. And you’re back in your room?”

Yes. Jean dashed ahead of him to her door, opened it, and jumped up and down where she stood until he caught up. Come in!

The first thing that Charles noticed was the smell. He coughed. “Goodness. Jean, has Princess Alexandra learned to use that dirt box yet?”

Sort of.

“She had better learn completely, and fast.” His eyes were watering. “It rather reeks in here, darling.”

“Hey, Mr. Xavier,” Scott said from the floor. “Kurt’s the smelly one.”

A bare blue foot shot out from under the bed. “Am not!”

“Are so!” Scott dodged the kick and laughed as Princess Alexandra pounced on Kurt’s tail.

“Jean,” Charles spoke over Kurt’s yelps, “detach her, please.”

Jean obeyed, cuddling the kitten in her arms. She’s trying. And I clean the box whenever she goes.

“Good lord. With what?”

Mr. Muñoz gave me a saucepan from the kitchen.

“And … then what?”

Jean promptly opened her bathroom door and pointed. Charles winced. With no water to speak of … Ugh. Even with the pipes thawing intermittently, it smelled like every bit of cat dirt put in the
the toilet was still there.

“Jean.” He shook his head. “I’ll figure out a better system, and we’ll implement it.”

*I don’t care if it smells.*

“It’s not just that it smells. It’s that people can get very sick from not cleaning up properly after animals. Just like from eating off the floor or from drinking bad water – things like that.”

Her eyes went wide, looking up at him, as she squeezed the kitten hard. Princess Alexandra flailed and mewed. *She could make us sick?*

*Could,* nothing. Charles looked at the adorable tableau in dismay. That cat could have *worms* – why hadn’t he thought of it before? “Be careful not to hurt her, Jean.”

*I’m sorry, Mr. Xavier!* She looked ready to burst into tears.

“Well, the stench is not your fault; you did your best. Just take care to wash your hands whenever you can, all right? And we’ll do some cleaning tomorrow.”

“But we were going to have a party,” Scott whined.

“That’s Saturday. Work before play. Who knows?” said Charles. “Maybe you’ll get some presents. Now come along – where’s Mr. Muñoz?”

*He went to the West Wing.*

“Did he?” Charles said, evenly. “Have you had lunch yet?”

“No!” Kurt rolled out from under the bed, dust in his black hair. “I’m so hungry!”

“Then let’s go have some.”

*And we’ll wash our hands extra hard.*

“That’s right.” He gathered his power and sent it flying in search. What had Armando been thinking, leaving the children by themselves? What if one of them had been hurt? What if Kurt had teleported away?

Raven made one pass after another over the West Wing as Charles went through the motions of taking in the soup pot from its snow bank, setting it to thaw and stoking the fire beneath it, searching for bread to stave off the children’s clamoring.

And – *there.*

“Nice try,” he whispered to the soup. Armando’s mind was intent on … a search of its own.

*Surprise,* Charles sent, and smiled to himself at the jump he sensed.

Then he absorbed a surge of crackling static from Armando, shaped like, *Back?*

*No, I’m reaching you from Nevada that Was. Of course I’m back.*


Charles kept his touch constant on the prickle of thought - and, carefully, he turned his back to the
children as he stirred the soup. Then he slid out Black's card from his pocket and memorized the telephone number. 720 1 888 1416. "The Feds," he whispered to himself, and flicked the card into the fire.

Just in time, too; Armando shut the kitchen door hard. “Could you stop? You’re giving me a headache.”

Charles made sure that the card had crumbled to ash; then straightened, smiled, and took the touch of his mind away. “Since you ask so nicely.”

“You’re worse than Frost. Hey, kids.” Armando moved round them to fetch a bowl and spoon.

Wash your hands! burst from Jean’s mind like fire.

“Ow,” Scott yelped. Kurt threw a slice of bread at her; it fell to the floor.

“Don’t waste food, Smee. And Peter Pan? Wendy says quiet down.”

“As does Michael.” Armando held out a hand. “I’ll take that bread.”

But you can get sick from eating off the floor! Mr. Xavier said so.

“I don’t get sick.” He popped the bread into his mouth. “I’ve got the strongest stomach in the Western hemisphere. And speaking of the West, Xavier – how was it?”

Charles stirred the soup. “We were put up in a hotel; one of the biggest I’ve ever seen. Very luxurious.”

“Nice.”

“And warm. Very warm. I should have brought back some of the blankets. Hell –”

No bad language in the kitchen, Mr. Xavier!

“ – by which I mean: my goodness, I should have taken them all. And Ororo is well, Jean. She sends her greetings.”

"Who?" Armando said.

"Storm, you might have heard her called." Are you the Weathermaker's daughter - Charles tucked the memory away. "How were things here while I was gone?"

“Fine. The day you left the kids made one big card, with … well. Finger painting.”

“I didn’t know we had paint.”

“I took some condiments from the mess hall.”

“Oh, that’s disgusting –”

“And then Kurt ate some of it. The whole project’s a loss – it took the better part of that day to clean them up.”

“Not in the library, I hope?”

“Down here.”
“Speaking of cleaning – children, give me that, I’ll cut it into thirds – one moment, Scott; calm down.” Charles did his best to rip a soft apple apart with a fork. Armando reached out and sliced through it with a finger. “Thank you. Here you are – and so, speaking of cleaning: thanks to plumbing problems, Jean’s room is unsanitary. We’ll fetch supplies from wherever we can find them, and we’ll clean tomorrow, all right? And you.” He turned to Armando. “Telling her to clean a dirt box with a saucepan? What were you thinking?”

“You think I ever kept a pet?”

“Fair enough, but children and animals have some principles in common, don’t they?”

“She’s not even big as this bowl.”

“It’s not how much of a mess; it’s over how many days. Go on and take a whiff, then come back and tell me what you think. Or you could tell me what you were just doing over in the West Wing.”

“I checked channel four – sometimes we get the weather, you know. Then I went to storage and got a few more blankets.”

Armando’s words tuned perfectly: truth. “So …”

“So we’re due for another blizzard. I can feel the pressure change in my sinuses.”

“Oh, just send me back to the hotel.”

“Somehow I doubt they’d be as friendly a second time.”

“They were hardly friendly the first time,” Charles sighed as the children’s noise peaked. “Really, what’s all the fuss now?”

Turning round, he took in the sight: the children, dirty and threadbare, waging a tug-of-war for the one half-rotten apple remaining. The light from the stove fire was growing more and more dim – he could no longer see the dust in the corners, the stain from water damage above the door. And he did not have to concentrate hard to hear a distant moan: the winter wind picking up strength and speed.

He was wearing a thin, button-down shirt of finest linen; thus, his shivering. There was nothing fearful or wretched about it; not at all.

“Don’t scorch the soup,” Armando said.

“You ladle it out, all right? I’ll return shortly.”

“Where are you going?”

“Upstairs,” Charles said, bitter. “It’s back to wearing sweaters for me. Surely you can give me five bloody minutes to fetch one?”

He stayed longer than five minutes. Long enough to inspect Sean’s room, and to realize that the cold had put paid to any smell from the clothes, all now gathering dust. Charles shook them out from their crumpled heaps; sorted; folded. He would wash them all. Sean would be pleased, if he ever returned.

And Jean could sleep someplace sanitary until they cleaned her room.

“Bleach,” he told Armando as he bumped the kitchen door shut, struggling to tug a sweatshirt down over his green sweater. “Diluted, of course, but we’ll need something strong to cut through the filth
in the sinks and tubs, and I vote bleach.”

“You know there’s ammonia in cat piss, right?”

“Mr. Xavier!” Scott sang out. “Mr. Muñoz said ‘piss’!”

“I heard him.”

The steam from the soup did not obscure Armando’s smirk. “I thought you were a professor before all this.”

“Of a sort.”

“So bleach plus ammonia equals –”

“I understood the first time. You don’t have to help me,” Charles said, taking the bowl of soup that Armando held out. “I’m perfectly capable of cleaning by myself. And that would leave you more time in the West Wing, wouldn’t it?” He put his lips to the brim and sipped, his eyes not leaving Armando’s. “What, exactly, has your interest there? Besides weather and the news? Since both would have taken you all of fifteen minutes to check …”

Armando sighed. “Give it a rest.”

“Then you don’t deny it.”

“Deny what?”

“That you’ve been spending time there. Using the telephone? You’ve done that. Memorizing the layout? I’ve done that. What, then? Are you set on digging up some of Frost’s secrets?”

“Sounds like you know more about them than I do. Anyway, ‘secrets’ is a bit –”

“I have a secret!” Kurt shouted. “I’m almost going to lose my tooth!”

Scott huffed. “It’s not a secret if you yell it, dummy.”

"Scott,” Charles snapped, "don't use names like that."

_and I lost one first!

“See, Mr. Xavier?” Kurt jumped off the bench, caught hold of his legs, and began jogging in circles. “See?”

“You are speaking with more of a lisp. Let’s see. Hold still. Make your smile big.” Charles grasped one fang. “Hmm …”

“Thee?”

“Maybe in a week or so.” Charles let go, and went back to his soup. “I’ll have to check with your father; he’ll know how long it takes. But in less than a week, we have our party …”

“Saturday!” Scott said.

“And we’re going to clean as much as we can before then. So all of you go upstairs and pull out any of your clothes that are dirty. Put them in a pile in the hallway – see if you can stack them without a single sock falling off.”
“Like a game?” Kurt squeaked.

“Exactly. It’s the cleaning game. Last one to finish making a pile of clothes has to watch the laundry machines go. But wash your plates in the sink first – hurry up.”

The children dashed to the sink; Scott working to push their bench over. Armando moved to make room. “The cleaning game?”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Not really. I’ll tell you what, though.” And Armando gave him a small smile. “I’ll handle the bleach.”

Later that night, when the children finally gave up cleaning, they slept like rocks. Charles saw them piled into one bed – Sean’s – and tucked them in securely, with a warm blanket that Armando had given him. Just once. They were all so young that it didn’t matter.

He caught Kurt’s tail and placed it back beneath the covers. “Stay put.”

“Hey,” Armando whispered from the door.

It was difficult to hear him, since the wind’s unholy racket was audible through two sets of walls and a hallway. Charles held a finger to his lips and eased away from the children’s bed.

He coughed in the hallway, on the lingering smell of their first go-round with the bleach. Carefully diluted, yes, but strong enough to catch, acrid, in his throat.

“All right?”

“I’m fine.” He waved off Armando. “It’s fine.”

“Fine.”

It was almost too gloomy to see. Armando was holding a candle that had dripped wax down his hand. Cleaning in the dark …

“I wish we had electric light here,” Charles sighed.

“Me too. It doesn’t make any sense that we don’t.”

“I know. I mean, in the West Wing –”

“– there’s outlets as soon as you hit the main atrium.”

“Where?”

Armando paused. Then focused on him, and – Charles saw a flickering image, projected to his mind.

“Good job. You mean the Hive.” He tossed the image back, grinning. “At least, that’s what I call it.”

“Yeah. So I don’t know why she didn’t wire the whole place, if she was going to go all-out with the tech down there anyway.”

“It’s that advanced …”

“Their war room, yes. The medical rooms, further down and to the north –”
“Ah, yes. I was put in an MRI last December.”

“Who has an MRI in one wing and candles in the other? All that tech, and that’s leaving out the Finder, which – yeah.” A quick shake of the head. “If the West gets one look at it …”

“If they even know it’s here.”

“It’s been years, Professor. Of course they know it’s here.”

“Honestly, then what is stopping them?” Charles made sure the children’s door was closed tight. “Even if she’s a telepath. Especially now that the Free West has a workable counter to her power, at least on the smallest scale – what’s keeping them from infiltrating this place and assassinating her? Or, if that’s too cloak-and-dagger, they could have obliterated everything here years ago. With bombs.”

Armando grimaced, and then tipped his head towards his room.

Charles followed him.

Only after Armando put the candle in its holder on a marble-topped table did Charles take a longer look round. “Good lord.” He grinned. “You’ve been busy.”

“Yeah.”

“Why not be imprisoned in comfort? An excellent philosophy.”

For it seemed Armando had taken what he liked from a storage room Charles had not known existed. There was a vast leather chair in one corner, a lovely carved cabinet in another, and the marble-topped table next to the bed. There were blankets on the bed and a few pinned up to give cover and color to the walls. There was a broom and dustpan next to the bathroom door. “And you keep clean, too.”

“I know I’m cleaner than you.” Armando waved him to the chair, folding up his legs to sit on the bed.

“And you never thought to clean the children’s –”

“Xavier? Leave it. We both have been taking them to wash up; we’ve been doing their laundry. The fact that this place is a literal shithole – neither of us can help that. And if you think I’m doing the heavy lifting on a bleach-water overhaul, by myself? You sound like Dallas folk.”

“What?” Charles was flummoxed. “Why?”

There was no fire in the room. So Charles only watched the fur slowly growing over Armando’s face by candlelight – and watched his eyes narrow. “Guess.”

“I have no idea.”

“I’m the color of their servants, Xavier. Look me in the eye and tell me you …”

Charles knew he was gaping.

“… you just didn’t think of it? Really?”

“I didn’t! They don’t have that in Britain.”
“Bullshit.”

“No – they don’t. Well. I mean, there’s a fair amount of anti-Semitism out of Coventry, because of the Party of Purity there.” Charles put their new presence in Oxford out of his mind. “And the Ethiopians, and those from the colonies – except India was independent in ’47, of course. Well. They mostly keep to themselves.”

“Colonies? Really?”

“It’s not like that –”

“You don’t think?”

“I don’t think that. Not at all.”

“Must be nice, not to think about it.”

Charles felt his jaw tighten. “Look. Take a blanket apology, for whatever you like – thinking. Not thinking. I don’t know what you want me to say, or what I can say.”

“I’m not taking anything from you.” Armando laced his fingers together around one bent knee. “I don’t care. But you’re cold, Charles?”

“Obviously.” He was shivering.

“I’d think that that would keep the Free West away, these days. On the ground, I mean. But …”

Charles waited.

“I was outside yesterday, when you were gone.”

“The children –”

“Were fine.” Armando’s lips tightened. “I took them down the road that afternoon, and when I went looking for wood, I saw something … off. They were calling me, though, and I didn’t want to frighten them. So I only checked again later at night, when they were safe asleep.”

_Safe_, with no guard - but Charles tabled his disapproval. “What did you see?”

“Someone tripped one of the bear traps.”

“A corpse, then?”

“That’s the issue, isn’t it? Scraps of cloth. Plenty of blood on the snow. Lots of tracks …. But no body.”

Charles swallowed hard. “Maybe it was someone – local?”

“There’s no _local_ here, Charles. You talked about the West bombing – that’s what they did back in ’55. They took only a very little bit of the material from the nukes they had left, made a few dirty bombs, and dropped them on Ithaca.”

“Christ.”

Armando crossed himself with a sardonic flourish and an odd curl to his fingers at the end.
“Did you overhear that as well? In Dallas?”

A nod. “Back when he was still Veep, Kelly had his own special fan club there. He’d visit; they’d talk. He came for morale during the siege; they talked. And as it went on and on, all their talks would circle round to how they had everything going their way back then in ‘55; how Frost was this close,” Armando pinched together index finger and thumb, “to getting pulverized. And they kept coming back to how the Red, and the Wolverine, and some of the others, took the rest of their nukes off the table in 1956.”

“Logan’s mentioned that more than once. That he and Erik – and other people maybe, I don’t know who – destroyed them. The nuclear weapons, I mean.”

Armando’s face was difficult to read in the dim light. “I had wondered.”

Charles pushed away his unease. “So, you think the person in the trap was a Free West spy? Or a saboteur?”

“That would be my guess. From what I understand of day-to-day life in the East, Frost has told the powers that be in Syracuse, Utica, and Albany, that the manor’s off-limits. That anyone who comes within five miles might as well be gone.”

“Logan’s said that as well.”

“It makes sense, with the Finder being here.”

“And the children,” Charles said, sharply. “Think about it: with their abilities, they might as well each be a bomb – and bombs the Free West wants. The whole battle of Dallas ended because MacMurphy was foolish enough to try and capture Jean.”

“I had wondered that, too.”

“It was my idea.”

“To risk a kid? Doesn’t seem like you.”

“No – I had joked about it. I meant the target to be me,” Charles gave a pained smile, “and then as soon as Frost took me there, I would get free and run.”

“You know what? That’s actually not that bad a plan.”

“Why, thank you.”

“The biggest trick is getting away from this manor. Far enough away, I mean. Getting away from Dallas, though …. South, there’s straight-up desert, and then Mexico – Frost’s now. Or west: more desert. You’d just have to hope you ran into some Aztlános.”

“They’re to be trusted?”

“Who else, down there?”

“Washed in the Blood …”

“Fundamentalist Mormons. Believe me, they don’t like new men in the group – at least, not above a certain age.”

“You learned all this in Dallas?”
“Just listening. It’s not like it was university.”

“After all this is over,” said Charles, “you should go to Oxford.”


“Of course. They don’t discriminate on account of race. Gender, now …” Charles leaned back into the chair. “The winds are changing a bit. I think it’s because of a fall-off in the British birthrate. If I were still there, I could advocate – but as it is …”

“Once people have something, it’s hard to take it away from them.”

“I’m not sure, of course – and it’s not ungallant to say that many of my female colleagues will argue very strongly against it.” He gave Raven a mental toast.

“They shouldn’t have to argue.”

“Well, I don’t know if it’s going to happen. Perhaps it’s better that I’m not in earshot, now. But you were saying – Aztlán? Fundamentalist Mormons? If I were thinking of relocating,” Charles gave him a smile. “What would be my complete choices?”

”The other Mormons aren’t so bad –”

“Salt Lake City’s a Free West tributary state, isn’t it?”

“Tributary city-state. But compared to the fundamentalists? The Temple folk will call Denver on your ass if they don’t keep you for themselves, sure, but that’s understandable, given the terms of their treaty. At least they won’t drive you into the desert and leave you there. And since the only other option’s the cannibals …”

“All right, all right. Aztlán it is.”

“One of us.” Armando clapped, softly.

“Really?” Charles leaned forward in the chair. “I know you speak Spanish, but I hadn’t thought that enough of a cultural leveler. How did you become part of Aztlán?”

“I didn’t. I wanted to, though.”

Charles sensed a story. So he kept still, waiting.

“My parents got us to Florida – I told you that. They died soon after. Aztlán … people know about it, even that far away. Mejor diablo conocido que diablo por conocer.”

“In other words?”

”’Better the devil you know.’ So, since I was a kid,” Armando smiled, “I decided I would walk to Chihuahua myself.”

“That’s a long walk.”

“Yeah. I got as far as Mobile. That’s Alabama that Was.”

“I know. When was that?”

“Winter of 1965.”
“Mm.”

“The East kicked the West out of Atlanta in ’61. They retreated farther than expected – regrouped in Dallas. I think they wrote off the rest of the Deep South as a loss, which made sense, given the weather and the plagues –”

“Bubonic?”

“Cholera, malaria …. Anyway, the West decided to hold off on trying again for it, especially after St. Louis. Which gave King Martin time to consolidate, you know?”

“Yes, I remember reading about him. The Relief of Birmingham, mostly.”

“Yeah. That was something.”

“It was. I’m surprised Frost didn’t counter him, given such a threat to her territory.”

“Hardly a threat – Birmingham was seven hundred miles from her border. Frost held D.C. and Harper’s Ferry, and concentrated on going north and west – Québec and the Sault; Columbus and St. Louis. Atlanta was just to keep the Free West from flanking her.”

“But …. He was compelling. Or at least – I thought so, from what I read.”

“King Martin?” Armando stared at the candle flame flickering. “I can’t imagine Frost cared about him. No threat, but no use to her, either – unless as a buffer. And then … not even that, anymore.”

Charles kept quiet.

“Well before Memphis, though … come 1965 the West started pushing back. They moved along the coast first.”

“And they captured you.”

Armando nodded. “When I realized they were going to Dallas, I went along with it. Closer to Chihuahua, you know? And then I got there, and I realized …” Even with the fur, his face looked bleak. “I had made a mistake.”

Charles sent him a pulse of sympathy. If he were still relying fully on his birds, it would have been his dove. But it was enough just to send the feeling.

“There was nowhere to go. After the airfield, and the garrison outposts, there was nothing but desert.”

“Couldn’t you adapt to it?”

“I was fifteen – I wasn’t sure of how long I could do what I could do. I figured it out as the experiments went on.”

“Fifteen? You were only –” Charles knew he was gaping like a fish, but he couldn’t help it. “And now you’re only nineteen years old?”

“So what?”

“You look so much older, is all.”

Armando shrugged. “Adaptation?”
“And I was thinking of getting us a drink,” said Charles, glib, “but it wouldn’t do much - not if you just adapt to it.”

A small smile changed Armando’s face. “I like drinks.”

“… Then why don’t I go get one?” He rose to his feet. “We still have to discuss the traps – don’t let me forget. And would you mind building the fire, for the sake of my toes? Please?”

“Sure.”

Armando’s annoyance with him had dwindled; excellent. Said annoyance made sense, growing out of personal dislike, or racial difference, or earlier trauma …. but Charles was relieved that he had found another plausible explanation for it. Everyone had differing stages in life. Nineteen …. It would be incredible, had he not been just as capable at that age – to say nothing of Erik’s achievements. The war had made them all adults rather younger than expected.

He retrieved the bottle of Scotch from his wardrobe quickly enough. There was only Erik’s metal cup; they would have to share. And when he returned to Armando’s room, Charles was glad to see the fire starting to catch.

“Don’t forget,” Armando drawled, “to talk about the traps.”

“Yes, you have an excellent memory. Here.” He poured a splash of Scotch into the metal cup. “You can start.”

“Thanks. I took a few glasses from the big storage, too – they’re in the cabinet.”

“I’ll be wanting my cup back, then.” Charles left it at that, and nipped over to pluck a tumbler off a shelf, just for himself, and prepared a shot. “Your health.”

He drained the tumbler and bit back his cough. Armando spluttered.

“Ha - not quite fast-adapting enough, are you?”

"Feel better, Charles?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You can knock me down once in a while, but if it's going to be a theme -"

“Oh, come off it.” Charles sat back into the chair. “Of course not.”

“Good.” Armando took another sip. "The traps, then. I have no way of knowing what boot treads are Western, so I couldn’t read the tracks. The fabric wasn’t uniform fabric –"

“That would be too obvious for them, anyway. But on the way to Albany, back on the third, Logan found a phoenix insignia by several crushed tollbooths.”

Armando whistled. “That’d be Lehnsherr.”

“You know him?”

“Of course. Remember when I told you I could counter him?” Armando idly threaded a finger through his steel necklace and snapped it in two. Finger and thumb pressed the pieces back together. “I still think I can – but I heard the Dallas gates come down, and that’s not something you forget fast.”

“Could these spies really be the Free West, then? Would they be so stupid? They would know that—bear traps aside, people like Lehnsherr could be waiting here.”

“Depends on how well the West is tracking our ops,” said Armando. “I would guess he’s in on most of those, if not all of them.”

“But then—”

“Then, what I think is,” and Armando sipped the Scotch, “Westies or some stupid not-quite-locals: whoever was out there didn’t want to be helped or healed after the bear trap. Which makes them people we don’t want sniffing around.”

“Point,” Charles conceded.

“So … what do you think we should do?”

“The children are a priority.” Charles stared at the Scotch, golden in his tumbler. “We’ll have to keep them inside, I think—and not let them out of sight. No more jaunts through the West Wing for you, all right? At least, not alone.”

“No more laundry trips alone for you, either.”

“Fine. Then, I think we need to get someone else here—another pair of hands. Two more guns.”

“McCoy’s coming by tomorrow.”

Charles smiled. “Really? What for?”

“Some last Finder fixes—the techs were in and out all day this past Monday. He was with them then.”

“That’s right. Really, though, McCoy couldn’t fight his way out of a paper bag.”

“You said it,” Armando drawled, “not I.”

“Well, it will be good to see him. I say we tell Frost as soon as we can and get her to delegate someone as an additional guard. If possible, Logan. He ran combat training here last fall, he has a decent enough way with children, he can heal from any injury, and he’s very, very good at keeping other people alive.”

“Good plan. You want to tell Frost, or shall I?”

Charles felt blank. “I’m not sure.”

Armando waited.

“I mean … it’s odd, isn’t it? Neither of us has done anything wrong. We’d only be reporting a genuine threat to the children’s safety. And yet … I don’t want to do it, because,” he grimaced, “I’m afraid she’ll take it as insubordination, and take it out on me.”

“Come on,” Armando snorted. “You’re not afraid of her.”

“I am, I think. A bit. I think I would be stupid not to be.” Charles drained his Scotch, and poured himself more. “I don’t want to be, but watching her in Las Vegas … She’s vain, and petty, and at times a right roaring bitch—but she played the Free West like a master. She has no qualms about ordering her seconds to maim and torture and kill on her behalf. She can break minds, even without
the Finder. And …” Charles swallowed. “And – talk of children. Who keeps children in the cold all
winter? Who starves them all winter? She’s callous and uncaring. It’s unnatural.”

A cough. Charles turned to look – and glared at Armando’s grin, as he said, “All of us muties have
moved past natural and unnatural, haven’t we?”


“No, I get you. I’d watch it, though. She could use the way you’re thinking about her to her
advantage.”

“Surely that’s how she’s stayed alive, all these years,” said Charles. “The Free West is positively
primeval, so with her being a woman –”

“Now there, you’re wrong. You can’t flirt and faint your way through a war for fifteen years, no
matter how good you look doing it. No. She has to have something bigger. Something they’re so
afraid of that it’s kept them from knocking her off.”

“The Finder, surely.”

“Not just. Because – you said so before. What’s to prevent them from bombing it, and killing her?”

“Her company, then. She holds the leashes of some nasty hounds, Lehnsherr first among them.”

Armando reached for the bottle. “He’s not immortal. And he’s not going to last. However lucky he’s
been so far, all the Free West needs to do is get him alone in the desert, throw five hundred at him all
at once, and add some boiling oil.”

“That’s quite the order.”

“They’re thinking of it. Even a part of it might work. Start a fire …”

“If they haven’t done it yet …. He’s tough, is all.”

“He can be burned, drowned, buried alive – I heard these plans. At Dallas, when Kelly and friends
weren’t going on about Frost, they were busy hating Lehnsherr. You know what the Free West has
all ready for him?”

Armando’s words were slurring the tiniest bit. Charles looked at his own glass, at his fingers, white-
knuckled, grasping it. “What do they have?”

“A holding cell. It’s made all of plastic, it’s a quarter of a mile underground, and it’s sunk in
concrete, twenty feet thick on every side. If they get him, they’ll fake an execution, and keep him
down there forever.”

“Seems a terrible waste of resources.”

Armando shrugged. “They’ve got money to burn.”

With an effort, Charles put the images of a plastic tomb out of his mind. “Back to your question. I’d
rather you tell Frost, since you found the sprung trap. I’m happy to be there with you, though. That
way we can present a united front.”

“Though we’re all on the same side …”

“You know what I mean.”
Armando gave him another toast. “I do.”

“Good. Then – whenever she returns, we’ll ask for an appointment, and tell her.”

“Fine.”

Charles let the silence rest. Half of his mind he cast back over everything, cataloguing … he had not revealed anything incriminating, had he? Only what he thought of Frost …

He winced. “You can keep this conversation from her, can’t you?”

“I can. She doesn’t dig too deep in my mind – or at least, she hasn’t yet.”

“Let me know if you need help concealing it.

Armando raised his eyebrows. The fur, Charles noted, was almost completely gone from his face. “I’ll take my chances.”

“Since we’re both here talking, those are my chances as well.”

“It’ll be all right, Charles. You don’t betray me,” Armando held up the metal cup, “and I won’t betray you.”

“Agreed.” Charles reached out to touch glass to metal.

They finished their drinks in silence.

“More?” He shook the bottle.

“No, thanks,” Armando said. He yawned. “I’d better go to sleep.”

“Tomorrow, then. Hank visits … I have to make those cakes at some point. What are we going to do about the dirt in the drain?”

“We have baking soda and vinegar. That’s a safer start than bleach and ammonia.”

“All right.”

Armando stretched. “And in the big storage room, I saw a fan. We could rig up some extension cords and use it to help ventilate, if we need the bleach again.”

“The big storage room – the one with all the winter gear?”

“Oh, no. It’s bigger. A few doors down, and they’re all locked, so I can see why you didn’t get there.”

Charles pursed his lips. “And that’s where you found all these lovely furnishings?”

Armando nodded. “We can get the fan tomorrow morning.”

“And then we can look for some more things to pass off as presents. Logan and Hank brought me some from Albany, but I want to make this Saturday a party to remember.” Charles rose and retrieved the bottle, and his metal cup. “Sleep well, Armando.”

“Night. It was good talking to you.”

“Likewise.” Charles smiled back at him from the doorway. “We’ll have to do it again sometime.”
That night, he dreamed of Erik.

Charles did not know why. It was hardly a week since they’d fucked – and in Las Vegas Erik had been a bloodthirsty ghost before turning into a brain-dead armful of skin and muscle on the roof. Before flying.

*Jumping*, Charles told the wall in his dream as he braced himself. *Not flying*. Accuracy in all things, even in a dream, even when Erik shoved up against him from behind, placed a slick mouth on his nape, licked and nipped before rasping, *I want you – let me –* clawing and *snarling* against his skin, for his clothes had magically disappeared.

And then, somehow they were having frantic sex on the hallway floor. *How*. Talk of accuracy – but this was a dream, yes, so he didn’t have to think of logic or logistics, of anything but being slammed into the flagstones, again, and *again*. Erik snapped his hips hard in the dream and Charles cried out and came in a hot rush –

He gasped himself awake. “*Fuck.*”

The sheets …

“Unbelievable.” Charles stripped off his pants and wiped down; bundled the sheets to the side. Then he wrapped his blankets close and told himself: “That’s enough.”

Enough to make him sleep deeply, it seemed, for he did not dream again.

The next morning, his good mood lasted until the sixth extension cord broke.

“*How* is this my life?”

Armando, snickering, made no answer. The children were giggling too. Charles propped himself up on his elbows, where he had tripped over the cord and fallen to the hallway floor. “This is ridiculous!”

“Ridiculous!” Kurt echoed. *Ridiculous!* Jean’s projection of his own image – staring up open-mouthed at them all – dissolved into rainbow bubbles of laughter.

“I mean it.” Charles got to his feet. “Of all the things …”

He dusted himself off and sighed, looking over the cord trailing behind them. Then he walked back to the West Wing door, unplugged the broken cord, and replaced it. “Only three left,” he called to Armando. “They ought to be enough.”

“It’s just as well that this one snapped – look at the fraying.”

“Right. The last thing we need is an electrical fire.”

“Are we there yet?” said Scott. The square fan obscured his face; it was almost too large for him to carry.

“You were the one to volunteer. And you’re doing splendidly,” Charles told him. “Jean? Lead the way.”
Jean took Scott’s forearm and started walking again. Kurt trotted behind them, holding the fan’s cord. Two additional extension cords later, they clustered round the fan on the flagstones, as Charles positioned it at the head of the dormitory hallway and flicked the switch.

With a faint whiff of something burning – “Are you sure nothing else is frayed?” Charles muttered to Armando – the fan whirred to life.

The ensuing squeal from Kurt made them clap their hands over their ears. “How does it do that?

“Electricity. That’s the same thing that powers the lights in the library and the West Wing.”

“Oh.’ The fan blades warped the sound, vibrating – “oh!” – so of course Kurt went to his knees and starting trying other syllables at point blank range. “Ahh – Scott, try it!” A tug, and Scott went to his knees next to him. “Say ‘ah.’”

“Ahh – cool. Jean, do you hear?”

And Charles blinked. For Jean had leaned over the two of them and joined in. “Ahhh.”

“Why, Jean. It’s lovely to hear your voice.”

She smiled at him sweetly. The breeze from the fan sent her auburn hair rippling out behind her head.

“You all should get a haircut; probably sometime soon. Priorities, though. Now that we’re ventilated,” Charles rolled up his sleeves, “Let’s get to work. Children? You get to sweep.”

They cleaned all morning. The children required direction at times, and even if he smiled at the sight of Princess Alexandra riding in the dustpan, Charles had to sigh at the piles of dust and dirt accumulating. And as he scrubbed and scraped at the porcelain of Kurt’s tub, Charles let his mind wander. How had Erik managed to keep his library immaculate for so long, given that he saw nothing odd about sleeping in filth? How would he, Charles, keep the rooms clean in future, given the state they had reached after only four months? How was Raven coping, with the entire college house to clean by herself?

He swallowed hard. It took a moment or two to refocus on the scrubbing brush. And the bleach, even diluted ….

Charles took care to blot his eyes on his sweater sleeve.

*Raven.* “Dearest,” he whispered. He had to get that memory back from Jean – all this time, all this putting it off, and if any day would work, today would be it. He still had to make two cakes; he could send the boys off on an errand to storage with Armando …

Charles shoved himself to his feet. He would keep Raven safe, no matter what.

“Water,” he called out to Armando as he left Kurt’s room.

“What?”

“We need more water to rinse out the tubs and sinks, and the pipes are still frozen.” He poked his head into Jean’s room; talked at Armando’s stooped back in the bathroom. “In the other storage room, did you see buckets of any sort? That’s where you found the fan and plunger, isn’t it?” For, conveniently, Armando had arrived with both while Charles and the children had been starting three loads of laundry.
Armando turned and wiped grime from his forehead. “Exactly.”

“Fine. And there, we can also –” Charles dropped his voice, “look for a present or two, hm?”

“I’ve got the Albany things Logan brought.”

“I had wondered where those went. But let’s go see anyway, shall we? I always like new places.”

A sudden outcry from the children made them both start, and run out to the hallway. “Jean?” Charles snapped. “Scott? What is it?”

“It broke, Mr. Xavier!”

Sure enough, the fan was slowly coming to a halt.

“What the hell?” Armando muttered.

“Probably one of the cords.” Charles squeezed his eyes shut against the headache threatening. “Let’s go see, shall we? Three birds with one stone.”

They traced the cords back, and back, walking through the library, then down the hallway to the West Wing. When they came through the doorway of the Hive and looked down the two levels to the Finder, Charles frowned. The cord looked intact all the way to the distant outlet – except … he squinted.

Hank! His image went off in their heads like a Roman candle, and Jean catapulted towards one of the metal ramps. Hank’s here!

“Hank?” Charles shouted into the Hive.

“… Yes?” echoed up to him.

“Oh, he unplugged it,” and Charles strolled to the ramp. “Unlucky for us. Come on, children.” As he circled to the lowest level, he smelled ozone and caught sight of sparks. “More Finder repair, I take it.”

They reached the bottom level. “Hank, what are you doing? Plug the fan back in,” Charles told Kurt, and: “How long have you been here?” he asked Hank.

“I only arrived a few hours ago.” Hank flipped a visor up. “The storm’s made travel outside impossible, so I had to wait for Azazel.”

“Keep your voice down,” Charles muttered, but Kurt had not noticed. He was focusing on the wall outlet, his tail flicking from side to side.

“And since our Lady will be using the Finder again any day now, I thought I would finish some of the wiring work when I had a chance.”

Not quite two months since his last stint in the Finder. Charles shook his head; the memories were still vivid. “I’m sure she’ll be very grateful for it.”

Hank gave him a look. Then glanced at Armando, wary. “I wanted to see you too – both of you, I suppose, since I have something for Scott.”

“Really? What?” Scott said, face tipped up eagerly.
“It’s a surprise. But since it was your birthday, and it’s your party tomorrow …” Hank reached out, awkward, and patted Scott’s hair. “I thought I’d bring it by. That, and – Charles, could I talk to you?”

“Sure thing,” said Armando. “The kids and I will just go to main storage. We’ll get Charles here some buckets, and,” he dropped his voice, “I’ll find them some good stuff. You stay here and talk with McCoy.”

The smile he gave Charles was mocking. Charles glowered. Then he caught sight of Kurt and gasped. “No!” and he ran over to the outlet. “You mustn’t put your fingers in it!”

“Why not?”

“It’s dangerous. Electric shock is like being hit by lightning.” He hoisted Kurt into his arms and hauled him over to Armando. “You stay with Mr. Muñoz, now.”

“We’re off on an adventure, Kurt,” Armando confided. “A storage adventure.”

Kurt grinned – and, Charles saw, nudged Scott’s shoulder with his tail. “Let’s go,” Scott said, taking hold of it.

“Well, that’s a good system,” Charles told them. “As long as,” and he trailed off, watching Jean scamper after them all, going through a far door. “As long as you don’t pull too hard.”

“Azazel can punch a hole through someone’s skull with his tail,” Hank said, hushed. “I’ve seen it.”

Charles remembered that tail flicking over Moira’s temple. He grimaced.

“It’s good to see you,” said Hank.

“You too. What was it you wanted to speak to me about?”

“Come here. I want to show you something.”

Charles followed him to another door. Hank pressed his palm flat on a panel next to it – a blue light flashed and the door opened.

“Just like the telephone room,” said Charles.

“Security. So,” Hank said, “you know how the techs have been here the past week?”

“I heard of it; I haven’t seen it myself – I went to Las Vegas, remember?”

“Well, what they were doing, mostly, was … putting in this.”

Hank flicked a switch.

And Charles blinked at the sight of … an elevated bathtub?

At least, it looked just like one – and he had cleaned out six of them since the previous night, so he ought to know. The white oblong rested on a raised platform, waist-high. Charles walked closer and peered over the brim.

“Not much room to move,” he murmured. For the interior was less like a tub: the outline of a body, carved out of the plastic. The overall effect was that of a sarcophagus. Charles’ eyes snagged on the wires bundled at regular intervals along the outline. That, and the drain right beneath where the
pelvis would rest. “What is it, then?”

“Do you still have the blueprint I gave you?”

“Of course I do.”

“Did you find out anything?” Hank said, urgent. “Whether it’s fake or real?”

“An amplifier layout, you said?” At Hank’s nod, Charles nodded in return. “I mentioned such a thing – those blueprints – to a Free West Intelligence agent that I met. He said to me: ‘I wonder if your people came by those honestly.’ And … everything I could read from his mind told me that he was telling the truth.”

“He could just be wondering if we stole the plans,” Hank noted. “That doesn’t say whether or not they’re a fake.”

“His mind was blaring dismay, on every level I could sense. To me, that says he didn’t want us to have those plans … and so, they could very well be real.”

For a moment, Hank was silent. Then his shoulders hunched.

“This is the amplifier, I take it?” Charles tapped the plastic. It was slightly warm to his fingertips. He leaned closer and wrinkled his nose, for it smelled vaguely of chlorine. “And you need the blueprints to …”

“To figure out how to wire it. But – Charles, if that information is correct …”

Charles waited him out.

“Well, come on,” Hank said, voice cracking. “Does this look like something in Jean’s size?”

“Oh. You’re saying I should be afraid? Please.” Charles paced a circle round the sarcophagus. “In the first place, I’ve been amplifying the Finder for months now. Surely this would be no different. In the second place …. Over the past two months, Hank, I’ve gotten the impression that Frost wants me alive, on my own two feet, and fully cognizant.”

Her smile, as he had bowed her onto the main floor of the celebration in Las Vegas ….

Charles shivered and put it out of his head. “Do you honestly think she’ll sequester me here? Hose me down occasionally? Install a recliner so she can get a better angle?” He tapped a cluster of wires by the drain, wires wrapped in plastic. “I think you’re jumping to conclusions.”

“I see what she does to people all the time.”

“Do you? And what has she done to you, I wonder?”

Hank wouldn’t meet his eyes. A dull flush mottled his cheeks.

“Perhaps some day you’ll tell me? I could remind you, then, that she’s just a petty little dictator. Her actions are no reflection on your worth.”

No response.

Charles gave up. “I came through all of November and December unscathed, didn’t I? I can take whatever she throws at me. And as for your blueprints – you can have them back. I’m sure someone with your technical ability would be able to discern faulty voltage in a split second.”
“I don’t want anyone to get hurt,” Hank mumbled.

“No one will be getting hurt. Come on,” and he turned to the ramp. “I have something else I wanted to show you – oh, hell,” Charles sighed, “they’re both in my suitcase, and God knows where that is.”

“Azazel brought it back.”

“Really? Where is it?”

“Outside.”

Charles followed Hank as he carefully closed the door, then reached into the shadows beneath one of the metal ramps. He tugged out Charles’ suitcase.

“Lovely.” Charles wrestled with the buckles. “Ah! Everything’s still here – excellent. I liked that linen suit, you see,” he explained, rooting through it, “so it’s like a second Christmas, having this come round. Here.” He gave Hank the blueprints. “And …”

He carefully took hold of the syringe, wrapped in a pair of socks. “Azazel found this in the purse of a Free West agent.” The viscous liquid looked just as ominous in the cold fluorescent light of the Hive. “He got pricked with it; I don’t know if it had any effects. What?”

For Hank was staring at him.

“What is it?” Charles said. “Spit it out.”

“Azazel was complaining about his muscles hurting, just this morning. And he never complains. I told him it might be the ‘flu, but …” Hank’s eyes were now fixed on the syringe. “I really want to take a look at that, Charles.”

“Here, then. Be careful,” Charles said, as Hank took the syringe quickly. “Where will you analyze it?”

“My lab in Durham.”

“Good. So.” Charles watched the liquid in the syringe ooze back and forth. “Did Lady Frost tell you about the incidents in Las Vegas? Logan’s poisoning with both fruit and cake?”

Hank nodded. “I’ve got a lot of work to do. Hopefully,” he shook the syringe, “this will give a few clues.”

“Or a few answers.”

“I’m just glad we have it. There’s another run happening on a Free West lab soon, and I don’t want everything blown up before I get samples, you know?”


Hank grinned at him. “Thanks.”

“What do you have for Scott, so soon?”

“Well, I told you about Forge, right? Some of his ribs got broken in Albuquerque, and since we’re saving up Archangel’s blood, he has to wait a little longer than usual. He’s had some time to help me. We decided to try for the same principle as Alex’s disk – red quartz to focus the plasma, but we have to angle it to fit with the apertures of –”
Charles nodded occasionally as Hank babbled. He had no idea of most of what he was talking about, but he grasped at: “Glasses? This is, essentially, a glorified pair of glasses?”

“Or a visor – but, yeah. Do you think he’ll like it?”

“Oh, I’m sure. So what do you have of it here?”

“Just the quartz – I’d like him to try looking through it.”

“If you do that this afternoon, Hank, I would appreciate it. I have to make two chocolate cakes, and if I have all the children watching, the batter won’t end up in the cake pans. So if you test Scott, Armando and Kurt can go along with you. I’ll take Jean to help me.”

“That sounds fine.”

Charles hummed. “I wonder what’s keeping them?” He made one brief pass with his raven.

“They’re in the bigger storage room –” he caught flickers of furniture, clothing, boxes – “which I had no idea existed. Really, Hank …”

“Logan would say: ‘need-to-know basis.’” Hank shrugged. “I don’t know. I suppose it’s that the fuse box is there.”

“So if the fan stops without being unplugged, or other things go out, we’ll know where to go.”

“Where Armando can go. You’re still not Sworn.”

“Well, of course. You’ve nothing to worry about. I haven’t even a key to the West Wing. Oh, wait –” for his raven sent him movement and intent. “They’re coming.”

“I’ll just take them all to the Danger Room, then, since we can’t –” and Hank broke off, wincing.

“And what room’s that?”

“Never mind.”

“Hank.”

“Fine. We held some of the tech there, before we had to move it all. It’s for training,” Hank explained. “When we can’t go outside, or when someone’s new to his or her power.”

“I see. I don’t suppose I can take a rain check on the cake, and join you –”

“Oh, look – they’re back!”

The others walked in through the door, and Charles cursed inwardly at an opportunity lost.

“Buckets ahoy,” said Armando.

We got lots, Mr. Xavier!

“Thank you, Jean. Hank and I have come up with a plan for the rest of the day – although it might change, come to think of it –”

“Lunch first,” said Hank. “We’ll talk about plans then.” He took some of the buckets from Armando. “Don’t forget your suitcase, Charles.”
Charles did not. He hoisted it and followed, disgruntled at everything, even the sight of a feather boa trailing from a bucket. Hopefully that was only for a present; other uses did not bear thinking about.

Eating a sandwich helped him remember: he had to retrieve the memory. So Charles resigned himself to giving the Danger Room a miss. Melodramatic name, anyway; it probably just had padding on the walls and a trapdoor or two in the floor.

After lunch, Jean pouted when Kurt and Scott left to see McCoy’s invention. Armando loped out after them and winked at Charles, projecting to him an image of the boxes from Albany, right outside the kitchen door.

Fetching them, Charles told Jean, “I may have fibbed just the smallest bit.”

She kept pouting.

“Because you don’t get to help me clean more. Instead …” Charles opened one of the boxes. “You get to help me make chocolate cake.”

I do?!

“Yes indeed. It’s a two-person job – I need you to hand me ingredients and to lick the bowl. I hope you can do that.”

I can! Jean bounced up and down on the bench. I can!

“Excellent. First,” and he went to the icebox, “we’ll leave the butter out to soften. I’m going to have to estimate everything; I have no measuring cups …”

Jean watched intently as he placed the butter near the stovetop, and set out the rest of the ingredients. Then he sent: Pull up your bench here, darling, and she scrambled to obey.

Good, Charles sent. Now open the bag of sugar – carefully.

Step by step, he went through the recipe he remembered. Creaming the butter and sugar, cracking one egg at a time, alternating the milk with dry stuffs – and Charles mentally crossed his fingers as he estimated the amount of baking soda. Too much will make it taste like soap, he told Jean.

What does soap taste like?

Charles smiled. You’ve never been punished that way for cursing, then? He sent the image: himself as a child, goggling in the mirror at his own lips distended by a bar of soap.

Yuck! The word was a splatter of grey suds across his mind.

Indeed. But your mother never did that? You were probably too young to swear.

There was a long pause.

Charles left off mixing the batter. What is it?

Jean’s brow had puckered. Who do you mean?

I suppose … Charles searched his memory and called up the image: the woman with red hair going white, hanging clean sheets on a clothesline, her lined face creasing further in a smile as she bent close. Remember? You sent me the thought when we talked about my shields.
Jean’s thoughts now felt puzzled. She wasn’t my mother.

“… No?” Charles covered his start by going back to mixing. Who is she, then?

Was. She was my Auntie, when I lived in the crush. But now she’s dead.

“Jean, what on earth is a crush?”

In reply, Jean sent the image of a roughly painted clapboard sign. Charles read: Children’s Crèche, Kingston, NY.

“Oh. A crèche. We have them in Britain; they’re for infants and toddlers.” He felt blank. “Were there other children there with you?”

No. Jean craned her neck to peer at the batter in the bowl. No others ever came to live with us. Auntie Hannah was sorry I was lonesome, but she said I was special.

“Why did you leave, Jean?”

Jean was quiet for a long moment. Then she projected –

– distant shouts and cries in the dark, and the rattle of gunfire – tatty blue slippers first rough against her feet and then cold as she stumbled into the snow, away from the house and into the scrub surrounding a clearing – in which the ramshackle house stood, the house going up in flames –

“My God. What about your Auntie Hannah?”

She died. I saw her go – and Jean mimed someone falling over, arms outstretched.

Charles felt sick. “You saw the whole thing happen?”

It was sad. Jean’s lower lip wobbled. I like fires, usually, but that one was so sad.

There was something there; Charles catalogued it for later. “How did you not freeze to death, sweetheart?”

Jean sent him a memory. It was a tiny spark. In his mind, he cupped it in one armored hand - - and in the blink of an eye, he was someplace dark and cold.

Charles shivered.

Of all things … In the memory, he heard what Jean had heard: breath whistling, thin and high. And he saw what she had seen, in sequence: looking down to see her slippered feet, but not feeling them. Numb. The stars glittering through tree branches as she looked up at them: distant and cold in the midnight-dark sky. Her breath steaming in front of her as she swayed where she stood; fell to her knees –

– and then he felt like falling to his knees, himself. For there appeared a vision: Queen Frost, gliding slowly through the trees towards Jean. Her arms and shoulders shone bare above her diamond-strewn dress; her crown glowed with an ethereal light.

Her blue-white lips shaped words, but with no sound.

That was before I knew Russian, Jean sent. I didn’t understand her.
“She didn’t speak to you with her power?”

Jean hesitated. It was …

“Hard to hear? I’m sure you were almost frozen.”

In the memory, and with a slow, wide smile, Frost held out her arms. They were dead white against the dark forest – but with some color, now, for the fire behind had intensified enough to flicker rose-gold over her dress, on her bare skin, in her eyes.

“How very … warm of her,” Charles managed. Really, his skin might as well crawl right off his body.

She took me home to here.

“And how old were you?”

Jean held up three fingers. I remember: it was my birthday just after, and I turned four.

“Was it nice?” He went back to mixing the batter; his hands were shaking. “Being home?”

Jean smiled sweetly again. I got a nice birthday present.

She sent a memory: sitting snug in someone’s lap and arms – and two large hands in plain sight, cupped round a child-sized candle holder. The long fingers flexed, and strands of metal curled up from the base, looping up and around in a delicate design.

Charles knew those hands.

A much smaller pair of hands – small and fat – clapped in excitement. Thank you! Charles heard, high-pitched. Thank you!

“Jean …”

Yes?

“You talked, then. And this morning, I heard your voice – it sounds like you could sing. Why don’t you talk now?”

Jean sent nothing in reply.

Charles peered down into her face. “I’m not angry. I’m just curious.”

I just … don’t want to.

“Ah. It doesn’t matter, does it? Whenever you want to talk again, do let me know.” For the worst thing would be to push and demand. All children had their developmental stages, and since Jean could communicate perfectly well, there was no problem. Just as long as it was not trauma that kept her silent.

He peeked at her again. Though her face was serious, now, she did not look too upset. “It’s not the Finder, is it? That made you want to be quiet?”

She shook her head.

“Well, that’s good. And now, for my favorite part.” He greased the cake pans with butter, then
dusted them with flour. “You hold those still for me.”

Jean lifted one finger.

Charles touched both pans. It felt as though they were melded to the countertop. “Telekinesis. My goodness. Make sure this goes – right – in –” He poured the batter out. “Perfect. And here’s your favorite part.” With a flourish, he gave her the bowl. “All yours.”

... All of it?

“Yes.”

Really?

“Really and truly. Except you had better hurry, lest the boys come back. Neatly, Jean, hurry neatly,” he added, as she lifted the bowl to her face. “Use the spoon.”

So, as Charles set the cakes in the oven to bake and started a mental timer, the clinks of spoon on bowl were the only sounds he heard. He could have been at home with Raven – back in time, of course, when she was still small. Back when the best times of her life were those spent cleaning up from baking.

You don’t want any, Mr. Xavier?

Charles turned to look, and smiled at the chocolate smeared over Jean’s cheeks and chin. “No, thank you.”

But that’s not fair, is it?

“I tasted it whilst I mixed, darling. And anyway, if you wanted to give me something, I would like that memory back.”

Jean blinked. What?

“The one …” and Charles had to clear his throat. “The memory of the name, Raven. Remember?”

Oh! Yes, I do. You said it was important.

“It is. And it needs to be a secret.”

I can keep it secret –

“No. I’m sorry, but no – I need it back.” For even a child, Charles knew, could be broken.

All right. Can I finish the bowl first?

“Of course. I need to watch these cakes – I don’t want them to burn.”

The cakes ended up fine, one only slightly scorched. Charles set them aside to cool, cleaned Jean’s face with a wet cloth, and sat down across from her at the table.

Jean smiled at him.

“You’ve got chocolate on your teeth,” Charles said, gently. “We’ll have some tea before the others return, all right?”
All right.

“And your big tooth is coming in very well. Let me see, once more?”

Her eyes cinched shut as she bared her teeth.

“Yes – excellent. Next time we go to Albany, you’ll have a haircut – or I might be able to manage it here. Whatever you prefer. Maybe you should go to the dentist, too.”

Should we go get the memory now, Mr. Xavier?

Charles’ smile was for himself, rueful. Only a child, and still able to cut through all his dithering. “Please,” he said.

He hardly had time to blink before he fell into Jean’s mind. Quietly, neatly, with no fuss at all.

“Good lord.” Charles scrambled to his feet and dusted himself off. Or tried to; the armor clanked. “Jean? Jean?”

Yes?

He whirled, to see her beneath the giant tree in the middle of the meadow. The tree’s leaves shone at him, beautiful, in red and orange and gold.

“That was very sudden, my dear.”

You wanted to come in. She walked towards him. So I just made it happen fast.


In front of him, Jean tipped up her head, waiting for him to speak. Her white robe looked immaculate; the embroidery caught the light. For reassurance, Charles made sure he himself had everything – and yes, his armor looked polished where he could see it, and his shield and sword and cloak were all present and accounted for. He even had the tokens of forgetfulness wrapped around his forearm.

Let’s go get the memory.

He felt unbalanced. “Unless you’d like to chat first?”

Jean shook her head, and walked towards the woods ringing the clearing.

Charles followed her. The trees closing ranks around him made him shiver, despite the lush greenery everywhere – though there were splashes of red in many different places. Enough to look like random fires were breaking out in the heavy leaf cover.

Which, given Jean’s phoenix, made sense. But – where was she? His heart jolted up into his throat.

“Jean,” he panted, stumbling through particularly dense undergrowth, “wait. I don’t want to get lost.”

There was a glimmer of white just to the side of one particularly large and gnarled tree: Jean, pausing, waiting for him to catch up. I wouldn’t let you get lost, Mr. Xavier.

“It’s something about deep forests of the mind, I suppose.” First Erik’s; now this. Charles wished for his sweater back so he could blot the sweat from his brow. “ Couldn’t you bring the memory here?”
“I won’t,” Charles said, staring down as a massive tree root rippled and moved, coming disturbingly close to his feet. He stared back up at the thick canopy; he was not panicking. The sunlit meadow so welcoming and bright, such a stark contrast to this –

Above him, a flurry of leaves flashed from green to red, and gold. And orange. The changing color rustled its way from branch to branch, faster and faster, until leaves cascaded down in front of him and materialized into Jean’s phoenix. Who promptly hissed in his face.

“Oh!” Charles waved the smoke away. “What did I ever do to you?”

Another rattling hiss: the phoenix’s eyes gleamed red at him.

“I was invited.” He edged back against the tree trunk. “She knows I’m here. Why don’t you go complain to her? And I have feathered friends of my own – as soon as they –”

But where was his raven?

Charles swore. His prickling unease – surely this explained it. “Raven?” he called. “Raven!”

Here it is, Mr. Xavier. Jean emerged from the trees to his right, holding a small branch and frowning. You don’t need to yell.

“I meant the bird this time,” Charles said, weakly.

Jean leveled her frown at the phoenix. They must have communicated, since there was only one more hiss before the vivid red and gold flashed over to her shoulder. Charles blinked against the spots on his vision. “Thank you for that.”

He’s just standing guard.

“Flying guard, maybe.” Charles’ glance fell on the branch. “Is that …”

Mutely, Jean held out the branch to him.

“Why …. It’s lovely.”

It was. There was one cluster of leaves at the tip, and a few more sprouting as Charles watched. The wood quivered in Jean’s hand, as though it wanted to fly away.

Take it. It’s yours.

“I don’t mean to make you feel badly, Jean dear.” For her forehead had pinched. Charles bit his lip. “I was quite inconsiderate of me, I know – to ask you to do this. Thank you for overlooking that.”

What do you mean?

“That words have consequences. That I should think before I speak,” Charles breathed, reaching out for the branch. He winced as he touched it – it burned hot enough to sear through his gauntlet.

“Thank you.”

Jean sighed, and reached up to stroke the phoenix’s head. You’re welcome. Is that all?

“Why – no.”
He could not say what instinct prompted him; perhaps it was the sight of her face, oddly … tired. “Not at all. Would you like an early birthday present?”

Wasn’t the cake bowl –

“Another one.”

Jean brightened. Yes, please.

So Charles lifted his head and shut his eyes. Raven, he sent, strong as he could. Raven. Bring me the jewels. He sent the image of the golden casket in his concealed atrium. Bring them to me now. “Please,” he added under his breath.

A flurry in front of him made his eyes snap open. The phoenix had opened its beak to hiss – but now looked nonplussed, if a bird could look so. And at his feet, Raven perched atop the golden casket, bright black eyes fixed on Jean.

Hello! Jean smiled.

The raven squawked and flapped its wings.

“Thank you,” Charles said, and the raven fluttered to his shoulders, flexing its talons into his pauldron. “Ow. Here, Jean.” He tucked the branch beneath his arm, wincing at the burn, and then stooped to pick up the casket. He opened it. “Take your pick.”

Mr. Xavier …. They’re beautiful.

“I got the idea from you, my dear. Remember? Your token of concealment? That very night, I made one of my own, from my raven’s feather and a veil.” He flicked a token of forgetfulness loose from his wrist; the silver ribbon and the opal both glimmered. “And I made many more on New Year’s Day. You may have – one. Or two,” he shrugged as the raven nudged his ear with its beak. “Two. One for the one you gave me, and one for your birthday.”

Jean edged closer, staring at the glittering heap. On her shoulder, the phoenix stretched out its neck.

I like this one. Jean plucked at a jewel that looked like … he didn’t know. Quartz? Black shot through with white … from …. Charles thought quickly. Surely it was the penguin – no other bird had those shades alone.

It braves.

“It – what?”

Like mine burns. And yours … She looked at the jewel hanging from his arm. It's … thought. It does lots, but it .... This one's different.” She held up the black quartz. “This one braves.

“‘Brave’ as a verb doesn’t really work that way, Jean. One can brave certain things in life, or one can be brave and do the same thing.”

I need to be brave. Can I have this one, Mr. Xavier?

“You may. Which other?”

I can’t choose! There’s thought, but I don’t want that one. But then there’s singing, and loyal, and tricky. Tricky’s different from wise. And peace. And fast – I like fast … and …. Oh.
She fished out a diamond, tugging it to the casket’s edge. It’s memory.

Charles blinked hard. From his diamond brooch of a bird, so long gone over to Frost. It must have left a sliver of a feather behind.

I want memory.

“I …” Charles darted a glance into the casket. “Jean, I don’t know if I have more than one of those.”

But then Raven screeched, loud and piercing, right in his ear. Charles winced. “Oh, goodness. Please, take it.” He waved a hand at Jean. “Go on.”

I just …. Mr. Xavier, I don’t want to forget anything. Ever. Sometimes I get scared that I’ll go to sleep, and when I wake up I’ll have forgotten things.

Her face looked … troubled.

And then it was easy enough to do. “By all means,” Charles said. He reached into the casket, plucked up the diamond, and pressed it into her small hand. “You keep it.”

Thank you. She draped the quartz and the diamond round her neck. This is the best birthday present I’ve ever gotten.

“You wait until tomorrow,” Charles murmured. Then he stared, as both jewels flashed, their silver ribbons with them, and shot out tendrils over Jean’s robe … before they disappeared.

The memory of Sean made him wince. “They didn’t hurt you, did they?”

Jean shook her head, smiling. I have them safe now.

“And I suppose this one here,” Charles eyed the phoenix, “wouldn’t let you be hurt?”

That’s right.

The phoenix was still staring at Charles. Now … rather more considering, than angry or aggressive.

“Well. We had best be getting back; we need to check on the cakes. Thank you for the memory, Jean.” Charles shut the casket up tight. “I’ll just have you …” He turned to his raven, “… take everything back, please?”

For the burn was making his side throb. He dragged in a deep breath – blew it out, relieved, as Raven vanished, casket and branch in tow. Damned if he knew how the bird managed it. “Mystery,” he murmured.

What?

“Nothing. Let’s go.”

The children were not the only ones who slept like the dead that night. Charles had just managed the occasional nod in reply to Scott’s overflowing excitement about Hank’s work; something about goggles. He supposed he would see the final product soon enough. In the meantime, Hank had left, and no one else had come.

Not Erik.
Charles had not wanted to dream of Erik again. So that night, even half-asleep, he gave himself more time in the bathroom: to wank as efficiently as he could. No fantasies, no nonsense, only the memory of Erik’s long and gorgeous back, all golden skin – that tattoo in Cyrillic – and the sharp line of his jaw as he turned and said –

“Oh.” Charles felt his eyes almost cross, as he rolled his hips through the last of it, wincing, and dragged in air. “Oh.”

Thank God for their cleaning; he had saved his tub for last. And in the meantime, he slid a towel over the shower wall and wiped it dry. “Oh … for running water again.” Exhausted, he let the towel drop. “That’s all.”

The next morning, he felt sore. And his throat was sore. From the exertion and the bleach fumes, no doubt – and perhaps a residual effect of being in Jean’s mind. Which meant her innate defenses were far more powerful than Erik’s … or even Frost’s …

Which was unlikely, so Charles tabled the thought as he made breakfast; supervised the children’s baths; kept them from nibbling at the cake; made lunch; and finally sent them to bring in buckets of snow to melt in order to rinse everything he had bleached. Then he fed them dinner, and had Armando help them fetch more snow, all evening long. At least the storm had stopped for a while.

“Can we come in now, Mr. Xavier?” Scott called from the other side of the kitchen door. “Mr. Muñoz says it’s too cold to keep the front door open.”

“No.” Charles twined tinsel through the cupboard handles. “Go brush your hair, all of you.”

Their whining, perfectly audible through thick wood, made him grin, but at least the children left soon after. He had finished decorating when Armando knocked. “Presents.”

“Excellent.” Charles let him in. “I had meant to ask – what was that feather boa for?”

“I saw something like this once, in a playhouse in Tallahassee.” Armando placed a large wicker chest on top of the table. “Costumes, you know?”

A lift of the lid revealed hats and shirts; skirts and coats, all in bright and colorful fabrics. “So these didn’t make it to the other storage room?”

“Guess not.”

“Why not, I wonder …”

“Who’s going to dress up in wartime?”

“Frost.” Charles dragged his eyes away from a tunic of rich, dark green velvet. “Anyway. I’m sure some of these will be a little big for them. But they tend to let their imaginations run wild – they’ll love it all.”

“I figured. Here’s from Logan.”

Frisbee, plastic horses, marbles – Charles nodded. “We’ve no wrapping paper. Let’s just use a sheet.”

“Sure. And here’s for you.”

“What …” He took the small case that Armando held out, and opened it. “A shaving kit?”
“I got it in Albany.”

“But …” But, he hadn’t bought anything in return – *shite.*

“You look like you could use it, sometimes.” Armando gestured towards his face. “Not that a full beard would be bad, but as it is …”

“Believe me, I know. And thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I’ll go get that sheet – and a present for you as well.” Charles forced a smile and ducked out of the kitchen before Armando could protest. He jogged up the stairs. *What to choose* – There was his cheap plastic watch – *no.* Jewels, his coat …

Raven presented him with an image: Ororo’s maps, folded into the spine of her book.

“Of course,” he breathed. Charles nicked a bedsheet from his wardrobe and snagged *Let Rain Come Down* from his shelf. It made sense – he had memorized them already. And since he, Charles, had found out about the fuse box, this would make things equal.

“Here you are,” he said, back in the kitchen.

Armando frowned at the book’s cover. “Just because we’re both –”

“It’s not meant to be inspirational. It belonged to Ororo. Storm, remember? She flew over this entire manor, and all the grounds, and hid her maps of everything in that book.” Charles tapped the binding. “I want you to have them now.”

Dark eyes gleamed as Armando slid a finger down into the ragged spine. “I feel them.”

“It was a surprise to me, finding them. They’re quite thorough.”

“Thank you, Charles. Really. This will save me …” A slow grin. “Thanks.”

Charles shrugged.

“I’ll just go hide this – the kids can be nosy. Almost done here?”

“Almost. Find the children, and bring them to the door?”

“Sure.”

As Armando left, Charles set the table. He checked on the tea, now finished brewing … and he dusted confectioner’s sugar over the cakes.

“Mr. Xavier?” He heard knocks and thumps on the door. “Is it time yet?”

“Almost …” Charles placed the sugar violets just so, and wedged in the candles. He lit them with a spill from the stove. “All right. Come in – *slowly.* And Jean, send Scott what you see.”

Armando opened the door. The children tiptoed in, all in cleaner clothes, with hair brushed. And Charles had to smile – Jean’s eyes, and Kurt’s eyes, had gone wide as saucers.

“Do you know what we do on birthdays?” Charles said, voice hushed. “We sing.”
Armando started, “Happy birthday to you,” and Charles joined. “Happy birthday to you. / Happy birthday, dear Jean and Scott …. Happy birthday to you.’ And then,” Charles said, “you say: hip hip...”

Kurt piped up, “But what about my Valentine’s Day?”

“Oh. Right.”

Armando shrugged and started: “Happy Valentine’s Day to you …”

“Really, that doesn’t scan,” Charles muttered. But he sang along with the rest of it, watching Kurt’s tail move back and forth in rhythm. “And now, you make a wish and blow out the candles. All of you at once – go on.”

*The candles are right here, Scott.* Jean tugged gently at his hand.


The children blew as hard as they could. The candles guttered and went out in one – no, in two fell swoops. “Well done!”

“I wished for my bro –”

“Don’t say it out loud, Scott – then it won’t come true. Have a seat, all.” Charles pulled out the benches. “We’ll eat some cake, and then we’ll open presents.”

He poured the hot, sweet tea and let their excited chatter wash over him.

“Yum, yum, yum –”

*It’s so good!*

“Why, thank you, Jean.” Charles nudged his candied violet over to Kurt, who had eaten his in a rush. He hid it behind the cake remaining to Kurt, and winked.

“Thank you, Mr. Xavier!” Kurt twigged to the concealment as Jean looked up; his yellow eyes blinked fast. “For the Valentine’s cake.”

“Birthday cake,” said Scott around his mouthful.

“Valentine’s cake.” Kurt’s voice was firm. “I love you, Mr. Xavier.”

Charles stared down at his slice. “I …” Love you too was lodged in his throat, as Kurt wriggled beneath his right arm and stayed there, a warm, solid weight against his side.

He remained there as they all ate their cake and drank tea. Charles let his eyes wander from design to faded floral design on the children’s teacups, taking in the scrape of utensils and clink of porcelain as a distant second to the taste of chocolate, as he held each bite of cake in his mouth as long as he could.

Some time later, Armando pushed back from the table and sighed. “I think it’s time for presents. All three of you lift the sheet.”

“But only Kurt and Scott can –”

Jean tipped up her chin and a corner of the sheet rose into the air.
“– reach,” Charles finished. “Right.” But it was inaudible, with the children’s excitement at the toys. Not two minutes later they had agreed to share everything, mostly because the yellow frisbee caught Jean’s eye.

“A miracle.”

Armando smiled. “Habit, by now. What Jean wants, she gets.”

Charles frowned, but Scott’s chatter cut him off.

“We can pretend to be kings and queens,” Scott said, touching a fold of velvet stuck in one of the chest's hinges. “After we clean up, we can –”

“Go to bed,” said Charles. “No ‘buts’ – it’s late, and it’s getting colder. Again.” For the brief lull of the afternoon had given way to more howling wind. Had it been the eye of some winter hurricane? Who knows. “Besides, Princess Alexandra has missed you all day.”

Can she sleep by us again?

“Now that everything’s clean, you should go back to your separate rooms – although Jean, you can keep Sean’s for a while –”

But we didn’t have bad dreams, or anything, when we were together. I told a story. Jean looked imploring. Please?

Charles hesitated. “Scott’s eight now.”

I’m going to be seven really soon, remember?

“I’m five!” said Kurt.

“Children. It’s just that,” Charles darted a glance at Armando. Who shrugged at him. “I only mean ...”

The three of them looked up at him, faces innocent. What do you mean, Mr. Xavier? Jean sent.

Charles shook his head. “Fine. Just this once. Or thrice, now, I suppose.” For Armando had put them to bed last night – they had probably sneaked out and stayed together in Sean’s room.

Kurt said, “We can tell stories?”

“No, you can sleep,” said Charles. “Has everyone finished their cake?” Despite the sugar, Scott at least was nodding off. “I’ll put the leftovers in the ice box – there’s enough for one more piece for everyone.”

He might even save his for Logan; present it to him with plate and napkin and an empty ampoule, just to see him flinch. Charles smiled to himself, sipping his tea, and idly sent his power flying through the manor.

Then –

– his mind brushed Erik’s mind –

– and he choked.

“Mr. Xavier!” Kurt swatted his back. “Are you O.K.?”
“I’m fine.” He wiped the tea off his chin.

His heart was surging up into his throat; his skin prickling. *Erik.*

Charles reached out to touch Erik’s mind again – *gently,* so he wouldn’t feel – *careful* … He kept his breathing quiet. Erik was focused on something deep in the West Wing. The slow metal grind of his power vibrated against the blueprint – silver-steel threading through the cloud of shrapnel.


“… Yes. Of course.”

“Are you all right?”

“That cake was amazing.”

“Try not to get this high on your other piece, whenever you eat it. Come on, kids. *Delen,* *muévansen.*”

Charles kept one thread of thought on Erik’s mind. Not enough for Erik to catch, of course, but enough to make him realize just how intent he was … focused. Not moving east.

“Let him come out of there,” Charles whispered. He had no key to the West Wing, and – *God* – All these children, all this domesticity. All the intrigue of Las Vegas – and it had been since the others’ trip to Albany – when Erik had …. Charles was hungry, and not for cake. “Come out of there, Erik. *Please.*”

As if on cue, Azazel appeared – at the front door, *fuck.*

Charles jumped to his feet, pulling around himself the strongest veil he could create. He toed off his shoes and eased out the door. Running down the hallways was easy. Sneaking up on Azazel, less so – but he managed it, and peered past a corner to see him, dressed in the Nehru jacket and black trousers, slouched against the front door. He was tossing a slender silver knife up in the air; catching it by the handle every time it fell. A candle was guttering in a sconce. It made the knife flash bright.

Had Charles not just spent near two days with him in Las Vegas, he would have stared. As it was, he considered, briefly, how damned *strange* Azazel seemed – the devil incarnate, louche pose and coiled build, doing nothing in particular besides tracking a knife’s arc with ice-blue eyes.

Then the knife stopped in midair, hovering in front of him.

Azazel made no sound. Just spread both his hands at his sides.

When the knife flashed towards his face, he vanished – and reappeared on the massive stone lintel above the main door, tail lashing. “*Yerka,*” he growled.

“Yes, comrade?”

Except – Charles gulped. It was – *Da,* *tovarisch?* – it was *Russian,* and a bit distant. There were footsteps in the hallway, and then … there was Erik.

He wore dark, nondescript clothing, a tattered leather jacket, and his dark winter hat. At his sides, he carried two large duffel bags. Or … the two duffel bags were *floating,* and Charles made sure his veil was impenetrable even as he broke into a sweat.
“Must you try to kill me?”

Erik did not reply. Instead, he let the bags float to the floor.

“Get it out of your system, then. No fuck-ups.” Azazel leaped to the floor, tail held straight out for balance. He landed hard, and winced, rubbing the small of his back. “What do we have?”

“An assortment.”

“Good.” Azazel stooped. The zipper of one duffel bag sounded very loud. And the clanks of metal ...

Charles turned from the bags and devoured the sight of Erik. He looked very serious – and slightly different than he had looked in Las Vegas. Perhaps it was the clothes. They were similar, Charles remembered, to what he had worn before the run to retrieve Sean. The shadowed eyes were the same; the stubble was the same …

A clink of a lighter. Even the cigarette was the same.

Azazel held out one clawed hand, still rummaging with the other. “Don’t mind if I do.”

Silently, Erik passed him a cigarette, and lit it.

“Thank you.” With a grunt, Azazel hoisted out an AK-47 – good lord. He handled it as though it were light as a feather – but, thankfully, only after he engaged the safety and flipped out the loose bullet. He held up two magazines with one hand, stretched towards Erik. “Load these?”

Erik took them. With a tip of his chin, the second duffel zipper flew down, and bullets rolled onto the flagstones. Then they all flew towards him in a flash, and then – guided by his cupped hand – into the magazine, clicking and clacking like knitting needles.

Charles watched, mesmerized. A handy way of going about things – his own loading a rifle of that sort left him with sore thumbs and an aching wrist.

Erik let the loaded magazines float to the floor. They kept up that rhythm for a while – a heap formed – until Azazel nodded, sharply. “That’ll do. Now, the rest.”

Sucking hard on his cigarette, Erik leaned down and pulled out various edge weapons from the duffels. He turned his hands palm-up to Azazel, who paused, considering, before taking a scimitar. “Where’s the scabbard belt?”

“Here.” Erik floated a tangle of leather and metal towards him.

“Here.” Erik floated a tangle of leather and metal towards him.

“Good. Now, you.”

A smile flitted across Erik’s face, with no warmth to it at all, as he flexed his hands. Charles could only stare at the different knives, large and small; a throwing hatchet; a hook – as they all secreted themselves on Erik’s person. The heavy-gauge steel wire that slithered out of the bag and up his left trouser leg took the prize.

“Ready.”

“Really?” Azazel narrowed his eyes, and held one red palm up high. “Give me a roundhouse.”

Erik backed up, angled his body, and – whirled, leg snapping through the air. He pulled the kick, though, before it hit Azazel’s hand; and drew his leg back down. Charles closed his mouth and
double-checked his veil. Fucking hell if he knew how Erik made that graceful; the few times he himself had tried anything like, he had fallen over.

“No jabs?”

“I told you,” Erik said, “I’m ready.”

“All right, then.” After piling the magazines into a drawstring bag, Azazel slung it over his shoulder – patted one of his pockets and made a face. “I have to drop these off a minute. Wait here.”

“Drop off what?”

Bright cellophane flashed in the dim light. “Two birthday presents, and one for Valentine’s day, for my back-biter. He talked about nothing else, last Albany trip.”

“I …” Erik looked pale.

Azazel narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“What’s today?”

“Shit,” a low growl, and: “I don’t have time for this. Wait one moment. I’ll write a quick note.”

He teleported away in the usual tangle of sulfurous smoke. Charles would not cough – he wouldn’t – he just had to gasp for breath.

Erik’s head whipped round. “Who’s there?” Metal flashed in his direction.

God – not even a few months ago, and Erik’s look and the metal writhing round his own shoes would have had him screaming in fear. Now? He felt the same fear, but something else, too, that edged towards balancing it. That they were equal. And that if Erik could frighten the hell out of him at night in Las Vegas, Charles could now surprise Erik at will.

He wouldn’t have much time. And he wouldn’t have another chance. Charles bit his lip, forced down his fear, dropped the veil – and relished Erik’s stumbling step back.

“Good evening.”

“What –” a hiss, and metal clattered in the duffels.

“Shh …”

“You.” Erik’s lips parted slightly. “Are you …”

“Erik. It’s Saturday, the fourteenth of February.”

And perhaps it was the adrenaline. For before he could think better of it, he darted forward, leaned up, and pressed his lips against Erik’s stubbled jaw. “There’s for you. Be safe, wherever you’re going. And hurry back to me – I’ll be waiting here.”

“I …” Erik pushed himself away, eyes wild. “Don’t want –”

And he turned his back on Charles.

Charles stared at the line of leather jacket in shock. His mind caught Azazel’s teleportation, and he veiled himself from sight in the nick of time.
“Party time,” Azazel caroled, “party time,” but then paused. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Zelya.” Erik turned on one heel to face him. “I saw …”

“If you’re seeing things, you must go talk to Emma. But we have this job first, comrade – can you do it?”

A jerked nod.

“Are you sure? I need to rely on you.”

“You can.” Erik reached out to take Azazel’s shoulder. “I swear it. You can rely on me.”

“Good.”

“But what about you? Your back –”

“It’s only the ’flu – I’ll live. Now come here, my friend,” and Azazel scooped up the AK-47 and stepped close to Erik. “Other hand.”

Erik took tight hold of the other shoulder. Squeezed both.

Azazel placed his free hand hand at Erik’s waist, coiled his tail around one ankle, and smiled. “Well and well, comrade. We’ve had good times, yes? Shall we dance?”

A nod.

“Then in three, two, one –”

They vanished.

Charles held his veil until he was sure they were gone.

Then, indignant, he let it fall. Unacceptable. Erik did not turn his back on him. What did he mean, no? He was the one who was grasping and greedy; he was the one who wouldn’t hear his ‘no’ – ever – so for him to say it –

“Blighter,” he spat, and strode back to the kitchen.

He cleaned in an angry haze. He could not say why it had cut deep. Perhaps it was that he hadn’t been afraid, for once. He had held the whip hand over an Erik that had a lethal amount of metal on him, and Erik hadn’t even had the honor to concede, to smile – even to acknowledge him.

With only one glare at the small boxes Azazel had left on the table, Charles left the kitchen immaculate – decorations binned and cake put away. Then he took his new shaving kit and went to his room. Leftover candles in the candelabrum gave enough light. He hoisted the bucket of meltwater left in his bathroom, and considered his face in the mirror. He took off his shirt, ignoring the cold.

He looked well – better than he had in months. Why, then …

Perhaps because they had a mission to run. Charles rubbed a hand over his face. Perhaps … because Erik would not let himself be distracted.
“If that is so ...” He splashed his face with the ice-cold water, worked up some lather from the kit, and started to shave. “Let’s see how long it lasts when you come back, Erik.”

If he came back. But something told Charles that Erik surely would.

There was no sense waiting up, though. So he built a roaring fire, slept very comfortably in his clean sheets – and only woke when someone stepped through the thought-fire on the library threshold.

Not Erik, though. Jean.

“Shite.” Charles kicked the blankets off. He reached out with his power – and inhaled. Erik was there, in the library.

And Erik’s mind felt … dulled, somehow.

Charles fumbled for the plastic watch and angled it to the firelight. Adjusted for the time difference. It was two in the morning.

He quickly touched the manor’s other minds. Scott and Kurt, fast asleep. Armando – he frowned, and channeled more power to the raven. Stretched out the silver net, forced it far and wide and …

Armando …

Armando was standing smack dab in the middle of bloody Ithaca.

“What,” Charles sputtered, but then he remembered: Ororo’s maps. And if Armando wanted to take a midnight stroll, in a raging blizzard, through wreckage possibly still radioactive … “His own business. His own ridiculous, foolhardy business.”

He folded the watch into his hand and got up; shook his head as he checked his appearance in the mirror. Before he could change his mind, he darted to take his token from the coffer, leaving the watch in its stead. He put the ivory over his neck and tucked the jewel beneath his sweater; then he took a candle and paced down the hall.

Charles paused on the library threshold. Jean’s mind felt like she was sleeping – which had happened … quite quickly.

He opened the door and stepped inside.

It was dark, and quiet – quiet, except for a low, rough hum.

Silently, Charles padded over to the chairs in front of the fireplace, angling the candle. There were matches scattered on the hearth, and a pile of tinder and kindling that had collapsed. The humming was coming from Erik: a darker silhouette in one chair, with Jean in his lap.

He could carry a tune quite well, Charles reflected, as he knelt on the hearth to repair the fire. A teepee structure, a match to save his candle …. He smiled as it caught quickly. And spoke to the flames: “That’s a lovely melody, Erik. What is it?”

There was no reply.

Charles rose and turned. “Erik? Don’t I merit an ‘hello’?”

Still nothing.

Vexed, Charles moved – but then bit back a curse as he bumped the table with the chessboard. “Too
dark in here.” He grabbed at a rolling chess piece.

The humming stopped – cut off.

“What is it?” Charles replaced the piece. “Are you all right?”

A hand snapped round his wrist in an iron grip – he flinched – before tugging, gently. It was more surprise than anything else that made him stumble again, and land with his face against the chair, Erik’s mouth at his ear. “You’re real.”

“Of course I’m real.” He turned to press his lips against Erik’s cheekbone. “I’m real, and I’m in danger of squashing Jean. She’ll wake up, Erik – be discreet.”

“She won’t wake.”

“Why not?”

Erik’s face was almost completely shadowed. Charles felt only a puff of breath – before instinct made him turn, slowly, and stare at the needle of the syringe, not two inches away from his right eye. His gut twisted – terror –

“You gave that to her? What is it?” Charles said, tightly.

“Just morphine.”

“From your desk. I remember that. Put it down, please.” He did not show his fear. “Erik. Put it down now.”

The syringe dropped to the carpet. At the same time, the chess pieces that had fallen floated back into their places, silently.

As Charles felt his heartbeat slow, other sensations crowded to the front of his mind. The snap and pop of the kindling catching in the fireplace. Erik’s breath warm on his cheek. Erik’s scent –

He frowned. “You haven’t managed to wash yet, today?”

Slowly, Erik shook his head.

Charles took a deeper sniff. Smoke. And – perhaps blood, but mostly smoke and sweat. “What have you been doing?”

“Zelya and I.” Erik looked down at Jean. “We visited a lab.”

“By ‘visited’, you mean ‘destroyed.’ Don’t you?”

Erik said nothing. Merely brought one of his hands to Jean’s brow and brushed back a strand of her hair. Charles caught sight of the ring on his thumb. Still there.

Charles let them be quiet together for a moment. This close, Erik’s profile took up most of his sight; Jean, nestled against Erik’s side, was on the periphery. He had only just been this near two days ago. He touched the back of one hand to Erik’s cheek; brushed down. Erik stayed still.

Two and a half days. Erik hadn’t shaved since … whatever bath he had taken Thursday morning. Or hadn’t been shaved since early Thursday, if he had been unconscious and getting sponged off, with a guest appearance from his ever-faithful bucket. Charles spared the image a slight smile, but kept it private.
Erik was quiet, still.

“What was it you were humming?”

“A song I heard, once. It was at the opera.”

“The opera? Where?”

“Berlin.”

“How civilized of you.”

There was no reply.

“Well,” said Charles, softly, “morphine or not, Jean’s tired. She had a birthday party this evening, you know.”

Erik nodded.

“Azazel left them presents. I don’t suppose you thought of any?”

Wordlessly, Erik gestured. Something floated from the table into his cupped palm – he lifted it to the light. It was quite small, but charming: a round, abstracted sculpture of a cat.

“Just for Jean?”

“Yes.”

“Nothing for the others.” Charles tsk’d. “They’ll feel left out.”

There was no answer.

“For a moment I thought you were bringing over a chess piece. Do you play?” After more silence, Charles bumped a shoulder against Erik’s. “Do you?”

Erik laughed. “No. I don’t play.”

Startled, Charles backed off from where he had half-rested on the chair. For the laugh had been … ugly.

“Then I’m sorry. It’s a lovely set; it should be used.” And not just as a bloody burglar alarm. Charles touched his throat – brushed the ivory – only ivory, thank God –

“What do you want, Charles?”

That tone: unacceptable, and where had it come from? “I just wanted to greet you. Then I suppose I wanted you to put Jean to bed, and come greet me … properly.”

For once, Erik caught the innuendo the first time. His gaze moved from Jean’s hair to Charles’ eyes. And stayed locked with them, glinting, staring out from the dark.

Charles swallowed.

Erik seemed intent on that. Staring. Nothing more.

“Or is that too forward for you, Drache?”
The shadow drew back. “I’ve told you that name is a foolish one. Why do you use it now?”

“Because you returned,” Charles backed away a step, “and did not even care to stand, and walk to me,” he backed away another, “and kiss me. I can’t call you Geliebter if you won’t even greet me.”

“I see.”

*That’s all?* “Well? Stand up. Come on.”

“A moment.” Erik winced, shifting.

“… Wait.” Suddenly, Charles felt like ten kinds of fool. “Are you hurt?”

“I just need a moment.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” He hurried back to Erik. “Let me – here. Let me get your arm over my shoulders.” He took Erik’s right arm. Erik hissed between his teeth. “I’m sorry. The other one, then?”

“I need that one for her.”

“It’s your shoulder?” Charles placed his palm flat on the deltoid; pressed, gently. Sure enough: he felt a bandage. “Well. Just brace yourself and I’ll have you up in two seconds flat.”

It took a few more, and an awkward jumble while Charles retrieved and relit his candle, but soon enough Erik was walking at his side, arm draped. Charles kept a slow pace. This close – with his chin practically bumping Erik’s armpit – the smell was stronger. But Charles found he didn’t mind so much.

“Here we are.”

“That’s not her room.”

“The children wanted to sleep together.” At Erik’s blink, Charles talked fast. “It’s all right; they’re all young enough. Besides, with this storm …. Look.” He exhaled in a white plume. “I didn’t want them to wake up to that, and no fire, alone.”

With no further word, Erik opened the door to Sean’s room – no hands – took his arm from around Charles, and walked to put Jean back to bed.

He stood by the bedside, looking down.

“They’re fine,” Charles whispered. “They had a wonderful party. Just let them sleep.”

Come here, he wanted to say. *I want you.*

Or, at least, he wanted something more along the usual lines. *Heel,* Charles thought, staring at the long line of Erik’s back. It was being teased by both Moira and Erik in Las Vegas, and deprived – and since then, stuck with children again, and only his own bleach-roughened hands for any touch. Charles watched Erik turn and walk back to him. They way he walked …

“So,” Erik said, quietly, as he shut Sean’s door.

“Mm.”

“They had a party.” He massaged his shoulder with his other hand. “What else have you been doing,
Charles?

Wanking, Charles thought, wildly. “Not much. Do you need a first aid kit? Because I have one in my room.”

Matter-of-fact, Erik took hold of his turtleneck. Tugged it up –

“What are you doing?”

“Do I need a kit?” His voice was muffled by cloth. Then Erik pulled the turtleneck off completely, and wadded it in his hands. “You tell me.”

Charles realized his mouth was watering. The candle in his hand was not shaking – the light just happened to waver on the angles of bone and the curves of muscle, on all the lines and ridges of tendon in the arms; at the long fingers plaited over the black cloth. And there was Frost’s token, the crystal glittering like an eye - but Charles had better things to look at than that.

“Well?” Erik said.

Different pieces of metal had left traces; he could see dirt ringing Erik’s arms where wires must have coiled. But – there. The bandage on Erik’s right shoulder was rather shoddy, and spots of blood showed dark against the grey. Charles was glad it had not been the left; it would be a shame to spoil the tattoo. “What hit you there?”

“A arrow. It was made of some type of stone. I didn’t see it, after.”

“How primitive. And there wasn’t enough of Archangel’s blood to heal you?”

It could have been the light, but Charles thought he saw Erik shiver. He frowned. “Are you cold?”

“Get the kit,” Erik said. “It’s warmer in the library.”

“Wait – no. Come in.” Charles walked to his room on the opposite end of the hall. “Please?”

The door swung easily on its hinges. “Do you like it? A friend made it for me –” and Charles bit off the sentence; fuck.

Too late. Erik had followed him, and then shut the door and leaned against it, fingers flexing in the cloth of his turtleneck. “Are we friends?”

Charles busied himself with building the fire. “We’ve had this conversation already at Christmas, and the answer hasn’t changed.”

“Charles. Are we friends?”

“Erik, I really don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

Bloody hell. The man was focused and serious; two things Charles had hardly ever seen simultaneously in him. Why couldn’t he just start begging for sex? “We’re lovers, not friends. Friends don’t do what we do.”

A line appeared between Erik’s eyebrows.

“There are different priorities. For friends, it’s talking – spending time together, having things in
common. For lovers, it’s sex. But really,” and he softened his voice and the caress of his mind, “there’s nothing wrong with not being friends. One can’t have everything in this world.”

“We’re talking right now.”

“Is that what you most want to be doing?” Charles placed a large piece of wood; angled it to catch. “Tell the truth.”

It was as though Erik had not heard him. “But what about – Ze dodi veze re’ei … benot Yerushalayim.”

“That’s Hebrew, isn’t it? Translate it for me.”

“This is my beloved, this is my friend –”

“ – O daughters of Jerusalem.” Charles finished with the fire and idly walked to touch the lower bedpost. Would stroking the metal frame … start something? “Very pretty, but it’s just a poem.”

“Yes. I remember it.”

Which was unusual.

Charles watched narrowly, as Erik closed his eyes and tipped his head back; moved it from side to side, stretching the trapezius. He looked unwell. The firelight cast his face into crags and deep lines, even as it made his hair gleam red-gold.

“Besides, the poem is completely heterosexual. David and Jonathan aside, what we have been doing is taboo.” Instinct nagged at him. “I’ve wondered, Erik. You have four tattoos – one in Hebrew, to boot. You don’t keep kosher. You murder people on a regular basis.”

Erik stared at the fire.

“And you have more than a passing interest in sodomy – hm. If she were given the wisdom of Solomon, the daughter of Jerusalem would probably tell David and Jonathan it’s less of a sin to lie back and take it. So one of them might get away with it if he lay – or lied – convincingly. David, do you think?”

“Charles.”

“What?”

“Please don’t.”

“Really,” Charles sighed, “what did you think we were doing all this time, my dear moron? Calisthenics?”

“Don’t.”

“… What?”

Erik turned to face him. “Don’t talk to me,” he ground out, “like I’m stupid.”

Charles opened his mouth. Closed it. Then tried, carefully: “I didn’t mean it that way.”

Erik glared at him.
Charles tried again. “I don’t mean you’re stupid.”

“Really? You could have fooled me.”

*I have fooled you* – but that would be unwise to say. “It’s just teasing, Erik.”

“Stop calling me a moron.”

“It’s nothing serious.” Charles licked his lips. “Erik, I –”

“Smaller words, then? I said: don’t call me a moron.”

“Well really, you could say please –”

Erik *snarled* – and all the metal in the room rattled at once: as though a clapper had struck a bell and set everything ringing. His bedframe rippled – Charles let go in a panic and felt his back hit the stone of the opposite wall. “Erik, stop! *Stop*, please don’t –”

– hurt me was on the tip of his tongue, and it would have been a frightened wail, so Charles was glad he had choked it off. Almost as savagely glad as he was to see Erik drop his turtleneck and bury his face in his hands. He could hardly hear Erik groan, “I’m sorry.”

*Good*, Charles thought. He clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering; moved to put the armchair between Erik and himself.

“Well, I’m so sorry. Please –”

“What happened to Rabe?” he spat. “All your little names go out the bloody window when you want to make people piss themselves, is that it?”

Erik kept his face covered with his hands. The ring on his thumb gleamed in the firelight. Charles saw he was shaking.

God damn it, he was in the right, here. Erik could not show up and terrorize him, act like Charles was his toy to snarl at and to threaten, and – Erik had never turned his back on him, before, *never*.

He closed his eyes. He knew he was still in control. Erik’s behavior couldn’t change that, however erratic it was.

Erratic. *Why.* He had some suspicions, and talk would take his mind away from the desire that itched beneath his skin. Desire and fear, brewed together into some poisonous love drink. But: *talk.* Rather talk than think about it.

“What happened tonight, Erik?” he said, soft and low. “What’s wrong with you? Besides the shoulder. Can’t you tell me?”

He opened his eyes, only just in time to see Erik shake his head. “I’ve already told you.” His voice was hoarse. "We destroyed a lab.”

“Mm.” Charles walked to him. Erik did not flinch or move away, even when Charles touched the bandage. “Let me see?”

He plucked at the adhesive, before placing one hand flat on Erik’s sternum, the better to rip the bandage free little by little with the other. There was no sound of pain. Only the warmth of Erik’s skin beneath his palm.
Charles gazed at the wound. “It doesn’t look as serious as I thought it would.”

“It’s close to being healed.”

“Then why did you leave before it was finished?”

There was no mistaking it: the skin under his palm quivered. “I wanted to get away.”

“So you …”

“Hid in a truck that Pryde transported here.”

“I thought she couldn’t phase people and things at the same time.”

“Perhaps not when my Lady watches.”

“I see.” It was easy to toss the old bandage in the fire; it stank as it burned. With his other hand, Charles petted Erik’s sternum. Then he took hold of the token. "And speaking of which - this comes off."

"It's not a camera," Erik said, dully.

"Well, obviously not. That doesn't change the fact that I don't like it." Charles tugged the crystal on its chain. "Off."

Erik lifted his good arm and found the chain; took off the token and held it out. For that, Charles gave him a smile, slipped his own fingers beneath the green sweater, and drew the ivory out. "Yours is much nicer. Isn't it?"

There was silence. Along with - Charles checked - an intent, wide-eyed stare. Much more like the Erik he remembered; excellent.

Slowly, carefully, Charles drew the token up and over his own head. "I don't want it to break. Let's put them here." He plucked at Frost's crystal, poured the chain into his hand where the ivory lay, heaped up, and then walked to deposit both on his bookshelf. "Strange bedfellows, hm?"

A wheeze - laughter? Charles hadn't thought it that funny, but no matter. He eased back round and slid a hand up Erik's chest, tracing a circle over taut, warm skin. He heard the click of Erik’s throat as he swallowed. “I think you need to clean up before I rebandage this. What do you think?”

"I …"

Exhaling, Charles pressed close. “What do you want?”

Because – fuck, Charles knew what he himself wanted. And he didn’t care if it was a risk. Erik would not ignore him, not ever. He gritted his teeth and set thought-fires through the whole manor with one push of his power. He ringed the Finder in thought like some prehistoric sacrifice in fire – if Frost came back, he would feel her instantly. What did it matter, anyway? Present or absent, Frost could be fooled.

He leaned forward. Erik’s pulse was throbbing in that long line of throat, almost visible. Charles kissed his neck, softly. “What do you want?”

Erik was shaking again.

“Shh. You can tell me.”
“I don’t know.”

“You knew well enough when we met in Las Vegas. Remember that? You licked my foot.”

“Yes, I remember.”

Charles almost didn’t hear. He was too busy cataloguing the hint of sweat at his lips, the scent in his nostrils and the intoxicating power thrumming beneath his hands … but then he caught up. “You do?”

A nod.

“You can’t blame me for being surprised. I’m never sure what you remember and what you don’t. It makes polite conversation difficult.”

Which is why he wanted them to move on to something quite different – but Erik’s inaction made that difficult. Charles pressed closer. Angled with his hip ….

Erik wasn’t hard. Impossible.

Charles reached down and cupped his cock through his trousers. “What’s wrong, Erik?”

“… It hurts.”

“What, your cock?”

Erik shook his head; his chin nudged Charles’ temple. “Everything.”

What to do?

For a while, Charles said nothing. Merely stayed still, touching Erik. Perhaps a kiss to his collarbone – there – and one to his Adam’s apple. The smallest bit of pressure could have results. He leaned closer.

Or perhaps …. The children were just down the hall, and Armando might return at any moment. Perhaps quiet care would be the name of the game. “I can help with the hurt, Erik.”

“No one can help.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic.” Charles kissed his cheek. “We’ll give you a bath –” This close, he felt the flinch. “Fine. We’ll give you a shower.”

And that flinch was a bigger one. Fuck. He could have kicked himself – the trauma – Erik wouldn’t want that, unless …. Charles thought hard as Erik curled forward, pressing into his warmth and hiding his face in Charles' shoulder, mumbling, “I can’t. When they .... I remember ....”

“With that memory, and that hurt ... I can help, Erik. You just need something better to associate with a shower. Let me give that to you.”

Erik sighed into his shoulder. “How?”

“You’ll see. I’ll ask you to do some things. Do you trust me?”

He felt a nod.

“Good. Then bring the candle with us. And thaw the hot water pipes, please.”
Erik walked with him to the bathroom, leaning on Charles with what felt like his whole weight. Charles allowed it. He steered them, plucked the candle from mid-air – it was floating, wrapped with a twist of wire – and lit the rest in the candelabrum. It would have to be enough.

“If you learn how to do this,” he said, as he stooped to the cupboard below the sink, rummaged in the basket, and pulled out some bath oils, “you’ll be able to march off and wash whenever you wish, wherever there’s falling water. No more sponging needed. Hm?”

When he rose to look, Erik was swaying where he stood, eyes closed.

“You’re dead on your feet.” Charles reached out and tugged at his waistband. “Take off the rest of your clothes. I need to see if you’re injured anywhere else.”

Erik stripped with shaky hands. Charles looked down, staring at every inch of body revealed; the muscle flowing from hip into quadriceps, the neat line of knee into shin – nothing knobby. Everything economical. Except, of course …

Gracefully, Charles went to his knees again. He looked up.

Erik was looking down at him, eyes open. And wide.

“Well? Have you missed me?” Charles shifted – just enough to brush his cheek over that length of cock. Even soft like this, it looked obscene against the rest of Erik’s slender body. Charles rubbed with his cheek. And frowned – there hadn’t been a reaction.

He reached up and slid his fingers through the thatch of dark hair spreading from Erik’s groin to his thighs. “You’re past due for a trim.”

“I don’t.”

“You must. It wasn’t this resplendent in December. Or in the library – do you remember that?” Charles slowly slid his tongue out of his mouth, stared up at Erik as he ducked down, just slightly, to press it against the glans. Not a twitch. Damn.

“You’re in that much pain, darling?” He made a show of licking his lips. “Usually you’re happier to see me.”

“It’s my head.”

With a sigh, Charles got up again. “Of course it’s your head. Foolish of me, not to realize.” He framed Erik’s face in his hands, drew him close.

And kissed him.

He kept it soft and gentle. One flick of his tongue; two – and when Erik parted his lips and relaxed against him, Charles had full access. Still: soft. Gentle.

It was better than it would have been in Las Vegas, he decided, as he smoothed his hands down Erik’s sides and folded them in the small of his back. Erik would have tasted of blood at night; would have been incoherent by day, or by that last day … The difference - but Charles set it aside to puzzle over later, and slid his tongue in slowly, ready to draw Erik out. He waited for a moan or a gasp. There was only the puff of breath, erratic.

He broke the kiss. It sounded wet. “Erik.”
The candelabrum was behind him. The shadow that was Erik inclined its head.

“Let’s move this to the shower, shall we?”

A shiver. Long fingers plucked at the front of Charles’ sweater.

“Of course. I almost forgot.” Charles laughed at himself, softly. “Are all the pipes thawed?” He took his hands away; started to strip, methodically; folded his clothes and placed them by the sink. Christ, it was cold. How had Erik kept from shivering this long? “How do I look?”

In the dark, Charles felt the warmth of Erik’s body, coming closer. He felt a hand brush his hair, trace his neck – trail down his arm.

“Well?”

“You’re very beautiful,” Erik whispered from the dark.

“Then why did you turn your back on me, Erik? Earlier, when you were here with Azazel. You’ve never slighted me before. I didn’t care for it.”

“Rabe. I only thought …”

“What did you think?”

“I thought I dreamed you. All this time.”

“Really? I thought I had made more of an impression.” But - their meeting in the hallway, when he unveiled himself - it must have been quite the surprise. Effective, in other words, and that was satisfying. Charles carefully hid his smile. Satisfying and believable - since for Erik to think him an hallucination all the way back to the first time they met ... would be nonsense, even by Erik’s standards.

“Please,” said Erik. Pressing close, and taking Charles’ face in his hands, now. “Please don’t be a dream.”

“Shall I pinch you? Would that – mmf.”

Erik shoved their mouths together – teeth clicked – and thrust his tongue past Charles’ lips. Which was rather more like it, Charles thought, as he licked and darted, dodging – but then Erik did something, sucking on his lower lip, and Charles’ eyebrows flew up as his cock jerked.

“Mm. Wait,” and he drew back as far as he could. Not far – Erik had gripped the back of his head. And how had his hands locked at Erik’s back again? “Save some for the shower.”

“I don’t ..... I don’t think I –”

“You can, my dear.” Charles brushed a kiss over his thin lips. “I won’t hurt you; I promise. Any time you want to stop, you can –”

“Say ‘blue,’” Erik whispered.

“... you can tell me. And we’ll stop.”

Charles waited. Erik stayed in his arms, trembling.

Time to move. “Come on. Come with me.” He stepped into the tub. “Like our dance – just follow.”
It took a moment; Erik moved awkwardly. But he followed.

“Good.” Positive reinforcement: Charles kissed him, unfurling his tongue, nudging Erik’s own before he withdrew. “But now …. You have complete control.”

“How?” Erik said, hoarse.

“You can feel the faucets, can’t you? That middle lever is the shower switch. Run some warm water, darling,” Charles licked Erik’s jaw, “and then switch it over … little by little. There’s nothing to fear.” A kiss to his ear, and a whisper would do the trick: “Think of it as rain. You can wash in it – you need pay nothing, you need no help, and you’re cleaner than you’ve ever been. Try it?”

The faucets creaked. Charles smiled as he felt hot water splash round their ankles – there, in the dim candlelight and the cold, he could see warm steam rising. He wrapped Erik in his arms and kissed him; made the slide of their mouths together as filthy as he could manage. He wriggled a thigh in between Erik’s and set up some decent friction – really, though, Charles felt he wanted something to rut against, even as he felt Erik’s cock finally take an interest.

Good. He worked up more saliva; let it out as he stroked Erik’s chest, found a nipple, and pinched.

Erik yelped. A gush of water spurted from the shower head.

“More of that,” said Charles. At the silence, he said, “Erik, it’s water. You’re not a child. All those who ran the showers in your youth?” He scratched Erik’s sternum, just slightly. “Dead.”

“I killed them.”

Only those who didn’t die in the third war, but Charles decided not to press the point. “You’d bathe in their blood if you could. As it is … I’ll bathe you. Do you feel the wires on those bottles of oil? They’re by the sink. Bring me one.”

After a second, the bottle snapped into the palm of his hand. “Good,” Charles murmured. “Close your eyes.”

He uncorked it, and with one smooth motion, dumped the oil on Erik’s head. An overpowering smell of lavender practically smacked him in the face. “Oh, Lord.” He coughed. “There. Now you have to wash, because if you don’t use the shower, you’ll be a flower bouquet to your enemies. Not as intimidating.”

Erik shoved his head into the crook of Charles’ neck. Charles grinned – there was that cock, finally - finally - getting hard and nudging his hip.

“I’ll spread it, I suppose. Just give us some water.” Charles slicked up both palms; ran them down Erik’s back, massaging, careful to avoid the injured shoulder. “Do you like that?”

A nod.

“Then think how delicious it will feel with some heat. Go on.” He rubbed harder. “Try, for me? Give us some.”

Water started falling from the showerhead. First only a little – Charles massaged over Erik’s shoulder blades – and then more. Whenever Erik flinched, Charles made sure to sweep his hands firmly to a different place and rub, feeling – little by little – the rigid muscles relax.

“That’s it,” he said. “Relax. Feel how good it is? The warmth?”
“Yes,” Erik breathed.

“And let yourself enjoy it.”

Erik was getting heavy, leaning on him, but his sighs were lovely. As was the languid grind that had started against Charles’ hip. Almost enough to make him lose his balance, so …

Inspiration struck. Charles smirked and went to his knees. Slowly.

“What –” Erik’s hands fumbled on thin air.

“Trust me.” The porcelain would be straight-up hell on his kneecaps – but surely the payoff of finding Erik’s cock, licking it, and taking it in … He couldn’t grin with his mouth full, but kept his smug satisfaction warm in him, as he heard Erik garble something perhaps meant to be words.

Yes. He doubled his efforts. It was so easy to suck, so lovely to relax his throat and work that cock deep – and he didn’t choke, not at all. He closed his eyes against the fall of hot water and moaned instead.

Erik reached out and braced himself on the shower wall. Rolled his hips forward, gasping, and Charles had to recalculate just how he was going to breathe, because that cock started thrusting, and getting his face fucked had always been a bit of a challenge, and with this –

He choked at a thrust that angled differently and knocked past the back of his throat – reached around to squeeze Erik’s arse and give him a warning pinch –

Erik sucked in a gasp as he withdrew – a gasp Charles could hear even with the falling water. “You’ve never …”

“Oh, yes I have.” He coughed. “When you first came to me after Dallas. Remember?” Erik had been thinner then, if that were possible; hardly any arse to grab. And judging by the groan echoing off the shower walls, remembered perfectly well.

Leaning away from the cock aimed at his eye, Charles took hold of it and started to stroke. Fluid wrist, curling fingers, drag and twist – Erik slammed his palm against the shower wall again.

“Charles.”

“Have a better memory, Erik,” he husked. “Turn the water off.”

The metal of the faucets creaked as Erik obeyed.

“Bring that candelabrum over here.” Hopefully the candles would not go out in the steam. “Shed some light on the subject, but don’t get wax on me. Good. Now, what would you think if …”

He sped up his hand.

“Charles,” breathed Erik. “I’m going to –”

“Come on my face, of course.”

He tipped his head back and looked up at Erik. Eyes wide as he could get them – I’ve been told they’re very beautiful – there would be no resistance possible.

And there wasn’t. Even with his injury, and headache – and perhaps fatigue; who knew … Even with all that holding him back for a time: there was Erik, undone above him. The pleasure-pain of climax contorting his features was the last thing Charles saw before he hastily closed his eyes and felt
the first spurt of come hit his mouth and cheek. He licked his lips at the next, and the next – reached up with his free hand to smear it down over his throat.

*Ha.* Erik sounded as though he had been punched. Charles smiled as he kept working the come out. It was reassuring to be right.

It took a good long while. His eyes felt gummed shut when he finally got to his feet again – searched, touched, and pressed his hands flat against Erik’s chest. “And now you’ll see the advantage of a shower. Give me some water, please? I’d like to wash this off.”

He was surprised when Erik didn’t lick him. Rather, the hot water came on and Charles could lean into it, sighing. He heard the candles go out with a hiss. “Get that out of the way. And hand me the bigger bottle, please?”

A moment later he had the shampoo. A nice lather, a good scrub for his face. “So whatever gets in your hair – blood, mud, come – see? There’s nothing a shower can’t fix.”

Even with the hot water cascading, Charles felt the heat of Erik’s body as he pressed up behind him, and ran the long fingers of one hand through his hair, suds and all.

“You can scrub me some other time, Erik. For now,” and Charles turned in his arms, “let me rinse? Watch. Depending how long your hair is, it’s best if you angle like this.” He tipped his head back.

And did not flinch as Erik kissed his pulse.

He was clean, now, after all. He could straighten again, and drape his arms over Erik’s shoulders, and kiss him deeply. *Lovely,* to know that the water would never get cold. Charles opened his eyes – saw nothing, and closed them again. Kissing in the dark, in hot water and steam … mapping Erik’s gorgeous body by touch, and with Erik’s mouth so gentle – his few movements slow and reverent as he cupped Charles’ face in his hands … it was all lovely. All except …

The longer they stood together …

“Erik,” Charles whispered against his mouth.

“Mm?”

God, his cock was throbbing. “Your turn.”

He felt Erik’s breath on his face.

“Do I need to spell it out? Get me off. Please.”

In a rush, Erik took hold of his cock. Charles grabbed at his shoulder to keep from slipping – the injured one, because Erik grunted in pain and Charles lost his balance. “Shite.”

“Sorry.”

“Never mind. Let’s move this to the bed, hm? Step out – be careful for the water. In future, you close the shower curtain.” He grimaced at the chill water on the bathroom floor – *more* cleaning, and just when he thought he had finished.

The door clicked. Erik had left.

“Oy. Wait.” Charles bent to gather their clothes and scrambled to catch up – Erik was stooping over the fire, though, building it, and Charles dumped the clothes on the chair and only just managed an
elegant sprawl on the bed, cock in hand, as Erik turned.

“Well?” Charles said. “Go on.”

“Where’s the grease?”

His skin prickled with anticipation. “Wardrobe.”

It would be worthwhile, Charles thought as he slowly worked his cock, to put something metal on that container. Something distinctive. Then there would be none of this searching, and clattering: Erik running fingers round the inside of the container to get out the last bit of grease; Erik moving said fingers to his own arse –

What.

“Erik? What are you doing?”

“Lubrication.”

“I –” His hand had forgotten how to move, even if his cock was practically begging for more attention. “I don’t think you …. want to do that?”

“I do,” Erik said, simply.

“But you’ve never done it, love.”

Erik smiled, all teeth. On any other man such a smile would be soppy. On him it was terrifying.

And the picture he made, prowling towards the bed …. Charles leaned back in a hurry as Erik casually tossed a leg over him, straddled him, and leaned forward. All his weight supported by his left arm – that couldn’t be comfortable. Nor would be reaching back around himself with his right.

“You had better stop,” Charles said, feebly. “You’ll hurt your shoulder further.”

“I can’t quite reach,” Erik conceded. Then leaned closer and stretched over Charles, looking down into his eyes. “You’ll have to finger me.”

Charles did not squeak. “I don’t –”

Erik waited.

“I. Erik – there are things you have to know, before you do something like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like,” and Charles grimaced as he blushed, “when did you eat last?”

“Two days ago.”

“But that’s terrible. Aren’t you hungry?”

“I drink enough water. Juice. Why does it matter?”

“I can go get you food.” Charles pushed himself up on his elbows. “Get off me and we’ll –”

“No.” A hand landed on his sternum; shoved. Charles fell back. “I want you.”
He gulped. “I know, Erik, but this is a completely different –”

“It’s not. You took me to you, and I’m yours.” Erik reached out to touch his face. Charles smelled the bear grease. “I want to take you to me.”

“I have your token; I’ve practically sworn you the moon. I’m yours already.”

“I want to take you to me.”

“Erik. You have some very strange ideas about penetration and power.”

Erik smiled down at him. Charles saw the firelight glint off his teeth.

“Charles. Do you remember when you were on top of me like this, the first time you took me to you? Do you remember what you said? I’m saying the same thing now.” Leaning close, Erik whispered hot in his ear, “Finger me.”

“My memory is excellent.” And Charles shook his head. “If you want this, you’ll have to take care of yourself.”

For it was one thing to lie back and let Erik fuck him – another thing to work him open and actually – Charles saw something bright move out of the corner of his eye, and flinched. “No powers in bed. Erik. No powers –”

Erik plucked a chunk of metal out of the air with one hand. Had it been in his pocket, earlier? Charles didn’t care, for his skin crawled as he saw Erik compress it, and start to roll it between his palms, saying, “Just this once.”

“No. I’ve seen too much of what you can – What are you …”

For Erik had made a perfect metal sphere, about the size of a cue ball. He set it on his good shoulder, let it stay there, balanced – and flicked with his fingers. The sphere vanished.

It had to be rolling down his back. To …

Charles knew his jaw had fallen open. “You can’t be thinking of using that.”

“Why not?”

“It won’t fit. It’s too big.”

“I’ll shape it.”

“Is it clean? God, Erik, metal doesn’t belong inside people like this. You can’t just –”

Erik frowned, concentrating.

“Are you …” Charles’ cock twitched at the thought.

A strange look crossed Erik’s face.

“Don’t hurt yourself.” Charles said. “Go slowly.”

Erik nodded and shut his eyes.

And all the noise of Charles’ misgivings dwindled to a whisper in the corner of his mind, at the sight
of Erik biting down on his lower lip.


Erik took his time. Charles had to start in on cubic roots just to keep from coming at the sights and sound. A few minutes in, and Erik’s nostrils had flared - Charles saw how he was breathing hard. There was a stark line forming between his eyebrows. Charles stared at the slight trembling in his right arm; the gathering of sweat at the base of his throat - at his eyelashes, soft and dark, fluttering where they touched his skin.

Slowly, Charles traced a hand across Erik’s chest. He found a nipple, rubbed it with the flat of his fingers. Then tried both at the same time.

“Nnh.” Teeth flashed in a grimace. “Charles.”

“Are you all right, my dear? How does it feel?”

“I don’t know.” Erik paused. “Strange.”

“It’s always a bit strange, at first.” Charles’ mouth was almost too dry. “How much of it do you have – in?”

“All of it.”

“I told you not to hurt yourself.”

“It doesn’t.” The long line of Erik’s throat rippled as he swallowed. “Not much.”

“Let me up. Just a little.”

Erik leaned back so Charles could move. God, his abdomen, of all things – the muscles straining for control – but then he lost his balance and sat back, heavily, on Charles’ knees.

“You’ll need to aim a bit further up, sweet.”

Erik’s eyes flew open.

Had he … oh. He had.

“I meant on my body, not with the metal. But what was that?” Charles stared at the way the muscles were quivering in Erik’s thighs. “Have you found your prostate yet?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’ll know it if you find it. Feels like nothing else in the world – as long as you get off on it. You might not.”

Charles spared their cocks a quick glance. Erik’s – halfway hard, a good sign. His own – he had to admit, he had seen it darker, but perhaps it was the dim light. Certainly it was as full as it had ever been, and it almost – hurt. He slid one hand round the base and squeezed.

There was a low laugh.

He looked up. “What?”

“Nothing.” Erik smirked at him.
“Feeling better, are we?” said Charles, nettled.

Erik did not reply. Only reached with one sinewy arm, and pushed Charles down on his back again. Charles’ head hit the pillow with a thump.

“Wait.” For Erik was breathing heavily, moving forward on his knees – looking behind himself and – Charles yelped at the strong hand grabbing his cock. “Wait, Erik. You can’t go so – slow down. I – fuck –”

It was tight – too tight, and hot as hell, and he was going to whimper and come like a schoolboy if Erik kept on hissing between his bared teeth and sinking down on him, inch by fraction of an inch. Charles wheezed; tried to sit up again.

And stopped as Erik moved his calloused hand from Charles’ chest – to his throat. Snapping around flesh like a trap.

Long fingers flexed. Erik kept moving his hips, working down further, even as he braced himself with his right hand to keep the full force of his weight off Charles’ airway – thank God, but he couldn’t swallow with Erik’s palm on him. “Move,” Charles gasped. “Your hand – don’t choke me.”

It wasn’t metal, but the memory of metal was enough to – he writhed beneath Erik, trying to buck him off.

“Ah –”

Charles froze.

Erik panted above him, staring with wild eyes. “Do that again.”

“Are you insane? You’re choking me. Stop!”

With a growl, Erik released his throat – but then placed the nails of both hands at the top of Charles’ chest, set their edges and dragged down, raking searing welts all the way to his groin. And if he were to use metal for another go – Charles panicked. “For the love of God, get off me. Blue – get off me now!”

He thrashed and punched, and the tight vise of Erik’s body released him, back and off and gone. The cold air of the room hit his cock like a slap; he choked back a whimper and rolled to the side.

“Charles,” Erik croaked. His weight had landed at the foot of the bed. Charles felt it, and felt hands sliding up his legs. He kicked – and connected, for he heard a pained grunt.

“Serves you right,” he said. “God, Erik.”

The hands again – Charles kicked again, but this time Erik dodged and then lunged, pinning him. Except he had to bloody well manhandle him on his back again to pin him, which was all of a piece with the rest of this farce, so Charles grabbed his shoulders to push him away.

His left hand slipped on something.

Charles turned his palm up to look, and saw that it was blood.

“Erik. I told you, you’re hurting yourself.”

He felt a puff of hot breath from above him. Charles’ adrenaline slowly leached away, leaving him
shaking. “What were you thinking?”

Erik bent and kissed him. And bit – Charles hissed against his mouth and Erik pressed his tongue against the injury.

“That’s not an answer,” said Charles when their mouths parted.

Then something clicked.

“You’ve marked me already – you came on my face, remember? And look.” He held up his left thumb. “That nail. Scars. The one on my neck’s faded, but the memory ….” He shook off the memory and kept his voice quiet. “And now you want me to mark you? Is that it? I’ve given you scars already.” Charles slid his hand to the faint slash crossing Erik’s collarbone. “With the glass. Remember?”

“I want to take you to me.”

“Just say you want me to fuck you; you sound like the bloody Bible. So. You want me to fuck you, but it seems you want me to hurt you, too.”

Erik was quiet.

“Why?”

“Charles …”

Charles waited.

“Not the first night – but when you were on me. Above me …”

“After the feast,” said Charles, evenly. “What about it?”

“I hurt you, I think.”

Charles cast his mind back. At present, his cock had chosen retreat with their fight, but at the memory of Erik beneath him for the first time … Charles breathed deep at the surge of heat, the blood rushing downward. “Maybe a little. Because,” he arched an eyebrow, “you understand how when a certain something isn’t quite little, it –”

“You aren’t little.”

“That is exactly what to say. Well done.” Charles cuffed his ear, gently. “You’re going to go far with this. Anyway. A little hurt, but a good hurt. I suppose you have to experience it, to know what I’m talking about.”

There was no reply. Only …. Charles kept his smile to himself. Only Erik’s stare, moving from his own eyes … to his mouth.

It was not a surprise when Erik kissed him again. Charles parted his lips – but Erik drew back. “Will you?”

“Will I …”

“Fuck me? Please?”

“If I do, it has to be my way. Can you do what I tell you to?”
Erik nodded.

Charles sighed. “How’s your headache?”

Erik said nothing.

“Move.” Charles pushed Erik’s good shoulder. “Do as I say. I’m getting the first aid kit, and then I’ll fuck you, all right?”

Erik’s eyes had gone wide. “All right,” he breathed.

With a groan, Charles got up and hobbled to the wardrobe. It was physically painful, with his cock halfway hard again, with the ache in his knees and his throat, and with – oh, being flung to his back had pinched something in his neck. And he couldn’t go run hot water on his head again.

He found the kit, placed a few more logs on the fire - heaped too high, now, but who cared? He peeked over his shoulder.

Erik sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for him.

Do it. Walking back, Charles handed him the rubbing alcohol and a cloth. “Clean that blood off.” While Erik obeyed, he searched for the bottle of aspirin; shook out two – then raised an eyebrow and made it three. “Here.”

Erik took the aspirin. Charles winced as he heard him chew them. “You’ll wreck your teeth.”

Although, really …. Probing the gap where his molar was missing, Charles considered. Recompense for injury? If he sought to balance their ledger, Erik owed him far more than just an attempt at rough sex.

Tiredly, he put the thoughts out of his mind. Three aspirin – hardly enough. Armando’s opiates would be a far better –

He swallowed.

“Rabe?”

Charles focused back on Erik – Erik, who was gazing at him: tired and disheveled. Clean, at least. And the blood on his shoulder was mostly gone.

“Now,” Charles readied gauze and adhesive tape, “if anyone asks, you did this yourself in the infirmary.”

Erik shook his head - a minute motion, but it made Charles’ skin prickle.

"Just tell me if it’s too tight." He started covering the wound. He could feel Erik's gaze on him, but the man himself said nothing. So he hurried on. "We’ll get this squared away, I’ll fuck you, and then we’ll have a drink like civilized people, yes?"

“If you insist.”


Erik tried, and nodded.

“Let’s hope that aspirin works.”
“It’s bitter.”

“It always is. You go have a drink of water. I’ll put this away,” Charles swallowed, “and I’ll wait for you to come back.”

Erik dragged himself off the bed and walked towards the bathroom. There was no limp. Not yet, Charles thought, and lost no time. He tossed the kit back in the wardrobe, looked for the grease – “Shite.” It was empty. Casting about, Charles thought hurriedly – rummaged for the moisturizer, and took it back to bed.

When Erik stood on the threshold of the room once more, Charles was waiting. “Well? Come here.”

Erik hesitated.

“You were the one to make such a fuss about wanting it. If you do,” Charles said, “you’re going to do as I say. You’ll like it. I promise. Now, come here.”

He waited for Erik to reach the side of the bed before patting the edge. “Lie down here, next to me.”

Erik frowned, but obeyed. “I thought …”

“We haven’t done it this way yet. Face away from me.” Charles took him by the shoulders to steer, careful of his grip. “The principles are always the same - it’s just the positioning that’s different.”

Erik craned his neck to look back over his shoulder. Charles met him with a kiss – and smiled to himself, as Erik melted. He kept it wet and slow, trying deeper this time, concentrating on what would get Erik pliant. Only the slightest bitterness from the aspirin, which was good …

“Hm.” When Charles eased back, he saw that Erik looked dazed. “Did you like that?”

A nod.

“How are you feeling? Here?” Charles touched his arse – Erik jumped. “Shh. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I don’t usually turn my back on things.”

“Look them in the eye, whether friend or foe ….” Charles kissed his throat. “That’s very like you. I only mean to ask: are you still ready for me?”

“… I think so.”

“I’m not having that metal in bed. Where did you get it, anyway?”

“The bedpost.”

“Shite. I’m not sure I want you to put it back, now. I’ll have to think of it being up your arse every time I see it.”

Charles ran his hand over Erik’s hip, sliding back and touching, gently; moving forward and running his thumb up the shaft of his cock. Erik wheezed.

“Didn’t mean to surprise you.” He focused on Erik’s arse instead. Still too bony. Still … Wait, was he still ready? Who knew. And there would be no more metal here, so Charles supposed he would have to check by himself. He sighed, fumbled to slick his fingers with moisturizer, and thought of something else as he reached –
“Erik.”

“Yes?”

“I know it’s your injured arm. But now that you’re bandaged again – can you take hold here?” He tapped Erik’s arse. “I need you to hold yourself open for me.”

Enunciating the words was difficult. This close, he could feel Erik trembling as he obeyed.

“Good,” Charles said. He slid one finger near Erik’s arsehole; perhaps the slightest, teasing touch – Erik flinched as though from a bullet. Or – whatever projectile would surprise him.

“Erik.” Leaving that arse, Charles took tight hold of Erik with his right arm. Squeezed along his biceps and torso, avoiding the shoulder. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“I’m not afraid,” Erik hissed.

“Then relax. I have to see if you’re –”

“I’m ready.”

“I don’t know that –”

“I’m more ready than you were, that night.”

Charles decided not to remind him that he had taken dozens of cocks in his sexual career. Especially when Erik ground back, and he gasped – and choked on his saliva, and really, how ridiculous. He was not the near-virgin here.

“Please,” said Erik.

“Fine. Deep breaths. And hold yourself –” he coughed, “like you were before.”

With a growl, Erik moved to do so. All the muscle in his back, shifting and flexing – Charles had to squeeze his eyes shut. Control. But he could still feel, so he had to bite back his moan and think of everything staid and controlled as he took more moisturizer to slick up his cock, fumbled to line himself up, and – pressed forward.

“Ah.”

“Are you –” Charles gulped. “All right?”

A pause. Then a nod. The back of Erik’s head moved over Charles’ hair; this close, Charles could press an open-mouthed kiss on his nape. He licked him for good measure.

Erik sucked in a breath. “More of that.”

“Wait.” The tight heat clamping down was enough to make his eyes cross; he had to rock back and forth in small increments just to work the head of his cock in. Charles swore. “Relax for me.”

“I’m relaxed!”

Charles winced. So tight – it was painful, pushing forward. So: “Are you? Really?” He swiped his thumb between palm and curled fingers, making sure it was slick. Then, quickly, he ran it down along his cock and started working the rim of Erik’s arsehole with it. Still greased from before, but
now stretched tight around his cock – there was hardly any give for his thumb. “*This* says that you’re not.”

“What are you –” Erik arched against him, panting. “That won’t –”

“Fit? Just you wait.” His blood pounding in his ears, Charles moved, explored – pressed hard against the perineum for good measure, and Erik – kicked? It was into thin air, and more of a twitch than anything, so …

“I hope that was involuntary.” Charles shoved his cock in another inch, gritting his teeth. Enough pressure, stroking, and – *fuck* – he gave up and just pressed with his thumb, hard, as he rolled his hips. The sound Erik made *then* was for the ages.


“I can’t –”

“Tell me, or I’ll stop.”

“*Don’t* stop – it feels. You’re –”

Charles eased back – and now, *finally*, he could thrust forward. Not all the way in, but he did, and Erik wheezed something in German.

“What?” Charles thrust again. *God*, it was so hot and tight, and he would not last without something to focus on. He shoved his cock in further; gave one last rub with his thumb before reaching around and took hold of Erik’s cock – a loose grip, but he felt hot flesh jump in his hand. “There you are. You like this?”

He set up a rhythm, stroking – in time with thrusting – Erik moaned.

“Do you?” Charles panted.

“I *love* it.”

“Good.” He tried a different angle; pushed as hard as he could.

“*Espèce de sale enfoiré –*”

“I forgot,” Charles had to drag in enough breath to speak, “you know French. For minute I thought – I was fucking – Logan –”

“*Du Verdammter –*” Erik whipped his head round; tried to bite.

“No!” It was the work of a moment to get his left arm under him, around – to latch on tight enough to stop Erik’s god damned *thrashing* – Charles had to hold hard as he finally, *finally* fucked all the way in. And squeezed Erik’s cock like he would rip it off to celebrate. “*No. Biting.*”

A groan. Erik let go of his own arse cheek – reached back to Charles’ quadriceps, and punched him. “Harder.”

“Oh, God, I can’t do harder.” It was a whine, but Erik wouldn’t notice – and his cock was being crushed by heat; anyone else would be crying by now, real tears. “I’ll just move, shall I?”

He did not wait for permission. Just moved.
The world contracted to the gritty drag on his cock, the sweat slicking up their bodies – the slap of flesh on flesh and the hot throb of Erik’s cock in his hand as Charles wanked him hard and fast. Erik’s gasps and groans were getting louder. Charles tried to sense other minds, but his power overflowed too fast, and he had to shove in balls-deep and stay there, grinding his teeth, to try to keep control –

Erik stiffened against him. “Did you just –”

Sweat was dripping into his eyes. “No,” said Charles. “Just pausing.”

“Don’t pause!”

“Keep quiet,” Charles snarled, and started again.

The children were fast asleep. Armando – was not in his room yet, nor anywhere on the manor grounds. There was not a flicker of anyone else. And Erik, back to writhing on his cock, thinking he would hold off coming until after him – Charles squeezed his eyes shut and moved his hand faster, holding tighter –

– until Erik cried out one last time, and started to come.

*About time* - but just as much as usual, damn it, and now there would be more cleaning, with the sheets on their way to ruined. All Charles could do was squeeze out pulse after pulse of hot come and keep the pace, snapping his hips in rhythm and kissing Erik’s shoulder. He had done it. Gotten him off. The duty of anyone who wanted to ream a virgin – or, in Erik’s case – close enough, and he was so close, and – “No,” he moaned as he came, and felt the hot stickiness of his climax slick everything up even more, so he could fuck in and out only a few more times, until he had to grind to an exhausted halt.

And he heard only their ragged breathing for a while.

After a longer while, Charles groaned and tried to move. He was draped over Erik, limp as a damp dishcloth. “God.” He gathered his wits, focused – tried to ease his cock out of Erik’s body as slowly as he could.

Erik’s breath hitched.

“Easy.” Charles patted his arm. His hand slipped on sweat as he drew away. “Are you all right?”

Wordlessly, Erik rolled onto his back. The line between his brows had returned. Perhaps, Charles realized as he sat up to help move Erik to the center of the bed … perhaps the strange expression had something to do with Erik’s left hand moving beneath himself – undoubtedly to his arsehole.

“Dripping a bit?”

Erik looked rather thunderstruck as he nodded.

“Not too much, I hope. I don’t want to have wrecked you.”

Woozily, Erik tried to sit up. Then he groaned and fell backwards. “Can’t move.”

“And that shows a job well done.” Charles stretched, feeling the bones in his spine pop. “Stay there.”

He clambered over Erik and lurched over to the bathroom, legs wobbling. He washed as best he could; then held his sweater under the tap, and returned to scrub Erik off. Silently, he wiped up the
come from Erik’s abdomen; did the same for his cock. “Roll over.”

In any other context it would have been funny: his flopping over like a fish. Charles bit his lip and checked Erik’s arsehole. Good. There was nothing torn, and no blood. Only a shiver, rippling goosebumps over Erik’s back, as Charles cleaned as much as could. As he ran the sweater down his back, sponging up sweat, the faded Cyrillic on the lower left caught his eye.

He touched that tattoo. “What does this mean, Erik?”

“No learning without suffering.”

Charles opened his mouth, dismayed. No words came out – of course. He had heard – bez muki net nauki – and his raven had kept his Russian knowledge a secret. “In English.”

Erik mumbled into the tangled blankets. “Don’t care.”

“Who gave it to you?”

“Shuvalov.”

“Ah.” He gave Erik’s back one last pass, before he dropped the sweater next to the bed. “Done.”

Then Charles pulled on a pair of trousers and a sweatshirt, hands shaking. There was a creak behind him. He turned to see Erik lifting his head and blinking sleepily. “Where are you going?”

“I told you. Some tea.” Charles smiled. It felt stiff. “After all this exercise, I think you’ll find it refreshing.”

Erik sighed, and nestled back down into the covers. “Hurry back, please? It's cold here without you.” “I will.”

Halfway to sleep as he was, Erik made no fuss about draining the cup Charles gave him. Charles got them both under the covers, even if the sheets were filthy - set his jaw, let Erik cling, and stroked his hair until he was deep into his drugged sleep.

Then it was a matter of seconds to leap into Erik’s mind. And there he was, on the near side of the river, staring into the metal forest.

“Please,” he whispered. “Let me pass?”

The trees were restless, moving in some invisible gust of wind. Were it just branches and twigs, Charles knew he could slice his way through – but the leaves flickering silver against the dark seemed to fly their separate ways and recombine at random. Add that to the sharp-shining undergrowth writhing over the forest floor …

“I need a path to the castle. Please, let me through.”

Why did he need to reach it? Charles did not know. Perhaps, he thought as he hurried along the path the forest made for him, perhaps it was routine. Third time the charm?

Or perhaps it was the music he started to hear more clearly, the closer he got to the castle itself.

There was the clearing – and there. The castle loomed above him, stretching up into the night sky almost as far as he could see. Charles ran to the gatehouse and its door – silently, he realized – not a
sound from his armor or his shield, or sword. His cloak whipped behind him as he darted through the door – and came to an abrupt stop in the bailey.

The steel bunker shone so brightly that he had to look away. Out of the corner of his eyes, he could see chain after diamond chain, fixed tight. Scorch marks and soot –

A change in the breeze brought the music to his ears in a sudden, vivid pulse. It was the tune Erik had hummed to Jean, just that night.

“Where is it?” Charles said to thin air. “I’ll find it.” And he started to run again.

For the sounds were not wafting from the bunker, that much was certain. Nor from the dungeon. Nor from anywhere higher up – definitely not from the door Jean had concealed. Which was a good thing, he supposed. Charles dodged the rippling red banners and ignored the burbling fountain.

There. He had traced the music to one of the hallways, grim iron doors and cold grey stone stretching into infinity. Heart pounding, he stopped in front of a door …

… that stood ajar.

And there was the music, lilting delicate and lovely from within.

Charles checked the handle. There was no sign of diamond or ice. He peered as best he could, squinting. He saw glints of gold in darkness, the heads and hairstyles of so many people … and something happening, on a stage.

There was no resisting his curiosity. “Raven,” he whispered. It was probably in its usual place, atop the highest battlement, but it could still guard – and cut through this mind in a flash. “Pull me out if anything goes wrong.”

He stepped inside.

Of course it was a memory: music and perfume; rustling dresses and gilded pillars. The opera.

In fact, he was standing in an opera box. There was a couple seated in front of him, in ornate chairs. From the back, he could see that the man was wearing a tuxedo. The woman was dressed completely in white.

“My lady,” said Charles. “Fancy seeing you here.”

As if on cue, Frost turned to smile at her companion. Her profile looked almost exactly the same as it did presently. He braced himself and turned to look at Erik.

Except it wasn’t him. But who –

Charles inhaled. He smelled a musky, strong cologne.

Schmidt, Shuvalov, Shaw –

“Herr Doktor Shaw, I presume.”

Shaw turned to Frost. Gave her a slow smile, brought her gloved hand to his lips, and kissed it. Charles paced to her side, carefully, to look Shaw in the face.

He did not look like a man who could start a nuclear war.
Ordinary. Dark hair, slightly sunken eyes. A nose oddly disproportionate – short? Perhaps due to the contrast with his thin gash of a mouth, or to the way that gash sliced his lower face as he smiled.

Then his image – vibrated, strangely, and Charles flinched. “What was …”

Shaw’s thin lips shaped words. From behind, Charles saw Frost’s platinum-blonde hair tilt in reply – saw her reach out and tap Shaw, playfully, with a fan. Something about it made Charles’ hair stand on end. Flirting with a cadaver? But – Shaw was manifestly alive – except … perhaps that was it. In the blue light from the stage, his skin looked like paper; paper that needed one spark to burn.

Charles shuddered as he dragged his eyes away. “Erik,” he mumbled. Where was he? There were two empty chairs in the box, but there was no sign of a tall, thin form - or shadow, for that matter. Erik would have been …. What had Frost told him? About – Sebastian, her voice whispered – from his own, Charles’, memory? Or was the voice here, in Erik’s memory, and – God, he might have to leave in a rush.

I disposed of him, and all was well again. That was what she had said. Or as well as it could be. November 1, 1951. My 23rd birthday.

Before November, 1951. Before Galut for Erik – so Erik would have been nineteen or younger – and he would not have had long hair.

“Erik,” Charles whispered. “Where are you?”

He checked the curtains of the box. Peered out the small entrance hallway; even looked behind the door. There was nothing.

Which was unsettling. In Jean’s memory of "Swan Lake," she had been sitting front and center, white bow in her hair – whilst Frost had watched the dancers, and smiled, and Erik had been having his mind rearranged …

Onstage, a singer trailing blue silk was half-walking, half-dancing through a pasteboard forest. Overlapping grey and green for trunks and leaves, the trees moved in time to the music, held by stagehands all in black.

The text was German. Charles considered. Either time was slowing, or he was hearing the song over and over again – or it was merely repetitive. Haunting, nonetheless. Especially as three others joined the singer and wended their way through the forest, hands linked in a round dance.

So it was one at a time that they faded from view, into white.

Charles inhaled. All the color was bleeding out from the stage, like iridescent oil being cleaned from glass. “Shite,” he muttered, and made for the tiny door. He fumbled with the fragile gilt handle – it twisted in his grip and he darted through.

He had to yank his cloak tightly to himself as ice crackled and solidified over the little golden door behind him. Turned solid and stayed – and Charles had a chance to look at his new surroundings.

He stood in a vast, opulent room. He saw a sideboard holding bottles, glasses, and goblets, with a clean and sparkling mirror playing backdrop to them all. There were few spindly chairs at the rectangular table. On the last, Charles saw a playbill. Die Entführung aus dem Serail. Mozart. Komische Oper Berlin –

Then a door opened. Charles wheeled round to see – the memory of Frost, and the memory only – thank God – walking silently into the room, carrying a tumbler. Charles saw a few fingers of liquor
in it. At the sideboard, Frost slowly, deliberately, opened the ice bucket, retrieved one cube, and placed that cube in the drink. Almost without any sound at all.

So her voice came as a shock.

“He’s mad, Erik. He’s gone completely mad.”

Charles looked from side to side. The room was empty.

And in the memory, after a long pause, Frost tilted her head back, staring into the mirror. “I don’t just say so. I know so.”

_Bloody hell._ Only party to half a conversation; how the hell was he supposed to understand? Thank God for Jean – at least he caught the translation of the Russian, blurring together with the reflected light in the room, somehow.

“What we’ve done together, Erik. What we’ve seen. Consider that. And consider what we have done _for_ him ... and he sends me out - to fetch him ice?” She tapped her index finger on the tumbler. The chiming sound was oddly clear for flesh on glass. “No.”

In reply, Erik must have said something she liked, for Frost turned and _smiled._

And Emma at forty-one was beautiful, but Emma – he calculated – at twenty-two ….

_God._ She dazzled him.

Faced with this Emma, he, Charles Xavier himself, would have had a very difficult time looking at anyone else. Would that they had met in a ballroom. Except – Charles gave a wry smile as he remembered. He would have been eleven, or possibly twelve years old. And surely Frost, having Erik as an honorary son, would not want another.

“I know you never would, Erik. You truly are a gentleman.”

Charles scanned the room again. Frost’s words were twice as strange when whispered to golden emptiness.

She cupped the tumbler in her hands. “He told me – Erik. Sometime in the next few days, he’s going to destroy Berlin.”

Watching, Charles saw how the low cut of her bodice … revealed nothing, somehow. Not even an uptick in her breathing, which one might expect, given the subject matter.

“I know. But the United States still has some two dozen. He’s told me,” Frost’s voice hitched, “to send Azazel to steal one. Again. And then a beautiful city will be destroyed. _Again._ Oh, Erik …” Frost’s beautiful eyes shut, and a glittering tear ran down her cheek. “They only just rebuilt.”

Then – abruptly, her eyes opened to slits, and she flicked them to the side. Erik must have risen from a chair, Charles realized. Risen, and started pacing, and now Frost was watching him like a hawk. She only left off for a split second - to a glance behind her into the mirror. Blotted a tear, he presumed, with one precise fingertip.

“I loved it, too. I don’t understand German as well as you do …. But it was so charming. Would you have this place destroyed?”

There was a long pause.
Then Frost’s voice quavered. “But what can we do?”

“Mind your drink,” Charles sniped.

For Frost had opened her eyes wide, pressed one gloved hand to her heart – had given the impression that she would faint onto the sideboard. Had this been on a stage, he would have risen to applaud the spectacle.

“Oh, Erik…. If it’s the only way … then it’s the only way.” Frost watched a corner of the room. “If you can be strong enough, I can, too.”

There was a longer silence.

Then that dazzling smile again – but now, tinged with the best imitation of heartbreak Charles had ever seen. “My champion.”

Frost extended her hand. Charles looked as attentively as he could – but he saw no sign of Erik, even though – that hand was being kissed. He was sure of it.

“Oh, my lady,” said Charles. “Very well played.”

“Stay here for a while,” Frost murmured. Her fingers coiled, squeezing thin air. “I’ll see to it that he sleeps. Then we’ll be able to plan. It has to be soon, you understand? He wants to go to Florence on my birthday.”

A rustle of her dress – she glided past Charles, to what had to be another door. He twisted his head, to look at her.

The back of his neck prickled at her expression, as she looked in from a pitch-black hallway. At her eyes, strange and staring from the shadow of the open door, glittering crystal.

“Stay,” Frost said.

She closed the door.

With nothing left to see there but blank gold ….

“Erik?” Charles croaked.

There was no reply.

Charles’ breath came faster. He turned and paced back to the table. A shadow, a sign - Erik had to be here. His eyes darted over the playbill, the glimmering reflection of light on the table, the glassware – its glitter in the mirror …

So he saw when the bottles began to chill, colored glass clouding, pure white ice creeping from the bottom on up.

“Cold drinks? I’d rather not.” He turned – there was no main door. Shite. Where had Frost gone? There – another small door in the corner, and Charles ran for it. Wrested it open and shut –

– and promptly gulped at the musty bricks three inches from his nose.

It looked like an exceedingly narrow walkway. Possibly hidden behind the wall of a house? Or in a building? He coughed on dust.
Then the distant crying started.

“No,” Charles said, shivering. “I don’t want – how long have I been here. Oh, no –” for the floor was starting to tilt. “I don’t want to go wherever this is going.”

The cries got louder. There had not been music for quite some time, and now there was someone shrieking – a child, it was a child –

He caught a whiff of blood and offal. “Are we in a slaughterhouse? I’ll have none of that. Raven.” Charles dragged in a deep breath. “Raven! Get me out of here – out, please, out!”

And in the blink of an eye, he was standing on the castle’s tallest battlement.

His raven squawked at him.

“You sound like a chicken,” replied Charles, distracted. Vertigo caught up: his stomach lurched and he staggered. “How did you do that?”

Raven fluffed its feathers, flew to the statue of Erik, and hissed at Charles. Who had to think for a moment, but then put it together. “Oh. From the phoenix? It was a handy trick Jean had, indeed.”

A rattling cry; the raven swooped. It brushed Jean’s tea light, flickering bravely on the pedestal of Erik’s statue. Raven must have brought it, Charles realized. He picked it up and cupped it in his gauntlets.

“Why here, though? Why didn’t you just take me to my reading room – or back to the real world? Erik’s not awake, is he?”

A feather drifted down; settled black on the grey pavement, next to Erik’s huddled form sleeping at his statue’s base. In the shadow, this time, which was why Charles hadn’t noticed at first. Charles snatched up the feather and jammed it in one gauntlet. “I’m not leaving these anywhere.”

There was only the smallest crr from the raven.

“Right. So I’m here … to see: oh. Lady Frost,” he nodded at Emma, “and now I know who this is.” Charles paced over to the statue on his far left. “Sebastian Shaw.”

The thin mouth, curved in its grin, was especially well done. Charles peered at the glowing ruby in the helmet. Now that he knew his own tokens had such power – at least, according to Jean – what purpose did that ruby serve? He waved Jean’s tea light over the statue. Nothing happened.

He thought and thought, but could find no answer. “We might think about it later, when we return. Will you put together some memories for me? Anything having to do with him.”

Raven clacked its beak.

“So. We had better go.”

Charles looked briefly at the statue of Erik. No jewels, no crown. But hadn’t there been .... He climbed the pedestal, tea light in one hand, and ran the index finger of the other through the groove round Erik’s brow. He blew away dust. “Completely out of balance. You need some jewels. I’ll bring you some, shall I? Next time?”

There was no reply, but of course he expected none. Though if stone could talk …

On impulse, Charles turned at the statue’s side; looked out over Erik’s mind, to see what it saw. So to
He shivered. There, in the distance, those terrible mountains reared: white snow steaming, poisonous runoff turning their sides black as obsidian. There was a red glow on the horizon, gleaming off the sluggish roil of the river. Moving slowly, Charles remembered, because of all the corpses. He blinked at a sudden gust of air – it smelled like ashes, and stung his eyes.

Cold air.

He looked down, biting his lip. The tea light flickered in his hand. The bunker was not as bright as it had been before, but enough of its light reflected from the thick cloud cover to illuminate the forest. The metal forest, still moving in the wind – and which, from this height, looked like a glowing, undulating ocean of scrap and wires.

“That, at least, I find rather beautiful.”

He turned to look at the statue’s profile. Raised the tea light –

“Oh.”

There, on a brooch holding the statue’s cloak at its throat, Charles saw the Magen David. Carved, and very faint. He took the light away and realized: all this time, the dark and gloom had kept it from his sight.

“But it’s something, at least.”

_Enough._ He sighed. Erik might be snuffling at the statue’s base right now, but soon he might wake, and then what would happen? Charles stepped off the pedestal, passed the tea light over himself.

“Let me not forget.”

Finally, he beckoned to his raven. “My room, please. In the real world.”

Slowly, Raven flew to him.

“Thank you.”

Perhaps another layer of cloud had formed in Erik’s mind, for everything dimmed in front of Charles’ eyes.

“Good-bye, Erik,” Charles said to him, where he sprawled, sleeping. “Rest well.”

The next morning, he woke alone.

Charles felt the blankets beside him – jumped to his feet, though with a groan, and looked about. “Erik?”

Weak light streamed through the arrow windows and fell on the flagstones. He squinted - Frost’s token was gone from the bookshelf. Cursing, Charles put his own token back in the jewel box, tossed on some clothes, and threw his power over the whole manor.

_There._

Erik was moving at a rapid clip through the West Wing. Charles checked – the children were in the kitchen, along with Armando – and slipped out of his room. He could not say why. Or rather: he could. He wanted to see how long the sedative had lasted. When had Erik woken up? It was
important to know.

Everything important, though, went up in smoke when Charles closed the library door, turned – and only just sensed Erik’s mind before he practically catapulted through the West Wing entrance, ran to Charles – and kissed him.

It took several hard pushes to get him to release his tongue. “Erik,” Charles mumbled.

“Rabe.”

“Good morning to you, too.”

“I don’t have much time,” Erik breathed. His eyes were glowing. “I wanted to – I forgot to give you this.”

He pushed a small but heavy bag into Charles’ hands.

“… What is it?”

“More for your box.” That look was hungry. Back to – normal then, perhaps, but Charles felt a stab of consternation. He had meant to ask Erik more about Shaw. Last night, Erik had seemed … more lucid.

“Erik,” he tried. “How do you feel this morning?”

A wide grin, all teeth. “You mean, because you finally –”

“I didn’t know you wanted it so.” There had been no limp, which was good. Charles gave Erik a long, assessing look. Practically vibrating in place; all energy and high spirits. “How’s your shoulder?”

“Healed.”

“Healed. Wait. Did you go –”

“I woke up in the library, and Zelya found me there. He took me to Archangel.” Erik smiled. “But I told him he had to take me back here, afterwards, because I forgot,” he poked the bag where Charles held it, “that.”

“Wait. Erik, you fell asleep by me. Why on earth would you go to the library?”

“No,” and Charles bit down on a yelp, because Azazel had just walked through the open door and slammed it shut. “The question is: why would he be asleep by you in the first place?”

“Because I love him, Arschloch,” Erik snapped.

Fuck. Charles kept his face blank, because the first part had been Russian, and he could not show that he understood.

“My friend, you’re a fool.” Azazel’s voice was dangerous. “He’s a liar, and a cheat, and he’s using you for his own purposes.”

Erik lifted his chin. “Prove it.”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I could,” Azazel muttered. “I can’t pin the slippery little bastard. And what were you thinking, going off with Pryde? Do you have any idea how much trouble you caused
me? Emma hauls me out of sleep at four o’clock this morning. Then I track you down only to find out you’re busy shoving your dick into a slippery eel –“

And Charles did not understand the rest of the profanity. He got the general idea, though. “Excuse me. Would you mind speaking English?”

“Fuck you.”

“Thank you so much. Is this something to do with Frost? I heard ‘Emma’ in there. Really,” and he made his voice snide, “what on earth keeps you working for such an inconsiderate person? I’ve seen you run ragged and then some, in the last week alone.”

“Don’t talk about what you don’t understand.”

“What don’t I –”

“Fuck you.” Azazel switched back into Russian. “What do I tell our Lady, Erik? You know you’re not supposed to come here!”

“You have to keep it a secret,” said Erik. “You promised me.”

“But she –”

“Doesn’t know. She can never know. She thinks Xavier hates me – so you see, it’s a secret.”

“Oh, you fuckwit,” Charles mumbled. Trust Azazel? He would as soon trust a barracuda, and here Erik had walked right up to it and held out his hand.

“You – are – so stupid,” Azazel breathed. “He’s a liar.”

“You’re either my friend, and you’ll do as I ask, Zelya,” said Erik, “or you’re the liar, for claiming friendship all these many years.”

Shite. A knife had slipped out of Erik’s sleeve - he uncurled his fingers and casually floated it over his open palm. Charles backed away, his eyes fixed on the gleaming metal.

“Erik,” said Azazel, “put the knife down.”

“I hardly ever ask you for anything. But now I’m asking this one, small thing. Tell our Lady that I went to the library here … because …” Erik frowned. “I wanted to be near Charles.” A sharp nod. “In the same building, so I could feel him. Tell her that.”

“Emma has her own ends, Erik. She’ll take any surprise out of your hide.”

“I don’t care about my hide. Do you care about yours?”

Azazel went still. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” Erik plucked the knife out of mid-air and flipped it high. Caught it. “Nothing specific.”

Charles did his best to find something fascinating in the chessboard. The pieces were still scattered. He didn’t remember anyone jostling it that morning, and … last night, he hadn't hit it that hard, had he?. Odd. But any focus would do, to keep his fear from showing on his face.

“I hope we can stay friends, Yerka,” said Azazel.
“I hope so, too. Do this for me?”

A sigh. “On your head.”


Charles’ fingers fumbled the drawstrings. He looked. “They’re purple.”

“Amethysts,” said Erik. “I got them all for you.”

“From where?”

“Albuquerque’s treasury,” Azazel cut in, also using English. His glare could curdle milk. “Will you tell me something, Xavier? Before I take away our friend here?”

“If I can,” Charles croaked.

“Have you ever seen a man killed with a revolving door?”

“… No.”


Charles gulped. “Let me guess –”

“This one?” A horned thumbnail hooked at Erik. “Has done it many times. Not last night, because we had no time to waste. But the memories I could show you. And you want that in your bed?”

“You’re one to talk. I think you should both go now.”

Erik made a sound of protest. “We were talking.”

“Thank you for the gift,” Charles said. “I think we’re done.”

“We’re not –” and Erik grabbed him. Charles yelped.

Azazel laughed, sneering. “Not so fun now?”

“Give us five minutes,” Erik ordered, speaking Russian.

“I’m not leaving.”

“Face the fireplace!” in a snap, and: “Five minutes.”

“Because I’m your friend,” Azazel growled. And paced away.

Charles forced his incipient panic down. “What did you want to say, Erik?”

“You asked me how I felt this morning. Ask it again.”

“All right. How do you feel this morning?”

“I love you,” Erik breathed. He kissed Charles. With teeth.

“That’s not an answer,” Charles said, thickly.
“I love you. And after last night, Geliebter,” Erik kissed his ear. And bit, hard enough to draw blood. “This morning, I feel like I could kill a thousand men.”

Charles held himself rigid. “Ah.”

“Ten thousand.” Erik nipped his ear once more. “All for you. I took you to me – I love you.” He drew back. His fingers pressed into Charles’ waist; flexed. “When can we do that again?”

His mind went blank. “What.”

“When can you fuck me again?”

“Keep your voice down!” He would not burst into hysterical laughter. He would not. “Erik ….We’ll have to see. We’re both very busy people.”

“I can always –”

“And we have to keep it a secret from Frost. You know that.”

“Of course. But we can –”

“And …. I’m not often in the mood for – that.”

“… You’re not?”

“It’s not you. You’re very beautiful, darling, and very passionate. It’s only that fucking someone is a lot of hard work. And – let’s be honest with each other: on most days, I’m a lazy man.” Charles tried a smile. “So you see the problem.”

“There is none,” whispered Erik, eyes hot. “I’m not afraid of hard work. I’d fuck you every night if I lived here.”

Charles stared at him, aghast.

“I mean it. If we lived together, I would make sure you were always well-rested. You could sleep, even.” Erik crowded up close to him again; whispered warm and wet against his ear, “I could fuck you in your sleep.”

“Thank you, but no –”

“I would slick you up and not wake you; fuck you and not disturb you – and you would wake with my cock all the way up in your beautiful ass, Schatz.” Erik lapped at his ear; something trickled inside. “Or I could give you my come, there, and wake you … licking every last drop of it out.”

“That’s enough,” Charles managed.

“Right, your five minutes is up.”

“It wasn’t even two!” Erik snarled, releasing him. “Zelya, I –”

“Time to go.” Azazel’s lips were thin as he marched up and grabbed Erik’s forearm. “Say goodbye.”

Erik’s mouth was wet as he whirled to face Charles; his eyes looked quite mad. “Rabe, I love –”

They disappeared.
“… You,” Charles finished.

The library felt very empty.

*Back to normal.* The half-lucid Erik … gone.

He heard his own sips of breath.

Perhaps, Charles thought, he should have talked more to that Erik – *lucid* – last night. But: *no.* That was the path to admitting that … with his teasing and trickery … he might have made a mistake.

Which he would not do.

His mistakes had a tendency to rebound exponentially, after all. Charles thought to the shower. Would Erik even remember the new conditioning? And – he winced. Would one measly round of fellatio outweigh years of trauma at Shaw’s hands, in that terrible place? Charles hunched his shoulders. What had he even been thinking?

He would go to his room, Charles decided. Put the amethysts there, and then go to eat breakfast. If he had to pretend his hands weren’t shaking as he hefted the bag – that was his own business.

“Hi, Mr. Xavier!” Kurt said as Charles walked into the kitchen. “Bye, Mr. Xavier!”

“We’re going to play costumes,” said Scott, following Kurt out the kitchen door.

“By yourselves?” Charles called after them. “By themselves?” he asked Armando.

“What are they going to do with a wicker chest? Besides, it’ll take them ten minutes to lug it down there. I’m almost finished.” Armando held up his coffee mug. “You can stay to watch Jean, if you want.”

“But who will watch you?” Charles replied, *sotto voce.* “Don’t think I didn’t notice. Did you enjoy your jaunt to Ithaca last night?”

“Fresh air.” Armando smirked at him.

*I saved a present until you got here, Mr. Xavier! Azazel said in his note to wait for adults.*

“It’s Mr. Neyafim, isn’t it, Jean? And Armando didn’t count?”

*Adults – more than just one.*

Charles raised an eyebrow at the package in its cellophane wrap. “Scott and Kurt got theirs as well, did they?”

*Their was candy.*

“Their presents *were* candy – plural. And they didn’t care to wait?”

*Nope.*

He poured himself some coffee. “Where did you learn that word?”

*Scott.*
“Well. Thank you for waiting,” he toasted Jean, “for me.”

*You’re welcome. I got this one, too.* Jean sent him the image of a small, round metal cat. *From* – and she sent Erik’s face, quiet above a book.

“I know.”

*I showed it to Princess Alexandra, but she didn’t like it.*

“Mm.” Erik had left it in Sean’s room, Charles remembered. Scott and Kurt must not have noticed it, or cared.

*But this is the last! It’s so pretty. May I unwrap it now, Mr. Xavier? Please, please?*

“Go ahead.” His stomach felt tight, so he went to fetch the milk. And so his back was to Jean, and he only heard the cellophane crinkle, and an eager meow.

“Get that cat off the table.”

*Can’t she stay just a minute?*

“Jean, I won’t say it twice. Or – on your lap, and your lap only.”

He listened to Jean unwrap the present.

*Oh!*

“That nice, is it?” he said to Jean. “Do you want more coffee?” he asked Armando.

“I – wait. Jean? What is that?”

*It’s mine!*

“Jean,” Charles sighed, turning, “there’s no need to be so …”

He stared.

The box was open. It was lined with red velvet.

And inside it rested a knife.

“What an interesting present. Why would Azazel want to give you …”

Jean picked it up with a giggle.

“You might be a little young to have it, dearest, hm?” The knife’s edge glinted silver at him. “Especially if it’s sharp.”

*Watch this!*

Jean opened her other hand and cupped the knife in both. Then she took a deep breath. And with only the slightest wobble, the knife rose half a foot into the air.

Charles could not help it. He pressed backward against the sink, staring. At the knife, floating above her open palms.

*I promise, I won’t let it slip.*
“Better not,” Armando said. “Right, Charles?”

But Charles could not reply.

For Jean had tipped her chin up at him, and grinned from ear to ear, proud as punch.

He noticed again, of all things, what he had seen two days previous. Her adult tooth was coming in, right bang in front. Perfectly straight.

*Plenty of room for it*, but why would that be –

– and her hair looked such a rich shade of red in the kitchen light …

“That’s impossible,” Charles whispered.

*I can hold it, I promise*. See?

“Hey now, *don’t* do that.” Armando reached out at the knife as it slipped through the air, orbiting the tabletop. Princess Alexandra hopped up on the table again and tripped over her own paws in her eagerness to chase the metal.

"A little help, please?” Charles heard the *clank* of metal on stone. Armando had transmuted his forearm and taken hold of the knife.

Jean glowered. *That’s not fair!* She reached out a hand; Charles saw her small fingers tense. A grunt from Armando – she must have pulled – *Mr. Xavier, tell him it isn’t fair!*

She turned the glower on him. Her eyes flashed grey.

“No,” Charles mumbled. He walked to the table; sat down hard on the bench. “That’s …”

“Charles.” Armando tapped his shoulder. “Are you all right?”

A squawk from the kitten meant that Jean had moved her back to her lap. *What’s wrong, Mr. Xavier?*

“Nothing, dear,” he said. He heard his own voice, thready. “I just thought of something strange.”

*Like what?*

Charles shook his head. "Never mind."

Chapter End Notes

The music Erik hums is that of the aria “Im Mohrenland gefangen war” – a ballad from Mozart’s comic opera *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (The Abduction from the Seraglio.) Though the text (and, obvs, the whole damn opera) is v. orientalist & thus a bit problematic, the outline of the song is poignant. It’s basically about a weeping imprisoned maiden who gets rescued by a brave knight “from foreign lands.” The tenor sings this song to alert his fiancée, and the fiancée of his employer, that they have to grab their shit and go, b/c it’s jailbreak time! (Or, harem-break time. You know.)

(ETA: Thanks for the umlaut catch! "In the land of the carrots" - hilarious!!! and
Since this is a German comic opera, there’s spoken dialogue. (And at this point in the plot, even while the music progresses.)

What makes the music lovely is Mozart’s playing with modality and symmetry. Having the accompaniment descend one whole step at a time gives the entire thing a bit of an archaic/exotic flavor (when one compares the normal half-step between degrees 7 & 8 of a major scale, for example.)

Hell, I just like it. So I figure Erik might remember bits of the tune, if not the lyrics.

For the music - an old-ish recording of a guy named Nicolai Gedda: Click here! (nb I assume not only that Erik would have a scratchy kind of baritone, rather than a tenor, but also that there would be no vibrato deployed.)

And for the text: Click here to follow along as you listen.
Chapter Notes

ETA: mega spoilers in the comments!

Finally, here it is! And my debts for this one are vast. For all the details, please click here! (There are so many; do please click! and if I have left you out, please let me know and I will include you super-fast!)

I'M SO HAPPY, I'm grinning from ear to ear!! One of these scenes has been on hold for three years, and it's finally hit the (e-)page!. I think you will know which, as soon you as read it.

Thought it’s not from the scene in question, here is Kurt’s lullaby.

I'd love to know what you think of the whole, but only if you'd feel so inclined - cause goodness knows I took a while! Enjoy!

ETA 27 August: my thanks to yuitka for the Cyrillic catch!

Impossible.

Charles hoped he was making all the right sounds of approval and interest at the children’s play in the library. He had joined them an hour ago, and still could not focus. Beneath the chatter of their staging and the crackle of the fire, his mind gnawed at the memory of Jean’s knife.

You’re not watching, Mr. Xavier!

“Yes, I am. See?” He gilded the words with his ability and sent them gliding over the children’s minds along with an image: his eyes, as big as dinner plates.

Kurt giggled and Scott smiled, tugging the brim of his overlarge hat. All well and good, except Jean was still scowling. And she had to stop, because – looking at how her forehead knit into a frown, Charles saw how she would grow and grow, and with the rest of the baby fat melted into the contours of an adult face, those grey eyes glinting out from beneath her lowered brow would look just like –

– he would not think about it.

“That’s a very pretty coat, Jean.”

It wasn’t, actually. It was what might once have been white fabric, grimy, far too large for her, and patched on one elbow. But Jean brightened and flung her arms out to make the sleeves flare.

“Me too!” Kurt jumped and twirled. “I’m pretty too!” His feather boa tangled with his tail, and his baseball cap fell off.

Scott bent down, carefully patted along the edge of the carpet, and found the cap. He held it up above his head. “Careful, Kurt.”
“You as well,” said Charles. “Don’t let your own hat slip.”

“Did I tell you about the glasses, Mr. Xavier?”

“Goggles, I thought it was.”

“Same thing,” Scott said, excitedly, straightening. “I won’t have to wear a blindfold ever again, I won’t have to worry about any hat –”

“That’s right. So for now, why don’t you take something more?” From his seat on the low couch, Charles snagged the costume basket and pushed it along the carpet to Scott. “Kurt has cap and boa; Jean has coat and crown,” for she had found the tinsel in a kitchen cupboard, though Charles thought he had hid it very well. “There has to be another piece in here for the character of …”

The children had insisted that he watch their play, but after the better part of an hour, Charles had little impression of the characters and even less of the plot.

*I’m the wizard*, Jean sent as Scott found his way to the basket and began rummaging. *Scott’s the monster, and Kurt’s …*

“Kurt is … what?”

*Um.*

“Kurt?” Charles grabbed the boa, half-heartedly, and tugged. It needed straightening. “Who are you?”

“Rargh!”

*No, that’s for the monster. You can be the tree, Kurt. Trees are quiet.*

“Rrrrargh!!”

“Unless they’re particularly monstrous trees.” Charles finished re-arranging the boa, tucking in the end. Its pink feathers stood out bright against Kurt’s blue skin and black hair.

Kurt wriggled. “Let go!”

*Kurt, remember in Tree Time, how the oak gets to close his eyes and think of acorns?*

“Acorns are delicious, acorns are a treat! Acorns are so tasty, and good for me to eat –”

*That’s the squirrel, dummy!*

“Jean!” Charles said, stern. “Don’t call names. Say that you’re sorry.”

Though, really – Kurt hadn’t seemed to notice. He had taken Charles’ idea and wrapped the boa closer; now it had him so tightly looped that all he could do was sway back and forth as he sang, “Acorns make me happy, acorns make me smile –”

“I think I’ve found a good one, Mr. Xavier!”

“Fine, Scott.” A headache was beginning to needle at the base of Charles’ skull. “Kurt, hush now. Jean, what do you say?”

*Sorry.*
Even the appearance of the word in their minds seemed sulky. Charles had no idea how she managed it. “Thank you, Scott, what have you found?”

“This! I wear the scratchy blanket for the monster, but this feels really fancy, so I can use it for when the wizard comes to the castle—”

“Don’t ruin the surprises,” said Charles, tiredly. “In any case, straighten up and show it off.”

He turned from unraveling Kurt, to look.

And choked on his own breath.

… What is it?

“Mr. Xavier? Are you O.K.?”

No. Because he could not stop staring.

Because Scott’s cowboy hat, pulled down so low, looked all the more ridiculous when paired with an Oxford undress gown.

His undress gown.

Charles stared, numb, at the black fabric; at the lace and pleats. Except he couldn’t tell the difference between pleat and wrinkle, now, and the lace on one sleeve was torn.

“Scott,” he managed.

“Do I look weird? You sound like you want to laugh but you can’t.”

“Scott,” said Charles, “you need to wear something else.”

Why?

“Yeah, why? This one feels nice.”

“I know.” Charles half-laughed, half-coughed. “I know it does, my dear … because it’s mine. Or. It was mine.”

“We said the rules, Mr. Xavier. No take-backs.”

Scott, that’s mean!

“Sorry!” Scott tried to untangle himself. Now free of the feather boa, Kurt leaped to help. Together, they managed it. “Here, Mr. Xavier,” Scott said. “You can wear it.”

“I couldn’t possibly—”

“But what will he be?” Kurt said, worried.

He can’t be our mother.

“Why not?”

Not in this story, silly – the mother’s dead. But Mr. Xavier is still Wendy. Jean turned to him. Aren’t you, Mr. Xavier? Maybe we could have a Wendy in this story too. She can be the unicorn.
“But Wendy’s in the Peter Pan story.” Kurt’s words were muffled; he had started sucking on the tip of his tail.

I know. I said so!

“You’re not in charge of this story, Jean,” Scott grumped. “I’m in charge.”

I told it to you first, and then I said you could be in charge.

Charles let their back-and-forth wash over him like white noise. He said nothing, fixed as he was on the sight of his undress gown.

How had it gotten there? He had awakened, in September, with no idea of—of anything, and had talked to Frost, and then had seen that his gown was gone, and his shoes were off his feet and in the cabinet—

He had thought that Raven had taken the gown, somehow. Or that someone from Oxford had returned it to her.

And instead—Charles bit down hard on his lower lip. Instead, Frost had taken the gown and tossed it away: into the storage room he was not allowed to see, full of flotsam and jetsam. She had taken it from him, though. She had—

—and Erik, face wreathed by smoke in the dark, whispering in his memory: After that, though, they dressed you again.

Charles felt sick to his stomach.

They left your shoes—the memory went on, in Erik’s graveled voice—I took them there later. Even if they would not let me go in.

Oh God, Frost had taken his gown, and then the rest of his clothes—off—and then tossed him into that telepath-proof cell like trash, when whatever she had tried had gone wrong …

“Are you O.K.?”

Mr. Xavier?

A blue hand grabbed hold of his and squeezed.

Blue … He looked for five fingers and scales; saw only three and fur.

Charles shook himself back to the present, blinking at the gown. Scott was still holding it out in his direction. And Jean and Kurt, Charles realized, were looking at him as though he had grown a second head.

“I’m sorry, children.” He took the gown. His hands were not trembling. “I just thought of something strange.”

Like this morning? Jean sent, and that did it.

“Get Mr. Muñoz.” Charles bent his head down between his knees and tried to drag in air.

But—

“Now. Quickly, Jean. Kurt, you run with her—please.”
His blood sloshed in his ears; he saw strange patterns on the insides of his eyelids. Then he saw—and felt—a bolt of heat crack across his mind. “Ow.”

*I’m calling him, Mr. Xavier! And we can get you some water.*

Jean ran away. He could hear her shoes clattering across the floor and then clanging on the metal spiral staircase. “Wait for me!” Kurt cried.

Erik’s shoes had clanged, when he—

“Jean,” he rasped. Bile surged into his mouth. He tried to swallow; his head was pounding. “Jean, come down from there. You can’t go up there.” Charles tried to stand—and heard a tinny ringing in his ears. It got louder. And louder. “Jean—” *Jean!*

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It was bizarre to feel someone taking him by the shoulders, to see a face close to his own, to watch a mouth moving in words—and to hear nothing but that same loud ringing.

Charles blinked at Armando. Then blinked again as the hands on his shoulders went to his back, and pushed. Then he was staring at the dust beneath the low couch, from the fine vantage point of the space between his knees.

*Odd.* Charles had only ever fainted once that he could remember, wearing far too heavy a sweater beneath cassock and surplice on Christmas Eve. This seemed the same—jolly good—with sound returning in fits and starts, his cough included, swishing in time with his pulse.

He had lost consciousness more than once, with Erik’s help. But he was not going to think of that.

A hand landed on the back of his skull, pushing down. “Ah,” Charles tried. “Is that really necessary?”

“Looks like it,” came Armando’s voice from above. “Kurt, go get a cup and the rest of the tea water. Jean, put that back and then go help Kurt. Don’t spill anything.”

Shoes clattered away. “One of these days we could let Kurt teleport,” Charles mumbled.

“Azazel would kill me.”

“But Mr. Muñoz—”

“I’m joking, Scott. Hey, you know what you could do for me?”

“What?”

“Come here and keep hold of Mr. Xavier.”

“How?”

Charles realized, with a start, that Scott sounded tearful.

“Just put your hand on his head. Maybe pat a bit. Go on, try.”

Charles felt a small hand pat the back of his skull, as Armando’s larger hands left his shoulders.

“Is that right, Mr. Muñoz?”
“Exactly right.”

“Really, I don’t need anyone to –”

“Charles?”

“Yes?”

“Keep quiet for a second, and keep your head between your knees.”

“Really,” Charles grumbled, “it’s nothing. I was just temporarily dizzy.”

“All right.” Armando dragged one of the fireside chairs closer. One carved leg, Charles saw, caught on the carpet’s fringe. “If you didn’t want to phone Frost, you could’ve just told me so.”

As fast as light, Charles sent Raven to check on Kurt. He was still busy in the kitchen – Jean had joined him. “Scott, why don’t you go wait for the others? They’ll be here with my water soon. Go to the door so you can help them.”

“O.K.,” Scott said, sounding uncertain.

“You’ve counted the distance, haven’t you? You can find the door. Go on.” Charles reached up and tapped Scott’s hand. “Soldier forth.”

Carefully – his head did hurt – he brought his legs up onto the couch, toed off his slippers, and watched Scott walk. It was far easier to focus on that cautious progress, to pretend absorbed interest, than to think about Armando’s frown. And then he hoped he was making all the right sounds of thanks to Jean for the water she brought – accepting the chipped mug and not looking at her smiling face as she took Kurt and Scott by the hand and went to find the toy horses. He was not looking, because he couldn’t think about it any more, he couldn’t –

“It’s been boiled twice now. You can drink it.”

“Right. Cheers.”

“We have to talk.”

A lesser person would have spluttered, holding a mouthful of water and hearing those words. Charles finished his drink calmly and set the mug down onto his lap. “We’re talking already.”

“Not about kids or faints or any of that.” Armando’s words were clipped. “We have to talk about Frost.”

“I can’t imagine what you mean.”

“I tell you the night before last that we have to call her, and fast, and that we need to work together – and you go and pull this? I make the call, I take the punch for it?”

“You honestly think I’m faking?” Charles’ headache spiked. “That’s ridiculous. If I wanted to get out of talking to Frost, you wouldn’t know it until you were on the bloody phone with her.”

“Maybe you could stop playing mental chess for just a second?”

“You didn’t know how to play in January. Have you learned since?” Charles tipped his head at the chess set across from Armando, next to the other chair. Erik’s – except Erik didn’t know pawn from king. “We’ve a board I’ve been dying to use. Anything except this conversation.”
Armando sat back in the chair. “What’s your problem, Charles?”

“I have no problem.”

“You can’t hear me out? You can’t even talk to me?”

“As I said –”

“We’re talking, I know. I mean talking like we did then. I was honest with you, and I thought you were with me. We can’t be honest again?”

Charles stared at him, his headache pulsing in his temples. “Why now?”

“Why not?”

“I’m this close to vomiting what little I’ve drunk today, let alone eaten – you see yourself what I’m going through and you want to have an honest conversation about bloody Frost? Right now?!”

“But –”

“I don’t feel well,” said Charles, throat closing. “I don’t like damned surprises. I don’t like not knowing what’s going to happen any random morning of the week.” He gave up, and closed his eyes. Drew his undress gown closer. “I don’t like it here. I just ... I just want to go home.”

Armando was silent. Charles didn’t blame him. Really, what could be said?

… but Raven would have said something, Charles knew. He could picture it as he sat, hunched over – her brow creased with concern, but then smoothing out as her smile shone through her eyes. *It’ll be all right, Charles. I love you.*

_Come home, come home. Raven, Raven fly away home ....*

Except, of course, he was only Charles. And here, outside his mind, he could not fly.

A splashing sound brought him back to the library. Armando was pouring the rest of the water from saucepan to mug. Charles let him place it on the couch, next to his knee. He stared at the mug, exhausted.

“Sorry,” Armando said. “For pushing you.”

“I don’t need coddling.”

“It looks like you don’t need pushing either. That’s what this is about?”

Charles saw how Armando had tilted his brow at the undress gown. He grimaced. “None of your business.”

“It came with you?”

Charles said nothing.

*Nothing* must have been enough. Either that, or Armando had previously witnessed unfortunates reunited with long-lost possessions – for he sighed. “It’s seen better days?”

“I didn’t do anything to it. I didn’t know it was here. Scott found it in the costume basket, and – presto – it bloody well sent me into a tailspin. Does that sound as ridiculous to you as it does to me?”
Armando was quiet. When Charles looked back at him, there was no mockery or irritation on his face. The expression was difficult to read.

It had better not be pity, was all.

“If you can get hold of a needle and thread, I could mend it for you.”

“Am I to take it that you had time enough to learn bloody cross-stitch in Dallas?”

“I’d use a straight stitch for this. Here.” From his seat, Armando reached out and tugged at the fabric in Charles’ arms. “Let me see.”

Charles let the gown go.

“It’s not that bad, really. Say … two hours? And that’s only if I want to take my time.”

Charles set his jaw; clamped down tight on the impulse to offer his sewing kit.

“… You rest a bit, all right?”

“Where are you going?”

“Someone has to watch the kids. I won’t touch this, if you don’t want me to.” Armando had not quite finished folding the gown by the time he rose; one fall of fabric waved at Charles.

“Oh, you’re welcome to it.” Charles made a show of drinking his water. “All my sniveling aside, it was a nuisance, having to wear it in Oxford. I don’t need it now.”

“I’ll be careful with it, Charles. You be careful with yourself.”

“I’m not –”

“Fragile or a weakling – I know. I’ll send one of the kids with a blanket,” Armando picked up the saucepan.

“Thank you.”

“No problem.” But when he reached the east door, Armando said, “Get better, and fast. Because I’ll handle calling Frost, but then you’ll owe me one.”

“I will, will I?”

“Big time.”

“We may not have world enough, but we have time.” Charles forced a smile. “Consider one owed.”

Armando gave him a look, and shut the door.

Charles considered finishing the water, but then set the mug down instead. Once its weight was gone, he was glad to see that his hands were not trembling.

Had Armando been offended?

Don’t lose an ally if you don’t have to. Geoffrey’s words, with a dart of his tongue out where an incisive had been as he grinned at Charles, tapping the chalkboard in the Oxford war room …

And what had set off this morning’s melodrama? Not just some shoddy undress gown, that was
“It’s impossible,” Charles said to the empty library. He grabbed the mug; drained it, set it down with a clatter. His throat was parched. “It ought to be impossible.”

Except … horribly, he could see how it would be possible.

Erik had been an inept lover to begin with; he still had his awkward moments. But all the clumsiness in the world did not preclude the possibility of him having had sex at some point in the past. Having fallen into bed with some woman, somewhere, seven years ago, and got a child on her. Fallen – or fooled – or he could have been hit on the head, or been slipped a drug, or something else could have happened to him –

“Or he could have just fucked some random bint and conveniently forgotten to tell you, lest he spoil the honeymoon.”

– but – Only you – Erik had said, the bloody romantic, so many times Charles had lost count –

“I’m not going to think about this.” Romantic, God help him. Given however long it seemed to have taken the idea to infect his mind, had he really come to think it romantic to be the first true love of a bloodthirsty thug?

– and just last night, had he really –

“Why do I care? God damn it.” Wiping sweat from his forehead, Charles swallowed against the pain in his throat. A murderer more than half insane; a monster that had imprisoned him, tortured him, come near to raping him – why did he care?

Except that Erik had seemed cognizant, just last night, until he –

“I don’t care. I don’t.”

Jean’s appearance, her expression …

… It could very well be coincidence, happenstance: a long proximity leading him to imagine things that did not exist. There would be plenty of time to think about everything later. For now, he would consider what had made him sick. He would not think of Erik, of Jean … of home…

He had not thought of home in so long …

The windows looked exceptionally clear as Charles blinked at them, hard.

He straightened his back and stretched – and a pulse of pain lanced straight up into the base of his skull – shite –

“Mr. Xavier?” came a small voice.

“Kurt?” Charles looked round at the door. “What is it?”

“I brought you blankets.”

“Why, Kurt …” He had to smile the smallest bit at the sight: a heap of wool and weave, edging into the room and making its way towards him, with a pair of legs in patched trousers wobbling back and forth beneath the weight. “Thank you.”

“Yep!”
“Say ‘you’re welcome.’ And where did you learn that word?”


“There, indeed. Let me pull them up.”

“I can tuck you in.” Blue-furred hands grabbed at the quilts and blankets. “Please?”

“Certainly.”

Despite his headache and clogged throat, it was restful to watch Kurt and to listen to the snap and pop of the fire. There was an off-pitch sound as well: Kurt humming as he concentrated on pulling the blankets into place, using his arms and his tail.

“What’s that, dear?”

“It’s Papa’s song for when I’m sick.”

“He used to sing it to you? What are the words?”

There was a pause. The tip of Kurt’s blue tail wended towards his mouth. Charles leaned forward, gently took hold of it and steered it away. “You’ve stopped with that, haven’t you?”

“… Yes.”

“You’re getting bigger and older now, Kurt. Papa doesn’t do that with his tail, does he?”

Kurt shook his head. He had taken something out of a pocket. Charles saw three marbles: two opaque and one crystal. “Those are nice,” he said.

“I was playing with Jean and Scott.”

“And those are your three?”

“My three left.” Kurt’s small body heaved a great sigh.

Despite everything, Charles felt his mouth twitch. Jean and Scott played for keeps; poor Kurt. “Come here and sit by me. Tell me the words to your song.”

“I don’t know all of them.”

“Whatever you do know,” said Charles, patting the sofa, “you can sing to me right here.”

Obediently, Kurt sat, tucking his legs up cross-wise as Charles straightened out his own and made his neck as comfortable as it could be on one arm of the couch. “Start when you like. I’ll just try to sleep a little.”

But Kurt took his time: passing the marbles from palm to blue-fuzzed palm, humming a little under his breath, looking out of the corner of his eye at Charles.

*There’s no need to be shy,* Charles meant to say – but his eyelids were drooping instead. It made sense. He had not slept well the previous night. He had been too busy fucking Erik …

But he didn’t want to think about that. Something else. *Anything* else.

“Kurt,” Charles said quietly.
He felt no need to open his eyes. With Raven looking out, he could see Kurt perched on the sofa – stretching part of the blanket taut over his knees, watching one of the marbles loop round and round it as he moved the fabric. “Kurt.”

The humming stopped. “Yes, Mr. Xavier?”

“I do think I could sleep, now. But would you sing? It would help me.”


And in the warm light of his reading room, his birds thrumming all around him, Charles listened. The words, slightly out of tune, featured Kurt’s lisp. He had a tooth loose, Charles remembered.

Raven had never had a tooth loose, though she had seemed like such a child – limited vocabulary and all – for their first five years as brother and sister. And it had seemed a split second between that and her being a perfectly mutinous eighteen years old. Just eighteen, and the Takers on their way …

Memory shimmered into an image in his mind’s eye: a freezing September day, and Raven looking over at him from the entrance to his study, leaning against the doorjamb and frowning.

It had been one of the days, Charles remembered, that she had stayed completely blue – the bathrobe draping dingy white over indigo scales and under coppery hair.

*For God’s sake,* he had said, setting down his teacup, *what are you doing? Someone could see.*

*And then there would be trouble. That’s what you keep telling me, isn’t it, Charles?*

It wasn’t what he had told her; not precisely, not always.

Except – Charles knew that it *was,* and shame washed up his throat, tasting of bile, even as he remembered: *Change back before someone sees you.*

*Why are we hiding?*

*You know why.*

Her eyes had flashed. *You’re my brother, and I love you, but some days you drive me crazy. You and this town.*

*You’ve made your point. Change back.*

*Charles –*

*Change back.*

Then she had changed into a mirror image of himself.

Charles remembered the surprise – fear – *awe* – that had shaken him, at the glare of his own eyes from five steps away.

Of course it had only lasted twenty seconds, because that was how long she could go before dropping the form and morphing into a rose-and-gold Mallory, wearing the old bathrobe and a new sulk.

*This can’t happen again,* he had said – and now, he cringed at the memory of the quaver in his
“Find another sister,” she had replied in ’60—a dip of her head, acquiescing, in ’63—and her narrow stare, one eye blue, the other yellow, in ’66. It had made sense, her frustration: eighteen and hemmed in on every side—when at the same age, he had already been on two Oxford missions … had rescued her on the first …

And Erik had been on his journey to Lake Baikal, to win a war and build a country.

Charles breathed in, raggedly; exhaled. Raven was not Erik. She loved the cozy warmth of home, the youngest children that she taught, the cats that kept her company … and she loved him, sister to brother, after he had saved her from starvation and radiation and God knew what else. He’d only ever wanted to keep her safe.

He tamped her memory back down in his mind; reinforced all the layers of shielding as he moved silently away, up to the surface again. The shields and veils, snarled into an impenetrable web, still growing … and had been, as long as he had been here in this manor, in Ithaca, in the East …

He knew, in the real world, that his face was wet. With any luck, Kurt would not notice.

Charles must have dozed in his reading room for a good long while. Kurt had started the song at least once again by the time he blinked awake there, hearing typical lullaby nonsense about fairy tales and the moon.

He gazed at what had been his Cyrillic shelf.

Overgrown as it was, now, the half-shelf half-wall—all tree—flickered with fire, its sharp leaves half singing, half whispering, The cloth for your horse I will sew for you from silk. Sleep now, my dear little child, bayushki bayu …

He felt no translation for that last; lully lullay probably came closest to it.

Charles sighed, tilting his head back to see his birds. “What do you think of his voice? Not bad, is it?”

His nightingale squawked. Charles gave it a half smile.

He tracked the different paths of his birds, swirling about him in eddies of song, each one unique. Missing were sparrow and hummingbird, of course, but Charles could say truthfully that he felt nothing lacking. And there were those missing that he could hardly remember: the magpie, gone almost before he knew it existed; the diamond brooch, flown over to Frost …

“Rest in peace,” he said.

A cry from his raven caught his attention. Charles looked and saw it flying up and down; over and around his bookshelves, and then in and out of the wall, circling especially through the secret door. Jean’s shelf still sent up flames. He ignored it, and Kurt’s song, focusing on the flight.

“Is that what I should be doing? Trying to remember?”

Another cry.

“But what, exactly? There are so many things to think about. Armando, Azazel. Emma,” he grimaced at the memory of her running her hands over his bookshelves, “and Emma’s … Sebastian. That one,” said Charles, nodding. “Let’s puzzle over him.”
The raven flew faster.

“Not good enough? Well, put him on a list. Let’s have you fly out a bit more; get some exercise. And let’s have me find the back way out of this manor, hm? Since I can’t run out the front. Or run at all, truly.” He sighed. “It’s rather more of an academic exercise, isn’t it?”

And he had not thought of it in some time …. Charles shook his head. The whirl around him of feathers and flight was not stopping.

“One last.” He frowned. “Erik and Jean. Whatever they are to each other – let’s think about that. A little down the road, though; I don’t want a repeat of this morning.”

His birds chirped and twittered. Startled, Charles looked round his chair – at the piles of books that had materialized, teetering on all sides, surrounding him. “A good think or two, and then some. Perhaps after I sleep some more?”

Except Raven screeched, and he opened his eyes in a start –

- to see Kurt flinch.

“What’s wrong?”

“You went like this.” Yellow eyes squeezed shut – Kurt imitated a snore – and then flashed open wide, staring at him. “It was scary.”

“I don’t snore. And don’t be scared.” He patted Kurt’s hand. “I had to wake up, is all.” He shook off the last threads of sleep and memory. “Where’s Mr. Muñoz?”

“He went to the West Wing.”

“Did he say why?”

“To call on the ’phone.”

“Ah.”

That had to be the conversation with Frost. It took only one pass of Raven through the West Wing, brushing over Armando’s mind, to confirm it. Charles set a kaleidoscope of faces spinning out of his memory and sent it over – and noted how Frost’s face somehow caught on Armando’s mind and expanded, distorting, as though she were reflected in rippling water. Proof positive.

Charles kept his smile to himself, merely shaping his thanks and relief into one vivid impression and whirling it over in turn. Armando started pushing back against him, sending – whatever – with a tinge of – out –

*Fine*, he sent, with a sensation of lingering warmth. And perhaps some of that well-being washed back, for instead of fretting, or strategizing – *thinking* – Charles merely leaned back against the armrest of the low couch. “You sang so well, my dear.”

“Thanks, Mr. Xavier.”

“And your father taught you?”

Kurt nodded, staring at his bare feet. “I miss him.”

“I have people I miss, too.”
“Really?”
“Really.”

“Who?”
Charles shrugged. “Just people.”

“From where you’re from, where they talk like you,” Kurt said, decisively.

“Exactly. But you’re the one who speaks Russian, Kurt – it’s quite wonderful.”

“Zamečatel’no.” Kurt flexed his furry toes. “That’s wonderful.”

Charles wished he could tell Kurt that he had understood him perfectly. “Thank you for that.”

“Do you want to play marbles?”

“It’d be difficult, here.” Charles shifted his knees beneath the blankets. “See? It’s a bit bumpy.”

“Like this.” Stretching part of the blanket taut again, Kurt sent a marble rolling down. “You can see where it can round and go through.”

“… I don’t quite follow?”

“I’d win if I could take the marble through. Jean says ‘no’.”

“Well, Kurt, I think I would win, no matter what the topography.”

“Jean says there are bad men coming. Are they, Mr. Xavier?”

Charles opened his mouth. Closed it. “When did she say that?”

“When we woke up.”

“Well, she may have heard someone wondering if that were the case, Kurt, but I’m here, Mr. Muñoz is here …. You have nothing to worry about. Would you like to read a book together?”

“Yes, please!”

“Good boy. Which one?”

“The mountain book.”

“Go fetch it.”

Charles put the Free West out of his mind and watched as Kurt scurried away. The book in question was a survey of the Himalayas. The details of geology in it were dull as ditchwater; Kurt favored the pictures. “Where did we leave off?”

The book thumped onto his lap. “K2!”

“That’s right. No one’s ever climbed it.”

“Papa has.”

“Your Papa doesn’t climb, he teleports. Come here; sit close.”
Kurt scrambled up the couch to wedge himself beneath Charles’ outstretched arm.

“Find the right page for me, and – oh.” Charles looked up as a thought-fire flared once, twice. Not ten seconds later, Jean and Scott peered round the library door, Jean cradling Princess Alexandra in her arms.

“Are you feeling better, Mr. Xavier?” said Scott.

“Somewhat. We’re just going to read.”

Can we read, too?

“Well,” Charles started, “I’m –”

“Yes!” Kurt bounced where he sat. “We’re at K2!”

What’s that?

“It’s the name of a mountain. Perhaps you can set the next scene of your play there. And come to think of it …” Inspiration struck. “Jean, go fetch your colored pencils and paper. I know we said we’d begin on your birthday, but reading and writing wait for no date.”

Beaming from ear to ear, Jean gave the kitten to Scott and scampered away. Scott kept careful hold, staying poised on the library threshold. “I already know how to read, Mr. Xavier. I’m just out of practice.”

“With that blindfold; yes, I know. The thing is, Scott, you’ll be getting your glasses, or goggles, or whatever they are, quite soon. Hm? And then you’ll be able to help teach Jean and Kurt.”

Scott smiled, and made his way over to the couch. Not thirty seconds later, Jean thundered in with her colored pencils and paper. Her dragging a chair over ensured room enough for all, and the wonders of the alphabet helped Charles forget everything upsetting. At least, for a little while.

Armando kept their lunch sparse, throwing together enough leftovers to make a decent soup. “I’m only giving you things I can boil from now on.”

“Really, I don’t think it was food poisoning.”

“I’m not taking chances. Here.” Armando gave him a spoon. “Try some.”

“From the pot outright? That will spread any sickness of mine.”

“Boiling will take care of it. Frost,” and Armando lowered his voice, “gave specific instructions.”

“I don’t think they’re listening.” Charles tipped his chin at the children, who were playing with crusts of bread in their soup bowls. “You’d think she could give us a generator instead. That would make these instructions moot.” He tried a sip of soup. “It’s good.”

“You sound surprised.”

“Come off it. Anything else I should know about? From your conversation.”

“She seemed ...” Armando shook his head. “I don’t know. She wants all of us, but especially you, to stay healthy. More importantly, she wants us to keep an eye on the forest. And for that, she’s letting the Wolverine come here.”
“Really?”

“Yeah. Come here to stay. You’d think she’d keep him out West.”

“Well.” Charles could not keep the smile from his face. “I know you don’t like him that much, but I promise he can pull his weight. When does he arrive?”

“Later today.”

Which would give him a bit of time to clean up after Erik. Necessary, Charles realized, keeping his smile fixed, since otherwise Logan would smell the evidence in seconds. What else? He watched the children play, letting the catalogue sort and consider and evaluate, lightning-fast, everything that might need doing in order to keep Logan from discovering anything –

Or …

Charles blinked at the notion, brought about by fatigue. Perhaps he would clean up, and have done. Everyone can be deceived – but it was so bloody tiring.

“You all right?”

“Could I have some more, please?”

“Sure.” Armando took a clean bowl and ladled soup into it.

Taking it from him, Charles inhaled the steam and let his eyes close. He would clean, rest, and let the pieces fall where they would. Just this once.

They all heard the thunder of knocking at the main door well after it had grown dark. Charles let the children tow him there, their excited chatter ringing in his ears and his mind. Armando followed at his elbow – as, from the other side, a familiar voice boomed:

“Little pigs, little pigs, let me in!”

Kurt drew himself up, indignant. “I’m not a little pig.”

“He’s the wolf?” Scott sounded worried.

Shrugging, Jean held one hand up; spread her fingers at the door. It opened.

“Ho, ho, ho!” There stood Logan, large as life and twice as loud – he dropped his baggage to the ground with a series of thumps and thuds. “Hello, boys and girl! Have you been good this year?”

Armando sighed. “You know it’s February, right?”

“You’re either the wolf or Father Christmas, but you can’t be both,” said Charles.

“Says who?” Logan stripped off his gloves and flexed his fingers. “I had to plow some serious snow to get here. I can be who I want.” With jerky motions, he tugged a cigar from a pocket and practically bit into it.

“We have a snowplow, now?”

“My ass, Charles,” he enunciated around the cigar. “The snowplow is my miniature, hairy, French-Canadian ass.”
Mr. Xavier, Mr. Logan said -

"We heard, Scott," said Armando.

"Besides, surely it would be 'arse québecois'," Charles added. “And … miniature?"

Irritably, Logan tuck the cigar behind his ear. “We’re just getting out of Albuquerque. Had to regrow a chunk of my back yesterday. Think I’m shorter.”

“All that after being poisoned in Las Vegas. You had better get some sort of hazard pay.”

Armando frowned. “So today you just walked here?”

“Had to slide down those da - big hills. Got dropped off by the thruway,” Logan forestalled Armando’s interruption, “hiked the rest.”

“Did they forget to drop off all your conjunctions?” murmured Charles.

“Frost couldn’t give you Azazel?” said Armando.

“What’s with the Spanish Inquisition? I like to hike.”

“Remind me to tell you about this Oxford comedy troupe that –”

“In the dark,” Armando noted. “In sub-zero temperatures.”

“And get this: I didn’t catch anyone,” Logan said in an undertone. Then he shook himself, hard. “Look out below!” Pellets of snow and ice pinged off the door frame and the stone floor, and the boys laughed. Kurt scampered to pick up the cigar where it had flown to the side; then scampered to give it back.

Jean’s brow puckered. Are you O.K., Logan?

“My stylist, not happy to see me?” Logan crouched down. “C’mon, kid, I’m just tired. Little help?”

It took a moment, but finally Jean gave him a sweet smile, reached out, and scrubbed both hands through his hair. Logan blustered and growled as the last of the ice fell away. “That’s better. Thanks. And now,” he rose, “I got some bags, and I bet that some people here got some bedtimes just ready and waiting to happen.”

“Aw,” Scott started; Kurt and Jean joined in – a cacophony of audible and mental whinging.

“Quit it,” Logan said. “Listen up, you three. Enjoy your last night of freedom, because tomorrow, my rules start. Remind me of the first one, Jean?”

Don’t set the place on fire!

“Exactly! Precisely! Learn that one, both of you,” he waved the cigar in Scott and Kurt’s general direction, “love it, live it. There will be more rules, soon as I see what’s what. Let’s go. Muñoz, Xavier, you grab my stuff, all right? And did you make any dinner?”

Armando shrugged irritably as Logan herded the children away – “Mush, mush!” – Charles merely went to take the bags. He passed a hiking pack in its frame to Armando. Then he retrieved two other, smaller bags, a leather case, and what felt in the dark like a pair of snowshoes.

“Make sure the rifle’s not loaded,” Armando told him.
“What rifle?”

Armando held up one of the gloves; sniffed inside it. “I can smell powder here; he must have reloaded it at some point.”

“Bare hands, in this cold?” Charles shoved at the door. *Behind it* – there. He took the rifle, pulled the bolt, and cleared the chamber. “But of course: he wouldn’t freeze like the rest of us.”

“Check the barrel.”

Charles did. “Cold as any stone.”

“Good. Wherever the Free West are,” and Armando started pulling the door shut, “they’re not close yet.”

“You’re not being serious –”

“ – are you? Logan?”

“Mmf.”

“Logan, please take your head from your nosebag and answer me.”

Tufted hair came up first, then Logan’s glower, wreathed in steam from the soup. He was using the ladle and a hunk of bread, alternately – though *really*, he would look more intimidating if he were not eating straight from the pot, and thus creating the same picture as Kurt did with a bowl.

“I said, X,” Logan tore off another mouthful of bread and gulped it down, “I’m dead serious. ’Cept I’m alive, and so are all of you, and that’s the way I plan to keep it.”

“I’m surprised you were chosen, Logan. I mean, I wanted you here, but -”

“I’m touched, Chuck. And I was due for leave. Guess Frost wants me East-side this time around.”

“So, Miss Georgia’s out West?”

“Watch your tone, Muñoz. Call her that to her face and she’ll melt yours straight off.”

“Not *my* face.”

“Try it sometime.”

“Leave?” asked Charles, trying to diffuse the mood. “This soon after – what was your stint in the autumn?”

“That was training. Different.”

“So what do you call what Armando and I have been doing?”

“Babysitting.”

Charles bristled, but Logan held up the ladle. “By which I *mean*: sitting on some of the most important babies this side of the world. If the Westies knew there was a mini-Azazel kicking around, they’d throw a shit fit. That or ten helicopters over here, all at once. Right, Muñoz?”

“I was telling Charles that I’m surprised they haven’t tried something like that before.”
“And they’re gearing up to try it now?” Charles said. “Really? Or is this just some ploy of Frost’s?”

Logan and Armando exchanged long looks.

“It’s the real deal,” said Logan. “I mean she always has something going on, but this is different. I’ve heard the chatter; I’ve seen the dispatches. A helicopter’s been spotted ’round Syracuse. Add all that to Lehnsherr smashing any cover they could use on the thruway, and bear traps going off like bottle rockets, now – yeah. Bad news.”

“If it’s cover he’s worried about, has Lehnsherr taken to chopping down trees as well?”

“On the thruway, bub. It’s the way you go. You might have to add an hour of travel time for every five miles of straight-up snow, ice, trees – anything that’s not a road.”

Charles looked askance at Armando.

Who nodded. “Without enough people left to use the cleared trails, they get overgrown in a year. It was the same in the Everglades.”

“– trade Lehnsherr for some alligators,” Logan mumbled into the pot.

Charles kicked him under the table.

“Back to what you said before.” Armando frowned. “You’re telling me the Free West doesn’t know that Kurt exists? How’d their intelligence miss him?”

“Azazel’s been good at keeping him hidden. He wouldn’t let him out of his sight; not ’til just this past fall. Poor kid. Snug as a bug in dad’s pocket for the first five years, and now he hardly sees him.”

“We’ve done a decent job of managing his moods, Logan,” Charles said.

Logan scraped at the pot with the heel of the bread; crunched, chewed, and sighed out a spray of crumbs. “I guess.”

“And I know I’ve said it before, but your table manners are still atrocious.”

“What do you think, Muñoz?”

The look Armando gave the ladle was eloquent.

“Two against one. That’s not good.”

“That does bring up something I want to clarify: will you two be able to get along, here? Otherwise … Well. I have to umpire the children’s next marble match. I don’t want to do the same with you.”

“Mr. Diplomacy strikes again,” Logan drawled. “We gotta parachute you into Denver sometime.”

“That’s not an answer to my question. Why the dislike, anyway?”

Logan and Armando were silent. Then Armando’s mouth twitched. “Not so much dislike, as …”

“Oh, no, it’s all dislike, bub.”

“Nobody likes to lose a fight,” Armando soothed. “I get that. I won’t even tell Charles the details. All the details of you, trying every single thing you could try, to get by me to the Dallas labs – and me,
leaving you lying there like jello.”

“What’s jello?” Charles asked, fascinated.

“Free West glop; they stick random shit in it and call it a salad, Marie told me. And it did not go down that way.”

“I was supposed to let some random screaming guy with claws into the children’s wing?”

“If he’s there to break you out? Hell yes.”

“You didn’t say anything before you started swinging.”

“My blood was up –”

“And then out.” Armando gave him a thin smile. “All over the floor. When – again – you didn’t get past me.”

Logan sat stewing for another moment, before hauling the pot over to the sink. He mumbled something.

“What?” said Armando. “I didn’t hear you.”

“Yeah, maybe. That’s what I said. But then we got Joanna in and she took you out.”

“What’s she doing these days?”

“You got a mash note for her?”

“It’s too late for Valentine’s Day,” Charles said, amused. “Excellent. What I thought was quite serious turns out to be fit for the schoolyard. Except: you’re adults, aren’t you? Logan, you can take a loss.”

“I didn’t lose –”

“You sure did.”

“ – I never lose!”

It felt good to laugh. Charles let it happen; Armando joined in. “You should have seen the look on his face.”

“I told you –”

“All right, enough, both of you. Please be civil in future.”

“And if we aren’t?” Logan growled.

“If you feel like fighting, you’ll have to try something different. Run a race. Play marbles –”

“Kid stuff.”

“Fine. When you next feel the need,” Charles said, grinning, “instead of fighting each other, you could both just remove your trousers and see whose is larger.”

Logan guffawed, but Armando coughed. “Sorry?”
“That, I would be happy to umpire.”

“Oh, Charlie,” and Logan fanned himself, “this is so sudden. You get the memo yet, Muñoz? Charles here knows his way around a –”

“Oi.”

“ – baseball diamond, which is where you umpire, right?”

“I prefer cricket.”

“I thought you played both.”

“Really, Logan.”

“Hey, you started it.”

Armando pushed back from the table. “I’m so glad we could have this discussion.”

“Running away, grandma?” Logan snickered.

“No. I just – I’m going to go check on the kids, and then I’m going to bed.”

“You do that. And Charles, you of all people ought to know that it is not the size of the boat, but the motion of the ocean.”

“That, and the weather at the port of call.”

“All right, I’m done.”

“All right, Muñoz, all right. Tomorrow, bright and early, we’ll sort out a plan for the week and then go get the kids. I’ll cook.”

“We hardly have anything,” Charles started -

“I brought some more supply. Pancakes sound O.K.?”

“Oh, yes. Your pancakes are a wonder to behold.”

“Well, you don’t behold them, you be … eat them. So go on, get lost; I want you both awake enough tomorrow to tell me how great a cook I am.”

“And if we don’t?” Armando said.

“Those snowdrifts are awful deep. I’m just sayin’. Muñoz, you’d be fine, but I don’t want Xavier here losing any fingers, toes – anything important, if you know what I mean, and I think you do. Right, X man?”

Charles smiled. “Good night, Logan.”

“Night, Charles. Night, Muñoz.”

“… Call me Armando.”

“Sure thing. Sleep well, both of you. I’ll take night watch.”

Which was a new development, Charles thought, as he walked to his room. But he supposed that
interrogating Logan could wait until morning.

He did his best to follow Logan’s command. In the physical world, Charles knew that his body slept the deep sleep of exhaustion. The hubbub of Las Vegas, followed by the whirl of the children’s festivities, followed by the effort of fucking Erik … It had all added up.

While sleeping in the physical world, Charles walked slowly through his reading room. All was dark and quiet. The only sound was his dove, warbling almost too softly to be heard.

Charles found his golden chair easily enough. Sat, and stared up through the great round window – at the designs glimmering in the glass.

He turned as he heard a *clink*.

Raven had dropped Jean’s tea light on the pile of books nearest him. Charles blinked at it. “Thank you, darling.”

A *crahhk*.

“Shh. Let them rest.”

The raven made no further sound, but beat its wings impatiently.

They had assembled the stacks of books just that morning; memory exercises apparently could not wait for the next. “Very well,” Charles sighed. “Here, then?”

He placed the tea light on the armrest of his chair, careful not to let his memories of Ororo’s maps catch. A stack of paper, loosely bound …

“I see you’re concerned about security, darlings. I’ll be reviewing during the day with Logan, all right?”

He selected the book closest to him, and opened it. Judging from Raven’s silence, it was as fine a place as any to start.

*As fine a place, indeed.* All the more so when Charles double-checked his bookshelf the next morning.

For once he had taken up the binder again, and paged to the photograph in question – a good dozen men in suits, and Emma – it took only a glance to see that his memory had been correct.

That there, with them all, stood Sebastian Shaw, smiling.

Charles was grateful for the mystery over the next week. It gave him something to occupy his mind during dull hours. *Who’ll take the children today? – Don’t look at me, Charlie. – You’re the best at it, Charles.*

It helped him adjust smoothly to Logan’s changes to their routine. *I walk the perimeter every day; you two alternate with me. – Logan, I don’t know how to – Right. Armando, you’re walking with me til X man here learns how to snowshoe.*

And it kept him from thinking about other things. *Erik.*

The memory of Erik, kissing his hand. Gazing at him with firelight gilding his cheekbone and
shoulder, smiling. Erik, holding Jean on his lap.

… *Erik and Jean* …

– but whenever that thought crept into his mind, Charles smothered it and focused back on Shaw.

One bright, cold day soon after Jean’s real birthday, Charles was on library duty with the children. He should have been reading to them, perhaps, but they could manage – Jean’s enthusiasm knew no bounds. And while they managed, he could take additional steps to gather information.

Emma’s Sebastian Shaw and Erik’s – *Shuvalov, Schmidt, Shaw* – were, first and foremost, the same person. Especially given the memory of the opera and the statue in Erik’s mind. “Occam’s Razor,” Charles told a volume in his hand. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*: the seventy-fifth he had found containing Shaw’s bookplate. Some sort of bear beneath a sword, and a tangled glyph which flummoxed him briefly before he separated the three-quarter circle and three bars. "C for Sebastian, *III* for Shaw. Bloody missionaries."

It was taking some time to set the books all together. Soon enough, though, he could investigate the most personal portion of Shaw’s library as a whole.

“So, as the same person, where do you go, and when? I know that you have a manor in Kiev, *Dvorets Shuvalovyk*, where you keep Erik for a time. I know you visit the Morozov Palace, in Moscow, in June 1945. And I know you find Erik in Auschwitz-Birkenau … when? *Tovarisch – Gospodin, Monsieur*, whichever – Shuvalov … *Herr* Schmidt in Auschwitz, I assume, since it was under German control, until …”

“Mr. Xavier, what are you doing?”

“Just sorting some books,” he called to Scott.

“Shh! Quiet in the library!”

Kurt had taken that rule to heart. Charles glanced over at the round table – Jean sending images of pages to Scott, Scott reading aloud to Jean and Kurt both – then beyond, at the sun in the window. A good two hours remained until Logan and Armando returned from the daily hike.

None of the library’s books about the second war had the bookplate in them. Which Charles supposed made sense. “No need to read up on what you helped create,” he muttered at the last volume shut. “Auschwitz, liberated on the 27th of January, 1945, by the Red Army. So, Mr. Shaw, how were you friendly with both sides?”

For Shaw had to have thrown himself on the mercy of the Soviets and taken Erik east. Or, given that he already possessed a family manor there, if the name was any evidence, perhaps he had been a double agent all along.

Charles gnawed over the puzzle as the children called to him again, as he walked to the table and answering their reading questions by rote. It would take Kurt much more time to progress to the point that he, Charles, would be a tutor in truth –

– *tutor*.

He wheeled on one foot and paced back between the bookcases. Emma had tutored Erik from the outset of their acquaintance. He remembered that very well, whispering out of his memories just the previous night in Erik’s voice: *He invited her back to Dvorets Shuvalovyk – she played the piano* –
“You were thirteen when you met her, in the winter of 1945.” Charles peered at the shelves containing Shaw’s personal collection. “And not in January of that year, for you told me you ate cake for the first time at your birthday the next spring. April, 1946, and you were fourteen. Which means …”

Erik had been twelve when he left Auschwitz. He had turned thirteen, and lived several months under the supervision of Shaw, and Shaw alone. Shaw had been hale and hearty at the Morozov palace that June, so he had to have had a way of dealing with Erik that did not involve telepathy.

If, for that matter, Erik had been any threat to him at all – for surely his powers had not been as developed in 1945 as they came to be later. And Charles realized: he had no idea what Shaw’s ability, or abilities, had been.

He wandered back to the table, listening to Scott read aloud what Jean was sending him.

“The woman exclaimed: ‘What a donkey you are! That isn’t your kitten, that’s the morning sun shining on the chimney.’”

“Donkey!” Kurt hooted.

“Kurt, that’s unkind; you don’t call people that.”

“But Hansel had not looked back at his kitten, but had always dropped one of the white pebbles out of his pocket on to the path.”

‘Hansel and Gretel,’ is it, Scott? I can’t offer you a gingerbread house, so don’t get any ideas. Wouldn’t you like to read another?”

It was next in the book! said Jean, squeezing Princess Alexandra, who let out a burbling squeak.

“Be careful with her, Jean. How many times do I have to tell you?”

Sorry!

“We’ll hurry, Mr. Xavier.” Scott cleared his throat, self-important. “When they had reached the middle of the forest the father said: ‘Now, children, go and fetch a lot of wood, and I'll light a fire that you mayn’t …’ What’s mayn’t?”

“‘May not’. It’s like saying ‘will not’.”

“ – will not feel cold.’”

Jean’s index finger was inching along the text; Kurt was craning his head to follow. Then Charles smiled as Kurt reached out with his tail and poked the back of Jean’s hand.

Hey! Jean sent in a spark.

She had reached to turn the left page to the right, instead of the right page to the left.

“Kurt, use your words before your tail. He just means you’re going backwards, Jean.” Really, she had seen him do it the proper way, but some things seemed all too easy to forget.

Charles knit his brow. If Erik had forgotten how to read before Emma met him later on – November, December of 1945 … if he had forgotten how to read in the course of one year …

Or more than that. Who knew how long he had been in Auschwitz, anyway?
Charles walked away from the table, rather more slowly. The sun had not progressed much in the sky. Scott’s voice provided a background lilt. He considered the books again, brooding. Feeling a strange, tickling discomfort – as though someone were breathing on the back of his neck.

Going through even a few books in his mind had been disconcertingly effective. He had a catalogue, and now it seemed he had its distaff: a timeline, clicking away like clockwork and sorting all the details, gathered up by his birds like crumbs off the forest path, pace Hansel.

And yet … the largest questions?

Charles sighed. He had no idea of their answers.

Except his discomfort had doubled – it was itching at his mind. Charles gritted his teeth at the memory of Erik, holding Jean on his lap and staring at nothing. It would be far better to focus on someone other than Erik for a while. The week of puzzling over Shaw, for example, had been an excellent start. It had offered him a glimpse at the library’s original owner. It was a foundation: built off Erik’s information, offered piecemeal over that entire ghastly honeymoon –

But that brought him back to the most important part, didn’t it? He could disentangle himself. He had self-control, intellect … civilization. He was thinking about the blighted history of their present world for intellectual reasons. Not for personal ones.

“More of Shaw,” he muttered to the aviary. “Less of Erik.”

As if specifically to disoblige him, the first memory he opened that night in his reading room was of Frost.

“I said Shaw,” Charles snapped at his raven.

It screeched back.

He glared down at the image: the black and white photograph of Emma, eleven or twelve years old, from the binder. There was her close-cropped hair, very pale; there was her shoe, brandished at the camera. There was that curling, impish smile.

“This has nothing to do with anything.” Charles slammed the book shut. Even in his own mind, he felt … sick. He did not know why. It was a perfectly fetching picture.

“I’ve done all the work so far. Now you go over the titles I found in the real world,” he commanded. “Give me a theme; any theme. Why would he start World War Three? What sort of person was he? Know the books, and I say you know the man.”

The theme, it emerged, was political theory and philosophy. Charles supposed he could have predicted Shaw being enamored of the Übermensch. “The same trite reading of it, however,” he said the next morning, to his own modest bookshelf in the real world. He straightened his Shakespeare from where it had tipped. “And I thought Mr. Sebastian Shaw mildly intelligent.”

Though he supposed there were all types of intelligence, as he spent the good part of the morning on his arse in the snow, having Logan laugh at him. It was difficult to walk with snowshoes. But he cared about walking the perimeter more than mockery, and Logan could go hang.

“Gonna shoot me for it, X man?”

“Oh, shut up.”
“You’re getting better. Come on. Once more.”

That had been the high point of the day. The low point occurred when Logan, looking grim, brought back a cache of weapons that evening. They made a loud clatter, dumped to the floor of the front hallway. “From the bear cave. I don’t suppose you put ‘em there, Charles?”

Charles shook his head.

“Armando, you have anything to do with it?”

“No.”

_truth_ echoed from the answer; Charles was relieved. Not that he had been worried. “Weren’t the bears hibernating there, Logan?”

“No sign of them, and no fresh scat. Now I’ve booby-trapped the whole place, but keep outside and it’ll be all right – just the new stop on the daily tour.”

“That’s another two miles,” Armando noted.

“You complaining?”

“No.”

“Those bears, Logan.” Of all things, Charles remembered _Tree Time_ – and the children, enchanted, watching forest animals sing. “Isn’t it too early for them to leave hibernation?”

*Ouais.* Logan kicked through the bows and arrows scattered on the floor. “Mom and cubs, though, they’re gone.” He snapped what looked like a dart gun in half over his knee. “Bad time to be a kid.”

Charles stayed away from his reading room for the next several nights, electing instead to go over his map of the manor, mentally. He made note of vulnerabilities, thought of solutions … set a list in order of importance and, every day, ran them past variations on: “Thanks, bub. Thanks a lot.”

Charles knew Logan appreciated the help. Armando contributed as well; it helped them both keep busy …

But it did not prevent flashes of memory from intruding. They were mostly of Erik, staring at nothing with Jean on his lap, his face worn and thin. Each time, Charles shook the image away and focused on other things. The mystery of Shaw, when he was in the library; safety for the children, whenever he was somewhere else.

Near the end of February, they all stood in the hallway, practicing.

“All right,” said Logan. “Ready? Set? Three-two-one go!”

Jean was the first to disappear, running round the corner to the dormitory; Kurt pelted after her. Scott, fingertips brushing the wall, was in third – but he was shouting, at least, and by that measure, enjoying himself.

There was silence. Then Charles heard distant thumps – and a crash. Armando had set up obstacles, but, “What on earth was that?”

Logan hummed. “Hope it’s nothing permanent.”
"Armando would have stopped them if it were," Charles said. "And if this were a horse race—"

"We’d know who’d win. Ladies and gentlemen, at two to one odds, here she comes."

For Jean careened round the corner again and sprinted down the hallway.

"Careful," said Charles, as she ran into him with a thump, beaming. Something jabbed him. "What do you have there?"

She held up a bag. My horses!

"Jean," Logan said, kneeling to take it, "these are the go-bags. And what’s in them?"

**Things for a ’mergency.**

"For an emergency, Jean." Charles smiled at her. "Important things."

My horses are important.

"Like your toothbrush, kid. Like another sweater. Let’s see … Charles, you check Kurt’s."

For Kurt had run up just behind Jean, gasping for breath. He held out his own bag. Charles took it and peered inside. "Socks, a change of underwear, and two sweaters. Good boy."

"See, Jean? You’d have to borrow from Kurt."

*I wouldn’t borrow. I’d take, from Scott.* Jean looked smug. *He has mine.*

Charles looked down the hall. Indeed, there was Scott, carrying a bag – and dragging a pillowcase. "You made Scott carry your things?"

"Jean, what’s the rule?" Logan’s voice was gruff.

"One bag," Scott called. "*I told* her so. I told her it was against the rules!"

**But I want my horses.**

"Your horses will be fine here," said Charles. "The whole point of this exercise—"

"– is to get out, fast, with what you need for an emergency," Logan finished. "The bad guys just caught Scott and all your sweaters. Now they’re all nice and warm, and you gotta wave bye-bye, because they’re taking him away in a helicopter—"

Jean glared. *Then I’ll burn it down!*

Logan shot a look up at him. Charles tightened his lips and returned the look with interest. Anything but look at Jean’s expression.

"Jean, if you burn it down, I’ll die." Dragging the pillowcase to them, Scott heaved a sigh. "Sometimes you’re a silly goose."

*Am not!*

"Are so."

"Scott, don’t call names. Even if they are a little … archaic. Silly goose?" Charles’ mouth twitched. "Where did you learn that?"
“From Grandma. What’s ‘archaic’?”

“It means ‘old.’ Like some of the words in the fairy tale book.”

“Oh. Is my own bag O.K., Mr. Logan?”

“Let’s see.”

For a while, there were only the clinks and rustles of Logan comparing the bags. Then he stood up, with a sigh. “All right. Scott wins.”

Jean pouted; Kurt started to whinge. “Why?”

“Scott has sweaters, socks, pants, and …” Logan held up: “an apple. Good job.”

*I didn’t know we could –*

“ – bring food?” Charles shrugged. “Mr. Logan wasn’t that specific, but I suppose Scott planned ahead a little at lunch. Scott?”

Scott puffed himself up. “Yep.”

“Congratulations. Your prize is – a wonderful thing I’ll think of later.” Logan put everything back in the bag. “Now, Scott, the trick is to get you going faster.”

“I’ll be really fast when I get my goggles.”

“Until then, we’ll practice. So, kids, why aren’t you gonna run out the front door?”

“Because they’d go there first,” Scott and Kurt chorused. Jean was still pouting.

“That’s right. Who do you look for when you run? Jean?”

*One of you,* she sent.

“And who can use her power?”

Scott and Kurt pointed to Jean. “As long as you don’t hurt anyone, Jean,” Logan said. “Deal?”

She nodded.

“But why not me?” said Kurt, softly.

“Cause I don’t want you to get lost, kid. If your dad comes here, you two can do your thing all you want, all right?”

“All right.”

“Good. Now you go tell Mr. Muñoz to reset the obstacles. And Jean? You made Scott carry your stuff here? You take everyone’s stuff back.”

Jean tipped her chin. A chill rushed down Charles’ back as each bag, and the pillowcase, floated into the air.

“Be careful, darling,” he said. “Don’t let them fall.”

Her brow had knit in concentration; the crankiness was forgotten. *I won’t.*
Silently, Logan and Charles watched the children march away: Jean in front with her arms outstretched, Kurt and Scott following, and the bags and pillowcase flanking them all.

“Then I’ll burn it down,” said Logan, grim, later that afternoon.

Charles sighed. “It worries me, too.”

Snow crunched with every step they took. Charles had learned to manage the snowshoes, but so intent had Logan been on two patrols each day at high speed, that this was Charles’ first. His being unfit meant that Logan paused every ten minutes or so, waiting for him to catch his breath.

Logan didn’t seem to mind. At least, he had not said much. It was a relief to have a change now.

“Her telepathic powers express themselves as fire,” Charles said, “when she’s not masquerading as a mouse in a conch shell.”

“Seriously?”

“You haven’t ever seen the fire? She gave you a token, through me, remember?”

“That just felt a bit like a spark. It must be different for telepaths, X.”

“Then take my word for it: mentally, I see certain aspects of her power as fire. How does she jump from that to arson in reality?”

“I have no idea.”

It sounded like Logan truly didn’t. “It’s something to consider, perhaps,” Charles murmured.

“You bet your British ass it is.”

Logan stowed his rifle and took out his field glasses. They had reached the high ridge, and now stood at the forest’s edge. Where Erik had – Charles dismissed the memory. “Anything?”

“Nope.”

“And you haven’t seen anything besides that cache, these two weeks.” Charles adjusted his own rifle.

“Not quite two. Shit. Was that a fake?” Logan’s jaw worked; it looked like he wanted another cigar.

“Just to fuck with us?”

“Those weapons didn’t look fake to me.”

“I know, right? And who has time to set it up? Or maybe they just thought we’d be too snowbound to get there, or that you two wouldn’t have the chance. As for attacking, the full moon was almost a week ago, so they’d be exposed if they tried anything now.”

“So the next new moon …”

“A week from tomorrow. That’s when we should be out, full force.”

“Wouldn’t they know you’re thinking that?”

“Floodlights – we should have floodlights.” Irritably, Logan adjusted the field glasses. “And an M2,
right by the front door.”

“Attackers would be able to turn any machine gun round and use it against us.”

“Not if Lehnsherr’s here.”

Charles choked. “He’s coming here?”

“Dunno.” Slowly, Logan put the glasses down. Then he squinted over at Charles, the bright midday light casting his face into sharp relief. “Not yet, at least. She’s keeping everyone busy in Wyoming, Nebraska . . .”

“Labwork?”

“Don’t tell it to McCoy that way, but pretty much. The thing is, if they do attack, she could have him dropped in – cause you know that if it’s an even fight, Lehnsherr tips things our way when he arrives, and then some. I need you to be ready for him being here, Charles. You think you can be?”

“I . . .”

Logan waited him out, still squinting.

“… I think so. As long as he’s occupied with fighting.” He met Logan’s gaze, evenly. “I won’t have him frightening the children.”

“I’ll run interference. Sorry in advance if you don’t like it. Him being here, I mean.”

_Less about Erik._ “If the Free West attacks, there will more not to like here than him. Take, for example, something else about the manor.”

“What the fuck is it _now_?”

“Look.” Charles took off his mitten to point. The cold numbed his fingers, even though they were still gloved. “An M2, at the front door? All well and good for the drive – but the rest? What’s on the third floor?”

“We don’t use that, or the fourth.”

“I know; quite the waste of space. But what do the third floor and the fourth floor have in common, Logan? Similar to the library. Think hard for me. Come on.”

A muscle jumped in Logan’s jaw.

“Windows,” Charles finished. “If I were the West, I’d bring helicopters to the fight, lower soldiers onto the roof, let them rappel down – and they’d kick through the windows and take the manor that way. And even if you put paid to their ropes, or shot down the helicopter, the roof’s accessible from the inside, and thus the reverse must be true. You remember last Halloween as well as I do.”

Logan looked as though he wanted to kick a tree until it fell over. Several trees.

Charles dropped his hand, pulled his mitten back on, and shrugged, to soften the blow. “Will that be another activity for a snowy day? Barricading,” Charles calculated, “a good forty-eight windows? We can gather the wood, but who’s going to plane it, let alone put it in place? Do we have ladders, or a saw?”

“All right, you’ve made your point. And we have a saw.”
Charles hummed.

“Come with me. I’ll show you the workbench.”

“One workbench,” Charles started –

“ – for the entire manor. This is it?”

They had trekked through the woods, over a road – “Elmira,” Logan had said – and over a creek. Charles had come close to losing his patience as they had stumbled and slipped their way up a gradual rise of snow, one that seemed to last forever. But before he could catch up to complain, Logan had jumped down a stark drop.

Then he brushed away snow, keyed in a code on a panel, stepped back as a door slid open - looked up at Charles. “You haven’t been here yet?”

“I haven’t.”

“Well, get a move on, bub. Feel special.”

Charles had jumped down. Had followed Logan down a narrow tunnel – from which another door opened onto a long tunnel, tall and broad enough to allow something huge ingress and egress; ridges on its floor to allow that something friction enough to move. “This is quite impressive.”

“No shit.”

“How on earth was it built?”

“I’m the wrong person to ask. By the time I came here, they had already set up this sucker, and the room for the Finder –”

“All those hallways? The panopticon?”

“The what?” Logan’s voice had echoed as he scaled a ladder to another small door, set high up in the wall.

“Never mind. Where does the rest of it go?” Charles had panted, following. For the tunnel kept sloping downward, into shadow.

“That’s where we used to keep the plane. Now that we got an air force, all of them stay in St. Louis.”

“Also impressive.”

“Whatever,” Logan had grunted. “Azazel ’n Lehnsherr? They’re an air force by themselves.”

“It sounds as though you’re jealous.”

“Believe me, I’m not.”

And that had been all, until they had made their way through a final door into a garage.

The first thing Charles had seen was a truck, familiar from his trip to Albany. Then another, less bulky truck, with a gun mounted on top – the one that had come back from chasing Moira. And a jeep. Charles had peered round the last. There had been no sign of any motorcycle.
He had frowned at another door. It was obviously one that folded up to let everything out. “Couldn’t we have come through there?”

“I haven’t had the chance to clear off the snow.”

“Ah. But how on earth would a plane get through a mound of snow? Since I assume the same is the case whence we came.”

“Whence, whence, are you shitting me?”

“Perhaps,” Charles had said, grinning.

“Well, here’s another joke, Chuck. Frost had all this shit built the summer she came here.”

“Oh.”

“You said it.” Logan had slapped the side of his truck, jogged to the garage’s other side, and revealed the workbench with a flourish.

“This is it?” Charles repeated. “For the entire manor, and the grounds?”

“Don’t knock it,” Logan replied, insulted. “McCoy’s got the lab; Lehnsherr’s got other places. This here’s mine. And Marie’s.”

“Marie’s?”

“Yeah. What can I say? My baby likes power tools.”

Charles conceded that the workbench was rather large. He watched as Logan carefully checked every tool; as he opened and shut all the drawers; as he looked in each drawstring pouch hanging from its hook; as he sighed.

“Everything all right?”

“Just fine. Anyway.” Logan pointed. “My circular saw. Her chainsaw. My hand saw. We’ve got enough, I’d say, but I also think there’s a faster way than just boarding all those windows up.”

“Do tell.”

“I still have to think about it. And I’m hungry. You hungry?”


“Sure is. Muñoz better have made something good.”

Charles fell into step behind Logan, heading to the rightmost corner of the room. He craned his head to look back at the truck –

– or, at least, he did his best to give that impression. All of his mind, his catalogue, his aviary, had snapped to a focus on Logan’s opening a small door and easing through it. “Hustle, X man.”

“I’m coming.”

He followed.

The door opened straight into …. The locker room, Charles had once thought it, with all its
compartments and divisions, crammed full of old clothes and tech. He supposed it made sense.
Storage, close to transport.

Charles controlled his excitement, carefully, and set his mind to tracking every step. Logan closed the
door behind them. Charles noted the mechanism for an ID card – *damn* – and then fell into step
again. Walking down one aisle, they passed three more, branching. And there was the storage
compartment he remembered.

“You don’t need another hat, Charles?”

“No. Frost threw away that bobbled number –”

“Good for her.”

“ – and my manteau hood was enough for today,” he chattered. “Which must mean that it’s getting
warmer.”

“We can hope.” They had reached Logan’s compartment. “Hang tight a second.”

“I’ll be right here.”

Charles decided to do what he said. After all, he knew very well what else was in this storage room.
Erik’s compartment. Erik’s *knives*. And that scent …

… it was probably faded by now. Certainly there was nothing that made him remember anything.

“Let’s go, Charles. Carry this for me.” Logan handed him a large box.

“My pleasure. What is it?”

“Clothespins.”

“What on earth for?”

“Fortification.”

“You know best, I suppose.”

“That I do.”

Of course, his mind focused on the scent. For the first book Charles opened that night in his reading
room contained the memory of Erik leaving him …. after sex. Leaving him dozing, with Princess
Alexandra purring in his ear. Before Las Vegas. After Albany.

“Yes, I remember.” He flicked a page; shrugged off the vivid sensation of Erik crooking his arm –
Charles’ head supported by the bend of Erik’s elbow, by his biceps – as they kissed, and kissed, and
as Erik placed his free hand against his cheek and slowly licked into his mouth –

“More *importantly,*” Charles snapped, “there’s something there about the garage. Correct? Let’s
see.” He flipped pages. Then tossed the book in his lap and watched, irritated, as the pages flipped
themselves.

Erik had ridden a motorcycle. Charles had tracked him whilst he did – and tracked him beforehand,
as he had left their bed and walked across the manor. And unless there were two garages … Charles
realized that the path Erik had taken did not line up with the one he had walked that very day.
“So there’s another entrance.”

His raven *crrr’d* at him.

“It could be from one floor down, through that pigsty of room, past the infirmary. Or – *ah*. It’s probably through the larger storage room. You know.” His mouth twisted. “The one I haven’t seen. The one Armando’s looted, somewhat. The one …”

Raven squawked.

“… The one with the fuse box in it. Like Hank said.”

Charles glanced down at the memory of Hank, babbling at him, as it floated over the open pages of the book before vanishing. “You realize, don’t you, that any entrance Erik uses probably has seven layers of metal to seal it?”

And if birds could look crestfallen, at that little comment, his raven did. It tipped its head to one side.

“A good try, though. Enough. We’ve as much of the grounds as will ever be relevant. We might as well get back to Shaw.”

His birds, as one, started flying round him in a whirl. Almost all of them. He resisted the urge to tug the penguin into his arms, from where it was laboring to circle his chair.

“Darlings, go to sleep.” Charles felt exhausted. “It’s too late, for all of us.”

----

He felt just as tired the next morning.

“Happy March,” Armando said, stirring a pot in the kitchen.

“That’s tomorrow. What are you making?”

“Oatmeal.”

“Where’s Logan?”

“With the kids. Listen, Charles –”

*Bonjour*-hi!” Logan boomed as he walked through the door, jogging Kurt in his arms. Scott and Jean were on his heels.

“Good morning,” said Charles. “Did everyone sleep well?”

“Sleep is for the weak,” Logan said, slinging Kurt to the floor; elbowing between Charles and Armando to peer into the pot.

“Did everyone who is *not* a self-regenerating powerhouse sleep well?”

Scott frowned around his blindfold. “What’s a self – refrigerating –”

“It was just a joke. Do sit.” Charles pulled out a bench. “You too, Armando. You cooked; I’ll serve.”

The children fell to after Charles set bowls in front of them all. Armando did not seem terribly hungry.

“So, Logan. What’s today?”
“Gonna fortify the third and fourth floor. I’m using those clothespins to hang up barbed wire, X man. Armando, you can help me out.”

“Make sure you get the tower,” Charles said.

Logan glared. “You know about the tower, eh?”

“I only ever went there once,” he lied.

“Rule-breaker,” Logan muttered.

“Is barbed wire sufficient protection, though?”

“With Lehnsherr stopping by? Yeah. It’s easier than boarding up all the windows, too.”

Charles frowned at a sudden thought. “All this preparation – we had better be sure they’re not just making a feint. Remember our own strategy at Dallas? Who’s to say they’re not thinking of something similar?”

“That was a double-feint, and I’ll bring it up with her Frostiness, and I really hope you’re just overthinking it,” Logan groaned.

“There’s no harm in doing so,” said Armando.

“Fine, yes, you’re both very smart. Barbed wire, and then we’ll walk the perimeter – unless you can do it solo, Armando?”

“Sure.”

“Which leaves me more time to decorate, which puts you on kid duty, Charles – oh, hey. That’s nice, I guess.” For the children had all bent to finish eating, double-time. “What’s the rush?”

“We need to pick a new book today,” said Scott. “And we couldn’t decide who would do it.”

_We were going to have Princess Alexandra pick. We’d put three books out, and the one she sat on would be the next –_

“ – but if she _peed_,” Kurt started, eyes round.

“ – it would end in disaster. As did the Judgment of Purr-is,” said Charles.

His grin was met with Armando rolling his eyes, with three blank stares, and with Scott’s forehead wrinkling.

“One out of five,” Charles sighed. “Well, it wasn’t very funny. I’ll help, children. Perhaps we’ll read the _Iliad._”

They did not pick any book. For almost as soon as they had reached the library, Kurt had run to the windows and glimpsed a distant flash of light on glass. Charles had determined it was not a rifle – rather, some surveying contraption – and thus no threat. He stayed silent after pulling his raven back, so as not to spoil the surprise for them.

Jean must have done the same, for she only grinned as Kurt and Scott tried their best to attract the attention of the man on skis laboring up the drive, once he waved the correct combination of colors. Then they had begged Charles to run back downstairs with them, though he had insisted that they
walk.

So Armando and Logan had beat them to Hank, who only managed one knock on the front door before it opened.

“Surprise!” Hank had said, holding out a bag.

Then the rest of the morning was for Scott, as he tried on his goggles for the first time.

Charles tried to speak to Hank – what had he been doing, besides designing weaponry and enjoying a wintry day spent surveying? – but Scott’s eagerness made it difficult. And wrangling the children all by himself, with the sunlight off the snow jabbing at his eyes, was a challenge. Charles frowned at Logan and Armando, halfway to the tree line. They looked to be having some sort of disagreement.

“Mr. Xavier, you’re short!” Scott laughed.

“Really, that’s the first thing you have to say about me?”

Hank was hovering. “Be careful,” he said. “The way Forge and I set it up – you have to hit that button, Scott, to let your power out. There’s one on either side. But if you jostle it, it’s possible that – ah –”

“I’d blow things up?”

“If you have your eyes open.”

“It’s weird to have them open. They itch.”

Charles had not been able to glimpse their color before Hank had dropped the goggles into place – and now, they were behind opaque red lenses. That much he had gathered, even with Scott jumping up and down in place.

“Calm down,” said Charles. He took hold of Scott’s shoulder, turning him. “Look that way: towards the tree line, not the manor. Take care to avoid Mr. Logan and Mr. Muñoz.” He waved at them to move.

“Nothing’ll happen unless I press it, Mr. Xavier. See?” Scott jumped from foot to foot. “Nothing. And if I press it –”

“No, wait!” Hank leaped to Scott’s side –

– too late. A wall of energy flashed from Scott and crackled across the snow. Not two seconds later it crashed into the trees at the forest’s edge – and through the billowing steam sent up by melted snow, Charles saw that some of the smaller branches had caught fire.

“Watch it!” Logan bellowed.

“Oh, no!” Kurt wailed.

Princess Alexandra! Jean ran back inside the manor.

“Jean, she’ll be fine. Scott, calm down.” For Scott had started hyperventilating. “It’s all right.”

“I didn’t mean to!”

“Really, that was quite impressive. Don’t worry. You just made some fireworks.” Charles waved to
catch Armando’s attention, and pointed. Armando took the hint and dashed towards the trees, his feet squelching in the new slush. Logan followed on his heels. “Everything will be fine.”

Armando was wading into the smoke. Charles could not quite tell, but he thought his skin had shifted to stone. Silent at his side, Hank was staring. Mouth open.

“Scott, breathe deeply for me.”

“I’m – trying!”

“Easy. Just in through your nose,” Charles demonstrated, “out through your mouth. It’s all right. See? They’re putting out the fire.” He patted Scott on the back, through the layers of coat and sweaters. “Be easy. Shh.”

“I need to tell Lady Frost about this,” said Hank, as Scott focused on breathing.

Charles stiffened. “No, you don’t.”

“She found out what Forge and I were doing. She told me to deliver it when I was done, and then to report back to her.”

“And you delivered it, and Scott put it on with no ill effects whatsoever. And nothing else happened.”

“But –”

“Please? Keep breathing, Scott,” Charles told him, and, taking Hank’s arm, pulled him a few steps away. “What do you think will happen,” he hissed into his ear, “when Frost finds out that little Scott can melt snow three feet deep and light ten trees with a glance? What do you think?” Charles shook Hank by the arm. “Is the army going to Los Angeles first? Or to Oklahoma?”

“I think,” mumbled Hank, “that they’re going to have to defend St. Louis –”

“The point is: where do you want to see Scott in combat? Because if you tell Frost what just happened, that’s exactly where he’ll go. Scott on the front line? Is that what you want?”

Hank shook his head. “But it’s impossible not to tell her.”

“Why?”

“Even if I don’t say it on the ’phone, she’ll look while I’m asleep.”

Charles checked on Scott. He seemed to be recovering. “She’s done that before?”

Hank nodded.

“We’re not finished with this conversation. Scott? Why don’t you help Mr. Muñoz and Mr. Logan pick up those branches? We could use them in our fires tonight.”

“Mr. Xavier, I can’t wipe my eyes.” Scott sniffled. “It’s not like the blindfold.”

“All right. Listen, I trust you, Scott. Keep your eyes closed.” Charles whisked off his mittens and gloves, then flicked the clasps on the goggles’ sides and back. “Keep them closed …” Deftly, he tugged the goggles away; wiped Scott’s face with the soft lining of a mitten. “Better?”

“Yes.”
Charles wiped the lenses. “Hank, can you put these back on him?”

Hank did so. Then Scott ran to the trees, joining Armando and Logan there. Irritably, Charles tugged Kurt up into his arms and gave him a pat on the back; anything to stop the crying. “We’ll go back inside. Hank, you find Jean. Tonight, we can have a chat in the library.”

Charles had waited to set out until he sensed Hank’s mind, hovering indecisively on the library’s threshold. Even so, it took using his veils to sneak past Logan standing guard.

He closed the library door and mimed silence. Then pointed to the northwest corner.

Slowly, Hank followed him. The whites of his eyes showed when Charles pressed catch and shelf simultaneously and the hidden door revolved inward. Charles stuffed a book in the open space and crossed his arms in front of him. “What did you say on the telephone?”

“Just what you told me to.”

“And what did she say?”

“… Nothing much. We talked about you, and then about Scott. I told her nothing really happened, but I don’t think she believed me.”

“So you think that when you fall asleep, she’ll go into your mind?”

Hank nodded.

“Like she’s done before. Let me guess: she did this in Dallas?”

“How did you –” tumbled out of Hank’s mouth, before he snapped it shut, turning crimson.

“You’re an open book, my friend. Now: this doesn’t go any further than myself. How close was Frost, when she read your mind like that?”

“Um.” Hank’s voice cracked. “Close.”

“How close?”

“Next to where I was sleeping.”

“I only ask, because she’s not going to be that close in the near future, is she?”

“No.”

“I don’t mean anything personal between the two of you. I mean coming here: geographically. Where is she now?”

“Albany.”

“Closer and closer, but not close enough to do now what she did then. For do you know what I think, Hank? I think that I am going to take a stroll around your mind this evening. Not inside. Just walking the perimeter.” Charles raised his eyebrows. “If that’s all right with you.”

Slowly, Hank nodded. “As long as you don’t go in.”

“I won’t. And she won’t get past me. I promise.”
“… As long as you’re sure.” Hank would not meet his eyes.

Charles considered him. Hank looked well enough. He had gained back some of the weight he had lost in the autumn and winter, resembling altogether less a scarecrow and more a man. But if Frost had done what Charles thought she had done, what Logan had said she had done …

_Poor Hank._ Put through his paces and cast aside: he had to have been upbraiding himself ever since.

“It can be difficult, can’t it?” said Charles, gently. “In an affair of hearts, when one party calls everything off … for no apparent reason?”

“How did you know?” Hank whispered.

_Gentle. Careful._ “Intuition. Instinct. The experience of a long and disreputable career.” He arched an eyebrow; sent a golden thread of _tell me tell me trust me_.

For the same instinct was telling him that Hank desperately wanted to be comforted. _Come on._

“… She said that I wasn’t any good.”

“Any good?”

Hank had pressed his lips together. He looked nothing but humiliated.

“At sex?”

A silent nod.

And there was the shine of tears, behind glasses. _Shite._ Thank God he wouldn’t have to have this talk with Kurt or Scott for a dozen years at least.

“That was abominably rude of her. Keep this in mind for the future. Even if you think it’s true – that someone is hopeless in bed – you _never_ say it out loud. Good manners are everything in this our dying world. And come to think of it, had you ever had sex before?”

“No,” Hank gulped.

“All the worse on her part. Recall for me what you have done. With Forge, you’ve made these goggles for Scott in record time, in addition to that device for Alex. With your colleagues in Durham, you’ve turned that nuclear weapon we took from the West into – is it fuel for a nuclear power plant, now?”

“I think so.”

“That’s brilliant! You’ve improved the Finder. You’ve designed countless other things, I’m sure. Hell, Hank, you restarted the bloody Gulf Stream –”

“Vulcana and Riptide did most of –”

“Take the compliment.”

“… Thanks.”

“The most beautiful woman in the world would be proud to have the favor of someone as brilliant as you. The entirety of Great Britain owes its present existence to your work. Just think – an entire kingdom, grateful to you. I’m sure its Queen is grateful too. And she’s a sight better than a queen
who tries on men like she does shoes.”

“I don’t think Lady Frost is like that, Charles.”

“Take the blinders off, Hank. I say that judging by the way she’s treated you, She’s an appallingly rude trollop. Even if she thinks she knows what she’s doing – in bed, I mean.”

Hank glanced towards the door, panicked. Charles bit back a laugh. “Does she?”

“Um. I don’t think I should, ah.”

“True – a gentleman should never kiss and tell. Really, though, consider her other lovers. Almaz, who can’t hold onto his own country. Azazel, who can’t stay sober more than half the time. MacMurphy, who was bastard enough to have bombed China, Before –”

“She –” Hank’s eyes had widened. “With Azazel? And with MacMurphy?”

“Actually, I’m not sure.”

Azazel – it was possible; they seemed in each other’s pockets. Charles let the memories unspool: Azazel calling – right on time, little one, and Frost laughing – you’ve no business calling me that. And there was the memory of MacMurphy, shaking his head, rigid, at a crystal goblet Frost held out – over Jean, snug on her lap – but that memory was edged by Erik, holding Jean on his lap, face haggard –

Charles shoved the memories away. “Whatever the list, do you know who holds pride of place? A man named Sebastian Shaw. What do you know about him, Hank?”

“Not a lot. Why?”

“I was just curious. There are several books in this library that belong to him,” Charles gestured towards the hidden door, and started walking. Hank fell into line behind him. “I wondered what sort of person Frost would have fallen in love with. That’s what she told me in Las Vegas, you know; that she had loved him.”

“In Las Vegas …” Hank looked anguished. “She didn’t … with you. Did she?”

“What, have sex? Heavens, no. We’ve an understanding, she and I.”

“Good. I was worried about you.”

“That’s most kind.” Charles patted his back. Such a limited imagination, his thoughts whispered, snide. Hank had not even considered that Frost would force him to fuck a third party. “In any case, what do you know about this Sebastian person?”

“He was a mutant, like us.”

“I thought he might have been.” Charles closed up the hidden room, listening attentively. “What was his ability?”

“Something to do with energy, I think. Lady Frost gave me drinks, the second night I stayed in Dallas,” Hank started blushing again, “and she drank, too. She told me a bit about him, then. Do you know about the Tunguska Event?”

“I can’t say that I do.”
“It was an explosion in Siberia, in 1908. Some scientists thought it was from a meteor or a comet – it registered across Europe as an earthquake. Lady Frost said to me that it was the scientists in the Soviet Union that was who wanted to know more about it – but that the government already knew all it needed to.”

“Which government? 1908 and 1930 saw régimes quite different in that area of the world.”

“I know. She said that the Tsar refused to give Shaw anything separately, in the Revolution of 1905 –”

“He revolted along with the people? How very equal-minded.”

“He led a faction, she said, after sitting in the Duma – but no one would make a treaty with him. So he told the Tsar he was going to demonstrate what he could do, and then he, well, made that explosion in Siberia.”

Charles digested this. “Did he have Azazel to hand?” he said, finally.

“Azazel’s loyalty is to the Frost family. The Morozovs.”

“He told me that already.”

“And,” said Hank, “Shaw didn’t meet Frost until the second war was almost over.”

“Then that story sounds like nonsense. How would the Tsar see something in Siberia from so far west in Russia?”

“I assumed Shaw sent a vision of it through a telepath –”

“You remember that Frost wasn’t even born until 1928.”

“– or he had another kind of teleporter there? Or something? Or maybe he did something else, too, where the Tsar could see. In the end, though, he got everything he asked for from the government. Lady Frost showed me a few things that he had given her. She said I could have whichever I wanted.”

In another life, Charles might have thought it hilarious that he did not possess a monopoly on inappropriate tokens offered. Frost and Erik – did they have bloody suitcases of the things? “What did you take?”

“I didn’t want anything. But Shaw – she said that when Shaw let the next few Russian governments know about what he could do, they gave him whatever he asked for.”

“Which was?”

“Money, mostly.” Hank shrugged. “At least, I think so. Lady Frost said they paid him to go live in Italy in the 1920s – far away from them.”

“Money and an Italian villa? What a conventional imagination.”

“Frost said that later on he wanted the Finder, to use … and Azazel, as a servant.”

“That’s a little more ambitious. And he obtained them?”

“She had both. So to get them …” Hank blinked behind his glasses. “She told me that that’s what he did. Once he asked her, she used the Finder for him and let him tell Azazel what to do.”
“How could Azazel let himself be used?” Really, Charles had thought better of him, casual sadism and bad breath notwithstanding.

“I think … He’s Sworn, but to her family, somehow. You’d have to ask him. But I’ve never seen him able to refuse to do something she orders him to do. And I’ve seen them together a lot.”

Charles opened his mouth to refute Hank. Then he realized – he couldn’t.

Azazel’s words echoed in his memory: *Family history …*

“So, Shaw made Frost use the Finder for him? And used Azazel for his own nefarious purposes? Truly?”

“She said he tricked her into it.” Hank frowned, concentrating. “She said that he made her think he loved her, so she would do things for him.”

“I can’t picture her doling out such favors right and left, let alone being tricked so. Such naïveté …” Charles shook his head. “Not Emma.”

“She said it was because she was –”

“– young. I’ll bet that’s what she said, hm?”

“How did you know?”

“It’s obvious. That whole story? She was setting it up for you to give all the sympathy to her, and then to fall into bed with her.” Charles gave mock applause.

“You don’t believe her, then?”

“I don’t believe she would give the Finder’s power and a teleporter to someone else. Not without something in it for herself. It’s a powerful story, though, so I can’t blame you for allowing yourself to be persuaded by it.”

Hank was silent.

*Poor Hank.* Charles moderated his tone. “That is … I don’t blame you for anything you did in this matter. If indeed there was anything blameworthy in it, at all.”

“I had wondered.”

“Wondered what?”

“I just … I’m not used to drinking that much, Mr. Xavier. You remember last year, don’t you?” Hank looked miserable. “And then I woke up, and we were in bed. And I didn’t remember getting there.”

Charles’ thoughts slowed. “What?”

“I didn’t know what to do.”

“Wait.” Scrubbing one hand through his hair, Charles refocused. “Hank …”

One corner of Hank’s mouth trembled.

“Just let me clarify one thing. Which, perhaps I ought to have clarified first. At any point in this, did
Frost ask you if you wanted to go to bed with her?”

“… I don’t remember.”

Fuck. “At any point, did you tell her so?”

Hank looked at the floor.

“But … this entire … I thought you had wanted to, Hank.”

“I guess I must have.”

“If you didn’t,” Charles snapped, “you didn’t. Tell me the truth.”

“Part of me did, maybe? She’s very beautiful. But part of me – a lot of me … I didn’t really know what was happening. So when I woke up, and she was there, I just. I don’t know. I haven’t told anyone this, Mr. Xavier. Just you.” Hank took off his glasses and tried to polish them – caught them, before they could fall to the floor. “I still don’t know what to do.”

“I’ll tell you what to do.” Charles knew that his anger was speaking. Sod it. “Sleep peacefully. Don’t worry about her, because she won’t touch you, or your mind. Not when I’m here. All right?”

“… but how can you be sure?”

“God damn it, I can be sure of very few things in my life, but I am positive that I can keep her from you.” Charles held out his hand. “Do you trust me?”

There was no hesitation as Hank took his hand, and shook it. “I trust you.”

In his reading room that night, Charles waited quietly.

He reviewed the evening. Armando returning late from walking the perimeter, tight-lipped and silent. Hank’s pensive quiet at dinner. Logan’s one-man comedy routine and the children’s delighted laughter.

Why didn’t you tell me this before? he had asked Hank on the way back from the library. Before you went back to Durham, or on the road to Albany, or before I went to Las Vegas. You could have told me any time – I could have helped you.

Hank had shaken his head. I didn’t want to.

Why now?

Sometimes when I remember it, it’s different. But when I talk to her, when I’m by myself …. Hank’s shoulders had hunched up, again. It all comes back.

Charles concentrated in the dark and quiet, unspooling power from his mind – threading his aviary’s wings and letting them fly far and wide.

I said I would guard your mind, and not go inside, he had said. May I ask one thing, though?

Hank had nodded, warily.

If I send something – a part of me, he clarified, flying to you – would you allow me to see if Frost has left anything in your thoughts? I promise: it would only be to check. In and out. You said you trusted
me.

_I do, Hank had said. You can check. Just let me know, O.K.? I don’t want to be asleep when you do it._

Charles would do precisely that.

He had chosen his owl. Wings of down, silent and sure …. “You know what to look for,” he had whispered to it. “Fly quickly.”

The owl had flown to Hank’s mind. Had aligned itself with – _lovely_ – the blue fractal, branching into additional formulae, twining into a helix and unspooling into what could be the bonds of some complex carbon. Floating over it all, the owl had searched with its powerful sight.

And found nothing.

Charles had double- and triple-checked, until his owl had felt affronted. “Thank you,” he had said. “You’ve done well.” And _thank God_, she hadn’t wanted to get her hooks into Hank’s thoughts, for whatever reason.

_Nothing worthwhile, Randolph – except your life, except your life, except your life_, slithered out of his memory. Charles could have sworn his owl had caught that fragment in its talons and flown it back into his mind before it could touch Hank. _Good work._

He had wrapped Hank’s mind in veil after soft veil of protection. Had woven shields that stretched between the two of them, connecting them in sleep. Thus Frost, checking Hank’s memory for truth and accuracy, would be slowed, if not caught outright, by his delicate web. She might make a virtue of necessity, and pay him a visit. Or … she might _want_ to drift to his mind, and pay him a very long visit indeed. It depended on how enticing he could make it.

“The glass of fashion,” he told himself, checking the mirror. He knew he was wearing his armor, just as he knew that Frost would see his evening suit. “The mould of form.”

The first chill took him by surprise.

“A poorly-insulated mould, I suppose. _Damn_. And we have to put out the fire!” Charles scrambled for his golden chair; draped himself across it. “Darlings, we have our play to play out. Hurry up.” _Frost can be fooled._

Arrowing over from making his fire vanish, his raven screeched at him.

“I’ll be careful. And you, control yourself. Or if you can’t, go to the pillar and fly there. Guard it for me.”

A good number of the birds made a cacophony and flew – or waddled – for the hidden room. His owl flew more slowly; Charles felt anxious, watching. “Take care, won’t you?”

His raven flapped its wings. Soon, only his nightingale and dove remained.

“Sing for me,” Charles told the nightingale. “And you,” he murmured to his dove, “could you rest here? Pretend to sleep, just as I do.”

The nightingale sang. Charles did his best to relax; he closed his eyes. But it was more difficult than he thought it would be, to let his veils open to her touch.
She had wafted across the outside of Hank’s mind. And now he felt every movement of Frost’s power slipping round his defenses and sliding into his mind. Rippling chills stroked the folds of his veils as she pressed in.

“She’s done this to other people, of course.” Charles focused on the nightingale’s golden song. “I suppose she wants them – relaxed.”

_or asleep._ For every touch of ice closing in was easing him to sleep – _sleep_ –

“Not likely,” he hissed.

In his hands, his dove warbled at him, anxious.

“It will be all right, my love. Just let her find her way here.”

It took some time.

Charles supposed that if his mind’s eye were open, he would see Frost floating down through the great window of his reading room. _Again._ Touching her diamond slippers to the floor, and trailing gorgeous light, silk, and crystalline dust into his mind.

For a long moment, there was nothing. Then he heard quiet footsteps.

They were not approaching him. No: they were moving away, even as she exhaled in a long sigh and the room’s temperature dropped.

Oh, he would _not_ have that. Charles faked a shiver, and a mumble of discomfort. He shifted where he sat.

From half a room away, she heard him. Charles hardly had time to marvel before Frost whispered, “Charles?”

“Hm?”

“Are you awake?”

He gave the impression of considering the question. Then Charles faked a yawn. “I’m _tired._”

There was no answer. No sound, really, which meant she was staying quite still.

Carefully, he opened his eyes to slits. He saw Frost’s shining gown glowing in the dark, scattering silent crystal motes with every breath she took. _Sound stupid_; _sound asleep_ – Charles did his best to project through the room a warm, thick tiredness; like a down comforter wrapping round a child’s shoulders. “Why are you here?”

“But I’m not. You’re dreaming, aren’t you?”

“Dreaming?”

“You are _dreaming._”

“Oh. I’m dreaming. That’s lovely.”

The shimmering light of her gown moved.

Charles made himself more comfortable in the chair, holding his dove beneath his chin. He could feel
the trembling through his throat. “Why’re you in my dream?”

The light stopped. “I’m not sure. Have you ever dreamed of me before, Charles?”

“Oh, yes.” *Sound like you’re smiling. In your sleep.* “Several times.”

“Really?”

It was uncanny, seeing the gown move, from beneath nearly-closed lids: as though shattered pieces of glass were coalescing and shivering apart simultaneously, a kaleidoscope of cold, moving uncommonly quickly across his mind.

“Emma? I’m getting cold.”

“But I am overly warm,” she murmured back. “I’ve tried to make it less stagnant in here, Charles; several times. It never works. How have you managed to counter me?”

“Hmm, don’t know.” Another yawn, faked. Charles smacked his lips together; angled his head so that a fall of his hair brushed his nightingale.

His nightingale … that was still singing, bless its brave, stupid heart.

“These precious little beauties,” Frost said. “Is that how?”

“Mirror mirror on the wall …”

The footsteps stopped. *Ha.* Even the silence sounded puzzled – or *thick.* Well, she could puzzle away, until she remembered that dreams didn’t have to make a jot of sense.

She inferred it quickly, though. *Damn.*

“… Who’s the fairest one of all? Are you calling me an evil stepmother? What stories has Jean been reading?”

“Reads backwards,” Charles mumbled.

Frost was silent again. But that, he understood. Jean’s habit didn’t make a jot of sense to him, either.

He felt her come closer. Charles stirred; tried to look like he was sitting up. He expected to open his eyes and see that she had found a seat, but she was still standing.

“Lady?” he said.

Frost inclined her head.

“Why am I dreaming about you like this?”

Bare shoulders lifted in a delicate shrug.

“Where are you? Sleeping, right now, I mean.”

“Albany, Charles.”

“And why are you here?”

“Why not?”
“Will you need the Finder, Lady?”

“I had thought to come use it tomorrow. My reports from Denver say that the Free West is planning something on a larger scale. I need to know what it is, Charles. And all I have here is the Seeker.”

Charles smiled, broadly. “It will be marvelous to see you.”

“… Really?”

“Really and truly.”

“It hasn’t been so long, has it?”

“I left you in Las Vegas on the twelfth. That was more than two weeks ago.”

He expected her to say something. But all that happened was that she turned, just so, and he saw nothing but her profile, and, in the gleam of her eye, her gaze flicking about.

And that lasted a while.

Damn. If she got bored and left, she could go back to Hank. So Charles reached out one hand. “Emma?”

“Yes?”

“Your hand. May I have it?”

Silently, she placed her fingertips on his gauntlet. Well, what he saw as a gauntlet. Charles concentrated on the discrepancy – on anything else – as he brought her hand to his lips. “I’ve missed you.”

And that silence had to be shock.

Ha. He glanced up at her face as he brushed his mouth over her knuckles, curled her fingers beneath his chin, pressed the back of her hand against his pulse. “Have you missed me?”

His dove fluttered next to their intertwined hands. Frost slipped hers away.

“Oh, dear. It just means to say,” he lied, “that it missed you too.”

Would she believe it?

The nightingale had stopped singing; both birds had fixed their eyes on Frost. Who, Charles saw, was very pale – even for her – against the warm darkness of his reading room. The blue shadows on her skin looked pronounced … cheekbone, clavicle … cleavage.

Charles let himself stare. It was supposed to be his dream, after all.

“What are you thinking, Charles?”

“That you are rather exquisitely beautiful.”

She had gone completely still. It was uncanny. Unnerving.

Could she hear the lie? Had that been a mistake? Charles scrabbled for anything to break the silence. “How are you enjoying my mind?”
“Very much. I always do.”

Frost smoothed over the soft fall of her gown. Then she turned away, quickly; touched the topmost book on a heap close to her. And opened it.


“… But that’s Sebastian.”

_Fuck._ “Who?” he tried.

She held up the memory, open, and extended it to him with one hand.

It had _changed_. It still showed the photograph from the binder, yes, but the figure of Shaw had changed from grey to the rust-red shade of dried blood, oozing color to contaminate the others.

“Charles.” Frost’s voice was flat. “What have you been doing.”

“Just thinking –”

“No.”

Charles shuddered. For Frost had turned back to face him dead on – but had closed her eyes. Beneath the lids, he saw something bright, flickering. “When I first saw you, after I gave you to Erik … I asked if Erik had _told you about Sebastian._”

“I know, but –”

“And you said _nothing._”

“– my lady, I didn’t know his name. I didn’t know. You told me yourself, who he was, in Las Vegas, and I didn’t make the connection until then.”

Charles shrank back into his golden chair as Frost’s eyes snapped open, staring down at him. “Do you expect me to believe that?”

_Fly_, he told his dove and nightingale. They did not need to be told twice, and made their escape in a flash.

“What have you been doing, Charles? Tell me the truth.”

“I…”

Part of it, perhaps. Enough to fool her – _yes_, to lure her in, to focus on _him_ and not on Hank, on Scott, on anyone else. “I was looking, because …” He licked his lips. “I had wondered, Emma, why you would have loved the man who started World War Three.”

She went still again.

Then Charles almost jumped out of his skin as she vanished and reappeared – _right_ in front of him, _fuck_. No glowing light or cascades of ice dust. Very like Jean’s habit – no fuss, no fanfare – except now he had to concentrate on not pissing himself.

“And who told you that?” she whispered.

“You did.” He would not look at her index finger, coming up to land on his sternum. He edged away
as best he could; winced as the touch burned cold against his armor.

“Not about love.” She was leaning closer, eyes glittering. “About the war.”

He swallowed.

“Who was it, Charles?” Frost let her eyes fall shut once more. Charles saw that same brightness, flickering beneath. This close, he could also see strands of her hair, falling loose from the sweep held up by her crown. This close, they looked – sharp.

“Emma?”

She opened her eyes and focused back on him.

“I would like to wake up now.”

“You don’t want to know anything more, Charles? I’m right here. Why don’t you ask me?” She flattened her hand against his chest. “I have forgotten more about it than anyone else will ever know.”

His armor crackled, sending up energy –

*Fine.* “How could you love a man like him, Emma? That’s all I want to know. Before you took me to you, I was an historian, and the Third War … No one knows anything about it; the answers were thought destroyed. Answers like Shaw are worth so much. No one else knows, really. I love that I know –”

He let himself ramble. There had to be some truth, after all, if this were his dream. Otherwise she would never believe it.

“I know what you are, Emma, and so … how could you ever love Sebastian Shaw?”

“And what am I?”

“I can’t possibly describe it.”

*Try.*

“You’re a true queen.”

Frost blinked.

“You’ve seen so much. You’ve done so much. You’ve had to make … so many difficult choices, for your people.” *Sound enthralled.* “More than Britain’s queen ever has. And I thought … I know I was angry and afraid, at first. But now I think …”

“What do you think?” she whispered.

“ … I think you’re a wondrous creature, Emma,” Charles whispered in reply. “So how could you love him? He was evil, my Queen. How could you ever, *possibly* love him?”

Frost stared at him, silently, for quite some while.

Then she said: “I think I need to see you, Charles.”

“Ah?”
“And soon.”

Charles gulped. “I think I need to wake up.”

Her hand moved up to the base of his neck. Her breath, cold, burned his chin. “When you do, you will forget this little conversation we have had.”

Charles kicked his head back and gritted his teeth against a whine of pain – there was ice, sharp, prickling all over his bare flesh of his throat and the fabric of his golden chair, radiating out from where she touched him.

“Do you understand me?”

*Raven.* He threw out the command. *Fly to me. Hurry.*

A distant clamor started. At the sound of screeching and of wings, Frost’s head snapped up. Her hand tightened; he could not breathe.

“You will forget, Charles. That is my command. Now: *wake up.*”

Doing so, Charles almost fell out of bed. A sharp edge of pain stabbed up from the base of his skull, but he did not feel the need to vomit. *Small steps.*

“Hank’s safe,” he mumbled to himself. Throwing his power over the manor like a net showed him no sign of Frost’s. “Everyone’s safe. For God’s sake, Raven, start the fire again. I hope you had a bloody good reason for leaving those books out.”

Raven must have started the fire, for his headache faded by the morning. And falling back asleep was no threat: Charles remembered everything when he woke up again.

So it was difficult to pretend he had forgotten, when Frost showed up at the manor door as they were sitting down to breakfast.

“Finish that, darling,” Charles told Jean.

Jean had climbed to her knees on the booth’s velvet cushion. She was staring at the bustle outside the window, her hands pressed to the glass.

“Jean.” He took her silver spoon and tapped the china cup with it.

Obediently, Jean sat back down. She smiled up at him. *There’s so many people!*

“I know.”

The number of pedestrians had increased as the day had advanced. Charles felt every single mind as a burst of frenetic thought, quickly passing by. He sipped at his chocolate, hyper aware of the chili powder stirred in. “Do finish, won’t you?”

After Jean did, he carefully wiped away the chocolate on her mouth with a linen napkin.

Frost had collected them both, waving off Logan’s questions and ignoring the others outright. She had bypassed his own protests about security, about the children – had taken his arm in her strong grip and hustled him down the hallway. Azazel will guard me. You will watch Jean. I’m to meet Edward Spencer today – do you remember him?
Charles had nodded, helplessly, as she had told Azazel, *To Boston, comrade, and hurry.*

Azazel had grimaced and taken their hands. And Charles had promptly felt his gut trying to turn inside out as the four of them teleported to –

“Boston,” Charles murmured, watching the people. “To think that we’re here.”

*Not for long,* Frost had said, cheerfully. *But I must go to Divine Service – this is the only proper cathedral in the East. Edward will just have to keep up. He’ll meet us there, comrade.*

Charles focused on his cup of chocolate. “Did you like yours, Jean?”

Jean nodded. *It’s like the cake we made.*

“Indeed it is.”

Frost had deposited them at a luxurious chocolate shop. *Order what you like; I have an account.* And Charles had merely stared after her as she had walked away up the street, Azazel slouching in her wake. His mouth and eyes had both been wide in dismay, no doubt.

He must have looked like an idiot.

“Well.” Charles plucked at the monogrammed napkin. *Hancock’s Chocolate.* He glanced at the clock. “It’s noon. Three hours, she said. They should be done any minute now.”

Jean was balancing sugar cubes, one on top of another.

*Be careful, now,* Charles sent to her. *Use your hands, and not your power.*

She nodded.

*Power.* He sighed, considering the exercise of the morning. He had set thought-fires all around the manor just as Frost was dragging him out the door, but the jaunt to Boston had snapped the connection. Finding them again had been quite difficult. He had focused for an hour; had exchanged perhaps five sentences with Jean. Now, from so far away, his awareness of them was tenuous at best.

At least he had chocolate for consolation.

The bell at the door jangled.

“May I help you, sir?” the server squeaked.

It was Azazel, who had to be a familiar sight, since no one in the shop was screaming. Not that there were many there. *Odd,* since the chocolate was delicious.

Azazel waved the server away, irritably, and flopped into the booth next to Jean. “Morning, Xavier.”

Charles checked the clock again. “Good afternoon, now.”

“Huh.” Azazel gave every impression of – setting up for a *nap?*

“Are you joking?” Charles hissed.

“Hm?”

“You can’t sleep. I want to talk to you.”
“Too bad,” Azazel grunted, and closed his eyes.

Gritting his teeth, Charles redirected his frustration. Why would Frost abscond with him like this? Any warm body would do, to entertain Jean. He was needed at the manor. Why bring him here and do nothing – especially after her visit to his mind? He did not know what to make of it. Her face had been difficult to read. The most vivid impression had been left – Charles winced – by her hand on his throat.

Still, that was nothing compared to Erik choking him in reality.

Charles considered the scrollwork on his spoon; licked up the sweet dregs of the chocolate. He had not thought of Erik for some time … as was appropriate. Less of Erik, more of Shaw – and now, away from the library, he had no way of continuing his search –

Perhaps that was it.

Charles flicked the spoon with a fingernail, disquieted. He had wanted Frost’s attention on him, away from Hank and Scott. Perhaps his research into Shaw had obtained that attention, and then some.

Though was it worth decreasing security at the manor?

Erik. He stiffened. Perhaps that was it – Erik would replace him at the manor. Or, since his playing nice with more than one person at a time was beyond the realms of possibility, he would no doubt replace him … in the woods. Roaming and hunting, tracking and killing – or bringing captives back to the stable, and amusing himself there.

If that were so, then Frost was keeping him safe. “Joy,” Charles mumbled.

He glanced over at Azazel, now breathing through his mouth, dead to the world. Then at Jean, who had built herself a ziggurat of sugar cubes. She met his eyes. The corner of her mouth curled up in her fern-tendril smile.

That smile …. It was very like –

Charles forced the memory away and locked it up fast. He gave Jean a smile in return.

Back to Shaw. Erik was broken. Azazel would not be forthcoming with details. Emma was Emma … but she had answers. The trick would be sorting through the lies decorating them. It was a good thing he was not as easily tricked as Hank.

Small comfort, he thought, as his eyes fell on Emma herself, sashaying up the street like a show pony. Edward Spencer, in her wake, looked overwhelmed.

Charles smiled tightly at Jean. Wake Mr. Neyafim, won’t you? he sent. We’ll be going soon.

“You weren’t guarding Frost?” he whispered to Azazel, that afternoon.

“She can take care of herself.”

“But Spencer –”

Azazel sneered. “He’s a gnat.”

Charles peered at Spencer. He had his hands pressed to a glass barrier, through which he was gazing
with wide eyes. Much like Jean, at Hancock’s, through the window.

Except Spencer was staring at the original Declaration of Independence.

“Or so you say it is,” Charles muttered at Frost’s back.

“Do you doubt me, Charles?” She strolled up to him, made a moue, and straightened his tie. She had hardly left him any time to change into something respectable, mind you, before dragging him away that morning.

“I don’t know, Emma. It’s been – how long, since you told me the truth?”

“I did in Las Vegas. Was it that long ago?”

“You left me there on the twelfth,” Charles said, peering at Spencer. “In the hotel, by myself. They could have attacked me when you were gone.”

“Nonsense. Howlett was there the entire time. And Azazel moves quickly.”

“For God’s sake,” came a growl. “Are we done yet?”

Radi boga – Jean must have known it. Which meant, Charles supposed, that it was less offensive than Azazel’s usual. At least he had a sense of what was appropriate in front of a child, a guest, and the Declaration of Independence.

“Comrade, hush. Let our Free West friend commune with the greatness of democracy – although really, there are more impressive things. Look, Charles. There,” she gestured at the wall adjacent, “is one of the earliest orreries built on this continent. Much more splendid than any piece of parchment, don’t you think?”

Charles pitched his whisper to carry. “Where are we, anyway?”

Emma looked stern – but then caught the ruse, flicked her eyes to Spencer’s back, and gave Charles a wink. “It’s a secret,” she stage-whispered back.

“You can tell me.”

“Charles, you can’t expect me to tell you secrets just because you look very handsome today.”

“Thank you, I think. You look lovely, too.”

Emma smiled at him, demure.

“I missed you,” he whispered – and had that been a shiver?


They turned their heads to stare at Spencer, simultaneously. He had only just glanced over his shoulder. And Charles commended his self-control: he could paste a smile on his face, walk over to them, and manage, “My thanks, Your Majesty.”

“Now Edward, I should remind you: that Declaration could be part of our negotiations. All you have to do is tell my friend William so.”

“If I can, Lady,” and Spencer bowed over her hand, “I will.”
Charles stared. Emma shot him a mischievous look above Spencer’s head.

Shite. The Olympics, when reinstated, would have a Free West contender for the gold in gallantry. And there that contender went, holding the bloody door for her.

“Come along, Jean,” Charles sighed.

Jean slid off George Washington’s chair and scampered to his side.

Perhaps they had just been in Philadelphia, Charles thought, desperately, as Azazel teleported them all away. Philadelphia, left pulverized just as much as Boston, but – like Boston – with a salvageable center? Or high ground? Somewhere that would have treasures of the former colonies, all in one place … . He could hardly think. He felt sick, disoriented, as they materialized in Albany’s City Hall. Too much.

“Goodness, Charles, you look unwell. Comrade,” in Russian, “could you watch Jean for a moment? She’ll be going soon. I must speak to her first.”

“He speaks Russian, Comrade,” said Azazel, jabbing his tail at Spencer. “Remember?”

“Of course.” Emma gave Spencer a dazzling smile. “He followed the liturgy very well this morning.”

“Thank you. It’s a shame to leave Professor Xavier out of our speaking, though.”

“You want the word ‘conversation’ there, Edward. And Charles needs his rest. He’s been exerting himself,” she said in an undertone. “The changes I made to the Finder, you understand.”

Spencer looked poleaxed. Emma smiled brightly, and switched to English. “We’ll meet with the governors next. Charles, do rest. My room is upstairs; the staff will show you.”

“Yes, my lady,” he said, woodenly. “Mr. Spencer. A pleasure.”

“Likewise.”

The two of them left; Azazel and Jean left. Charles wobbled his way up the main staircase. He was intercepted by a maid in uniform; led to a receiving room, a parlor, a bedroom –

The maid left him there. Charles toed off his shoes and called Frost’s bluff completely by taking the bed.

Delegating the manor’s thought-fires deeper into his mind, Charles had set new ones on the thresholds of all the rooms surrounding him. Thus, he felt it instantly when Frost crossed the entryway, and he shook off his sleep by the time she opened the bedroom door.

“Emma? Is that you?”

“Good evening.” A dim light flared: the gas lamp on her vanity. The pale golden glow in the mirror was that same light, shining through a fall of Frost’s hair.

Charles sat up. “What time is it?”

“Just past seven o’clock.”

He watched, as she sat in front of the vanity and sighed, taking off her hat before she met his eyes in
“Nothing to say, Charles?”

“Not really.”

“So short with me,” she mused. “Did you sleep poorly?”

Charles shook his head.

He watched, silently, as she undid a catch at the top of her fur cloak, then shrugged it from her shoulders. She was wearing a tight jacket beneath, which she removed to reveal a low-cut bodice. Charles would have thought it not warm enough for the weather.

Frost took a box from a vanity drawer and fished out of it a few small containers and some cotton pads. “You don’t mind my taking a moment?”

“Not at all.”

“Good.”

She was very methodical about removing her makeup. It seemed most of it had been for her eyes – or, at least, she was focusing on them above all. Charles watched the play of her fingers, pressing, wiping, dabbing. The smeared pads accumulated. There was a joke about mountains that could be made, Charles knew, but Kurt was not there to appreciate it. He wondered whether the children had read any books that day. He wondered –

“Would you please fetch me some warm water, Charles? Through there.” Frost indicated one of the room’s interior doors.

Leaving the bed was like trying to escape a snowdrift, but he managed it. The rest was child’s play – indeed, he was as sweet and compliant as the children had ever been. Fetch, Charles thought to himself, sourly.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Sighing as she washed her face, Frost said, “I would have thought you’d ask me about everything that happened today.”

Fine. Charles shrugged, and asked the first thing that came to mind. “Why meet Edward Spencer in Boston?”

“To give him a chance to make an intelligence drop. He left Divine Service for a good ten minutes this morning.”

Frost had buried her face in the thick towel. The moment of truth. Charles looked out of the corner of his eye. Discretion was everything in evaluating a woman with her mask off.

When she folded the towel … it was disconcerting, how little had changed. Perhaps her eyelashes were a shade lighter, but he could not be sure of it.

“That,” she continued, “and in a few weeks I have to sit in judgment at their stadium. It’s always practical to walk by the prison for some research.” She considered her image in the mirror. “Well?”

“I don’t know that you need cosmetics, Lady.”
She smiled at his reflection over her shoulder. “Flatterer.”

“It’s true.” He gestured at her flawless face. “Why use them?”

“Because it’s expected, and because I like them.”

“In that order?”

“No, not really. Charles, you can’t blame me for liking nice things.” She tapped her fingers on the vanity top. “Not without blaming yourself for the same.”

“I find judicious hypocrisy the best strategy, there.”

“Then welcome to the judiciary.”

“So, our great minds think alike?”

Frost laughed. “Hang these up.” She indicated her cloak and jacket. “And feel free to make yourself comfortable.”

Like hell. But Charles kept his expression placid as he obeyed her. He took off his suit jacket; placed the clothing on hooks near the bedroom door. Then he leaned back against the wall, pretended to shut his eyes, and started unknotting his tie.

From underneath his eyelashes, he could only just see how intently she was watching him.

“Jean got back to the manor safely, then?” he said.

Frost hummed.

“I promised the children a story. They’re frightened, with all of these new security measures …” Charles sighed. “Am I to remain here, Lady Frost? In Albany, I mean. Will the children be safe?”

“I had supper prepared … but it’s getting late, true. The children will be missing you. I can call Azazel; he’ll be here within seconds. Let me know when you wish to go back.”

Charles blinked his eyes open. She had turned away from him and back to the mirror. He only saw her shoulders; all that bare, pale skin gleaming above the bodice.

He had assumed she would … try something.

But there Frost sat, slipping ornaments out of her hair, reaching down to the buckles of her boots with a sigh – giving up the spindly chair as a bad job, and moving to the divan.

He watched her tug at her left boot for a moment. “Here,” said Charles, hanging up his tie. “Allow me.”

Kneeling, he realized that his instinct had been correct. For as he slid Frost’s boots off her feet, Charles felt her stare hit the back of his skull like a cosh.

“How very gallant of you.”

“It’s no trouble at all, my lady.” He placed the boots to the side. “Will you need anything to protect your stockings?”

“Fetch me a pair of slippers from the closet.”
Charles found the correct door on the second try, concealed his shock at the size of the bloody thing, and picked an innocuous pair of soft white slippers – one of at least twenty. He held them out for her approval.

When she nodded, it was easy enough to return to kneeling and to slide the slippers onto her stocking feet one at a time. She had, Charles noted, good ankles. Strong. After a moment, he let go the right one, sat back – settled his hands palm-down, just above his knees. And waited.

“Charles,” Frost murmured.

“Yes, Emma?”

“Now that you mention it, there is something I would speak to you about.”

He hadn’t mentioned anything, but Charles kept his poker face. “What is it?”

“I know what you’ve been doing in the manor library.”

“Tutoring.”

“That, and uncovering every book from the personal collection of my old acquaintance, Sebastian Shaw.”

“Who?”

“Come now, how absent a supervisor do you think I am? I know you’ve found those books. Though I don’t remember them being that interesting.”

Shite. She had corroborated the entire operation, somehow – or, Charles realized, she just did not want to reveal how she had traipsed through his mind just last night, and was hoping that he would reveal it instead. The latter. He would not smile, though the idea of Frost dashing about conducting research on her own all afternoon was amusing. “And how would you know that, Emma?”

“What if I said that Jean told me?”

“I would say that Jean is illiterate. Improving, yes – I’ve been teaching her since her birthday – but not up to listing book titles yet.”

“That’s true. But she can recognize a bookplate like Sebastian’s. She saw them in each volume. You’ve put them all in one bookcase.”

“How interesting.” Truly. She had used her discovery in his mind to triangulate – and done it damned fast, just by asking Jean.

“Caught out.” One corner of her mouth curled up in a smile. “Admit it.”

“I’ll do nothing of the sort. And besides, if I were to admit looking up this – who did you say he was?”

“Sebastian Shaw, Charles.”

“If I were to admit it, why would it matter?”

She settled more comfortably on the divan, crossing her legs. Charles leaned back to allow her space for the maneuver, and deliberately kept his eyes from the neat trim of her skirt – sliding up to reveal the press of one thigh on the other – an opaque press, given the white stockings, but as fine an effect
as any Bernini, really –

“– to me? Charles.”

“Yes,” he cleared his throat, meeting her eyes again. “I’m listening.”

“It would matter because Sebastian Shaw was a very remarkable, powerful, and deranged man. And I would not have anyone, especially someone I value, follow in his footsteps.”

“You value me?” Play along. “Is my ability to tutor so splendid?”

“You don’t know what it means to me, not to have to fret about the children.”

“Then I would like to take this opportunity to petition for something.”

“Later –”

“If it’s too much trouble to power the whole manor, then please let us have a gasoline generator. There’s gasoline for the trucks, somewhere, isn’t there? We could run small heaters off a generator; we could boil water much faster. Please, Emma. Your time in Solovki must have been dreadful – so cold, for so much of the year –”

“My little brother died from it.”

“… I’m so very sorry.”

Emma’s face showed nothing. “It was a long time ago.”

“Then … with your own brother dying … you must see what can happen to children in such conditions. Why not improve them? Putting them through the same ordeal you went through, when we can prevent it – it’s terrible.”

Habit allowed him to conclude with some patter about cruelty, while his mind caught fire with the knowledge that he was right. That she had to be recreating her childhood.

But why?

Charles controlled his flinch as she nudged his shoulder with one foot. “You care for them very deeply, don’t you?”

“For the children? Yes. I’ve always liked children in general, in my life. Perhaps it stemmed from losing my parents so young.”

“As so many of us did. You’ve never been a father yourself; not that I could find.”

“I certainly hope not. You’ve never been a mother?”

“Mm. Sebastian would have been an atrocious parent.”

Charles muffled the aviary’s clamor in his mind, gritting his teeth. Here the two of them were again: she wanted him to take the bait. Fine. This time, he bloody well would.

“If I had been researching Shaw … perhaps I heard you mention him … and felt intrigued. That’s all.”

“You only heard me mention him?”
“In Las Vegas, lady. But Logan did tell me about, and I quote, your ‘old cuckoo-bananas boyfriend.’ Is it the same person?”

“Really, how rude. So you concede?”

“If I do, will you take your foot off my shoulder?”

She laughed. And moved her foot. “Now?”

“Very well. I was reading what I could read of Shaw’s collection – but you need not fear for me on that point. No one person, however remarkable, could twist me into ideological lockstep through a mere book.”

“There you are, Professor. It’s been … how long, since I heard your voice? Perhaps when you were advising me on that tea party with Lady Stryker. Such wise counsel.”

Charles felt his shoulders twitch.

“Sebastian would have been impressed with you, I think. He would have offered you brandy and conversation, night after night. He would have insisted on hearing all of your ideas. He would have called you the most stunning mind he had found in his long life.” Sliding a languid hand along the frame of the divan, Emma sighed. “And then he would have twisted you into his ideology, given enough time. It was what he did best.”

“Really —”

“If you don’t believe me, why don’t you come and see for yourself?”

Emma uncrossed her legs and smiled.

She thought she had him. The flounder on the hook. It was thus permissible to stare at her, open-mouthed. “Beg pardon?”

“My mind, Charles. Come see. I’ll show you Sebastian, and I’ll show you why – twenty years after I disposed of him – I mistrust any trace of him remaining.”

It was not a lie, what she said. But it was not the truth. Instead, it was a grinding of the two together in his mind’s ear – a horrible quality.

“Your memories? Isn’t that rather personal?”

“You’ve been there before.”

“This sounds more serious, is all.”

“There’s such a thing as being too polite.” Emma waved one hand at the bed. “Lie down. It will be more comfortable for you.”

“As my lady wishes.”

Charles settled back onto the plush comforter. There was no need to fret. This happened every day: someone going to bed. And unlike poor Hank, he had protection against anything Frost could throw at him.

Emma’s mind was, as always, freezing cold and blindingly bright. Charles shaded his eyes with one
gauntlet and looked round for her.

“Over here.”

Her voice echoed in a strange way. It could have been because she was at some distance: framed in his view by mounds of darker ice – standing quite still.

Charles set off towards the White Queen and slipped almost immediately. She did not laugh. Nor did she change their surroundings to something more welcoming, or come to help him. She remained in one place, looking elegant, as he scrambled for purchase on the ice.

They were situated in a part of the glacier with more stone than usual, jutting up at strange angles. His raven cried aloud and launched itself into flight.

“Am I wrong in thinking that this is different from my other visits, lady?” He climbed over a heap of snow, not falling. “Is there a special reason?”

“Other than my current companion?”

He sketched a bow from atop the heap – “Thank you very much for that” – and slid to her side. “But I thought you brought me here to meet an earlier one.”

“Yes, indeed. My Sebastian.”

Emma gazed out at white nothingness. She sighed. Then Charles swallowed hard as the glacier began to rumble and shake. He did not stumble or flinch as the ice in front of them began to collapse; he merely held up his hand. His raven banked, sharply, and began to fly back to him.

“What a pity. She looked so lovely against my sky.”

“You’ll have the memory of it, then. You understand, my lady.”

It was a relief to feel his raven’s talons dig through his gauntlet. Charles transferred it to his shoulder, where they could both watch the breakage give way to liquid: chunks of snow and ice swirling round in a circle, palest blue threading it faster and faster.

Emma glanced at his raven. “Can she behave herself in an enclosed space?”

“Why do you ask?”

With a gesture from her hand, the churning water parted around a huge, black cylinder. It shed fragments of ice and snow as it rose up. “I ask, because we’re moving to new quarters.”

“What is it?”

“A submarine. It’s perfectly safe.” Another gesture, and a gangplank unrolled from the tower and floated to their feet. “It may look fluid – the mind tends to be, after all – but the memories are perfectly solid ones. And you’ll have me there throughout.” Frost picked her way over the ice and stepped up to the gangplank. “Come along.”

Following her, Charles could not say what instinct prompted him to look down.

But there, deep in the water, he saw the paler silhouettes of blue-white hands – more than he could count – plucking at the submarine’s dark sides.

“Charles, come along.”
He checked that sword, shield, cloak, and raven were all secure – and followed.

The submarine was as chilly inside as out. As Charles followed the reflecting surfaces of Frost’s dress, cascading down the spiral staircase, he tried not to think of the water’s pressure on the hull. The occasional creak made him start; he looked for portholes or inner doors, but could see nothing as the walls pressed closer.

“Here. Come along.” She turned back to look at him, and walked through a wall to their right.

“Emma.” Charles swallowed hard. “That won’t take us out into the water, will it?”

The submarine’s metal vibrated with her laughter. Of course not.

Five white spots appeared on the wall. They turned into the lengths of fingers and thumb, then into a palm – and then Emma’s hand slid through the metal, disembodied. Come along.

Charles made sure his raven was safe on his shoulder. Then he took hold of the hand and allowed himself to be dragged through after her.

In the room on the other side, he spat out what tasted like bilge.

“Look,” said Emma.

Charles saw a man, richly dressed, striding up and down in front of a massive, ornate window on the far side of a table. It was a round table – the one from the library, Charles realized, with a shock. And the man was Sebastian Shaw, with fur trim on his collar and cuffs, smoothing his mustache with one thick finger. Charles saw the glint of a ring.

“More of a dandy than I expected,” he muttered.

“Shhh. Listen.”

Shaw seemed to be practicing a speech. “Genes are the key that unlocks the door to a new age. A new future for mankind. Evolution.”

“I forgot you don’t speak Russian.” Emma concentrated. The memory blurred, then cleared. “Now listen.”

He listened to Sebastian Shaw pontificate again. There was a phonograph playing in the background; something warbling and saccharine. All of Charles’ attention, though, was fixed on the slight boy sitting at the table: writing in a notebook with what looked like an antique fountain pen.

“Did you get that?” Shaw asked, kindly. “Let’s see.”

A finger landed on the notebook and twirled it round. Shaw read, his lips moving with no sound; then tsk’d. “Here. ‘Evolution’ with an ‘o’, not an ‘a’, Erik.”

For it was Erik. Charles stared. An Erik much younger and smaller, though with the promise of a larger frame inherent in his wrists and hands. An Erik staring straight ahead, green-grey eyes overlarge for his face, as Shaw circled around to the back of his chair.

Shaw brought the thumb and index finger of his right hand, touching, an inch from Erik’s left cheek.

Or – cheekbone. Erik was far too thin.
"For these mistakes, my boy? There’s just – a little – *pip.*"

Shaw flicked his index finger.

The side of Erik’s face collapsed.

“Oh *God,*” Charles yelped. “What –”

“It only looks like that,” Emma said, calmly. “When Sebastian used his power it could distort the object it acted upon, but in one’s vision only. It was nothing permanent.”

Erik was hunched over his notebook. Charles saw blood falling in gobbets from his nose; the blow must have affected the sinus cavities. “You were there, Emma?”

“How do you think I have this memory?” She pressed behind his left shoulder.

Charles looked to the right. There, in the shadows between two bookcases, he saw a much younger Emma. Her thin arms were full of books. She was standing quite still.

On his shoulder, the raven rustled its feathers.

“I watched that entire lesson. That, and many more like it.”

“When was this?”

“When I first arrived at Shaw’s manor. I had just turned seventeen. Erik was to be my student.”

“In that same library?”

She nodded.

“You saw this, and you did nothing to stop it?”

“What should I have done?”

“Said something? To have this happen to a child …”

She shot a glance at him. *Veil veil veil* – Raven flexed talons into his shoulder. Charles covered his true dismay with a show of disgust. “That’s how your precious prince came to be such a brute, isn’t it? Once he got big enough to hit back.”

“One never hit Sebastian back. His abilities made it futile.”

“What were they? I must say, I’m curious.”

“I was wondering when you would ask. You may come see. However, Charles …” Emma looked serious. “Your lovely little raven must stay behind.”

“What – *no.*”

“This is my domain; I know which memories can be dangerous in it. You’re perfectly safe with me, but I can’t account for her as well. Send her back to your mind.”

Charles hesitated.

“*Now.*”
“All right. Darling.” Turning to look directly at his raven, Charles pressed the words into its wing. *If I need you, I will call for you. Then fly to me.* “You had better go.”

The raven turned its head from where it watched Erik, and clacked its beak at Frost, sharply. Then, in the blink of an eye, it disappeared.

“… How very impressive.”

“I surely think so.” *Sound vain.* “I’ve had it practice traveling just like that, from wall to wall of my reading room.”

“How very repetitive, then.” Striding past, she grabbed his upper arm and pulled him out of the memory; back to the iron stair and then down another two turnings. Charles hurried to follow.

“Here. Come see Sebastian use his gift differently.”

They pushed through another wall, one throbbing in a way that set Charles’ teeth on edge. The room on the other side contained a dizzying array of reflecting surfaces. He tried not to miss his raven, and quickly resolved to stay still, lest he lose his balance and fall into the room’s center.

For there stood Shaw, both of his hands gliding over …. Charles frowned. “What’s that?”

“The reactor core of a nuclear submarine.”

“Those existed? When was this?”

“1950.”

“I never knew they were invented that early. When, in 1950?”

“Before the war, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Then how did Shaw come to use one?” Charles turned for a better look at the room. Dozens of fragments of himself stared back at him from the walls. “The Soviets let him have the pick of their weaponry? They had only just made a nuclear bomb in 1949.”

“In terms of bombs, Josef Vissarionovich knew there would be some delay in catching up to the Americans. It was mostly due to a lack of materials. And the methods he used, to make up for lost time …. You know, Charles, I came to realize that my family had been lucky to be moved to Solovki before the second war, not taken to Kolyma after. Ice on the one hand. Gold, platinum, and uranium on the other.”

“You’re not answering my question.”

“Be patient.”

In front of them, Shaw had taken hold of two glowing rods extending from the reactor core. His face rippled, as if caught in a terrifying heat wave.

Charles knew that if he were in his physical body, in the real world, his own skin would be crawling. As it was, he just felt sick.

“Do you see now? Sebastian could absorb energy from anything. A punch thrown in a fight; a
nuclear reactor …” She shook her head. “Anything and everything.”

“That’s still not an answer to my question, Emma. And even if he could absorb this much radiation, this is your memory. You’re watching. How did you survive it?”

“I wouldn’t want you to think me that resilient. I took this memory from him when he died.”

Her words rang with truth. Even so, he would clarify. “When you killed him?”

“To answer your original question: Stalin loaned his dear friend Shuvalov one of the first Soviet nuclear submarines because that dear friend had given him exactly what he wanted. Expertise. Materials. And eventually … one hundred nuclear bombs.” Emma shook her head. “It was at least a third of the bombs the Americans had already made. I never knew the exact figures.”

“How?”

“That’s where history gets very personal. Please don’t think I take any pride in it.” She lifted her eyes to his. “I had no idea he would do what he did.”

She was a very lovely sight. Fragile. Pure.

Unlike the surge of truth and lie together that her words had sent reverberating through him.

The room was rippling, shimmering all around them both. Charles fought off nausea. “Can we discuss this somewhere else?”

“Of course. This way.”

Charles followed her through the wall and down the staircase, walked through another wall, and took a shaky breath of fresh air in the next memory. It was dark, wherever they were, though the grey sky at the horizon could be the dawn. Crickets chirped. Somewhere nearby, he could hear water.

“Where are we now? And when?”

“Solovki, June of 1935.” Emma looked up at the sky. “I was seven years old. I liked to come to this creek when I was a child – I’m sure I’m here somewhere.”

“Please finish what you were telling me.”

She sat for a long moment, collecting her thoughts. Then sighed.

“Sebastian enjoyed great favor. A submarine, a country manor, a palace in Leningrad – countless people to wait on him wherever he went. That, and free rein to do what he wished with the talent he recruited to his side. Erik was his favorite among us. My own talent, you see, had already been shaped – and Azazel answered to me, not to him. Erik was more malleable.”

“I don’t want to hear about Lehnsherr. You said Shaw supplied Stalin with weaponry. How?”

“Subterfuge, sabotage, and then outright theft.”

“Such underhanded –”

“Audacious, I’d say. For example.” Emma smoothed one slipper over the grass, now visible in the dawn light. “The first major favor I did for Sebastian was take a midnight trip with Azazel, to Fort
Bliss in Texas that Was. There, I met Wernher von Braun, and persuaded him and his family, his staff and their families, German expatriates all, to relocate to the Soviet Union.”

“Dare I ask how?”

“Does it matter? Azazel and I reached Fort Bliss at midnight, and we had them all snug in Moscow by evening the next day, Soviet time.”

“Wouldn’t American spies have noticed their presence there immediately?”

“Von Braun and his associates were taken to Metro-2, four hundred meters under the city. No escape, no communication – and no desire for either, since Sebastian had them separated them from their families.”

“Oh.”

“Herr Doktor Professor Von Braun.” Frost looked up at the sky. “The Americans had snatched him up from Germany in 1945 … and sat on him after, like the goose on the golden egg. I believe they were still sorting out his clearances.”

“Von Braun,” Charles’ catalogue finally came up with the connection, “who invented the V-2 rocket.”

“He invented many more such things in Moscow. Or under Moscow.”

“Under duress.”

“Recall who you are defending. V-2 rockets fell on London first, I understand.”

“Yes, but –”

“And you must understand: after all that happened on the Eastern Front, do you think the Soviet Union that Was liked it? That a prosperous capitalist country had joined the war just in time to take the juiciest plums from Germany?”

“I’m fairly sure the Americans saw it differently.”

Emma lifted one eyebrow. “That’s a given.”

“And – choicest fruit? Those scientists, after what they had done?” Charles shook his head. “They should have gone on trial instead.”

“Oh, my idealist. Trials don’t invent intercontinental missiles.”

His catalogue gave him another name he knew. “Why not Oppenheimer?”

“Von Braun’s presence in America was still a secret at that time. Oppenheimer was a public figure. Taking him would have provoked some sort of diplomatic incident.”

“I see.”

“In any case, given my memories of what Germany did to Stalingrad, it was my personal pleasure to deliver Von Braun to Josef Vissarionovich himself. I only wish I could have greeted him with the Finder. I would have liked to have made him crawl.”

“Emma …” Charles knelt at her feet. He took her hand. “Why are you so angry?”
For a brief moment, she stared at him as though he had lost his mind. Then she jerked her hand away. “I’ll pretend you didn’t ask that.”

“Please.” Slowly, carefully, he reached out again. He took her hand; brought it to his lips. “Why? You can tell me.”

The sun was rising. Frost was backlit by it, so he could not see her face, but after a while, he heard a quiet sniffle. “I…”

“You can tell me.” He put all the softness he could into his voice. “Emma…”

“Oh, Charles. I was under Moscow, too.”

Charles waited.

“I was …. I had rooms next to the Finder. I had Tesla as a tutor, but he died. I went above ground perhaps three times during the war, and only to have my photograph taken. I didn’t leave until Sebastian asked that I visit his estate. That was in 1945.”

“So from 1941 until that point,” Charles murmured, “you were buried alive.”

“I…”

Something hard landed on their joined hands, rolling into the crease where his palm met her knuckles.

“I’m sorry.” She slid her hand away; reached up to dab at her face – oh. Charles stared. She was crying, but instead of tears, jewels fell from her eyes. Crystals, or …

“If those are diamonds … My goodness. If you could do that in reality, my Queen, you’d be the richest woman on this green earth.”

Emma laughed through her tears. “I suppose so.”

The sun had risen. In the pale light, Charles saw how she rubbed at her eyes. “It’s too early for this.”

“How do you know?”

“I remember. It’s Solovki in June, so that light means that it’s three o’clock in the morning. I suppose I let my brother sleep, this time. Usually I would wake him up, to play.”

“So early?”

“It was the best time to watch the mist on the water. I’m sure I’m doing that, somewhere. Come along.”

___

Only three memories, and Charles felt exhausted.

What was she playing at?

If the plan had been to tire him out, it had worked. If it had been to overload him with information, it was working.

And if it had been to send his emotions into a tailspin …
Charles sensed that the sight in front of him might do the trick.

Emma had taken them to another memory – of a vast hall, full of warm, golden light. Charles turned round. Looked out, and up, and saw constellations sweeping across an aquamarine ceiling. “What is this place?”

“This is Grand Central Terminal, of New York City that Was.”

“I’ve only ever read about it. What year?”

“1946.”

“And how did you …”

There were so many people, Charles thought, staring. From his vantage point near the top of a grand marble staircase, he couldn’t think of counting them all. He knew he looked ridiculous, gaping. He didn’t care. All those people, intent on their travel beneath the watching constellations, setting the immense weight of marble, wood, and gold humming with life …

“… How did I?”

“Manage it,” he finished, around a lump in his throat.

Emma slid her hands along the marble rail in front of them, where the staircase split. “This was before Fort Bliss. Azazel liked Sebastian well enough in those early days – and Sebastian did ask.”

Watching the crowd flow around a round booth beneath them – topped, Charles saw, by an ornate clock – he considered, before turning back to her. “Is that quite true, Emma?”

“Caught.” Her smile was sad. “As Sebastian caught me. Can you imagine it? He told me he didn’t quite believe that anyone could cross the Atlantic in an instant, or that anyone could conceal two people in love from the viewing public. So … I decided to prove him wrong. And there he is.”

She pointed.

Beyond the clock, near the center of the terminal, stood a figure in a long fur coat. It had to be Sebastian Shaw.

Footsteps pattered on the single stair behind them.

“And there you are,” said Charles. He watched as a younger Emma traipsed by. “Your hat …”

“You’re hardly one to talk.”

“Did you use the entire polar bear, or just part of it?”

Emma swatted his arm. “Hush.”

They watched as the younger Emma walked, then broke into a run, to meet Sebastian Shaw. Laughing, Shaw swept her up in his grip and twirled her around, as though she were light as a feather.

“Very romantic,” said Charles.

“If I had known, then, what he would do …”
By this point, Charles decided, sighing, most of the bait was well into his gut. Nevertheless, “You’ve told me bits and pieces. Out with it. What did he do, Emma? Tell me, and I promise –” he smiled, “I won’t tease you about your hat.”

“Oh, Charles …”

She had done excellent work, picking the golden terminal as the stage for her dramatics. For she only had to tip her head, and the lights around them started to dim. “I hardly know how to tell you.”

“Whatever you think will shock me, I assure you that –”

“Sebastian Shaw started World War Three.”

Charles did not look away. She was watching him for his reaction. Which was …. He knew already, from Erik. She knew already, that he knew. So what did she think he was going to do?

Play his part, of course. So, “No –” He stepped backwards, half-stumbling. “I don’t believe it.”

“I think you do.”

Charles faked a greater stumble; caught the rail and looked out across the marble floor, to where Shaw and the younger Emma were holding each other’s hands. Around them, the flow of people had stopped. Their kiss looked all the more active, and alive, against a tableau of frozen suits, hats, coats ….

He wondered where Erik was. They had probably left him at the manor. Or he was on a lower level, feeling the trains come and go … but he was not thinking about Erik, God damn it.


“Erik, Azazel, and I made it possible. Each of us, so talented in our own way, was caught in Sebastian’s thrall. He had Erik tattooed, you know. Twice.”

“Why?”

“Ownership. Commemoration. Should you like to see those memories? I was there, both times.”

“No, thank you. Shaw didn’t do that to you, did he?”

Emma gave a thin smile. “Tattoos don’t suit me. Sebastian tried. He failed. But he did not fail at starting the third war.”

“Gathering fissile material and stealing nuclear weapons …. I think I see. You could make guards look the other way. Erik could break any security and lift any metal. Could Azazel transport a weapon alongside you two?”

“It tired him. We had to time everything very carefully.”

“Why would he do it?”

“Because I told him to.”

The pain in his throat had returned. “And why would you do that?”

“Because I trusted Sebastian. I loved him.” Her voice cracked. “I believed him, when he said that the
way to prevent a nuclear war was to ensure that the foes were equally matched. That they would not engage if they were certain to destroy each other.”

“Except they did. Or, at least, they started, on November 25, 1950 … and this terminal …” Charles gazed into the growing darkness. “Rubble, less than a month later.”

Emma’s eyes glimmered – but with diamonds or tears, he could not say.

“I always think to myself: I stood there, in its center.” She gestured past the opal clock. “And if I had known then, that not five years later it would be gone ...”

Charles could no longer see any people.

Looking up, he could only just trace the constellations in lines of gold, blurring. “You would have stayed, perhaps?”

“I would have stayed. For a little while.”

“I think that sometimes as well. Except with London, of course.”

“I should have liked to see London. Charles ...”

She placed a hand on his forearm. He turned back to her.

And went still, as Emma stepped closer.

“What is it?”

“Wait.” He tried to step away.
She kept her hand on his cheek, even if she had to stretch her arm. Her eyes were wide. “Charles.”

“I’m not sure I want to.”

“Why not?” Those same eyes had a crystalline sheen. “I’ve told you so much, Charles. I trust you. And you reject me?”

“Well, reject is a bit much, but my lady. My queen. You’re very, very beautiful. Surely you understand, though? I’ve also just learned that without you, World War Three would not have happened.”

“That’s not true. The Finder had … Do you know how many children they took to Moscow, to find someone who would fit it? If not me, there would have been another telepath. There were so many of us.” Her voice wavered. “They had us all in a room. I remember it felt as large as this one, and we filled it.”

“What happened to the rest of them?”

“I don’t know.” Tears had pooled in her eyes; she blinked, and a gem fell from her cheek to her bodice. “But if not me, they would have found another. Sebastian would have found another.”

“And another Azazel? And another Erik?”

“I trusted him, and they trusted me. I was wrong. All I could do, in the end, was kill Sebastian, and even then it didn’t change what he had done.”

“Speaking on behalf of the world, Lady,” Charles bowed, heart hammering. “I’m glad of it.”

“Are you? My idealist, glad to have a man killed so very slowly?”

Give in. The answers he wanted, within his reach. Charles leaned into her touch. He did not want to think of whether his face burned from his blush or the chill of her hand. “Why slowly?”

“A man with the power to absorb and redirect energy of any blow? The energy of the atomic blasts we witnessed?”

“All of them?”

“A portion of the energy, from each and every one. He got better with practice. He wanted more, constantly, and his power grew to such an extent … He almost killed me with a kiss, after Paris. A kiss, Charles.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Fine words.” Emma took her hand away. Turned away, shoulders bowed. “Come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

They appeared inside a luxurious room. Charles caught his balance but almost tripped over a chair. The room was familiar; he couldn’t place why.

“Here we are in Germany. It was almost a year into the third war; America had long since fallen to pieces. And this was the night Sebastian revealed his true self to me.”
Charles followed her gaze. There was Shaw, looking larger than life, and – Charles choked back a half-hysterical snort – wearing a bizarre helmet on his head.

“Do you like it?” Shaw said, voice reverberating in the memory. “Josef had it made and I said, what’s a bit of borrowing between friends? So. What am I thinking?”

A younger Emma stood across from Shaw. So thin – but Charles focused on her face, as she tightened her lips and narrowed her eyes.

As, after a long moment she said, “I don’t know.” Blank.

Shaw smiled. His teeth were very white. “I was thinking that you were the most exquisite thing I had ever seen in my life …”

The younger Emma smiled with all her teeth as well. Charles saw instantly that she was covering her shock.

“… and that this needs ice.” Smirking, Shaw held out a glass tumbler. “Fetch me some.”

Her smile faded. Still, she took the tumbler in her gloved hand.

“There’s a good girl.”

The younger Emma walked right to where both of them stood. Frost herself stayed in place, but Charles jumped to get out of the way. He turned to watch her open a small golden door. The look on her face had been –

Wait.

He instantly recognized the room behind the door. It was from Erik’s memory of the opera at Berlin; his memory of Emma placing one cube of ice into a drink before saying, calm and cold, He’s mad, Erik –

The door closed before he could hear anything. As it closed, everything around them winked out of sight.

Charles trembled as it sank in – Erik’s memory –

“That helmet was the ultimate defense against telepaths,” Emma sighed in the dark. “Appalling, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he said, feebly.

“I couldn’t read his mind after that. He wanted me out.”

“Just like that?”

“Can you imagine it, Charles? If you, as a telepath, were loved – if you were so deep into someone’s mind that when that someone breathed, you breathed … Can you imagine that being taken away?”

Charles shook his head.

“And after everything that I did for him. But even with my love given all to him – he lied.” Her voice caught in a sob. “A month after the third war began, he had the Finder dismantled and hidden. He must have started to mistrust me then, although more the fool I, for I believed him when he said that Josef wanted to take it – and me – back to Moscow, and that hiding it would keep me safe.”
“Ah.”

“The third war went on. The greater the number of cities bombed, the more I knew Sebastian had to be stopped – but I took too long to strategize, alone. And then, with his mind shielded completely, I knew I could do nothing.”

“You had Azazel.”

“He could not kill Sebastian without killing himself. I would not have that.”

“So you needed someone else to help you – and you chose Erik?”

She sighed again, tremulous. “My prince …”

The word was Russian, so Charles said nothing.

“Erik was nearly grown. He should have known the danger we were all in. However, Sebastian’s ideology had near converted him.”

“And that ideology was?”

“The superiority of our kind – of mutants. Sebastian thought that radioactivity from nuclear war would speed up the mutation process in the worthy and kill off the rest.”

“What utter tripe. Any scientist could have informed him –”

“He was far more politician than scientist. My own education was sadly lacking, and Erik knew only what I could teach him. Tesla or Von Braun could have told Sebastian, perhaps, but one was gone and the other was … buried alive, I think you put it?”

In her memory, they were still in complete darkness. Charles half expected it to press in alongside her words and suffocate him. Raven –

“Even if they had told him, he would have proceeded. And why? It’s simple, my dear idealist. He may have believed his own tripe, as you put it, but I saw it as cover for his true aims. He wanted the energy from all those bombs. And then he obtained it, and he thought himself indestructible.”

“With his death, surely all that power would have been released. How did you kill him?”

It was strange, that she was weeping, yet able to speak so clearly. “I’ll show you. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Because I wasn’t.”

Before Charles could blink, they appeared in the same submarine room again. Except now the throbbing was an outright clattering – the reflecting surfaces trembling so strongly that shards of them were falling to the floor.

Instinct made him gasp and duck as a body sailed over his head and smashed into the wall.

Charles heard a cry of pain amidst the sound of shattering pieces of – glass? Mirror? He bolted up from his crouch to look round, wildly – except the reflected light was blue-green, not gold, rebounding and magnifying the image of Shaw from all sides. There was no bed in sight. In a nuclear reactor, really – Charles gulped back another hysterical laugh.
“This is when it happened,” Frost said, quietly.

_Erik, whatever you’re doing, keep doing it. It’s starting to work._ The same voice – her younger voice, it had to be – slipped out from amongst the shards and through the memory. Those shards were falling fast, from one sharp and expanding fracture in particular.

Charles backed away as the body lying at his feet stirred.

She had projected to Erik, and here he was. Charles stared at him: at the black uniform, trimmed with silver, that outlined his body as he pushed himself to all fours … that showed how he was still _far_ too thin. And … _so young._

Charles saw, of all things, a lock of auburn hair falling onto Erik’s brow. It was absurd – he wanted to brush it into place – instead, he jolted back again as Shaw advanced, eyes aglow from within the shadows of the helmet.


Shaw slipped the fingertips of one hand under Erik’s chin. Casually, he threw him into another wall. Charles cringed as it shattered, as Erik fell to the floor amidst a rain of glass.

He felt Frost press his shoulder. “Don’t be afraid.”

“I want –” _Raven. Raven._ “I want to leave.”

“It’s working – he heard Emma’s voice sliding around Shaw’s words – _I’m starting to see you, but I can’t yet touch his mind._

“All this time together, Erik,” Shaw mused, from the middle of the room. “You’ve come a long way from bending gates.” He smiled. “I’m so proud of you.”

In the memory, Erik wavered to his feet and started tearing the room apart. Charles gaped. Metal pipes came crashing through the walls, struts and rebar and steel beams – and Shaw deflected every blow. The force of the strikes slammed through the room; each concussion made Charles flinch.

_Wait._ This was a bloody _memory._ He had armor and shield and sword, even if Emma couldn’t see them. He would fear _nothing._ “How is this possible?” he snarled at her.

She raised her free hand. Around him, the memory froze. There was Erik, face twisted up in pain, and Shaw, staring at him, grinning from within the thicket of metal. “Excuse me?”

“How? You aren’t here.” Charles turned in place to check – there was no sign of a younger Emma. “You’re communicating with Erik using telepathy – at least, that’s what I assume your voice in Russian is doing. So how do you have the memory of everyone here? If it were from Shaw’s mind, you wouldn’t see him, would you?”

“You’re so quick to forget our walk through your memories of Albany? Traveling through memories is like using the Finder. There are certain tricks to it.”

The memory had stilled, but his head was still being squeezed by something merciless. “Emma. I want to leave – this _hurts._ And if it’s painful for me, it must be excruciating for you.”
“Not so much anymore. I took Sebastian’s memory of this conversation, before he died, and I have Erik’s, too. I needed to study it, you see -”

“You call this a conversation?” Charles saw blood on Erik’s face; his eyes looked agonized. Either Frost couldn’t see it from her position or she didn’t care.

“– just so I could understand why Erik would betray me. Watch.” She lifted her chin.

The noise of falling glass and crashing debris returned. Pieces of metal rebounded, deflected, as Shaw walked towards Erik again. “And you’re just starting to scratch the surface. Think of how much further we could go, my Erik, together.”

“What the hell is he saying? And what did you say, earlier?”

“I’m sorry.” Frost snapped her fingers. The memory froze. “Give me a moment, and it will proceed in English. Unless you want to start from the beginning again?”

“God, no.”

They watched as Shaw sent everything Erik threw at him ricocheting into the walls, and as he forced a beam up against Erik’s chest. As he left it there, considered for a brief moment, and then slid a hand round Erik’s nape.

Frost had done something, for Charles was closer now, without having taken a step. He could see the sweat pouring down Erik’s face; could hear his breath, thickened by blood in his mouth. Could feel Shaw’s whisper:

“I don’t want to hurt you, Erik. I never did. I want to help you. Emma doesn’t understand that I’ve made this our time, our age. We are the future of the human race. You and me, son. This world could be ours.”

Erik looked …

Charles did not know how he looked. Dull, certainly. But there was grief there, too. And in his voice, when he said,

“Everything you did made me stronger. Made me the weapon I am today. It’s the truth. I’ve known it all along.” He turned to stare at Shaw. “She was wrong – you are my creator.”

“Behind you,” Frost said.

Charles turned. He saw a thick cluster of wires split into separate tendrils, all snaking through the air towards Shaw’s helmet. Then the tendrils grabbed, yanked, and –

“Now, Emma!” Erik shouted.

And Shaw froze in place, where he had whirled to catch the helmet.

After a pause, Charles exhaled. “That worked well. Then what? How did it end?”

“Then … well. For the next part of the memory, you’ll need mine, too.”

Charles felt a wave of vertigo as she pointed at the last intact fragment of mirror. “We’re on the ice, far above the submarine. I had Azazel drop Erik in and come back to me.”

Azazel and Emma shimmered into view, standing across from each other. Around them was nothing
but blank ice. Emma looked younger; Azazel looked exactly the same. Her face was stony. His … full of fear.

Her hands were on his shoulders, fingers flexing.

“Little one,” Azazel said, “are you all right?”

“Be quiet. I can only control him for so long. Ah.” Charles saw the mirror blurring, refocusing, and Emma appeared again, “Oh, it hurts – but I love you,” she said through gritted teeth, her hands forming fists, “I love you so much.”

It felt far too personal to watch. Charles hoped he had never appeared so anguished, speaking words of love. Abject. Undignified.

“And here we have it,” Frost said. “Come to me.” She waved him to her side. “You can see both best from this vantage point.”

He had no idea whether she meant Shaw and Erik, or the simultaneous memories. But he carefully walked back to her.

Mirroring him in the memory, Erik lowered the beam to the floor, and moved past Shaw’s frozen body. Stood across from him and stared, before gesturing with both hands.

The helmet floated down into them.

“Oh, no,” Charles said.

“Sorry, Emma,” Erik began, lifting the helmet.

The other memory rippled – shock. “Erik, please. Be my prince –”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you –

“ – don’t do this, Erik, there’ll be no turning back –”

The helmet settled on Erik’s head.

Frost held up a hand, face stony. “We had our plan, you see. Erik would remove the helmet; I would take hold of Sebastian’s mind and send him to sleep. A gradual, gentle freeze was of the utmost importance, given the nature of his mutation. But Erik had other ideas.”

“If your way was so important, why didn’t you explain it to him?”

“Perhaps I should have. Then again, none of what happened would have happened, had he obeyed me in the first place. All that time he had his own plan – and as you can see, it caught me by surprise.”

Frost did not even blink as her younger voice rebounded, now from the memory in the mirror alone. “No – don’t do this, Erik, Erik!”

In the memory, she slammed one hand against Azazel. He let her do it, standing like a red and black wall.

Erik stalked up to Shaw and paused, as if thinking. Then, with the faintest tilt to his lips, he moved so that the helmet brushed Shaw’s frozen fingers.
“If you’re in there,” Erik rasped, “I’d like you to know that I agreed with every word you said. Our age. Our time. We are the future.”

He paused again. “But…”

Charles watched Erik walk to the opposite wall.

“… unfortunately, you killed my mother.”

Erik turned. And held up a coin. “This is what we’re going to do.”

“No,” the memory of Emma on the ice rippled again, with – fear, Charles felt. Next to him, Frost took his hand. Charles half jumped, but let her hold on to him as they listened to her younger voice sobbing, “Erik, please.”

“Shall I take him?” Azazel snapped. “Emma. Tell me when to take him.”

“You can’t. Just keep me here, with you – don’t let me fall. This is going to –”

“I’m going to count to three,” Erik said. “And then I’m going to move the coin.”

“Sebastian killed his mother that way, you see,” said Frost. “Unless Erik moved a coin on the count of three, his mother would be shot. And – he didn’t move the coin.”

Charles remembered every inflection in Erik’s voice, from when he had told him very the same thing. But Erik had not told him then, that turnabout had been fair play. He stared, sickened.

“Well, Charles?”

“This is terrible. Emma, he’s going to –”

“Kill Sebastian? Obviously. Hurt me? Of all the surprises that day, that one was perhaps the most unpleasant.”

Beneath her words echoed her own voice, from her memory, like the ebb and flow of blood from a heartbeat, “No, my love, I love you – you’re hurting me. Stop –”

“It’s Sebastian doing that, by the way,” Frost said, calmly. “He didn’t give me an inch. He fought me in his mind with everything he had, until he died. Now: here. This is exactly what I saw.”

And Charles was staring out from Sebastian Shaw’s eyes, at the shadowy figure of Erik in the helmet.

“One.”

All he could feel was Shaw’s rage. And all he could see was the glint of bared teeth and the glitter of eyes from beneath the helmet, and a coin floating through the air. Getting bigger and bigger –

“Two.”

– two coins, because he couldn’t move his eyes. Mein Tod, howled through his mind, Emma’s mind, *der kleine Erik Lehnsherr* –

“Three.”

Pain lanced through his skull before the image went out like a candle snuffed.
In the other memory, on the ice, Emma screamed.

“Oh God,” Charles gasped, “make it stop—”

“You should appreciate the small things,” Frost said. “I broke the visual link early. It took a while for the coin to sever his optic nerves.”

He could hardly hear with the scream echoing round them both, going on and on. Azazel had taken Emma by her arms and was shaking her, shouting something at her – but Charles did not know what it was. He had never seen anything so terrible: Emma, all mouth with teeth, eyes wide and staring at nothing as she screamed into thin air.

Suddenly, the memory of her screaming turned red. Which darkened. And darkened again: a watercolor wash layered on another wash and another and—

“Emma, what is it?”

“You’ve never had a brain bleed, have you? That’s what it is, to a telepath.”

“But you didn’t—”

“No, not I.” She watched herself. “I felt what Sebastian felt. I experienced every second of his brain being sliced in half. And I suppose my mind let the one sensation color the whole.”

He would not be sick. He would not. Instead, he would watch as Emma clawed at Azazel – as her back arched for one second, and as she jackknifed over, retching.

“Is it over?” Azazel shouted, bending to catch her shoulder again, shaking her. “Is it done?”

“No,” she slurred. “I have him. But it didn’t work. The energy – the fire, it’s going to—”

“Emma—”

“Get Erik. Bring him here. Hurry, I can’t—”

Azazel disappeared.

Emma fell onto all fours, coughing. Then curled in on herself, like an animal in pain, garbling, “Fire. It's fire.”

“You see, playing his play out, Erik triggered something in Sebastian’s mind,” Frost said to Charles. “I had intended otherwise. I had planned to send his mind to sleep and then to slow it down. It’s the smallest nudge from sleep to death, especially in the cold. It’s very peaceful, Charles.”

“Ah.”

“More importantly, any brain activity controlling Sebastian’s mutation would have come to a very – slow – stop. But this . . .” She shook her head. “All the energy stored from the bombs was about to find its way out. The only thing restraining it was my hold on his limbic system. It’s something to consider – the seat of our powers, and how brain-death affects—”

“Emma,” he said, appalled. “Look at you.”

For in the memory, she was writhing on the ice, face up to the blank Arctic sky. She was clawing at her own face, eyes wide and unseeing – fire fire –
“Here!” Azazel shouted – then released Erik and dropped to his knees by her side. “Emma?”

Charles saw Erik, the air blurring strangely around him, reach out to take her hands – and then change his mind, and stand frozen instead.

“Azazel,” she gasped, “take us away.”

“Where? Give me orders.”

“Home!” Her back arched as she punched the ice with both fists, “the manor – I can’t hold him, it’s coming, the fire –”

“To the manor,” said Azazel to Erik. “Take my hand.”


“Not you, too,” Azazel snarled, and grabbed Erik’s forearm.

Charles saw the telltale wisps of vapor swirling round them before the memory vanished into darkness – as they must have vanished, into thin air.

For a long moment, in the dark, he could say nothing.

“Where did you end up going?” Charles finally whispered.

“The manor,” Frost replied.

“Azazel obeyed you over Erik, then?”

“Of course he did.”

They were silent. Charles heard a faint, distant sound that might have been his heartbeat, or water against the submarine walls.

“Do you see why Sebastian had to die?”

“Yes,” he gulped.

“He did his best to destroy the world,” Frost mused. “And then Erik took his helmet – and I thought: what if he were to finish what Sebastian started? That childish bit of revenge released enough nuclear energy to destabilize a glacial shelf in Greenland. All because Erik did not stop to think.”

“But would he really –”

“Shortly after I established our home in the East, I resolved to neutralize the CIA’s remaining nuclear bombs. I needed Erik’s help. But he wanted to do something quite different, with all that weaponry. Did you know that, Charles?”

The pressure of the dark was bearing down hard. Charles felt his mind struggle against it. Truth and lie oozed in a discordant morass from behind the chime of her words; the sound of his frantic heartbeat drowned them both out. “When?”

“1955.”

“He still had the helmet? I saw –” he gasped for air, “a vid. Eretz Galut. He had long hair. There wasn’t any helmet.”
The pressure increased. “He had grown stronger. He thought to guard his mind with magnetic fields. He returned the helmet to me. Can you imagine the arrogance.”

It was not a question.

“I don’t understand.” He struggled harder. “Emma. Could you,” help me, he wanted to finish, but the words caught in his throat, gurgling.

**Raven. Raven. Help me.**

“Oh, Charles …”

Frost sounded distant. Pain throbbed through him with his pulse. He wanted Raven. He needed Raven. Charles stretched out with his thoughts – but they were so deep in Frost’s mind that he could only feel the echoes of its cry calling out to him. *On the ice*, far above, and they were miles down in the dark and deathly cold water.

He would not panic. If only he could draw breath.

“Oh, Emma. Let go. I can’t breathe. I can’t see.”

Though Frost said nothing, she must have done something. With a clattering chime of crystal feathers, the thing that had been his diamond bird appeared. It scattered light through the gloom. Charles could see Frost’s drawn, pale face, eyes aflame – could see the hawk flying to perch on her shoulder. It was higher up than he thought. *Oh.* That was because he was flat on the ground, at Frost’s feet.

The huge hawk, diamond feathers glittering on its breast, stared down at him emptily. It did not preen itself. It did not even move.

Frost reached up to stroke its head, her gaze not leaving him. The bird opened its beak, and chirped. A very small chirp.

Charles felt like vomiting. All of this – everything – dear God, he needed out, out from the ghastly chill of Frost’s touch, from the vicious panorama of her past – from all of the dark pressure, so deep in her mind, grinding him to pieces.

“Yes. Please, I need to wake up.”

“My Charles,” she said, quietly. “You’re not dreaming.”

“No, it had to be the sight of the poor creature that had been his bird, that made him want to weep. “Please. I’m begging you. Let me wake up. Let me go.”

She did not move. But she might have closed her eyes.

_________________________

And then Charles was staring at the ceiling of her bedroom.

The memories already seemed to be … fading. Or: becoming less crushing, all-consuming. Like a bad dream.

**Raven**, he whispered to his mind. **Is that your doing?**

Only the slightest thrum answered him. He closed his eyes. Interesting. Dark, threaded with red and
gold – perhaps his nightingale was taking the lion’s share of the work, moving all the last few hours down into the deep … Charles groaned. It felt as if thought-fire after thought-fire was going off in his head: each of them a tiny firework. “Oh.”

It took a while for him to push himself up off the bed, careful not to move his neck. His entire body felt bruised. He rubbed his eyes, groggily – and then heard a small sound, from Emma.

“Are you all right?” he said.

“No.”

Charles peered over at her. She was hunched over in a corner of the couch. Legs drawn up; arms wrapped around her knees. She looked miserable.

He stumbled to his feet and tugged at a blanket on the bed. “You’re shivering.” It was difficult to walk, but he made it to her side and draped the blanket over her. “Here.”

“I didn’t know that would happen. My head aches terribly, Charles.”

Wearily, he shoved aside the awful grinding sound of truth and lie. “I have a headache as well.”

“There’s aspirin in the powder room. And water.”

“I’ll get some.”

He wobbled his way there, found the labeled bottle, filled a glass with water – it slopped over the brim as his hand trembled –

“Let me.”

Charles went still. He had not heard her follow him.

She reached from where she was standing – next to him – and turned off the tap. “You first.”

“Ladies first.” He held out the bottle. “I insist.”

Emma shook her head, wearily. “So little trust. They’re nothing but aspirin.” She opened the bottle and shook several into her hand. Then tipped them into her mouth, matter-of-fact, and chewed.

Charles grimaced at the crunching sounds. “That’s a terrible habit.”

“Works faster,” she mumbled.

He downed two aspirin himself; wiped water off his mouth and set the glass down on the sink. Then he saw how the blanket had slipped from Emma’s shoulders and fallen to the floor. He knelt to pick it up and tuck it round her again, careful to fold it around all her bare skin. “You’ll catch your death.”

“A cold? Everything I showed you, and you think I’ll be finished by a cold?”

“I suppose not,” Charles said.

Emma sighed again. Then –

– Charles stiffened as she stepped close to him. Leaned on him.

“Is this all right? You don’t mind?”
“Um.”

“You’re very warm.” She shivered, moving closer. “That’s all.”

Control, he had control. He could move away any time he wished, so it would be idiotic to stand like a statue, arms stiff at his sides. Carefully, he placed them around her back. He patted the blanket, between what had to be her shoulder blades. “Better?”

Emma sniffled, and pressed even closer. “Thank you.”

She was of a height to nestle her face into the join of his neck and shoulder. He remembered that from Las Vegas. She could probably feel his heartbeat galloping; certainly, she felt him swallow hard.

For a long moment they stood still.

Then she murmured, “Are you afraid of me, Charles?”

“After everything you showed me?” He let his breath tremble through his throat. “Yes, rather.”

“Really?” She sounded sad. “You don’t need to be.”

“I thought that was what you wanted.”

“I only ever wanted to trust you. You see, I …”

Charles gazed into her eyes. “Yes?”

This close, he could see a beauty mark above her upper lip. It had to have been concealed, before.

“I don’t know how to say it,” she whispered.

Charles knew his reply. He had given it to so many women, so many times, Then don’t say anything – smile, and bend his head, and –

Oh, fuck.

“Shh, Charles.” She moved a quick, cold hand to his face. “Don’t say anything.”

And with that, Emma stood up on her toes, and kissed him.

She was better at it than Erik.

At least, that was his first impression.

Charles inhaled and parted his lips; let her tongue touch his. She didn’t flail, she didn’t thrust – she just … tasted. And let him taste. It was bitter – the aspirin, he realized – and when she brought her other hand up to frame his face, leaning in to press her body against him, instinct had him reaching beneath the blanket to place his own hands on her waist.

She was warm, through her bodice.

And she seemed to be pleased at his touch. At least, she sighed into his mouth and ran her hands up into his hair. A scrape from her nails made his shoulders jump. He had liked that, in a former life. He controlled his shiver – but broke the kiss.
“What is it?”

*Say anything.* “How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“That I liked that.” He knew he sounded stupid. *Too late.*

“… Lucky guess?”

“Are you in my mind, Emma?”

Gazing up at him, she shook her head. Gave him a small smile. “Charles …. If I were in your mind, you’d detect me in an instant. You’re that powerful.”

“I am?”

“Kiss me again. Please, Charles. *Please.*” Emma caught his shirt and pulled, tugging him down. Whispered against his mouth, “I liked it, too.”

*Oh, splendid,* his thoughts gabbled as he kissed her. With a soft noise in her throat, she twined her arms around his neck, letting the blanket fall to the floor. He could feel her breasts. Which were … large, relative to her frame, from his experience. *Experience.* It had been – *God,* he hadn’t fucked a woman since August –

Not that he was going to now, of course. Even if they had angled their mouths to get deeper– still controlled on her part, absolutely nothing sloppy – he wasn’t going to.

He didn’t *want* to –

Emma broke the kiss and brushed her lips up his jaw to his ear. “What are you thinking?”

"That I wasn't expecting this."

She laughed, quiet, throaty. "Surprise."

"Quite."

"Oh, Professor. So buttoned up." She ran a fingernail down his shirt front. "So elegant and controlled. But something tells me you might like more than just a kiss."

He kept his breathing regular.

"Take me to bed, Charles."

He tensed. She felt it, so close. “Or to the sofa,” she said, lightly. “Or to any place that doesn’t involve the corner of the sink poking me in the back.”

Charles glanced down between her shoulder blades. Sure enough: there was the sink, right up against her arse. Which seemed quite a nice one. Not that he had ever outright ogled her from the back, but he was making up for lost time now, and *shite* that had to *stop.*

He dragged his eyes away; tried leaning back and meeting her own with a smile. Then tried dropping a kiss on the tip of her nose. “Someplace more comfortable, indeed. But, once there, I’d rather not do something we haven’t thought through.”
“You’re still afraid of me.”

“Which I told you already.”

“I told you that you needn’t be.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Hm.”

“And what about Almaz?”

“Oh, he’s not here, is he? Let’s agree not to discuss other men in our bedroom. I promise,” and she dropped her voice, “I won’t make you remember anything more about a certain man we both know.”

“I remember enough: you, giving me to him to be raped, so I would much rather not remember anything about it.”

“Poor Charles.” She gave him a kiss on the cheek. “You should have just sent him to sleep.”

“Because of course I knew how –”

“Because it’s easy. I’ve done so with Almaz, many times. But how can I make it up to you? Fine wine? Books? Clothes? I do have more money than is good for me.”

“To make it all equal,” Charles felt his mouth twist. “I would have to tell you to go and fuck Richard Slade for however long he wanted. In whatever positions he wanted, no matter how humiliating –”

“Mm. If you came along, you could watch.”

“I …” Charles took a moment to recover from the idea. “I think you’ve mistaken the meaning of Vice President.”

Emma breathed a laugh into his ear. And moved, sinuous, sliding into his touch at her waist. “Where were we?”

“I don’t know.”

“We were moving to my bed.” She plucked at the back of his shirt. “Or …”

Charles waited.

“… is the prospect that repulsive?”

“You’re very, very beautiful, my lady –”

“You’ve told me that already. I know that already. What am I to you, truly?”

You’re a true queen, he had lied, just last night. She would want to hear it again – she would want – “I can’t possibly describe it.”

“Try? For me?”

“I can’t, with words. You would have to be in my mind to comprehend it fully.”

“We can go there.” She set both hands flat against his temples, disconcertingly fast. “Right now.”
“No, that is – here.” Charles twined his fingers through hers; drew her hands away. He inclined his mouth closer. “Feel with me.”

He made the kiss slow, to have enough time to fling his nightingale at the cold power creeping up against his veils. Sing. As beautifully and as loudly as you can, please, he ordered, and hurry.

It obliged.

So much so, that when the kiss ended, Frost looked transfixed.

Charles felt too much like screaming to be smug. He was not afraid. He merely waited. For the other shoe to drop, his mind hissed, but –

“Do you know what I thought, when we first met?” she whispered.

He shook his head.

“The doors opened – I saw you. And when I felt your mind, all I could think was that I had found him. Someone powerful. Someone beautiful.” She swept her hands over his shoulders, down his arms. Back up. Across his shirt. Like she was polishing porcelain. “Someone just like me.”

“… Like you?” Charles echoed.

“Well. With a little refinement, yes.”

“Refinement –”

He realized his mistake the instant she laughed. “You see? We are both pictures of perfection, and we both know it. Oh, Charles.” She took his hands in hers and steered him backwards out of the powder room. “We’ll never be bored.”

Bored, hell. He reached the point of panic before they even made it to her bed.

Emma was touching him. Not just touching - grabbing. He would never have thought she would be like Erik at a time like this, but the only difference between their respective pairs of greedy, grasping hands was that of size.

That, and her manicure, glinting at him as she unbuttoned his shirt.

"Emma,” he said thinly. “Please, I -"

“Shh.” Her fingers were fast; she sounded breathless. “Let me do this for you.”

Charles’ arms felt like lead. He could not stop her. She finished. “There.”

And she pushed.

He landed on the bed, his heart in his mouth. Perhaps a panic attack would be the way to go. Or he could just play along, he supposed - pretend that his breaths were shallow from arousal and not outright fear, even as she crawled up his body and placed her hands on his belt. "Wait. Emma, I don’t know if we -"

"You don’t need to say a word," she whispered. "So - don’t."

"But -"
"Shh." Emma leaned forward. She had put paid to his belt, the better to pin his shoulders with her hands: surprisingly heavy, given how ... *delicate* she was, he would have said if he had only seen her in Shaw's library, in her mind - or *fragile* she was, if he had only seen her in the anteroom to the Berlin opera, in Erik's mind - but he had seen her cross a room in the blink of an eye in *his own* mind, and it was one leap from that to the idea of her traveling through walls and windows and *mirrors* - except that was impossible and she was whispering:

"I don't want you to talk. I want you to kiss me."

He gulped.

"Darling." She plucked at his shoulders. Her voice sank, almost inaudible. "I've waited for you, Charles, and now I have you. So kiss me."

"Oh," he said, faintly. *Oh*, she was straddling his hips, adjusting the tiniest bit - he knew the particular motions well enough to acknowledge her skill at gauging his body's interest, even as she snaked forward to find his mouth. Hers was hot and wet - but not in the way Erik's was hot and wet. Erik felt like a clumsy boy. Emma felt like Charybdis.

Her skirt was riding up, almost to her waist. He felt the raddled cloth as he twisted his body, trying to get her away -

"Mmm, there," and Emma broke the kiss. "There."

"No -"

"Yes."

"*No, Emma - please. Please* stop!"

She stopped moving. Still straddling him; still with her skirt riding up. Charles saw the quickening rise and fall of her breath, in front of his eyes. He saw her pulse flutter at the base of her throat.

"Charles? What is it?"

It seemed she had stopped. So it was sheer relief making his voice wobble. "It's too much. Too much like –"

"Like what?"

"Like *him*. My God." Charles made a show of burying his face in his hands. "All those days, all those nights – *all* that he wanted was me on a flat surface. And I don’t want to remember it."

She was silent.

Charles tried a sniffle, as loud and wet as he could make it. With any luck, she would be disgusted and back off. Or think twice and back off. Or ... just think.

For he could almost hear her mind working. Perhaps she had a catalogue like his, though hers would have to be memories on individual shards of ice, shaken together and sorted out like an oracle.

He dropped his hands and looked up. Her face was blank – except, a split second after he moved, she slotted an expression of sorrow and sympathy into place.

Charles fought to keep from shuddering visibly.
"There, there, my love," she murmured.

It was practiced. It was *fake*. It was a store mannequin pretending at humanity. Or - she. She was. Leaning over him, still, with an ample display of cleavage right in front of his nose. She smelled of sweat beneath her perfume. Not quite a mannequin, then, but still not moving away -

Until she eased back. And off. And knelt at his side. *Thank God.*

“Poor Charles. I didn’t mean to bring back any bad memories.” A fingertip trailed over his cheek. Charles turned his head and kept looking up at her, putting all the sorrow he could into his eyes.

“I’m sorry. Truly, I am.” She withdrew completely from the bed. He felt the mattress shift. “I am ashamed to admit that I forgot you had been through so much.”

"I ..." *Don't mind,* he supposed he could have said, but he couldn't shape the words. In fact, it was all Charles could do to try to button his shirt. His hands felt palsied.

"Let me do something for you, Charles. You’ll like it, I promise."

*No, no,* no. “What’s that?”

“I’ll give you a lovely supper. And then ... Charles, do you remember what you did with Sean? How you lessened his pain? Certain memories can be too intense – can take over similar experiences happening in real time. So when we’ve had our supper, I’ll show you how to lessen your own pain. Those memories, and others like them, can be muted.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t be afraid.”

"I'm ..." *Not.*

Except that would be a lie.

"Won't you sit up for me, Charles?"

He obeyed without thinking. *Rather like a marionette* - and he shook the thought away and moved to the edge of the bed. Shoved his feet over the side - *one two* - and let them fall. Did his best to meet her eyes without flinching.

Frost had to know how beautiful she looked, in the dim light of the room, when she reached out to run her hands through his hair and then to frame his face.

“I won’t hurt you in any way.”

He was silent.

"Don't you believe me, Charles?" She stooped to drop a gentle kiss on his mouth.

"That you won't hurt me?" He felt her lips, warm, as his own shaped: "My lady, you already have. A great deal."

"Oh, my dear. It only made you stronger." She withdrew. But she kept one hand on the side of his face; kept a soft stroke with her thumb - until even that stopped. “You're just like me, after all. I might love that about you."
“My lady …”

She waited.

“I might not know how to love,” Charles confessed.

“My white knight.” She smiled. “I’m sure we can learn together.”

Frost moved her right hand from the side of his face, straight to his mouth. Charles took the hint, and the hand, and kissed it.

She let him up, and led him to an adjacent room. Charles’ mind, fractured as it felt, catalogued the crystal chandelier glittering above them, the sideboard covered in silver and lace, the elegant table in the center … set for dinner.

Dinner for two.

“Light the candles.” Frost gave him a little push. “I just need a moment to check something.”

Before he could protest, she eased away and closed the door.

Charles took a moment to catch his breath. To finish buttoning his shirt, and to blot his mouth on his sleeve. To make sure his birds were …

They were silent.

“Understandably,” he said.

He took another moment. Just to think. “It will be all right, darlings.” He tugged his suit straight. “I’ll just tell her ‘no’.”

And then he had to sit for a while, and put his head between his knees.

When he could stand again, Charles found matches in a sideboard drawer. It was easy to light the candles on the table, two on each side of the centerpiece of roses. In that light, the settings sparkled: porcelain, silver, crystal. The roses, mounding up from their vase, were a lustrous pink.

He supposed that his face ... was not.

"Buck up, man." He dragged his eyes away; stared down at the goblet to his left. He flicked it with one finger.

The chime from the crystal sounded strange, in the silence. Too loud, perhaps. Too piercing.

In another life, Charles reflected distantly, he might have been hyperventilating at this point.

“You're not afraid,” he gritted out. “Memories, a meal, and then off with his head? She wouldn't do that. It'd stain the carpet.”

Then he tried the door. It was unlocked, which he supposed was something. He could leave any time he wanted, especially if he felt uncomfortable with such opulence.

He could leave right now.

Gasp­ing, Charles sent his power out through the capital building, but veiled, absolutely, lest she see.
There were more minds than he had expected at this late hour. He found Frost instantly and flew back up from the building’s depths, darting through all the rooms, lightning-fast. He catalogued bureaucrats, asleep; secretaries, asleep; wait staff, asleep; Jean and Kurt, awake –

“What?” He focused in an instant. Jean? What are you doing here?

Mr. Xavier! she sent back. It was framed with golden happiness. Lady Frost brought Kurt so I wouldn’t be lonesome. But I didn’t know you were here, too!

“But why would –”

Though the capital building, right under Frost’s nose, was safer than the manor …

Is Scott there? he sent.

Nope. Where are you?

Charles sent the impression of the ornate table with a spark of power, thinking with everything else: if Scott were at the manor, but the other two here –

Are you having another party? Jean sent, excitedly. Can we come?

“Excellent notion,” he muttered to himself, and replied: Yes, with force. Come here, right now. His owl dropped the location into Jean’s mind; he felt her spring into action.

Scott at the manor, along with Logan, Hank, and Armando – before he could dither further, Charles catapulted his raven in their direction. West – “Fly, darling, and fast,” to find the others and make sure –

West.

“The Free West,” he breathed, as Raven shot through the sky – the world beneath solid as any stone, with only a few scattered lights of Syracuse, Utica – there. The echo of a small lake set his power vibrating; then a road and the flare and flicker of –

– a dozen minds, at least. Crawling up the manor’s walls like fire ants.

“Oh, no.”

In an instant, Raven found Logan’s thoughts, grim and focused but spiky with anger. Logan! Are you all right? Charles fired off the words and winced as they hit Logan’s mind – it was like punching a tree.

Where the fuck are you X man get back here hurry –

A mind appeared – Schrödinger’s mutant – and Azazel and Logan flickered out – and then back in, higher up. Another floor of the manor? Wherever Azazel and Logan were, they flanked a seethe of raging power that Charles knew –

No.

“They’re attacking,” he gasped into the empty room, in Albany. “It’s now. Why the hell,” he reeled Raven back in and sent it arrowing down through the building to Frost, “are we still here?”

He felt rather than saw Jean and Kurt dash into the room. “Did you run very fast?” Charles said, distracted.
“I took us,” Kurt chirped.

There was Frost’s mind, good. He sent the alarm to her instantly. “You know you’re not supposed to do that, Kurt. Not without your papa.”

*Mr. Xavier, what’s wrong?*

He dragged his attention back to them. Jean was peering up at him, worriedly. Kurt had gone to the table and was pulling out a chair.

Charles forced a smile. Pulled out another chair for Jean. “Let’s wait for Lady Frost,” he said. “She’ll be able to explain.”

It roiled through his mind as his fingers dug into the upholstery: an attack, happening now, and he could do nothing to help, save taking hold of the Free West soldiers’ minds and stopping them, point blank.

Which, come to think of it, he might be able to do. Even from Albany. As long as Frost didn’t notice –

“Do we get cake?” said Kurt.

“What?”

Kurt bounced in the chair. “It’s a party. Do we get cake, like at Valentine’s?”

“We’ll see. Jean, when did Lady Frost bring Kurt here?”

“Only just this afternoon, Charles,” Frost replied.

He twitched where he stood, and turned. “My lady.”

She was framed by the door. And there behind her, Charles saw Azazel, gasping for breath, a lock of hair falling over his face.

“You got here very quickly, Lady.”

“Comrade,” and Frost touched Azazel’s arm, “it’s all right. Be easy.”

“I need to get back –”

“It will be over in five minutes. I need you here.”

“What’s wrong, Papa?” Kurt said.

“Never mind.” Azazel pushed past Frost and stumbled to the sideboard. He grabbed a carafe, slopped it over a glass, and made a show of gulping down at least a pint. Water spattered the inlay.

Frost’s mouth thinned. “Ridiculous. I bring you here for a respite, and you repay me by –”

“My lady,” Charles snapped over what promised to be a Russian diatribe, “what are Jean and Kurt doing here? Is the manor safe?”

Azazel set down the carafe. “He doesn’t know?” he said to Frost, still in Russian, *damn it*, so Charles knew he had to keep playing the fool –
Know what? Jean sent to them all.

In English.

Perfect, for he could echo: “Know what? If these two are here, and Scott’s at the manor,” he said to Frost, when Azazel shot a glance at her, “what’s happening there?”

“Emma, enough of these games. I …” Azazel turned round, and took in the sight of the room, fully.

He said nothing more.

Emma patted Kurt on the head as she turned to Charles. Switched into English. “Now, Charles, there’s nothing to worry about –”

“On the contrary. Their safety is my priority, Lady, so I insist I return and help.”

Her fingers rested on Kurt’s dark hair. Her smile was fixed. “Everyone there has the situation well in hand.”

“I insist.”

Charles did not look away as she approached him.

“If you insist? Then absolutely.” Emma touched his cheek with her fingertips. “I just wanted to make sure you have only the best of memories of tonight, Charles. For the future, you understand. I won’t have you thinking back with fear.”

She dropped her eyes. Stepped closer, fuck, and – she kissed the corner of his mouth. “My prince was taking care of those soldiers when Azazel left. Wasn’t he, Comrade?”

“He was,” came Azazel’s voice. Flat.

Charles tried to look, but could not move away from Emma leaning in for another kiss. “Can you promise not to be afraid of him, Charles?”

“And whose plan was it,” he hissed against her mouth, “that I should be afraid?”

“Mine, of course – and I’m so sorry for it. But you need not fear. Remember what I told you: any fear, any pain … I can take away from you. For you.”

Another kiss, and she slipped him her tongue. His heart was pounding up into his throat, but if he struggled or protested, he did not know what she would do. All he could manage was to cup her face in his hands, open his mouth in response, give the best impression that he was enjoying himself.

Eventually, she let him breathe.

Charles wanted Kurt to squeal in disgust, Jean to start asking questions – Azazel to sneer. Looking round, though … all he saw was the three of them, staring at him.

And there was nothing but satisfaction in Emma’s smile as she turned away. “I’ll just go put on another layer. We’ll leave when I return, Azazel.”

“But is it safe for them to –”

The door shut behind her.
“– go back?” Charles finished.

“By now?” Azazel said. “Probably. Erik’s been swatting the Free West like flies.”

_Erik._ Nausea rushed up; Charles found a chair to stumble into. “I don’t want – I didn’t –”

Azazel clicked the claws of one hand on the sideboard. His teeth were bared. “Enjoying the game, Xavier?”

“No,” he choked. “You knew? You knew she would –”

What game, Mr. Nefayim?

“You go help Lady Frost, little one.” Azazel stared at the board like it held treasure. “You too, little backbiter; don’t let Jean out of your sight.”

Charles waited for the door to close. Then said, hoarse, to Azazel’s back: “Why didn’t you tell me?"

“How could you miss it?”

“She bloody well gave me to _Erik_. Was I supposed to read that as an invitation to the dance?!”

“I told her that was a mistake.”

Charles would not look away from the lashing tail. He was not afraid. “That’s why you were so angry about it –”

“That’s why, _nothing_.” Azazel wheeled on him and glared. “Leave Erik out of this.”

Charles gulped.

Azazel continued, “What do you think she’s been looking for? What do you think she’s wanted, all these years?”

“Cannon fodder.”

“True. But you must finally understand, Professor … that sometimes a very, _very_ capable person can want more than two things at once. It’s an amazing feat. But it does happen.”

Charles felt faint. “I don’t think I can do this –”

Azazel leaned back against the wall. Shrugged.

“I mean I don’t _want_ this.”

“You’d better learn to want it, and fast. No one says no to Emma –”

_Quiet,_” Charles gasped as his thought-fires flared. “She’s coming.”

Azazel turned at the squeak of the door opening. Charles saw his eyes snag on the children, skipping back into the room; on Emma, following.

“Here’s your jacket, Charles,” Emma said. “Now, Azazel will make sure Erik keeps away as soon as we arrive, but stay close to me anyway.”

“Hands, everyone.” Lightning-quick, Azazel’s tail coiled around Kurt, who giggled. Charles winced as Emma grabbed his hand and _squeezed_.

"Erik."
“My lady –” he said.

"- that hurt."

“I’m sorry, Charles,” she said in his ear. “I didn’t mean any harm.”

She kissed him on the cheek, releasing his hand. In the cold, the damp on his skin prickled as soon as her mouth slipped away.

Between Frost and Azazel, Jean whimpered.

Charles knew why. The sickness from teleportation, the shock of the cold … no. It had to be the sight of the manor in front of them. It looked like a shadow in the light of the half moon …

… but rather more substantial in the light of the fire raging in the front hallway. Visible through the shattered walls at what had once been the main entrance.

“But,” he started. “Those doors. Those were – huge.”

Frost made no answer, folding her hands beneath her chin instead. She was wearing gloves, Charles saw. His own fingers cramped in the cold.

He heard distant screaming. Three floors up? his mind catalogued – then ground to a halt. The roof.

“Azazel, if you would.”

“Children,” said Charles, hoarsely, as Azazel teleported. “Come stand by me.” He pulled his ability to him as close as he could – he wanted to feel nothing of Erik. Not now.

“I’m cold, it’s cold –”

“Shh, Kurt. Just imagine we’re on a mountain. On K2. And here –” he took off his coat and draped it around them. “You two can share.”

I don’t like this fire, Mr. Xavier. Jean sounded tearful. Can’t we stop it?

“If only Ororo were here,” said Frost. “Oh, but look!”

The flames outlined a silhouette, which – after a long moment – started to steam.


“… What do you mean, ‘Scott’?”

“Mr. Xavier,” Kurt said, fangs clattering together, “can we go inside?”

Charles stared at the damage. The rubble in the firelight lay in a blast pattern. “Are you telling me –”

“Let’s go closer. Do you see, Kurt? The fire is almost out. I’m sure the embers will be quite warm for a while. We’ll warm up, too.”

They moved to the remnants of the doors, charred and smoking, scattered in pieces.

“Hey, Charles,” Armando said, before he started coughing.
“Are you all right?”

“I inhaled some smoke, is all. Lady.” He nodded at Frost. His features gleamed in what was left of the light from fire and moon. Because his skin had turned to stone and ice, Charles realized – a fascinating adaptation, but –

“Did you get that trick from Bobby?” said Frost, smiling.

“Who?” Armando had to cough again.

“He was a student here in the autumn,” Charles said. “Armando, what happened?”

“The Free West attacked. Logan and I headed off the first wave here, and we thought Hank had taken Scott to safety, but – I guess he hadn’t.”

“Are they all right?” Charles croaked.

“We can’t find Hank –”

“He’s safe in Albany,” Frost interrupted.

“Right.” Armando stared at the embers. “Scott ran back; he said he wanted to help. And this is what he did.”

“Armando … Did anyone die?”

A nod.

Oh, God. And Scott had only just turned nine years old …

Charles looked over to Frost. She was gazing at the wreckage.

Smiling.

Like a mother whose son had helped win a football match, at the thought of Scott killing – nine years old –

His attention snapped to Kurt, shivering harder now. “I need to get them inside,” Charles said, abrupt. “Where’s Scott?”

“His room,” said Armando. “Logan’s with him, but Charles, Lehnsherr’s here.”

“He won’t bother me, I’m sure of it. Will he, my lady?”

“Hmm?”

“Is there a path clear, Armando?”

“To the left.”

“Wait. Charles, where are you going?”

“It’s below freezing,” he gritted out. “The children are not equipped for it. And Scott killed a man tonight. I need to talk to him.”

“Two men,” Armando muttered.
“Really …” In what light was left, Frost’s eyes glittered. “Howlett’s talking to him already.”

“Well.” Charles’ own eyes burned as he blinked, hard. “I’m cold, too.”

“You were the one who insisted on coming back –”

“My lady.” He bowed, stiff as a board. “Please excuse me.”

“Ah, ah. Leave Jean here. I wish to speak to her.”

“I …”

I’m not cold, Mr. Xavier. Don't worry.

You’re sure?

Jean nodded, scrubbing at her eyes with the back of one hand. I’ll come soon.

“We just have to talk about what happened, is all.” Frost was watching, looking … indulgent, now. Charles saw how the embers’ glow was lighting her face. Jean’s as well.

He wanted to snatch Jean away. He knew he could not.

Watch them, he sent, veiled, to Armando – as forcefully as he could. Then he turned on his heel and hustled Kurt inside.

“Is Scott O.K., Mr. Xavier?”

“Let’s go see.” It was too bloody dark inside the manor at this hour once they turned the corner from the fire. But Charles knew the way. He half-ran the rest of the way to Scott’s room, tugging Kurt along.

And twitched as he saw Logan staring at him from in front of the door, arms crossed on his chest. A candle flickered in its holder, at his feet.

“How is he?”

Logan’s voice gentled as he stooped. “Hey, kid.” He patted Kurt’s shoulder. “It’s past your bedtime, but you can still tell Scott a story.”

“Logan, I could tell them a –”

Charles winced in the face of Logan’s withering glare. Watched him snatch up the candle and usher Kurt into the room. He strained to hear something, anything, but the boys' voices were too low.

Soon enough, Logan came back out into the hall and closed the door with a click. “X man. It took you long enough.”

“To …”

“To fucking get here!” It was a hissing whisper. “Where were you?”

“I couldn’t leave –”

“Azazel was back and forth from Albany at least four times.” Logan held up fingers in Charles’ face counting. “Status check here, take the Seeker there, drop off Lehnsherr here, take McCoy there –
you’re telling me you missed feeling him?”

“It must have happened before I checked the building, Logan. But with Hank gone, and you and Armando guarding the door, Scott was left alone —”

“We needed you. Right, Armando?”

“You could say that.”

Armando had joined them. Charles stared, indignant. “I told you to watch Jean!”

“I tried. Frost sent me away.” Armando muffled his cough. “What happened, Charles?”

“I was just —”

“Kissing up in Albany when I needed you here, Charles. You could’ve kept him from blowing the front yard straight to hell!”

“Logan … Yes, I was in Albany. But I didn’t know about the attack. Believe me, if I had known … The instant I found out, I demanded Emma take me to you.”

“Her majesty?” Logan reached to pick up his rifle, resting next to Scott’s door. Gave Charles another smile with no warmth to it. *That’s catching*, Charles thought, wildly. “How’s that working out for you?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Logan leaned forward, and sniffed. “You sure?” His lips curled back from his teeth. “You sure you weren’t so busy you just plain forgot about us?”

Charles felt his face heat. “I couldn’t leave,” he mumbled. “I was in her mind …”

Where Raven, he realized, would have sounded the alarm. Told him. *Perhaps*. Unless Frost had planned the whole thing –

He started back as Logan shoved his rifle at him. “Your turn to guard. We have to go put the brakes on Lehnsherr. Armando?”

“Yeah.”

“Fun and games with barbed wire. Let’s go.”

"Wait." Armando took the candle from Logan. "Even if the power goes out, I got it, man."

"Whatever you say."

Armando passed the candle to Charles. "Keep good watch."

"I will," Charles said.

"Move it," Logan growled, and Armando moved.

*God*. Charles sent Raven flying to the west. There, on one of the higher floors – he felt Azazel’s mind flickering in and out, one place after another … but in one room. *Dodging*, he realized. The seethe of metal in the center, twisted round with *rage* … shot through with vicious intent. Maddened by … Erik was doing something with the barbed wire.
Trying to catch people. It made sense.

He expanded his power’s reach. There was no one other than Erik and Azazel, in the entire West Wing.

No one left alive.

Charles watched, wordlessly, as Armando and Logan disappeared round the hallway’s turn. Armando looked back. Logan didn’t.

He wobbled to the wall opposite Scott’s room. And slid down it, to sit on the floor.

Where Frost found him, not two minutes later. She was holding Jean’s hand. “Charles, who gave you those?”

He stared - rifle on his right side, candle on his left. "Logan and Armando."

"Hm."

“They’re gone,” he said, to his knees. “West Wing.”

“I know.”

She tipped her head to the side, looking down at him. He had the memory of how her eyes looked from much closer – how the blue was flecked with grey, and with something paler than grey – how she tasted, for God’s sake –

She reached out to touch him. Charles flinched away.

“Oh, dear. I thought this might happen.”

Are you hurt, Mr. Xavier?

“Shh, dear one, he’s not. Now you go in and take care of Scott and Kurt. Remember what I told you.”

Can I have Princess Alexandra?

“‘May I’, Jean," Frost said, smiling, "and of course you may. Go find her, and sleep well.”

Jean nodded, solemnly, and walked to her room. She opened the door with her power. Only when she walked out, cradling the kitten, crossed into Scott’s room, and closed the door, did Frost speak again.

“Charles, listen to me.”

“Yes, my lady,” he said.

“Cold feet. I knew it would happen. Even with Sebastian, it happened. But unlike Sebastian, you’ll make the right choice, I’m sure.” She crouched down in front of him. “Shall I send Azazel to fetch you back to Albany, in due time? Or would you rather not?”

Charles kept his face blank. He nodded once. Then again, more vigorously, as her power crackled around his mind like a vise, snagging on his veils. “When I return, my lady, perhaps we might resume our supper.”
“I’d like that very much,” she said. “You must guard the children until Howlett and Muñoz finish their work. I’ll try to make sure that my prince keeps to the woods. I can almost guarantee that he will.”

Terrified, Charles remembered. He was supposed to be terrified. “Don’t let him hurt me,” he mumbled.

Frost cupped his cheek with one hand. “He’ll never hurt you again, my love. We’ll have our supper, and in the morning, I’ll introduce you to my staff. To the governors, if you’d like. You won’t have to tutor anymore. Someone else will take care of the children, starting tomorrow.”

“Yes,” said Charles. “Anything.”

“Good.” She gave him a gentle kiss on his mouth. “Guard them for me now. Azazel will be back soon. And I hope to see you in better spirits when you return to me, my Charles. Cowardice does not become you.”

Charles did not turn to watch her walk away to the West Wing. He watched wax drip from the candle instead.

He felt, flaring across his outstretched power, Logan’s mind, Armando’s mind, both alight with action. Frost’s and Azazel’s, disappearing. Erik’s …

… moving, faster than should be possible, through the woods.

Azazel will be back soon.

Charles gritted his teeth, and checked that the rifle was loaded.

The wait was intolerable. The candle burned down, steadily. All he could do was send his nightingale to Scott and wrap the children round with warmth and safety. He would not do anything to Scott’s mind – bad enough, what had happened when he took away the pain of others before, experimenting.

Experimenting. Strategizing. His endless plans … all they had done was land him in his present snare. Snare, hell: it was a bear trap. It was as bad as the chain Frost had clapped on his ankle last autumn; it was as bad as being Erik’s toy to abuse. Worse, since it seemed Frost could not be fooled – since he had gone in, all confidence, knowing everything that she had done, knowing that he would not be seduced, and still given her exactly what she wanted.

Or, at least, she thought he had.

Someone just like me – her voice slinked out of his memory. He swatted it away. He knew he wasn’t like her. But Charles also knew he couldn’t do what she wanted, or he would become just that.

What, his mind whispered, can be done?

“Think of something,” he grated at himself – at the aviary, at anyone or anything that was listening. “Think, man.”

He tried, desperately, to think. All options were being walled off as soon as he thought of them: by snow, by Erik’s guarding the grounds, by Azazel’s imminent return – by having to guard the children. God. If Frost tried to part him from them in earnest, well, he’d make it a condition of his …
“Of what?” he whispered to the hallway. “Of your employment? For God’s sake,” he gasped, “you’re already accepting it. Think.”

His raven presented him with the image of … Erik.

“What about him?”

Charles found his mind again. It was not moving, now, deep in the forest. Charles did not dare touch him. For through his power he could see how the vicious metal cloud was slowly turning: shards, nails, spikes, all tearing and ripping like the bloodiest Catherine wheel. Grinding any care, compassion – humanity – to a powder.

“Oh, Erik …”

He shivered in the cold.

But why should he care? No matter what he had seen in Frost’s memories, what remained was a monster. One that had imprisoned him, tortured him, only just kept from raping him. An animal with glimmers of a soul …

Why did he care? Perhaps it was because of that last.

But Charles knew he could not care; not anymore. Because caring had gotten him into this trap, just as much as any strategizing had.

He swiped his free hand over his eyes – and started, as Azazel’s mind flashed into being near the front door. Charles waited until a pair of weathered boots entered the dim circle of candlight. They stopped in front of him.

Then one of them started tapping.

“So, where are they?”

“Who?”

“Howlett and Muñoz.”

“The forest.” He checked. And blinked. There was no sign of either of their minds. There was Erik, but …

“Where, in the forest? Can you give me a direction?”

Charles lifted his chin. “Go ask Erik, why don’t you?”

“Did you leave your manners where you left your courage, Xavier?”

“A snort.

“Why are you looking for them, anyway?”

“This little skirmish left two Free West helicopters unguarded, right by the cell outside Syracuse.” Azazel’s tail quivered; he had to be stretching. “Everyone gets to join in the fun. Even I am getting a second wind. Are you ready to go back to her, Charles?”
“No,” he said, quickly. “I’ll stay here. Someone needs to guard the children.”

“That’s what I thought you’d say. I’ll be back a bit later. Be ready.”

He vanished. Charles inhaled the sulfurous vapor; coughed it back out. Or tried to.

Azazel’s mind did not reappear in the forest. Perhaps he had thought better of asking Erik for directions; perhaps he wanted to take his time. For when he did show up again, it was deep in the West Wing. Which was odd, but more so was how he disappeared again, and not in the usual way – Charles stumbled to his feet.

His maps and catalogue made the connection fast as light: Azazel had slipped inside the room protected against telepathy.

And he was not alone there.

Last September Logan and Hank had dragged him out of it into the light of day. Now … Logan and Armando had secreted themselves away, and Azazel stepped in to join them. Why?

To have a discussion … protected from Frost?

His power had been stronger than that protection, Charles remembered. He brought it to bear, gritting his teeth. What felt like five minutes of grinding effort rewarded him with a dim impression of Azazel’s mind, of Logan’s, of Armando’s …

… of Marie’s.

“What,” Charles said, into the empty hallway.

Marie was there. And Angel. And someone he remembered from chasing after Sean, so long ago. Jean-Paul, the flyer.

*It was pretty damn thin at the beginning,* Logan rumbled from his memory: *just Jean-Paul and me, and only after Mags got me out of Alkali late ’55.*

And then there was Alex. *What the hell?* All of them, crammed into the room –

– but all of a sudden it was too late to press further, for Azazel took them all away.

For a long moment, Charles’s mind felt as slow as the melting candle wax. Except for its reaching an obvious conclusion: they could have been there to have a conversation without Frost, true enough … but.

They could have been there to have one without him.

Charles felt desolate.

… He could have helped, surely?

With whatever they had been discussing?

Except it was easy enough to deduce. He had come late from Albany, too late to help and apparently reeking of Frost. Enough to make him distrusted.

“But as well,” he whispered, so his voice would not crack. “I don’t need any of you. I *never did.* I’m
– I’m leaving, God damn you and your war.”

For he should have done it at any point before, but he had been afraid, or had been so possessed of scruples – but now his back was to the wall. So. Azazel would return. Charles would shake his hand, say hello, take hold of his mind, and make him take him back to Britain.

If he could, he would take the children. They were all alone here, after all.

Charles checked his power blanketing the manor and the forest. There was no one there, save himself, the children … Erik.

Damn. If he were to do this mad thing with Azazel, Erik would need to be taken out of the picture. Before he could reconsider, he sent his raven out to Erik’s mind.

He touched it.

And Charles had to suck in a deep breath as Erik’s thoughts leaped to meet him. Coils of metal whipped around him, squeezing: all the sharpest edges of the shards facing out, and something dark, and hot – vibrating with want – pressing up against his own mind.

He focused on breathing. In. Out. “Hello, my dear.”

Except Frost had been close to calling him that – Charles throttled the surge of sickness and sent more power to meet Erik. “You’re all right, I suppose?”

It felt as thought the metal cloud was ratcheting tighter, closer. Purring, rubbing up against him like a cat.

Erik, he tried sending –

– and then wheeled with a gasp as he heard a peculiar scraping sound. It was barbed wire, slithering down the hallway. “Fuck,” he whispered, frantic, as he pressed himself against the wall as flat as he could. Stop! he sent.

Of course, Erik didn’t. Rather, the entire mass of barbed wire found his shoes, moved to form a semi-circle around him, and shot up like ivy would up a wall - but in a matter of seconds. And there it stopped. Barbed wire hanging on thin air – except then the coils of wire pressed in, pricking at his clothes, scratching at the rifle – and now he couldn’t bloody well move.

How am I supposed to shoot? he sent, furious, along with the image of the rifle in his hands, its barrel swathed in wire. Let me go!

All that he got in return was a throb of … satisfaction.

Charles clenched his teeth. Or if you won’t, then come to me. He framed the command with iron. Now.

It seemed Erik’s mind had liked that that. At least, it snapped up the iron, fast; started moving again, faster. Right towards the manor – fastest.

Charles tried moving. Barbs caught at every inch of exposed skin and prickled him – fuck – he felt goosebumps race up and down his body, but he didn’t think there was blood. Best to leave off. So he did, and stared ahead, and waited.

At least you can stare. Erik had left his eye sockets alone, though they were surely wreathed in wire.
My eyes – so long ago – I’ve been told they’re very beautiful …

Erik’s power felt like a whirlwind, approaching at a rapid clip. Don’t you dare make a sound, Charles sent. I won’t have the children frightened again.

He did not have to wait long.

For all the clamor of his mind, Erik himself was uncannily quiet. He ghosted up the stairs and the hallway, coming to a stop in front of Charles. And anyone staring as hungrily as he was staring would look like a fool … but Erik.

Was holding a pair of swords.

Charles swallowed, staring in turn. The metal of the swords was not clean. Much like …

Erik was obscured by the barbed wire as he eased closer, but Charles could pick out some detail - even with the candlelight dimming. The bulk of his coat; his trousers and his bare hands. The metal on the soles of his boots scraping the flagstones. The heavy steel wire coiling around one shoulder.

The way every strand of barbed wire quivered when Erik tipped his head, just so.

Memory hit like a punch: Erik curling his fingers in the air and bringing the helmet down to his head – and Shaw – Charles had to push it all away, for the present time, lest he start screaming and never stop.

“Let me out of here.” He kept his voice quiet. “This is ridiculous.”

“Rabe,” Erik whispered. “You’re safe.”

“I’ll be safe even if you let me out. Do it now, Erik, or I’ll …”

“Yes?”

“Please,” said Charles. He tried to move; winced as barbs caught at one of his hands. “There are other ways to keep me safe.”

Erik closed his eyes and tilted his head back. Then the wire began easing away from Charles, one strand at a time. Slowly. Charles kept his breathing steady. Watched the line of Erik’s throat. No scarf. He couldn’t see any tension. Just Erik swallowing – then a long sigh.

“You’re enjoying this,” Charles whispered, accusing.

“You feel … bigger.”

“What?” Charles hissed. “Erik, what the hell –”

The wires ripped apart in time for Erik to fling the swords aside, dive forward, and grab.

“ – do you mean by –”

That, his mind finished.

Erik had buried his face in the crook of Charles’ shoulder. Had taken hold of his waist with both hands, and had – squeezed him. “This …” Another squeeze. “Charles. I –”

“ – want to bite you,’ of course you do,” Charles finished for him, toneless. “Again.”
“... I’m glad you’re here. Where I can feel you,” Erik finished, rather more softly than Charles had.

“Oh.”

Charles could move now. Carefully, he placed the rifle to the side. Then he reached up and plucked Erik’s knit cap off his head, the better to scratch his hair. “Thank you, I suppose.”

“Liebster Rabe.” Drawing back, Erik frowned. “Where are your friends?”

“Excuse me?”

“Howlett. Muñoz. I was chasing them. Then they were chasing me. I thought they’d be here with you, but then I couldn’t feel James, so I wondered.”

“Did you fall and knock your head at any point during these chases?” Charles said, coldly. “They went to hunt helicopters in Syracuse.”

Erik blinked. “No one told me.”

“It seems you and I are guarding the children, although you were meant to stay in the forest, I think. What possessed you, to flout your Lady’s wishes?”

“You,” Erik growled –

Charles placed a hand over Erik’s mouth. “Quiet.”

The grey-green eyes were dark, staring at him.


Erik did not look away, even as he pressed a kiss into Charles’ hand.

Charles swallowed hard. In the slight space between his fingers, he caught a gleam of teeth. Then he felt the slick slide of tongue. He swallowed again at the sight of blood, darkened to brown and flaking off the side of Erik’s face. “Is that yours?”

Erik kissed his fingers again. “No.”

“Don’t you ever worry about hepatitis?”

Another nuzzle.

“Really,” Charles pushed at Erik’s face. “Must you?”

“I know I’m not clean, Rabe. I’m sorry,” said Erik, simply. “I just wanted ...”

"Wanted what?"

It was enough of a distraction - for as Erik lipped at his fingers, Charles checked the net of his power, lying over the manor and the woods. If he concentrated, he could expand his reach to encompass Ithaca – so he did. A burst of additional effort sent the raven flying to Syracuse, to drape the net over it as well.

He deliberately stayed away from the welter of activity he detected, southeast.

And manfully controlled his flinch as Erik nudged his hand aside and pressed forward, to kiss ...
Charles blinked at the image that swam into his mind: Erik at the Rose in Bloom, aiming a dart at the well-worn board opposite the vid screen. Laughing as he missed the center, sliding his hand round a tankard, bringing it up to his mouth to sip, once, then again, and passing the other hand over Charles' hair as Charles prepared a shot of his own ...

Except it was too ludicrous. Erik in a pub; one might as well bring a lion on a leash. The look on Geoffrey's face alone would -

Charles exhaled as Erik left off kissing the corner of his mouth and slid his own mouth home. 

Hurry up. He opened his mouth mechanically as Erik flicked at his lips with his tongue. Angled his head so Erik could get deeper, made all the right little gasps and moans. And he could do more; there was practically a list by now, really - so he could slip his hands to Erik's chest; could hitch one thigh over and up, to give himself leverage to grind against Erik's leg if it came to that. He could move to spread his palms over Erik's back, careful to avoid the heavy wire.

Erik's breath was warm, his tongue was warm, his bloody saliva was warm and there was too damn much of it. Charles brought up the catalogue and started in on the rips in the fabric of Erik's coat. He plucked at each one he found - perhaps from darts, perhaps from arrows -

The steel wire touched his right hand, and slithered to life like a snake. "Fuck - Erik! No!"

Charles jerked away as best he could, trapped between Erik and the wall and all the barbed wire. At least he had not yelped. Had not whimpered. Had not.

But he had knocked over the candle. So much for any light.

Erik had moved with him - was still less than an inch away, for Charles could feel his breath. Could smell it. Copper. Why hadn't he tasted it? Why, because it was normal, was that it?

"... I'm sorry," Erik whispered.

He couldn't stop shivering. "Fine."

"I didn't mean to frighten you."

"You didn't fucking frighten me," Charles snarled. "I was surprised. That's all."

"Shh." Erik was touching him; petting his hair, his neck - his brow, his cheekbones. Charles felt his gorge rise.

"Your hands are no cleaner than your face."

"Rabe, Rabe ... I'll wash, then. I love you."

Which would be a non sequitur to anyone but Charles Xavier, heir to Pavlov. Fine. Lure the creature in, subdue it - he would feed him up and fuck him if he had to, and Erik would sleep, or - the opiates, his mind whispered - and then Azazel would be short one mindless killing machine of a comrade if he called for help -

If he could just stop shaking. 

Enough. It wasn't so cold.
“Schöner Drache,” Charles said, smiling. It felt tight on his face. “You wash up. Just a bit, though. I find, tonight, that I like the sight of your … prowess.”

Silence. Then Charles felt the warm puff of laugh. “Schönster Lehrer, at any point this evening, did you fall and hit your head?”

“Shut up.” He thumped back against the wall. “Is it too much to say that I just want you close by? And I don’t want it to take long,” he gritted out, “is all.”

Lies, lies - and to him, Erik’s ensuing silence felt electrified.

“Yes,” Erik breathed, finally. “I’ll go do that. Right now.”

He turned and practically ran into Charles’ door.

“Open it like a normal person would, please.”

“You distract me.”

“As per usual.” Charles followed Erik’s stumbling path; registered the few embers left on the hearth. “Build a fire, too. Have you eaten?”

Erik shook his head. He had dropped to his knees, instantly, and taken two great handfuls of kindling; Charles could see that much. And now he had to be looking up. Waiting.

There had been the lines of Erik’s cheekbones and jaw, bumping up against his face just a moment ago. They had been sharper. And there had been the painful jut of hipbone he had felt, fucking Erik, two weeks ago.

“I’ll make you something,” Charles muttered.

“Thank you.”

It took a moment or two to stumble there, but as soon as he had relit the candle in the kitchen, Charles focused on the memory of the splash of blood over stubble on Erik’s face. He fanned his distaste into a flame while he tossed bread and cheese onto a plate.

It made mixing opiate into tea much easier.

Of course there were second thoughts to dispense with. Back in his room, Charles gnawed his lower lip as he stared at the fire, now burning merrily away.

For example: what if the Free West attacked the manor again?

“They wouldn’t try a failure twice,” he told the flames. “Although this, and those helicopters … it feels like a feint.”

Which he had warned Logan was a possibility. “Should have trusted me,” he said, coldly, before he put it out of his mind.

Another thought: what if Frost tried calling Erik to her side?

No. She wanted him, Charles, there. And in the meantime, she wanted …

Him, terrified. Clawing at Azazel to return to Albany, to flee from Erik. And everyone going to
Syracuse – *fuck* it, she could have just wanted the excuse to leave him alone with Erik lurking, ready to attack, the *bitch*. Charles had to applaud her, for an obsession that let her deduce how best to torment him even in the midst of a military exercise.

If it were indeed that.

Charles stretched his power to survey the southeast of Syracuse. He frowned. The furor there had stopped. And he could not feel the minds of his friends. “Former friends,” he told the bedspread.

“Who do you mean?” Erik said.

Charles shook his head at the floor. “Never mind. I was just woolgathering.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Aside from this skirmish, poor Scott killing two men, and you killing however many more? Everything is fine.” He looked up. “I – suppose.”

He was proud that the last word had made its way out of his mouth. For there was Erik, leaning against the bathroom door frame, his body licked golden by the firelight.


Erik tilted him a lazy smile. And stretched.

Charles positioned the plate more strategically in his lap. “Now who’s a distraction?”

The smile turned pleased. “Really?”

“Um.” For Erik paced over and went to his knees, Jesus *Christ*, on the floor right next to Charles’ feet. “Yes, really. What if the Free West were to attack again, right now? You’d charge out to fight them in the nude?”

“There’s no one else here; not for miles.”

“You’re using your ability?”

“As you are, I think.”

Charles jerked a nod. “I can’t feel anyone, either. They could have taken all the metal out of their clothing and acquired wooden weapons, so I have the advantage. Unless you’re able to sense someone’s blood at a greater distance, now.”

“That’s for war.”

“Erik, how many people did you kill tonight? You don’t call that war?”

Erik yawned.

*For God’s sake.* The simpleton, returned in full force - Charles felt like choking, even as Erik shuffled closer, quietly and placed his chin on Charles’ right knee. He could feel the warmth of that long throat through his trousers.

“Is that for me?” Erik said.

“Is what?” A glance back showed Erik staring at – oh, *thank God*, he was only staring at the meager
contents of the plate. Charles willed away his flush. “Yes. If you still want it.”

Erik moved his head, to rest his cheek on Charles’ thigh.

“Do you expect me to feed you?” Charles said, waspish.

“If you did, I’d eat everything we have. Just hand it here? Please?”

“Fine.”

Charles slipped him the plate. He would not focus on the long fingers wrapping round it, or on that damned ring still on Erik’s left thumb and the way it clinked against the porcelain. Nor would he commend Erik’s manners, in taking small bites of bread and cheese, alternately. Instead, he stared at the mug of tea steaming away on his bookshelf.

Charles sent his raven to check the children; they were fast asleep. He scanned the nets of his power again for any sign of Azazel. Nothing.

It had to be done.

And sooner, rather than later, lest he talk himself out of it.

“Are you thirsty?”

Erik nodded as he swallowed a mouthful.

“Well. There’s some tea. Let me –” Charles moved to fetch the mug, and darted back, cursing himself for missing Erik’s warmth immediately. “There. Drink up.”

“There’s none for you? That doesn’t seem very civilized.”

Charles swatted him as cover for his flinch. “I had mine in the kitchen. I’m sorry I didn’t wait, but we British love the stuff.”

For a long moment, Erik stared into the mug.

Charles distracted himself by considering how the hair came to a curl on the nape of Erik’s neck. The fire was not high, so that hair was a darker shade of red than usual -

Erik’s head snapped up. “What was that?”


“Outside. I thought I felt –” He rose to his feet, swiftly; moved towards the door.

Charles outstripped him, elbowed past him into the hallway … but the children were still asleep, and nothing had changed under the net of his power.

“What was it?” he whispered.

“Sorry,” said Erik.

Turning, Charles frowned at Erik’s sheepish expression as he lifted one shoulder and let it fall. “I think it was a body.”

“A body.”
“Falling from a fourth-floor window.” Erik walked back to the bed and sat. “The wires gave way. I must have felt his bandolier, going down.”

“A dead body, then.”

“Well, he’s definitely dead now.”

“Well, so much for a pleasant night,” said Charles. He frowned at the fire, now sending up smoke. “Did you –”

Erik yawned again. Charles heard his jaw crack, and saw the empty mug resting on the hearth.

“– oh. You drank it.”

“It was good. Now come here.”

“But we were talking.”

“We can talk here, can’t we?” Erik settled back comfortably onto the bed, still completely naked.

Even with the fire well on its way to dying … in its light, he was so beautiful.

*Oh, God.*

He couldn't be. For fuck's sake - Charles wouldn't let him be. He was a murderer. He was mad. He would - what had happened to the steel wire? Charles flicked his glance round the room, but - no, it would be in the bathroom, on top of the pile of Erik's clothes - which no doubt stank. It would be coiled like a snake, ready to strike - or to chain him up again, chain him like he had been by them both, Frost and Erik - by the whole bloody pack of them, chained in his room like a prisoner.

He was god damned *done* being a prisoner.

“- Charles?”

Erik must have been calling him. "What," Charles said.

“Come here? Please?”

Charles walked to the bed; sat down. He gazed at the tattoos, at the scars. He reached out to touch his own, faded over Erik's clavicle. “I'm here now.”

“Good.” Erik gave him a smile, and reached to hook a finger into the waistband of his trousers.

“Aren’t you forward this evening?”

“I only want to feel you again.”

One long palm came to rest at his waist. Charles looked away.

Erik gently tugged his dress shirt out of his trousers. “This suit.”

“What about it?”

“I like it. Did you go somewhere?”

Charles gave a tight nod. “Boston.”
“Schön. Did you see the lines?”

“What lines?”

Erik flicked open a button. Then another. “Most have collapsed, but there’s still parts of the red line, and the green. The blue. Some people live down there.”

“Public transit? You’re asking me if I got the official tour of whatever public transit is still available in Boston? Priorities, Erik.”

Erik slid a hand inside his shirt. Hummed. “There was a station called Charles – I saw the signs. I think it flooded after the third war.”

“The third war.”

“What about it?”

I know more about it. All of Frost’s revelations – everything Erik had done – but it was hopeless to ask him, now. “Never mind. Oh.”

The hand stilled. “All right?”

“Fine. I’m not ticklish. Just don’t pinch me.”

“I won’t.”

Erik contented himself with petting him. Charles let him do it. Considered his expression: the strong lines of his face relaxed, his eyes half-closed. His mouth. The thin, sensual curl of mouth that he, Charles, had been licking at not ten minutes before ....

And there went the petting hand, straight down to Erik’s cock. Back to normal - though now was really not the best time, so it would have to be quick.

“Shall I help you with that?”

“Oh please. Yes.” Erik tipped his head back as Charles bent his own.

Charles breathed, considering the slow strokes of Erik’s hand. With the right timing, he could send damp heat over the head – ah. It worked; Erik shivered. He was still near flaccid, though, and the twist of his hand was easy and slow. Too slow.

“You’ve been practicing?”

“I try to make it last. And I think of you,” said Erik, eyes closing. “Only you.”

Full marks, Charles sighed, and gave him a touch of tongue.

“Nnh. Wait.”

Leaning back as Erik tried to sit up, Charles allowed himself to catalogue that abdomen – the muscles bunching in it, rippling – before Erik fell back with a groan.

“I don’t understand. I want you to suck my cock ... but Rabe, I’m so tired.”

“You must have had a long day.”
“Yes.” Erik’s right hand slipped away from his cock and fell to the bed; his left hand slid off Charles’ belly.

Charles did up his shirt buttons again. "Perhaps you should go to sleep, my dear."

“Schatz. Did I tell you what I saw in Boston, once?”

“What was that?”

“The lights, when night fell. Over the harbor.”

“Not fireworks?”

“From the sky.”

“The aurora? Lovely.”

“And then I remembered Baikal.”

Charles couldn’t help it. Misery welled up and clogged his throat. “I wish you remembered more.”

“It’s all right, Rabe. I love you.”

“No.” Charles closed his eyes, so he wouldn’t have to see Erik slump into his drugged sleep. “It will never be all right.”

Only quiet breathing answered him.

Charles scrubbed at his face and considered. The opiate had worked fast. But Erik had downed the tea in record time, so that was that. Charles checked the manor, Ithaca, Syracuse, everything in between …

There was still no sign of Azazel.

“Erik?” Charles placed one hand on his abdomen.

Erik did not move.

“I wish I could have known you before.”

But now I have to leave. For with Erik sound asleep, as soon as Azazel returned, Charles would do just that. He wanted to go home. He needed to go home … while he could still remember it.

I wish you remembered more. The past, all locked away. And surely Frost had buried secrets deeper in his mind than Charles had ever thought possible.

… In his mind.

“No,” Charles breathed, “not now. God, don’t even think about it.” His hands were sliding forward, almost of their own volition, his fingertips brushing Erik’s hair. Red. “No. Fuck, no. This is the worst time.”

… He could see if Erik knew that Jean was his own daughter.

… He could see what, if not that, Frost had worked hardest to hide.

… He could find something to destroy her -
Charles winced at the passing thought. How. Erik was the one whose mind was destroyed. How, then, could he leap from that wreckage to the idea of the wreck hiding secrets of unimaginable power ...

"Jean's that, though. Isn't she?"

There was no reply, of course; nothing verbal.

All Charles felt was a strong sense of... urgency?

He called up his raven. It appeared in his mind's eye, lightning-fast. “Listen to me,” he told it – and all the aviary, all his power. “If you sense Azazel here, or anything coming to the manor, friend or foe, you pull me out instantly. Please?”

His raven made no sound, but sent him a pulse of approval.

“That’s new. But on that happy note –”

Charles took a deep breath.

He exhaled in one long gust when he opened his eyes in Erik’s mind. “Let’s hurry.” He turned, looking. “Raven?”

There was no reply.

“Search,” Charles ordered. He knew it would hear. “Find what’s hidden. Shaw, find me Shaw or the day the third war started, or…” He felt helpless. “Or find if Jean, if that’s important. Just find the most important thing that Frost has hidden, and do it fast.”

It took matter of seconds to check his gear – sword and shield, cloak and tokens – and to orient himself. Even in the dark, he could see roiling clouds obscuring the sky. He heard a distant rumble; he didn’t know what it was. He had landed on the near side of the terrible river ... closer to the forest than he had ever been on his arrival.

The metal forest, through which Charles saw a path stretching, broad and clear.

Carefully, he approached it. He stepped past the first few trees. Something brushed his shoulders; he flinched. Looking back showed how the silvery branches had closed behind him; had folded up into a web from his heels to his hair and pressed him forward.

Charles stumbled another few steps up the path. More branches slid together, fast as thought. He was put in mind of a Venus flytrap.

… Except the metal had not hurt him.

Not yet, he thought, wildly, and started running.

The path stayed unbelievably clear compared to his first race through the forest. Charles was staring at the castle almost before he knew it, the battlements and towers jolting in his vision as he sped for the gatehouse door. It opened easily. The bunker in the courtyard was battered shut, dark and stained. He ran past it. The doors to the keep swung open easily as well, and Charles would have spared that a thought – worry, fear – were he not so focused on the final sprint. The dust inside the main hall caught in his throat; he stopped in front of the Imperial staircase and his cough echoed off the looming walls. Blood red banners fluttered above him as he looked round.
“Raven?” he called. “Raven?”

There was no reply.

Charles had to bend over to catch his breath. “Damn it,” and he coughed again. Spat out phlegm. “What the hell?”

There was another rumble, shaking his feet, setting his teeth on edge. That was new. He could see glittering dust puff from between the flagstones of the floor. Squinting through the haze that dust formed, Charles saw the dark place between the double stairs, swathed in the strange cloth, red and black and silver.

There were secret memories past it, he knew. As far down in Erik’s mind as he had ever gone.

… But his raven was not there, and he had given it orders. And shite, from the beginning, he could have told it to whisk him to the precise location he needed. He could have spared himself a sprint; he could have – Charles coughed and coughed – spared himself this.

He tried walking to where the haze was thinner, with little luck. He tried placing his cloak in front of his nose and mouth – it was slightly better, he could take a silent breath, good.

But in the silence he heard the door of the keep open. And shut.

“Oh, no.”

Charles let his cloak fall; drew his sword and raised his shield. He stared at the swirling haze – and through it, at the shadow peeling off from the door and starting to walk towards him.

He couldn’t run, not coughing. “Raven,” he said, “take me away.”

Nothing happened.

“What? Raven!” Charles panicked. Without its help, there was no escape possible – unless he could run again. But he stumbled back and hit the pillared end of a banister.

He could see that the shadow was Erik, walking steadily, and – that meant Erik had been awake this entire time? Oh no, no –

Charles brandished the sword as Erik reached the stairs.

Erik just looked at him.

In the sword’s shining light, Charles could see no weapons. No metal springing from his hands, limp at his sides.

“Erik?” he said, cautiously.

There was no reply that he could detect. Not even a change in Erik’s expression this time. Before there had been rage. Fear. And … some curiosity, perhaps, when Erik sniffed at him – and now there was just a blank.

“Erik, I’m sorry. I know I promised you –” Charles cleared his throat, a mistake, because then he had to hack and cough, “I promised I’d stay out. I’m not here to hurt – ow,” he coughed, and it felt like it was cutting him, “ow!”

Erik’s taking hold of both his shoulders was a shock. Charles yelped and tried to wrench away. But
all Erik did was push, slightly. Push, and then follow him, with one step. Push, and then follow.

“You want me to go somewhere?” Charles shook his head. “Just walk. I’ll follow you. Somewhere I can breathe.”

That somewhere turned out to be the tiny square fountain, burbling water, near the wall that had held the unicorn tapestry. “That’s right,” said Charles, and he sheathed his sword as he stumbled over, “you’ve hidden it. Oh, thank God.” He took a clean breath, then cupped his hands and splashed water on his face. “That’s better.”

And more than better, for the water tasted wonderful. Before he knew it, Charles had taken a deep drink. Then another. After the second one, he looked up and saw Erik watching him, steadily.

It had better not have been a mistake, consuming something in another’s mind. Charles gritted his teeth, trying to remember if he had ever – oh, except Jean had eaten scones and jam in his, and she seemed all right. So. All he had to worry about was water dripping off his chin. “Forgive my enthusiasm.”

Erik was silent.

“Here.” Charles held out his cupped hands. “Won’t you have some?”

Silence. Again.

“Drink.” He stepped close to Erik. “Won’t you? I’m sure you’d like it. Is this because of the tea?” Lifting his hands, he kept talking – anything to drown out the guilt clamoring at him. “I’m very sorry. I only wanted to come here to help you. Because … Erik?”

Charles had reached up to Erik’s mouth and tipped his hands – but the water ran over closed lips, and down, and down, to spatter on the stone floor.

“Erik. What’s wrong with you?”

Erik stared at him, his face a blank.

“That’s why I’m here, isn’t it?” He heard his own words ring – truth. “I want to help you, because there’s something very wrong here,” Charles stretched his arms, to encompass the hall, the dust, everything. “And Frost has done it to you.”

The whites of Erik’s eyes flashed.

“Shh, shh. I’m sorry. I want to help you. Will you let me? Erik?”

But when he reached up to Erik’s face again, Erik flinched.

“… All right.” Charles took a careful step back. “I won’t touch you, I promise. Just … can you tell me how to help you? Can you tell me anything?”

Erik seemed to be considering. After a long pause, he let one shoulder rise and fall.

“Good. We can have a system. One shrug is yes, two is no. And that shrug - who came up with that? You or …”

Jean, he would have finished, but his tongue had stuck to the roof of his mouth.

Charles took another drink of water. Wiped his face. “Tell me it’s not true, Erik.”
He wheeled on one foot. Everything that he had put together – he could say it. No one else would ever hear. “And tell me that Frost isn’t her mother. Please.”

That was perhaps the limit to those questions, for Erik now looked like a corpse: chalk white under the dust coating his face.

“I wish you could drink,” Charles said, miserable. “And I need to breathe, and even with this,” he hooked a thumb at the beautiful fountain, “I don’t want to stay here. Can’t we go to your woods?”

They ended up going to the highest battlement.

Once there, Charles gasped in relief and ran to the statues. His raven was bobbing its head and croaking from Erik’s shoulder. Well – the statue of Erik, of course, for the real Erik was following close behind him. He saw Jean’s tea light flickering at the statue’s base.

“My darling,” he said, stroking Raven’s feathers. “I give you specific orders and then you won’t even come when I call? I was terrified. I’m sorry;” he told Erik over his shoulder, “but you had that effect on me, for a good long while.”

Charles watched Erik pace past the statue of Shaw, reach the far edge of the battlement, and look out. Or at least, Charles thought he looked out. It would be difficult to see in the dark even if Erik were not wearing black.

He was far enough away for Charles to whisper, “Azazel?”

His raven was silent.

“I’ll take that as a no. Now, Erik,” he said, for Erik had covered several meters in a split second and was staring at him again, “let’s have our system. One shrug for yes, two for no?”

Erik was silent.

“One nod? One blink? Or you could try writing: is there charcoal anywhere? Can you twist your metal into words for me? I could give you a quill – could you, darling?”

Raven screeched and molted several feathers at once.

“There, you see? And you can use my blood if you have to. Write down how I can help. Tell me.”

There was still no response. Charles’ heart sank. “Is this what she’s done? You can’t tell me how to help you in any way?”

He did not need to see the empty face to conclude: of course. “How very cruel.”

Raven was quiet.

“But I can still try. Raven, we have work to do, and we don’t have much time. Come along.”

It flapped its wings again.

“I won’t even say ‘one flap for yes, two for no.’ I told you to find what’s hidden, didn’t I? And I know you like coming here, and I’m glad I can breathe, but we have to go down to that door behind the tapestry.” He gave Erik a brief look. “I’m sorry for what I did to you in the room with the mirrors, but those three memories are important, I think. I – easy! What is it?”
For his raven had shrieked in distress. Charles reached out to soothe it. “Darling, what’s wrong? Did you hurt yourself?”

He looked closer. A pinion had caught on the statue’s concrete face, or granite, or whatever it was. He stepped up on the pedestal, careful to avoid the tea light, and worked the feather free. “There now. Better?”

His gauntlet scraped the stone; an edge caught on the groove in the statue’s hair.

Wait.

“This,” Charles said.

Every instinct in him flared.

“This is important, somehow. Every time I’ve been here, I’ve seen it: you don’t have a crown.” He turned to look at Erik. “Is that it? Do you need a crown?”

For there was one, he remembered: down in the depths of the castle. A fearsome crown, set between the wreck of the Washington Monument – that had been it – and a reflecting pool of blood. An ugly crown, all wrought iron and jagged collets.

“They have jewels and you don’t, so if I put a crown on you, something happens? Something is fixed? Oh God, that has to be it.” He jumped down from the statue, heart pounding into his throat - the idea - of ice melting, doors opening, every last treasure revealed - “Raven, come along. We’ll go find it,” Charles said to Erik in a rush, “right now. I still have time.”

Fuck, what had he done wrong now? For Erik looked out at him, eyes smudges under his brow … looked at him like Charles had killed him.

And to be killed, Erik had to be alive - how could he have thought those eyes were dead? They were alive, and they were in pain.

“What, Erik?” Charles said, agonized. “If not a crown, then what?”

On the statue’s shoulder, Raven screamed.

“Not you. Erik. What do I need to do?”

But Raven screamed again.

Erik wasn’t looking at him anymore. He was looking over Charles’ shoulder.

Charles turned to look, himself.

And Frost’s statue turned its head, to look right back at him.

Charles catapulted out of bed. His back hit the wall opposite.

In his mind, his raven was still screaming. In Erik’s mind, Erik had thrown himself between Charles and the statue of Frost, just as the tea light exploded.

He stared at Erik. “Are you …”

Erik’s eyes opened. He stared at the ceiling.
He started to tremble.

“What have I done?” Charles gasped. “No, Erik—stay there!” He ran to his wardrobe. Pawed through it. Nothing—so he grabbed a pillow from the bed and ripped the pillowcase off. The jewel box, unless—it would tear—he emptied it, and took the first aid kit, his coat, a pair of socks, a scarf—gloves—

He wrenched round to look again. Erik had not moved from the bed. Not even when Charles had yanked the pillow away.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m so sorry. But promise or no promise, I can’t stay here another minute—”

He wedged his feet into his shoes and ran into the hallway; stumbled into the mass of barbed wire, and shouted in pain as it tore at his hands.

"Mr. Xavier!" Scott wailed. "What’s happening?!"

“Is it the bad men?” Kurt’s voice was shrill behind the door. Charles heard thumps and scrapes.

“No—Jean, Kurt, Scott, you stay there, do you understand me?” He pulled free of the barbed wire. Which, he saw, was not moving. “It’s safe; you’ll be fine.” His voice cracked. “Just stay!”

Mr. Xavier where are you—

Cursing himself, Charles turned and ran.

The library, he thought, frantic. The hidden rooms. He could hide in one until he figured out what he could do—

His power caught the flash of Azazel’s mind, appearing in the center of the Hive. “Fuck!” There were others, too, and they all ran in different directions out the panopticon—Logan, Armando, Kitty Pryde, Jubilation Lee, Alex, John—and Victor Creed, oh God—

Let the door be open, and it was, but—

—but Logan was sprinting down the hall towards the library, from the east.

Charles stood frozen in place. Instinct seized him: he put the pillowcase down, and nudged it beneath the sofa with one foot. And just in time, for Logan crashed through the door.

“Charles!”

“I…”

Logan ran up and took hold of him. His eyes were wide. “Are you all right?”

“Yes?” Charles began to breathe again. “I’m all right.” Not regularly. But it seemed—Frost hadn’t yet—said—

Except there she was, and not five seconds later the Finder roared to life in a fury. Charles yanked his strongest veils around his mind and tried not to pass out.

“Ow—fuck, I get it! Charles, where’s Lehnsherr?” Logan gasped.

“My room,” Charles said, teeth chattering.

“Your room?” Logan sniffed him. “Shit, I should not have left you. Did he hurt you?”
“Logan.” He trembled. “What’s happening?”

“Albany’s under attack; Frost just dragged us here. Ammo, we need more ammo.” Eyes wild, Logan slapped something plastic into his hand. “Get to the Finder; she’ll want you there. I’ll take care of Lehnsherr.”

And he sprinted away.

Charles looked down. The piece of plastic was Logan’s I.D.

He looked back up. Made sure all his shielding was as strong as he could make it. And added another veil – a real one, in the real world – to conceal himself from sight.

Then Charles snatched up the pillowcase and darted through the library - wrenched open the door to the Hive with one pass of the I.D., slammed it shut behind him. He towards the Finder – she wouldn’t expect that – keeping well beneath the crash and surge of its power. He swiped the I.D.; passed through door after door. But where was he going –

His raven flew ahead of him to the garage.

“There,” Charles gasped, and sprinted after. He rounded corners, slammed through doors – shoved open the door into the smaller storage room, ran down and across. Past all the compartments, past Erik’s. He found the other I.D. mechanism –

– and paused. Doubled over to catch his breath.

From the other side of the door came the noise of things being thrown about and an engine turning over. He felt Victor Creed, Jubilation Lee, Yuriko, John, two minds he did not recognize – and Kitty Pryde.

His raven careened back into his mind, showing him Kitty’s hands on a steering wheel.

Charles licked the sweat off his lips. Carefully, he eased his power out behind him. Veil. Frost … in an unspeakable rage, wielding the Finder. Azazel … flashing over to the West Wing. Logan …

… was hurt.

And Erik …

He didn’t dare touch Erik.

“I’m sorry,” Charles whispered to his hands, covering his face. Oh, God – the children, hearing whatever Erik had done to Logan. He checked on them – and then let his hands fall, fast, for the children were gone.

“What happened?! This is –”

Raven dropped into his mind the image of Armando … crouched in the larger storage room.

“What does that have to do with –”

The power went out.

Charles instantly looked down at the I.D. reader. “No. No,” not after this far, “please work. Please have an override.” He swiped the I.D. – and after a slight delay, a green light flared. With a gasp of relief he stepped through, pouring all the power he could into his veils and shields.
It was chaos. In the darkness people were cursing and shouting – until, “Hey!”

It was Lee. She held up one hand; it fountained over with sparks and light. “As you fucking were!” she bellowed. “Get on the munitions!”

The babble of voices stopped instantly. Everyone ran into a ragged line, passing what looked like ammunition from one person to another to the truck.

“Where the hell is Lehnsherr?” Lee snapped.

“You know, I think all the cold means she’s on it,” came a voice from near the truck. John.

Lifting her hand, Lee sent light further into the garage. “Don’t make me come over there, Allerdyce.”

“You look like the Statue of Liberty, ma’am,” John sang out. “Oh-h say can you see / all the West-ies get killed?”

“Shut up. Double-time it! They need this!”

Charles stared at the truck. They … in Albany. He was sure of it.

Before he could falter, he moved along the perimeter of the garage. Kept his eyes in front of him; kept his fingers tightly knotted in the fabric of the pillowcase. He stood across from the truck; stared at the doors hanging open. It was rapidly filling with ammunition.

Charles knew he would have to time it carefully.

One chance.

“Good,” Lee shouted, and closed her fist around the light – once, twice. “John, step back. Victor, close it up.”

Charles beat him to it – bit back a yelp as the door slammed on his foot. As Creed grunted; tugged; slammed the door shut again and by that point Charles had curled in on himself in pain, so all was well.

All would be well. He closed his eyes. He wasn’t a praying man, but –

“Kitty, on my count,” came muffled through the wood of the truck’s walls. “One. Two.”

– Charles didn’t have time for anything before Kitty transported them.

He rolled over what had to be canisters of bullets, clawing at his temples to keep from crying out. The transport, the wrench of his mind ripping away from the manor and everyone there – and now the fear and pain of everyone here, for he was close enough to Albany to feel everything.

Charles sent his raven to check. It sent back an image. They were at Albany’s gates, well behind the defenders’ line. Mounted guns, rifles and barbed wire were everywhere – the impressions dripped into his mind like blood.

Shaking, Charles crawled to a corner of the truck and hid. “Just a little more.” He would not weep. “Just let them – open this.”

And he still had luck, it seemed, for the doors were torn open not thirty seconds later, and another relay started emptying the truck of ammunition. Charles watched it all disappear. He felt, carefully,
with his power – to gauge when he might dash out, and in what direction.

So he instantly felt Azazel, Logan, and Lee appear atop the city wall.

Shite. “Go away,” he whispered. Lee stayed on the wall; two teleported again to the ground - Azazel and Logan, heading directly for him. “Please, please go away.”

It took them two minutes, and in that time he heard enough machine gun fire to root him to the spot.


“Give me a second.”

Logan had a torch. He held it up. In its wavering light, he looked ghastly – the left side of his face all bloodied strips hanging off bone, with an eyeball terribly exposed as it flicked round - but that same side knitting itself back together even as Charles stared.

The torch’s beam moved to the corner opposite. Then to Charles’ corner. It paused.

Then Logan grunted. “Nothing.”

“Tvoyu j mat, nothing?! Stay here!” And Azazel teleported. Presumably to tell Frost.

Logan passed his free hand over the intact side of his face. Charles saw how it was shaking.

Then he said, “Hey, Charles.”

Charles froze.

“I told you that you’d have to make a choice. Is this it? Is this really what you’re gonna do? Leave? When I need you here?”

Which was a lie, Charles thought, savagely - because of what Logan had done not one hour ago. He stayed silent.

"You know I can smell you, right?"

He would not react. He would not.

“And now I don’t smell you, so thanks a lot.”

What …

“Your choice. Your life. You want to go, you fucking go –”

Charles was no longer listening. For his mind was clicking over the possibilities, and drawing one conclusion.

He managed to turn his head and look down at the empty space to his left.

He blinked once. It stayed empty.

He blinked again. He saw Jean.

Oh, no.
Charles hardly registered Logan’s shouting at Azazel and struggling. He hardly noticed them disappear. His thoughts were occupied: fear. **Horror.**

But mostly fear.

*Mr. Xavier?* Something soft brushed his mind, quivering. *Please don’t be mad at me!*

Charles shook his head without making a sound.

So close, he could see Jean’s eyes shining in the dark; could see her small hands holding a bag in her lap. She sent him an image of his face, pale and twisted with fear, staring down at her. Framed with her own frantic tumble of words, *Mr. Xavier, where are you going?*

*How did you get here?*

*I followed you.*

From outside came the sound of shouts, carried on the wind, and then the rattle of more gunfire.

*Why are you going away?* Tears started pooling in Jean’s eyes. *Mr. Xavier, why?*

“You have to go back home,” Charles whispered, numb.

*No! I want to stay with you!*

“Jean,” he gasped, but then pressed the words into her mind. *There’s no time. I have to leave.*

*I’ll go with you!*

*It’s too dangerous.*

*I can help!*

*No, Jean. What about Scott and Kurt? What about – oh God, was he really going to – What about Princess Alexandra?*

Jean’s eyes went huge. She clutched at her bag.

*Who will take care of her if you’re gone, Jean?*

*But I forgot! Can we go get her?*

*No – you need to go back, where it’s safe.* Charles jerked his head at the whistle of an aerial bomb. He winced and threw his arms around Jean; shielded her as it exploded – quite a distance away, but the truck shook.

*I won’t leave you!* Jean shoved her face into his coat and started to cry. *Please!*

Charles as tightly as he could. “Shhh,” he said, muffled by her hair. But there was no need to remind her; she was weeping without any noise at all.

He was still veiled – he stretched his power to include Jean – *they* were veiled, and the two of them working together would be invisible in every way, to everyone. He jumped at the sound of the truck’s front door, slamming shut: audible above a cacophony of shouts, the rattle and creak of chains at the city gates, and then what sounded like a foghorn.
“Oh, God,” Charles mumbled. *You’re sure? Even without Princess Alexandra? We can’t go back.*

Jean tightened her grip.

_All right. He scooped her up. We’re going._

He grabbed the heavy pillowcase and ran for the truck’s double doors. Open on the darkness outside, they looked like a giant, wood-framed mouth. *We’re going.* Guns spat more bullets. Horror seized his gut. *We’ll be fine,* his thoughts gibbered. *It will all be fine.*

Charles jumped.

Snow and wind walloped him full-force; he gasped and turned his back, flinging the thought at Jean: *Don’t let go!*

*I won’t!*

He started to run. One look back showed the dim outline of the truck, disappearing into the whirling snow.

_How would he_ – but the foghorn sounded again, and Charles sprinted towards it. The worst of the snow was behind him – *Ororo,* it had to be her – but the wind was still pummeling everyone else who was running for the city.

The raven strained, concealing them, as he neared the press at Albany’s gates: guards, soldiers, passengers from transports, men and women with guns, all milling about – shouting, crying – the stench of gasoline burning and the *bang* of tires exploding. He held Jean as close as he could, shielding her from the chaos.

*Mr. Xavier!*

*Yes, darling?*

The words felt tearful. *I’m scared.*

_Don’t be. We’re almost there._

_Where?_

But Charles had to focus on pouring power into his veils as he lifted Jean and slid along between the crowd and the wall. Two men were fighting over a suitcase. He elbowed past them – dodged a guard – ducked under a rope. *Hush. Keep quiet.*

He sprinted up the steady incline to the market square. There, Market Hall loomed above them both, dark and obscured by gusts of snow. And there was ice everywhere. Charles hissed and adjusted his footing as he wheeled left, hard, and ran down Pearl Street, ducking into the shadows cast by houses and shops.

255 *South Pearl St.* – the memory flickered in his mind; he tossed it over to Jean as he ran. *That’s where we’re going.*

Jean sent nothing back but a sense of - ? - blurred by the cold.

“Dr. Vogelzang.” He sent the memory of her face; felt Jean grip harder.

_God._ Charles gasped to somebody, *anybody,* that Vogelzang would be home, that she would answer
– as he skidded to a stop, heaving for breath, his hands like blocks of ice and all the muscles in his arms and legs on fire.

255. There. As quietly as he could, he unlatched the gate, then stumbled up the steps and set Jean down.

He rang the doorbell. “Please,” Charles muttered to himself. “Please.”

He heard the thump of footsteps. Dr. Vogelzang opened the door.

Charles stared.

“What is it?” She squinted past the chain stretched in front of her eyes. “Who’s there?”

Closing his eyes, sending the most heartfelt thank you, love, thank you, that he could manage to his raven, Charles let his concealment fall. Jean was still shielding – a small part of him, the detached and observing part, marveled at it, even as the rest of him sagged in exhaustion.

Even as he heard Vogelzang gasp. “What –”

“You remember me?” he croaked. “Charles Xavier.”

Vogelzang kept staring.

Charles gulped in air. “I ran with – and I didn’t know where to go, except I knew you could help us. Please.”

“Us’?”

He moved to the side. Do it, Jean. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Not here.

Jean shimmered into view.

Dr. Vogelzang’s dark eyes flicked back and forth between them both.

Then she undid the chain and tugged the door open wider, spilling light onto the snow of the front yard.

“Both of you – in! Hurry!”

And Charles darted inside, still holding Jean safe, and let Vogelzang slam the door behind them.

Works inspired by this one: 

Fie Foe Fum by ChangeableConsistency, Nine Eleven Ten - Art, Craftwork, Music by Subtilior, who loves you better by mixture, secret, love, sorrow, by bulma90_13, Nine Eleven Ten - The Beast by Cylin, Once upon a dream by etxaberri, Nine Eleven Ten - The Song by puffy_pastry, Art for "Nine Eleven Ten" by avictoriangirl, Nine Eleven Ten Art by Pantalaimon_sh, Art for Nine Eleven Ten by Pantalaimon_sh

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