Erik moved the coin: a lot further than Shaw was expecting. And as a result, we wind up with a Notting Hill AU set in the 60s, and a naturalized Erik and Edie, British citizens.


Notes

Notting Hill AU set in the First Class era. Mutants have normal citizens' legal rights but experience bias similar to homophobia or racism levels. Erik and Edie are naturalized British citizens: Erik succeeded in moving the coin and killing Shaw and they made it out of Germany. Many mutants are 'in the closet' including Charles and Erik. Raven was adopted into the Lehnsherr family.
The Face I Can't Forget

Just A Boy.

Raven stirred, alerted by the long, long silence to the fact that business was exceptionally slow. There was no great need to worry: their bookshop was ticking over in the black - just about - and had been for years now, given a fortunate location and loyal clientele. It was just - wet Wednesdays, and early closing day, and a long way off payday for a lot of folks. The thing was, a lack of customers gave her the urge to mess with her brother for her own personal amusement.

She looked over at him, hunched beside the elderly till, a vintage Guy de Maupassant spread out before him and a mug cooling by his side.

If his chunky cable-knit cardigan was any more enveloping he'd be cuddled up in it like a sleeping bag. The collar was so proud it might as well be an Elizabethan ruff. 'The spectacles,' was what she snapped at him, though, loud and without warning. He startled and jumped, almost knocking his mug over and shooting her a pained, reproachful look. 'Can you please, please dump the spectacles? It's been three bloody years, brother mine, since you actually had them prescribed for that infected corneal scratch. And having clear glass put in them instead of the prescription lens? Honestly, the affectation. Along with the cardigans you look like a cuddly old academic. What about your marriageability? How am I ever going to get rid of you in that state?

'I like them,' he said defensively. 'I feel naked without them at this point.'

'You hide behind them,' she said sharply. 'Just so no attractive males might conceivably take a look at you and get any closer.' He hunched up at that, and shot a shifty look around.

'Oh for God's sake,' Raven said. 'The place is so dead we'll have to shift the business into being a funeral parlour as things stand. And anyway,' she said, getting up from the footstool and shifting as she walked towards him – to her blue form, to him, to the milkman, to her habitual blond form, 'if the world is starting to be just about ready for mutants, then it's going to accept homosexuality at some point, Erik.'

xxx

Business picked up a bit as the afternoon ticked on, but still left Erik plenty of time to ponder. There was no way he was giving up his cardigans, obviously - that was a battle he'd fought and won long since. The spectacles, on the other hand - he had to admit that logically Raven had something of a point. They were a prop that comforted him - hiding his reactions, making his eyes less noticeable, giving him something to twiddle with if anyone tried talking to him – or god forbid, chatting him up. Maybe: maybe he should try operating without them. Off and on. On a trial basis. But not this afternoon.

The whole 'homosexuality is just as normal and acceptable as mutation' lecture he tried sincerely not to think about, and failed. The thing was, it wasn't as if mutation was all that accepted. Oh yes, post-war Britain was a society that prided itself, puff-chested and vociferous, on its tolerance. There was no rounding up of the different, there were no stars, no camps here. That didn't mean someone with a visible mutation wasn't taking a risk on a quiet walk home after a night at the pub. Or someone with a clearly mutant child didn't run the gauntlet of daily rude, or abusive, or just plain well-meaning but tactless remarks on a daily basis.

And so it went for homosexuality, but more so in a way. Since that was still a criminal act, and viewed as a choice, not an infliction, by many. Put plain, he was in no hurry to advertise his
mutation, nor his predilection, and he hoped his little sister understood. He wanted her kept safe: all of his miraculously whole little family kept safe. And if the price of safety was hiding, he'd pay it.

Raven, though... he sighed. And when he sent her out on the doughnut run, he asked her twice to please please stay in her blond form. For him, as an indulgence.

Her ranting had set his mind drifting and ruminating, though, and while her errand brought him a little peace, it served a dual purpose. That spare twenty minutes, it meant he could cast a crafty eye around the aisles: yes, still deserted. And then settle back behind the counter, reach under the shelf and pull out a handful of magazines.

Oh, the melodrama, he chastised himself. As if he was doing something shameful: as if it was a collection of particularly hair-raising pornography. It was *perfectly innocent*. Harmless lightweight reading matter. Well, perhaps the poolside shots... *Gossip, Star Parade, Inside TV, Dreamboat Drive...* they were *harmless*. You could have given them to your mother to read.

Not that you would want to actually be caught poring through one of them when your mother walked through the door of your shop, even so. He shuffled them swiftly back under the counter with extreme dispatch, breathing fast, smiling with genuine pleasure.

In a moment he was round the counter and hugging her, and she was laughing. 'Liebling, you'd think for sure I hadn't seen you in six months! Only last night we were in front of the TV watching Mr Frost together! With you finishing off the torte, don't think I didn't check the tin when you were gone...'

She patted his cheek, small and round and coiffed and healthy, pink-cheeked. The satisfaction of it hit him, just the same as it did every day of his life. Every extra day with Edie, it was a gift to him. And a gift from him, in a sense.

'Mamma, a day without you is six months in my heart,' he vowed with saccharine sincerity, and she thwopped him with her glove. 'Nonsense. Silly boy. Now set me a coffee up to brew, and let me take a look at your magazines. Yes, darling,' she said, at his expression. 'The ones you just shuffled away out of my sight.'
He May Not Be What He May Seem

Chapter Summary


It was torturous. Bad enough as he hovered, persnickety on the detailing to get Mamma's coffee just as she liked it, two crisp caramel biscuits on the side and a spiral of froth just so. But to do it in such a hurry, longing to get back and monitor and censor what she might be flipping through... And yet still to have to get it just so, it was Mamma's coffee!

Record time, he got back to her in from the tiny backroom kitchen, and sat down beside her with his own mug of tea. It was a taste he'd adopted in his quest to become more British than the Brits who'd given his family a home, somewhere to belong. But Mamma had been too old to acclimatize, to something she still regarded as foisty old leaves steeped in hot water. (Not understanding that, yes, it was that. But it was so much more than that.)

His intent was to distract her, engage her with family tidbits, and lures about some nice girl he had his eye on. (There was always some nice girl he had his eye on. It kept Mamma happy, and where was the harm, especially to imaginary girls?)

But for once it did not work. Mamma remained intent upon his magazines, and while she chatted to him happily, responding to every overture, she kept right on turning the damn pages. A starlet holidaying with a man who was not her fiancé here, a court case of breach of contract between an actor and studio there, cheesecake shots of the prettiest up and coming stars... From magazine to magazine she flipped, as if she was searching for something. A new movie production of a Terence Rattigan play, a 'dress like the stars' fashion piece, a fashion shoot with Jayne Mansfield dressed as Anne Boleyn, Charles Xavier's latest flame accompanying him to a recent awards ceremony...

'There we are!' Mamma said triumphantly. 'I knew it would be in here somewhere. You do love your film magazines, and I just knew I'd seen his face somewhere before in one of them.'

The foreboding was silly, and reasonless, and awful. 'Whose face, Mamma?' Erik asked cautiously.

Edie beamed, and jabbed a manicured finger at the glossy page. 'This boy! This Charles Xavier! The minute he stepped into the shop, I just thought to myself, 'I know that face. I know I know that face. And who could forget those eyes? But where from?' And then it came to me. Your magazines!'

It was every time, every single time. On all occasions when neither he, nor Raven, nor Hank were available to tend to the shop, and Mamma volunteered her services... Always something happened. But not this, obviously, whatever she seemed to be implying. Because that would be crazy.

Erik breathed deep and steady. 'What are you talking about, Mamma?'

Edie smiled at him with a sweet and simple pleasure. 'Oh liebling, you know I kept an eye on the shop on Friday afternoon? Well, I completely meant to tell you about it, it was so exciting, and then Sondra from the knitting shop had me out to tea and bridge and I just absolutely lost track of things,
and then...

'Mamma?'

'My love, we had a film star visit the shop! Charles Xavier! How exciting is that?'

The breathing really wasn't working much. 'That doesn't sound terribly likely, Mamma. Are you sure it wasn't someone who just looked rather like him?' Because God forbid Charles Xavier had set foot in his establishment. Certainly while he wasn't there with afternoon tea, a camera and every employee he had shaking his hand, to remember and record the event for posterity.

But Mamma just laughed, and patted his cheek. 'Oh Erik, what a fool you think your old Mamma is.' He rushed to deny it, but she didn't wait for him. 'Of course that was the first thing that came into my mind, once I realised who it was, or at least looked like. But then, he had a gentleman with him who was quite clearly an employee or security detail of some kind: might as well call it a bodyguard and be done with it. A rather nice fellow himself, too! He looked a little unnerving at first, with big sideburns and some kind of metallic attachment to his hands: you would have been interested, Erik!' He was sure he would, he thought grimly, drily.

'But he was very protective of his charge, and really very nice. He bought a book himself, a poetry collection: let me think, I believe it was Robert Herrick. And then he started declaiming various bits of it, and made Mr Xavier laugh very much. He said to this fellow, 'Do give it a rest, old lad: people will think we're in love!' Edie laughed immoderately. 'He was a charming boy! Once I was sure he was who I was thinking of – though, oh dear, Erik, I simply couldn't think of his name – I insisted on making him tea and biscuits, and him sitting down with me in the back of the shop with his friend.'

Erik put his hand to his head. He was pretty sure this was just a strange and alarming dream, so he wasn't going to worry too much. Not that much. 'And then you all got acquainted, I take it?'

Mamma nodded, a little vague. 'Well, we got introduced after a fashion: he told me he was Charles, and his friend was – ah, Logan, that was it. I must say, his mutant friend was a handsome fellow: of course, Mr Xavier is a lovely boy, but film-stars are picked to appeal to the teenybopper crowd, isn't that right? Now, for a mature woman such as myself.'

Erik simply couldn't arrest her flow of reverie fast enough. 'Mamma! Seriously, now! Charles Xavier visited my shop? And you didn't think to tell me until now?'

But Edie blinked at him, puzzled-like. 'Well, darling, I know you're a terrible old film-buff. But I didn't know you admired him specially. Otherwise I'm sure I would have thought to tell you straight away. He certainly made a terrific impression on me! Oh, darling, and I think it was mutual! Do you know, he asked if he could adopt me as his new mommy and take me home to the States!' Edie was a good-natured woman, but she was certainly dignified. It wasn't often she giggled: but this was seemingly a special occasion. 'Such a flirt! I said, poor boy, do you not have a mother of your own? And he said, well, technically, but we needn't worry about that.' She paused, contemplative a moment. 'I wonder what he meant. Nothing good, I think. Well, I told him that the position of number one son was filled in my life, of course.'

She reached out and pinched Erik's cheek. 'But that I was always open to additions to the family, and that he must be sure to come and drop in the shop whenever he was in England. So then, of course – really a lovely thoughtful boy, my love – he asked me all about my family, you and Raven and our lovely Jakob – and then I showed him a picture!'
Erik felt faint. 'Mamma. No you didn't. Please. Not the one with the ears, when I was fourteen?'

Edie turned brisk, even a touch contemptuous. 'Oh heavens, love, you think I have no tact at all! No, of course not: the one with the good suit, at your graduation. The very nicest picture I have of you. And then the one of Raven in the dark cream suit, with her all indigo blue in the apricot sunset. So pretty, love, my favourite."

She wasn't speaking to Erik at this point. For Raven had jingled the bell as she stepped through the door of the shop, bag of doughnuts in hand, and no doubt extra pastries as well. Raven just never knew when to stop. Not with anything. As she rushed to kiss Mamma, the bag was dumped in Erik's lap, and he sorted through it absently. He might need sustenance to get through this.

Ray settled at Mamma's feet for want of a chair, and patted her knees. 'What are you talking about, Mamma? Who have you been showing my photo to now? I know you never stop trying to find me a boyfriend, but isn't it a bit early to worry about getting me married off? I'm twenty-one! I haven't even finished my degree yet!'

'Oh darling,' Edie said comfortably. 'I'm only proud of you, and how pretty you are. Where's the harm in that? Although if Mr Xavier did come calling again, I'm quite sure he'd love to meet you. Why wouldn't he?'

Raven went quite still at that: alert as any predator. 'The name, again, Mamma?'

'Charles Xavier, love! You know, the fellow from the films! He was in the shop last week, I was just telling Erik. It was so exciting!' Mamma beamed into space, sinking into a daydream.

'Oh yes,' Raven said. 'I was just making sure.' She turned a little and gave Erik a meaning look, which made his heart sink. 'It certainly must have been exciting. *What a pity you weren't here, Erik!*'

Raven had caught him, a time or two, reading and re-reading certain sections of particular magazines. She had at least once made off with one specially well-worn one. (*Innocent. Perfectly innocent.*) And back in the day he'd taken her along to at least a couple of showings of Xavier's films. Before he'd felt the stirrings of speculation in her trouble-stirring bosom. After that he'd been sure to attend multiple showings solo, and on the quiet. Just so that Raven needn't waste her time cooking up ridiculous theories. He was ever a thoughtful brother.

'Yes, isn't it,' he responded, wooden-faced. And if the coffee-spoons trembled a little, jangling restive in their saucers, well, it was nothing to do with him. Perhaps a passing earthquake.

xxx

Of course Erik spent the next couple of weeks in a frenzy of speculation about a possible second visit to the shop, from American movie stars filming in the beautiful greenery of the English countryside. (And yet handily near enough for trips to the capital.) He had expected nothing else: wasn't fool enough to over-estimate his control over his own fevered brain. Rather, he intended to wait it out, until his brain wrested back the use of a few cells from his embarrassing monomania, and realised no such realization of a fantasy would be forthcoming.

Raven was his main concern, during his few intervals of rational thought that weren't devoted to putting purchases through the till and setting the shop books in order. She didn't say much: but everything she said was a deeply meaningful hint, heavy as a lead weight on the toe. And she looked, she looked plenty.
And then she wanted, on this particular afternoon, to talk him into going out and haunting the environs of the set for Xavier's latest film. Erik knew damn well, if he resisted too hard, they were going to get into a discussion of exactly why it was the worst idea ever. Which God forbid.

'Oh, but why? Why, Erik, why?' Her deliberately high, whining voice drove him crazy, largely by virtue of being designed to do so. 'Hank, can you help me out here? You don't mind minding the shop while we go, do you?'

Hank knew his place, and merely shook his head obediently.

'See, Hank doesn't mind. Erik, I've done all the research, I even know where he's staying: why on earth won't you come with me to track and meet your future boyfriend?' There, first shot across the bows: thank God they only had Hank for a witness.

And Hank, the dear boy, carefully met no-one's eye, and shuffled off behind the stacks. Quiet as a little mouse, twice as timid.

Raven grinned, and swayed over towards him, where he was re-ordering the design and architecture section. She took a mosaic tiling book out of his hand and biffed him lightly across the cheek with it. 'Come on, love, did you think I didn't know? Where's the harm? Let's have a little fun: I'm sure he'd be thrilled to meet us. He already knows our names, and Mamma's adopted him: we're practically old friends before he ever sets eyes on us. Life a little, Erik: you can cherish a pathetic long-distance homosexual pash for, oh, about three years going by your usual habits. Or you can make it an adventure, whether we get to meet him or not.' Resting her cheek on his shoulder, she crooned at him. 'He's lovely, darling, I do admire your taste. If you hadn't got there first I'd be swooning myself. Maybe I should just go chase him myself and come home with him on my arm for Mamma to feed up. What do you think?

Of course it wound up in a huge row. Which, to any outsider, would have looked like a few stiff, choice words and a bit of coolness, nothing too dramatic. But he did hate to be on the outs with his little sister. So he volunteered for the pastry run himself, and got out of the shop.

xxx

Coming back, he'd worked himself up into a terribly bad mood. It wasn't all at Raven: more he was angry with himself for being such an idiot. In fact she was probably right: he was taking himself far too seriously, over a bit of day-dreaming he might as well just treat as a bit of fun, since nothing else was going to come of it. Probably she was right, and he ought to go on a big celebrity hunt with her, get an autograph and chat and remind Charles Xavier of his tea with Mamma. Except he knew perfectly well he wouldn't do it. Was far too reserved and anxious, and would only make the most perfect fool of himself under such circumstances.

Heavens, was he really never going to stop tying himself up in unnecessary agonies?

At the door of the shop he stormed past Hank, loitering outside with a cigarette and a worried expression. The boy was hurriedly jabbering something at him: but considering Hank's conversational staples covered the Goon Show, and the intricacies of his Biology degree course, and not much else, he brushed past and ignored the chuntering.

So he really had no preparation when he swooped in towards the counter, where Raven was serving a customer with her eyebrows raised high. Some fellow chatting to her, to whom she was paying the closest attention, while also telegraphing – something, something wildly urgent by her expression – at Erik.
She took a long breath, and her eyes popped wider, if possible. 'Perhaps my brother might be able to help you?' she suggested, as Erik dumped the pastry bag rather uncivilly down on the side of the counter.

And this chap – in a smooth linen suit, and sharp tieless blue shirt, and the sunglasses no Brit ever bothered with for the sake of three days of sunshine a year – turned towards him.

Oh dear.

xxx

Well, it would be Charles Xavier, wouldn't it? When he had no advance warning (despite Hank's best efforts), and a scowl on his face, and his little sister right there to witness his utter absence of social graces (and remind him of it later).

It only took a fifth of a second to be sure. Mamma's recounting of her tale helped, otherwise he would probably have just assumed he was delusional. The shades didn't help: but no, there was no doubt. It was the object of the last eighteen months' spare time fantasizing, monopolizing of all cultural activities and reading time, and – well – stress relief. He asked his brain to shut up. Everyone did that. It was just you didn't talk about it, that was all.

It was, quite certainly, Charles Xavier. Handsome, flushed, freckled (what?), and... Well. Amazingly short. Not that it mattered. (Although many interviewers and publicists had evidently been more than a little creative with the facts. Five foot ten, Erik's arse.)

And beaming at him as if he was the nicest surprise ever. What a turn up for the books. 'You must be Erik!'

Oh, Mamma. Bless you.
Within the Measure of a Day

Chapter Summary

Erik can totally stay cool, calm and collected meeting his humungous Hollywood crush in person. Can’t he?

Chapter Notes

I cannae honestly believe it's taken me until now to realise that, obviously, chapter titles should be taken from Charles Aznavour's 'She'. My spare braincell was evidently on the blink until now.

I doubt the banns are read prior to a marriage at temple, but it's common Brit parlance amongst non-churchgoers.

He breathed, because it might keep his voice steady, and he didn't want to amuse Raven any more than was inevitable. And he pretended he was Cary Grant. It had never failed him before: and it seemed to be an occasion sorely in need of a second film star on the premises. 'Mr Xavier, isn't it?' he asked, and marvelled at the smoothness of his own tone. There was something wrong with his head: he felt about a million miles away from the actual location of his body, as if he was phoning in the dialogue from some lone star in another galaxy.

And Charles Xavier's wide forehead creased up in concern. Because Erik had wounded him. 'Oh, surely not,' he protested, and that was certainly a faint pout. 'Why, your mother and I are dear, dear friends – already,' he added. 'And after all of the stories she's told me about the pair of you, I feel as if we practically grew up together. Raven and I, you see, were just getting much better acquainted before you arrived, and it didn't even occur to her to mister me. Did it, my love?' he asked.

The accent: it was a long way from the plain mid-West tones or New York vowel-mangling he was most often required to approximate in the movies, when he wasn't playing European or British. Not exactly Brit – Erik was in a position to be a connoisseur, having worked to almost eradicate his German accent, become flawlessly RP in a way Edie sighed over, proud and sad at his earnest efforts at assimilation. But pretty damn close to it: a WASPy Boston Brahmin twang, just subtly over-emphasized, the vowels lengthened, less cleanly clipped and more smoothly drawling. Put him down in the middle of Ascot, or little Lillibet Windsor's tea-parties, and the surrounding dignitaries would take a moment to place that he wasn't quite one of them, though it was a damned close-run thing. And yet the vocabulary was quaint, specialised, unarguably British, and he remembered Xavier had attended both British boarding schools and Oxford.

Raven did a bit of flouncing. Oh, she was clearly enjoying herself immensely. There were going to be words later. 'I'm almost your sister, Charles, why would I call you mister?' And she edged out from behind the till, and cosied up to the man. To the international film star, perhaps Erik should have put it. The incorrigible.. celebrity-hunting... flirtatious... Well. She had better not be after his man, that was all.
And Xavier put his arm around her. And beamed at a flabbergasted, immobilized Erik. 'So, Erik,' he said breezily. 'Charles, then?' 

'Charles,' Erik said weakly. He felt rather as if he'd been hit by a big red bus on the way back to the shop, and maybe that would explain the high-speed fantasy world he was currently living in.

Raven cuddled in some more to Xavier's side (and Erik reminded himself that he loved his little sister. He did. He did. Homicidal impulses or not.) I think Charles has the wrong book,' Raven said, looking a little concerned, but mostly smug. She was also speaking to Erik with her eyes as she talked, and what her eyes said was, brother mine, check me out cuddling your alternate-world boyfriend. Come and get it or I might claim it for myself. 'I did my best, but abnormal psychology and sexual deviancy aren't really my areas of expertise as a bookseller. I did explain, didn't I,' she said, gazing into Charles' eyes solemnly, 'that for real in-depth advice in those areas you probably needed my brother? Well, here he is!'

Erik pulled his glasses off his nose and gave them a quick polish with his handkerchief. This was sibling code: shorthand for 'you die tonight', pretty much. The death glare he was giving her probably got the message across just as well. But it was broken up and distracted by Xavier – well, Charles – gently disengaging from her, and taking Erik's arm instead.

'Shall we?' Charles asked, and Erik felt sorely tempted to say, surely, we shall do anything you like. But, despite the excuse of being in close physical contact with the physical embodiment of half of every secret magazine stash around the shop and his house – that and the fact that his head was about to pop with it – he kept his head, actually. Less said the better, when anything he did say was liable to be utterly inane. A questioning look seemed pretty safe, though, and he tried that. Though most of his concentration was focused on mentally recording every moment of this for posterity. Since he hadn't been given any warning, damn it (Hank's laudable efforts aside), and had not even his old Brownie available for a few quick snaps. If he could have managed to work himself up to suggest it in the first place.

His memory would have to do, and dear God, photographs had in no way prepared him for reality. The eyes, of course: he'd already suspected that if they were stunning in (usually) black and white and on the page, then they would surely decimate him in person. Not wrong there. Every second he was carefully trying not to gawp – no, to be accurate, to gawp without getting caught – at every bit of Xavier that caught his attention, hair and shoulders and arms and ass, cataloguing and filing away for future... reference. The height, he was beginning to feel, was beautifully designed, because obviously he could curl around Xavier comfortably even in his single bed, but the hands, bigger than his, a little rough-hewn and broad and like they could take a hold of someone and re-position them for easier access and comfort and-

Oh dear Lord, the man was halfway through saying something and Erik might as well have been sitting with his head in a bucket for all the idea he had what it was. Panic made his auditory capacity extra sharp now, though. '...so, Otto suggested that a quick scan through Wilhelm Reich might be useful, and though I'm loath to accept advice on so much as changing my socks from the fellow, I have already come across Reich and wasn't altogether unfavourably impressed, what would you say? They were arm in arm, now, and he could only deal with that by refusing to process it at all. Ambling down the nearest aisle, Xavier's attention flicking from row to row of shelves, clearly waiting for him to take charge and shower down bookseller knowledge and experience. He sucked in breath and attempted to get a blooming grip. (Maybe also while getting a very subtle grip on Xavier's arm. Not quite so much that it could possibly cause offence or startlement, or be described as a grope. Just very carefully hovering on the line.)

'So,' he said, breathing carefully and pulling very slightly closer. 'My sister said... you were looking
for, ah, works on abnormal psychology? And sexual deviancy, he thought, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to be the one to bring that up. He brought them up to the psychology section, and stared without seeing, mostly aware they were still in unnecessary physical contact. It wasn’t as if he was going to be the one to pull away.

Oblivious, it seemed, Xavier leaned against him. (Was he imagining?) ‘Well, my new project – Otto Preminger, you know, less said the better, this is the point at which I zip my lips,’ and he mimed deeds to words, ‘it has a brother and sister at the core and there’s a one-sided incestuous obsession heavily implied – perhaps not even implied. Perhaps a suggestion of latent homosexuality too,’ he said thoughtfully, ‘although that would definitely be implicit. I’m thinking perhaps Jung too? A deviant heterosexual obsession containing a flight from inversion?’

Erik’s heart did rather sink at that. Well, of course, if Xavier considered homosexuality in any way deviant or ‘inverted’ or abnormal, or whatever, then he would only be joining most of the rest of the population, probably. His stomach felt a little hollow: but he was a bookseller, and here to sell books. No matter to whom. He unhooked his arm from Xavier’s and unobtrusively eased away, reaching out instead for the shelves. Taking down a couple of volumes, he passed them over one by one. ‘These might be a better fit for your requirements: the Reich’s a study of both normal and pathological sexual response, and the other includes psychopathic and sociopathic personality type studies. It doesn’t sound quite your usual type of film, may I say?’ he risked, watching Xavier’s bent head as he examined the contents page of the first. His haircut was very slightly outgrown, and slid out of shape with the tilt of his head. Erik’s hand itched to push it back.

Xavier was too quick for him to withdraw his gaze and not get caught out staring, but he coughed and averted his face quickly. The smile was dazzling. ‘Oh, yes, Edie mentioned that you’d seen some of my other films,’ he mused, and reached out to touch Erik’s forearm. Friendly, Erik thought uneasily. Just friendly. ‘Your mother’s an absolute sweetheart. I must confess myself rather jealous,’ he said, smiling.

Disarmed, Erik felt the emotional temperature slip up a couple of degrees. No harm in it. (He was absolutely not smiling like a goon, probably.) ‘Oh yes, she mentioned you’d tried to steal her away,’ he said lightly. And, without at all meaning to, or knowing it was coming, he punched Xavier lightly on the forearm in an echo of the other’s action. It was alarmingly easy. If he started getting slack and giving in to sudden impulses, he’d be bending the chap back as if they were doing the tango, sweeping the fellow up against a book-case and trying to kiss him into submission while... yes. Definitely time to regain a little self-control.

Fortunately – dear God – a light, manly, friendly punch was all Xavier could possibly interpret it as. And he laughed pleasantly – with full eye contact, as his eyes sparkled, and Erik felt utter, heart-sinking bonds of infatuation and magic creep around him like cobwebs. Honestly, couldn’t the absolute bastard have had halitosis, or a stoop, or been a rude delinquent and ruffian? It was inconsiderate to be so charming. It surely couldn’t give anyone around him any chance at all to escape with their hearts intact or their minds at peace. ‘Can you blame me?’ Xavier asked easily, running a hand through his hair. ‘Not all of us are so lucky in the maternal department: my own old ma is designed more along the lines of one of those species where mommy dearest eats her young, if they don’t come up to scratch. I was pretty lucky to make it beyond toddler stage.’ His voice wasn’t quite as light on the last observation, and his gaze was a little unfocused. His mind was fairly clearly a million miles away, or maybe a decade or two.

But it was brought back with Raven looming behind them, cups and saucers in her hands. ‘I take it my brother has you up to date with all the latest research on sexual deviation, Charles?’ she asked sweetly. ‘I’m here to rescue you from his terrifying erudition: he’s such an old professor when he gets going! Come and sit down in the back again: we can put Hank to work and see what terrible fictions
Mamma's been telling you about us!

It sounded good to Erik, and he reached out for the cups as Raven shoved them meaningfully at him, twitching an eyebrow as she did so. At least she wasn't openly grinning and rolling her eyes. But Xavier reached out in the same moment that he did, and it seemed that terrible, ridiculous infatuation might make Erik abnormally clumsy. Their hands clashed (warm, alive, strong, really not the moment to be thinking this) and damnation and tarnation, there was hot coffee all down the front of Xavier's sharp tailoring.

Erik didn't actually want to die or anything, but it would have been nice to have a time machine to rewind the last one hundred and eighty seconds.

It would also have been terrific if instinct hadn't kicked in and the cups hadn't been rimmed with gold leaf. It wasn't as if it did any good, Xavier was still soaked. All he'd achieved was an instantaneous exposure of his powers and his mutant status, cups frozen in mid-air. So now, he was a homosexual mutant who'd tipped a hot beverage down his long-time crush. Good god, he might as well call his rabbi and have the banns read immediately, he thought sarcastically to himself, gazing at the carnage. (Possibly a little indecorously, considering its placement.)

A predictable outcry from all three of them went up, and Xavier patted at the damage rather hopelessly, while Raven rushed off. And Erik let the cups sink to join the broken saucers on the ground, carefully and leaving them whole. Not much point in discretion now. He was pretty much short of explanations other than mutation.

He did hope Xavier wasn't a bigot. But he'd long learned you could never rely on it, not with what seemed the nicest people even.

Watching the descent of the crockery, Xavier seemed more interested in them than in his soggy state. 'Fascinating,' he murmured. 'Generalized telekinesis?'

The sick anxiety in the pit of Erik's stomach eased a bit. Academic curiosity was a lot better than instinctive aversion. 'More specialised than that: metals and metallic alloys,' he said, smiling uneasily. He hesitated. 'I don't suppose I have to ask you...'

'Oh, my dear fellow,' Xavier said smoothly, devoting his attention to the mess of his attire. 'I'm the very soul of discretion. It's a disagreeable world out there in many ways, I'm well aware. In fact-

But he didn't have a chance to finish, because Raven was back with them, a dry cloth in hand which she promptly attempted to dab him down with. Sometimes Erik thought Raven just refused to understand the meaning of ladylike.

Xavier swiftly took over mopping-up duties, mouth twitching a bit but admirably sober really. 'Thank you, my love. Not that I'm sure it's going to do the job really. I may have to call my friend and get a ride back to my hotel, I think.'

'Oh, don't say that,' Raven protested. 'Erik hasn't scared you off with his circus tricks, has he? He's perfectly harmless, you know: only chases after me with half the cutlery drawer on my birthday as his party trick.'

'Raven!' Erik warned, scandalised. It did no good: it never did.

'See,' she said, pert and beaming, 'it runs in the family: we're all a bunch of perfectly friendly freaks around here!' And she demonstrated, quick as thought, not her full natural hue but a trace of a delicate lavender flushing her cheeks, eyes flashing gold for the briefest moment.
It didn't exactly thrill Erik to see that Xavier seemed even more fascinated by this – charmed, even – than by his own power. In fact he might conceivably have been a little bit put out. 'Oh, really, that's delightful. You have the full chromatic range, I take it?' Xavier reached out as if to touch her cheek, and really Erik had to step in at that point.

'Oh for God's sake, Raven,' he said sharply. 'Just because I make a mistake doesn't mean you need to go around advertising private matters to all and sundry.' Then he heard the echo in his ears, and winced.

Xavier seemed oblivious to his rudeness. 'Not to worry, old son: I mean to say, your mother was quite free with the family photo album on my last visit. So, your rather wondrous gifts aren't precisely a surprise, or anything, you know: although I must say, terribly impressive in person.' Then he did reach out and stroke Raven's cheek, just a little, making her bridle just as if she was shy. The damned minx. Not as if he didn't know better, or anything.

But of course. Mamma was proud of their every move and quality, and their powers were part of that. Discretion was a foreign concept to her.

At any rate, Xavier sighed and gave his suit a resigned look. 'I think I must admit defeat and say my goodbyes at any rate. Do you have a phone I could possibly use? I'll give Logan a call and get him to pick me up, after purchasing your recommendations, of course,' he said, charming smile flashed politely but a little abstractedly at Erik.

Erik really wanted to protest: but what could he do? Raven, on the other hand, wanted to protest, and went right ahead. 'Oh, don't be silly. All the way back to your hotel just to get cleaned up and change? Erik lives just across the street, and must have something he can lend you. Have a bath! Make him make you lunch! I'm sure it's the least he owes you, after the clumsy clot dumped your drink down you in the first place!'

Thank you, Raven, Erik thought silently. Normally it would have been in the driest, most sarcastic tones, even in his head. But no, just... thank you. Except Xavier looked a little bit doubtful: but only a little bit, like he just needed a tiny amount of persuasion and assurance and geeing along. Which Raven, as always, was more than equipped to provide. Around two minutes and thirty seconds, and she had them at the door of the shop, and Xavier had moved on to only the most token protests.

'Really, are you sure? I admit it would be much more convenient: my hotel's on the other side of the river and I have a couple of appointments this afternoon, so really...'

Raven gave him an actual physical prod between the shoulderblades and pushed him off the doorstep. They might as well have known Charles Xavier their entire lives, Erik thought giddily. 'He makes good fishcakes,' she advised. 'Set him on in the kitchen, run a bath and make him open a bottle of scrumpy. Don't let him get started talking about Heine or aeronautical engineering: you'll never escape. Now get along with you.' She prodded Erik in the shoulder and got him out there too: and he could only hope Xavier hadn't noted the heavily unsubtle wink. And the thumbs up. For God's sake, Raven.

Then she turned her head and whistled – just about - as if Erik's assistant had perception for ultrasonic whistles. 'Bigfoot! Come hither, your services are required! You can clean up the broken shards, I'll man the till. Erik's off on an adventure with our new pal.'

And she winked at both of them as they turned back to her, and Erik cringed, just a bit. Not that Hank took any offence, just straightened up from the wall he was shambling against and stubbed out his cigarette. As he ambled past them, he smirked a little shyly at them both, and whispered, 'My mistress calls!' Their laughter followed his rather ridiculous figure: tight jeans, pampered quiff,
oversized shoulders on his weedy frame. And of course the huge boots: but that was none of Erik's business, for all that he knew things Raven really shouldn't have disclosed.

It was only a little uncomfortable, the walk over. Erik felt too dizzy and unreal to be really nervous: more as if he'd had a couple of lunchtime halves at the Goblin pub before a quiet Friday afternoon's trading, and surfed through the afternoon on ethanol and book-dust fumes. He coughed as they walked, no frog present but a lead-in for what he wanted to say. 'I'm sorry I over-reacted a bit to Raven being, well, Raven. My sister doesn't know the meaning of reticence, I'm afraid.'

Xavier turned as they crossed, hands in pockets. His frequent smile was missing: but he didn't look annoyed. More thoughtful: and he examined Erik a moment or two. 'About your special characteristics? Well, as I say: the cat was already out of the bag on that one. Your sweet mother gave me both your background histories in the utmost detail.' Then he did twinkle a bit. 'The utmost, let me emphasize. There's barely a thing I don't already know about you.'

It seemed almost like a challenge. Or maybe like a piece of flirtation. Erik's cheeks positively burned: and he examined the fascinating asphalt as they stepped up from the road onto the pathway leading up to his house.

Charles didn't appear to notice. 'Edie's rather a force of nature, isn't she? I must confess myself slightly intimidated. As well as positively infatuated, of course.' His hands were stuck in his pockets, and he smiled out into the bustling market street, the cool grey-toned afternoon light.

Erik was most comfortable with Edie as a subject: less confusing altogether. In the two-minute walk up to his house, he reminisced to Xavier about how Edie was once had up in the magistrates' court for breach of the peace, after punching a lady in Debenhams food court. It was due to a rather unpleasant remark. Raven had been in her blue form, and too young to understand the comment. but she had well understood that Mamma would punch dignified church-going bigots in her defence, all right. The magistrate, it turned out, had been - on the quiet - a friend of a friend of Mamma's - Mamma had so many dear loving friends. Significant eye-witness testimony had been mysteriously disregarded. But Mamma was still rather proud of her 'rap sheet' as she delighted in calling it, having misspent part of her youth on a great many Ida Lupino flicks. 'Eight years under the National Socialists, two informant neighbours shot in the back, four months in the camps and not a stain in my record. Six months in England and I'm a menace to society!'

Erik discreetly edited Edie's 'family' version of the story for Xavier's consumption: he had his doubts about its veracity in any case. Surely his gentle Mamma would never... Well. On the other hand he couldn't imagine her countenancing a lie to her children, either.
The Mirror of My Dream

Chapter Summary

It's a dream come true for Erik, having Charles Xavier visit. And when dreams come true it can be terribly, terribly stressful.

Stuttering. Trembling. Inappropriately unguarded and impassioned hints, allusions and outright declarations. These were just a few of the things Erik wanted vehemently to bodyswerve, considering he now had Charles Xavier trapped in his kitchen. (Trapped. Just one sample of the way he was entirely failing to control his brain. Now that had to be nipped in the bud.)

He did a bit of rigorous internal sergeant-major parade-ground yelling in his head. (Not his favourite memory from his period of National Service, as a registered naturalised British citizen. But rather useful now, he found. And also, doing his bit for England had meant more to him even than to Edie.) But it helped him get his priorities straight, in an instant: offer bath! Make lunch! Offer clothes! Do not visibly yearn or drool! Be – oh, how did the awful art-school kids from Goldsmiths and the Chelsea college put it? Raven's semi-pals in their beatnik clothes, sweat-stained turtlenecks and packs of stupid expensive French cigs, in the back pockets of their cold-bath-shrunk Levis? Cool. Frosty, daddio. Smirks on their faces and yearning for mockery, for a sign their lures were taken seriously.

Fat chance anyway. But still, one must make the effort. 'Let me show you the bathroom,' he offered, taking Xavier's jacket – and, oh dear, he'd really gone to town with that tea. 'The water should be nice and hot, we only had the boiler mended last week.' If he'd been trying to give the man an impromptu shower he couldn't have achieved a more thorough drenching.

'Oh, well, if you're sure,' Xavier said ruefully, glancing down at his lovely ruined suit. 'It would be rather wonderful.'

'Don't be silly,' Erik said. 'Come along,' he tutted, and led the way, praying that Az hadn't managed to wreck the joint in the five hours Erik had been absent. Also that that workshy 'resting' actor wasn't – oh God! - home, with nothing to keep him gainfully occupied. But no, the open door of Az's bedroom revealed it empty as Erik came up to it, Xavier following along curiously behind. Erik casually kicked it shut as they passed. God knows what else it might reveal. And the bathroom – also praise be to God – was in the tolerably clean and tidy state he'd left it in that morning, largely due to Az having left for his current casual job before Erik, no doubt. It was still tiny, and functional, and basic, in his narrow little slice of a three story house squashed into a back-street of Notting Hill; but clean and tidy was something.

He fussed around with towels and a new bar of soap and explaining about the dicky tap that required a bit of coddling. (Embarrassing: but, well, better than scalding the fellow as well as soaking him.) Finally he couldn't think of one more damn thing, and edged uncomfortably out of the bathroom, managing only the most flickering eye contact. 'Well, I'll leave you to it and go and start preparing some lunch. I suppose I may as well go with Raven's, er, orders: would fishcakes and salad be all right with you?' He felt himself fidget purposelessly, discomfort and yearning kinetically translated.

'Oh, really, Erik, I'm already trespassing on your hospitality quite embarrassingly, though,' Xavier protested, a serious look in his eye. Erik supposed he had his own personal dietician, and trainer, and whatnot: how else could his skin be so smooth and perfectly tan, the whites of his eyes... Oh,
'dammit, he thought to himself bitterly. *Enough about the eyes already.*

'Erik had been all ready to be politely declined, but he scented insincerity on the air. It was an utterly perfunctory protest, after all. With a touch of something wistful about it. Now he could look *directly* into those magnificent, unparalleled eyes. 'Are you hungry?' he asked simply.

Xavier rolled his eyes. 'Oh, God, starving!' he said, and laughed.

'Erik grinned. 'I'll go start chopping spring onions,' he said. 'And I'll sort out some clothes that are most likely to fit you and leave them outside the door. All right?'

As he hammered crashingly down the rickety, echoing stairs, he felt fairly insanely euphoric. There was a little touch of heightened unreality in everything he could perceive with the senses: the tan kitchen linoleum seemed to shimmer, the chink of coffee cups as he set them out – *must* be more careful this time – resounded and hung echoing in the air. It was all *real*, though, and it was impossible not to be excited, even as he cautioned himself not to ask any more than this one hilarious, ridiculous moment. Charles Xavier was passing through his life, for an hour or two the man would barely remember in a year – perhaps not remember at all. And Erik would no doubt wrap the episode up in lavender and revisit it continually for years.

The reminder made it easier to relax, although despite his best efforts, he couldn't quite shut up one small portion of his brain. That was the one that kept reminding him that it was Charles Xavier - *that* Charles Xavier - perfectly nude and wet and splashing about in his bathroom. (Maybe not with the rubber duck. Or maybe with.) The voice emanating from that part of his brain sounded an awful lot like a breathlessly horny virgin.

Which was fair enough, really.

That wasn't the voice he heard calling to him a couple of minutes later, though. No, this one was deeper, faintly transatlantic, and yet terribly Britishly apologetic. And located up his own back stairs. 'Awfully sorry, Erik, but I've got coffee in my hair, it seems – I simply can't imagine how it got there, it seems to defy the laws of physics utterly – and I can't locate your shampoo. Do you have any idea where I can find it?'

Erik told his feet to stay exactly where the hell they were, and his mouth to direct Xavier *verbally* in his quest. His feet had other ideas, though, and he fairly trotted up the stairs. Of course he wasn't surprised to be greeted by a half-naked and moist Xavier leaning out of the bathroom doorway – why else had he been in such a hurry? But it was difficult to get a really good eyeful when polite discretion was a social necessity. Still, he fully managed to appreciate the view as much as possible: one of Erik's less worn towels linked loosely around Xavier's waist, damp dark hair curling around his brow and ears, droplets of water running down a chest that had evidently been shaven for several key scenes in his cat burglar flick with Ann-Margret. The one with all the *swimming pool* scenes.

It was due a re-run, he thought: he'd definitely be off to study it carefully a *seventeenth* time.

It was probably a good thing that he couldn't just openly stare, slack-jawed: it meant that careful breathing could restrain his state of excitation, as he poked about in the bathroom cabinet, and emerged apologetically with the bottle of Sunsilk. It probably wasn't any better to be visibly averting his eyes as he squeezed out of the room again shyly, but better that than any worse social *faux pas*. The smile he was rewarded with was breathtaking, he could tell even out of his peripheral vision: and it just made him want to blush and run. 'Thank you so much!' Xavier said warmly. 'I'm so sorry to be such a bother.'
'Oh, it's no trouble at all,' Erik mumbled. 'I'll just, er, sort you some clothes out and leave you to it,' he said, voice trailing off into inaudibility, and very nearly did make a run for it. In his bedroom he had to sit down gasping with relief – after such careful control of his breathing – and hear with massive disappointment and thankfulness, the bathroom door shutting once more. And a whole lot of cheery splashing resume. Possibly combined with singing: yes, that was absolutely *I Fall To Pieces*. Patsy Cline, and all her heartbreak and hysteria.

Well. Erik knew precisely how the poor girl felt.
The Famine Or The Feast

Chapter Summary

Erik's plan: make lunch, be cool, don't drool. How badly wrong can something so simple go?

Chapter Notes

Bobby Scott, Ric Marlow, Tony Richardson ref. (depending where you take it from.)

Charles' sunglasses make a special guest-star reappearance. I don't know what they've been up to and I'm not going to enquire.

Sorting out the clothing issue wasn't exactly a piece of cake, but he fudged up a solution somehow. All his suit trousers and regular slacks looked to be too long in the leg. However, at the back of his wardrobe was a very old pair of jeans that Erik used to wear when he was taking care of the garden at his mother's house, before she'd got someone in a few hours a week to leave him more time to take care of the shop. At least Xavier could roll up the leg on those without it looking too ridiculous. The best match for them seemed to be a sweater, and he picked out a thick dark turtleneck, a Christmas gift from Mamma, that was pretty nondescript, but comfortable. He supposed that if you were internationally famous and, ah, not looking your best, you wanted to be as anonymous as possible. Even if you did wind up looking rather like one of Raven's dreadful friends.

Which was a little disconcerting, because true. He was close to finishing up cooking, and knocking together a hot salsa and green salad, when Xavier ambled into the kitchen. He was smiling, but looking a trace self-conscious, toes wiggling on stockinged feet as he planted himself by Erik's side, and leaned up against the kitchen counter.

'So, how do I look?' he asked, pushing a hand with elaborate emphasis through his damp unruly hair, jokey - but a little serious. Vanity went with the job, Erik supposed. How could it not? 'Tell me I'm pretty!'

Erik kept his eyes mostly on his hands and the frying pan, and was amazed at how composed he felt. With a little edge, with a weird unexplained prickle of tears and amusement at his eyes, the warmth of a light flush on his cheeks. 'You look like you're going to burst out declaiming freeform Beat poetry any minute,' he said lightly. 'Or make me look at your artworks of currently unrecognised genius, maybe. Very young.' He brought the fishslice over to his hand, circling round Xavier, and neither of them commented. It was nice to be able to be so easy for once, about his powers.

Xavier eased out of the way as Erik dished up, into the middle of the kitchen. 'My etchings, eh? Oh, well, young never hurts in my game. I'd best not let my agent catch a glimpse, she'll be trying to get me cast as a jazz-crazed teen desperado in a sub-Romeo and Juliet tribute. Thank you so much for the loan, by the way: so kind of you. And it seems Raven was right: your fishcakes smell delicious.'
He did not seem quite at ease, any more than Erik, as Erik ushered him to sit down at the kitchen table. (There was no need to make an embarrassing ceremony of it in the dining room, after all). It was subtle, but there in the flick of his eyes, the sudden withdrawal of smiles. He wasn't so very relaxed: he just acted relaxed really well.

That was all right, and Erik wasn't going to be offended. It was a strange interlude for both of them: just a more memorable one for him, a passing peculiarity for Xavier. He did what he could to make it easier: that was to not pretend that it was anything other than strange. 'I suppose it's a little odd for you to find yourself having lunch with just a regular fan,' he said, aiming for self-deprecation. 'I was going to say 'in the clutches of', but then it just seemed too sinister.'

Raven always said he could be quite respectably funny, and should try it more often. Xavier laughed at least, and said, 'Good choice. That would definitely have been sinister. Would you really call yourself a fan? That's so sweet. Or does my ego just obviously need a little boost, what with suddenly being demoted to twenty year old art student?' He rested his arms on the table, leaned in close, smiling, and it was choking. About eighty-seven reminders so far, that Xavier was a perfectly normal, pleasant, real person, a regular human being just like himself, all of them doing Erik no good at all...

His voice might have been slightly strangled, as he managed a cautious millisecond of eye-contact, and said with a shrug, 'Oh, well, you know, all the films, in the crowd for a couple of premieres, most of the relevant publications...' He let it go, and wondered if he'd struck the right note between disarming fannish candour and light kidding. Probably not. 'Anyway, twenty would be pushing it a bit,' he risked, aiming for a switch in focus. 'Maybe twenty-four. In a dim light, and from a good long distance. Pepper?' he asked, offering the shaker.

But Xavier just froze a moment, then reached his arms up to stretch, linking them behind his head. 'Bloody cheek,' he said, grinning. 'I'll have you know I get carded all the time in bars back home. At least in the places where I tip heavily enough.' He yawned, popped his shoulder audibly, flexed his arm and relaxed, taking the pepper shaker out of Erik's hand. 'Thanks,' he said, and jibed the same shoulder up again a couple of times, wincing. 'Old war wound,' he explained to Erik, who was busy trying not to look openly transfixed. 'If you can call getting thrown off a horse during filming, because someone decided to test and see if the decorative Civil War armaments from props worked, a war wound. Considering my co-star at the time - I don't mean the horse, it was much nicer-mannered - it certainly felt like warfare.'

His gaze flickered over Erik's face, and his smile didn't seem to have much to do with anything he said. Erik supposed it must feel nice to charm everyone you came into contact with: unless you just got used to it. Or maybe you got addicted to it, couldn't do without it.

That was how it went, chit-chat and movie anecdotes and a little gentle probing about Erik's life. Erik brushed it off: there was too much he didn't want to talk about, and none of it was as interesting as Xavier was to him. And there was tension about saying something stupid any minute, and carefully observing everything about that face, up so close like he'd never expected and alive with expressions and thoughts that couldn't be predicted from multiple previous viewings. And anxiety about table manners transgressions, about betraying himself stupidly, and about time ticking by. Mostly about that last, but not so much about the finite amount of time itself, however he might be grasping onto every second.

Nothing was going to happen, he felt no particular sorrow at the loss of any specious opportunity. He just didn't want to let moments slip away, unrecorded in his memory so that he couldn't bring them back at will. They slipped away anyway, and finally he was drying up plates while Xavier washed up, chatting with his face screwed into the sunshine from the backyard window. (And didn't
that make Erik want to giggle like a girl. Charles Xavier doing the washing-up (after some insistence) after a meal in his kitchen, and talking (at some prodding from Erik) about why he'd wound up in Hollywood, at a point where he was supposed to be halfway through a genetics doctorate at Cambridge.)

'...so then they wrote in more lines for the bit-part in the musical we don't talk about, and of course I had Moira as my agent by that time, just as a matter of course. I'd told her I was going back to Cambridge after filming, to which her response was, 'Of course you are, darling. Maybe you'd just like to attend the eight casting calls I have lined up for you before you go. What harm can it do?' He smiled ruefully, carefully squeezed the last cup in the drainer, tipped the water out and dried his hands. 'And the rest is a tragic and sordid history of wasted potential. Footlights when I started my doc, and a bit of extra work for a laugh: really,' he mused, 'you have to be so careful about the little things that don't mean a thing at the time. It's not the obvious major hazards that throw you off course. It's the tiny insignificant things that couldn't possibly trip you up.'

Erik was all done too. Nothing more to dry, nothing more to offer. He stood and his hands hung. 'I don't suppose your potential has been wasted, to the people who enjoy your films,' he said.

'I'd like to think not,' Xavier said, but his smile was wry. 'In any case...' And Erik wasn't an idiot. He could recognise a natural stopping point, and the prelude to farewells and thank-yous, just as well as anyone. He'd been naturalised in Brit social niceties, as well as accent and tastes.

He absolutely could hardly bear the thought of doing it, but on the other hand he knew he'd never forgive himself if he didn't. Fidgeting and awkward, he cleared his throat and jumped in. 'Ah, I feel an awful fool for asking you, but, ah, well, would you mind awfully, um, signing a couple of things? I realise it makes me a bit of an idiot, after this morning, and you know my mother, and, well...' Good God he'd utterly lost his way on that, and his gaze flinched as he was aware of his cheeks burning.

But Xavier just reached out and tapped his wrist, beamed at him. 'Anything you like, love. When I haven't signed anything for too long my ego gets itchy and whiny, anyway. What have you got?'

Erik's shoulders relaxed (because even if Erik was an idiot, Xavier was seemingly terribly good with idiots, and could ease any social awkwardness with a charm that really ought to be patented, canned and sold on supermarket shelves.) And he muttered something about just a minute and only a couple of things, and ducked out of the kitchen to rummage around in the front room. That was where he kept the things - a film poster he'd coaxed out of the local cinema manager, and a programme from an early theatre production he'd bargained off another fan - that he'd always had in mind to get signed by Xavier, given the opportunity.

Well, here it was, and he really ought to be happier about it. Enough was never quite enough, that was all. Taste of honey, and all that.

Except, dammit, despite his perfectly sound (and maybe obsessive) organisational skills - these things weren't where they were supposed to be. And the whole cupboard looked like a bomb had hit, completely rumpled, disordered and disorganized. What the hell? Oh God, no doubt Az had been searching for something, and left chaos in his wake. Just at the worst possible time.

As Erik shoved bad-temperedly around the shelves - because they had to be here somewhere, amongst the disorder and debris - there was a step behind him. 'Mislaid something?' Xavier asked, and he did sound a little bit amused. No doubt at the fond foolish idiot making such a drama out of something and nothing.

Erik raised his head and straightened up, resigned. There was no way he was going to be able to find
those things within a socially acceptable span of time. It wasn't as if he could reasonably hold Xavier up. The man must have better places to be. 'I'm afraid so,' he said, smiling stiffly, but his bitterness and indignation easing - instantly - at the warmth in Xavier's face. 'My lackadaisical housemate has been exerting his talents on my filing system. End result, nothing where it's supposed to be, and three months of re-sorting everything, I don't doubt.'

'Not to worry,' Xavier said easily, one hand in his - Erik's - jeans pocket, the other toying with his reappeared sunglasses, swinging gently from a sturdy forefinger. 'I can always sign them another time, when they finally turn up.'

'Yes, that would be nice,' Erik agreed. And, a likely story, he thought. He wasn't young enough to believe in fairy tales that were never going to happen. Xavier was going to forget his existence - and Raven, and perhaps his mother, even - as soon as he was out of that door. Not that the fellow didn't probably mean it completely and sincerely, in the moment, Erik thought warmly, and felt his smile grow.

'Is there anything else I could sign for you?' Xavier suggested, looking a little bit concerned. 'I feel awfully useless, and after all your kindness, too.'

'Yes,' Erik agreed. 'I've been awfully kind and generous with the tea today. Positively liberal with it, you might say.' It was really lovely to make Xavier laugh. Damn programmes and autographs to hell anyway, they didn't mean much in comparison. Not that he wouldn't have liked a memento, he thought wistfully. He really would. Although he could think of better things than an autograph.

Although possibly better not to think about that, because if he did start to think about that, then the results could get pretty awkward. A kiss, for instance, he would cherish that, that would be about a thousand times better than an autograph. His gaze flicked over Xavier's still twitching mouth and skittered shyly away.

That was a start, of course. Because - and this was why it was bad to even begin thinking along these lines - if he was really, flayingly, excruciatingly honest with himself about it, then undoubtedly the best, most memorable, most intensely satisfying memento of Xavier's comet-like intrusion, flight and exit across the sky of his existence - would be sucking his cock.

Well, if you can't be perfectly honest in your own mind - as long as you're not socially oblivious enough to say any of it out loud - then where can you be?

And now, now he realised that Xavier was staring at him, quite as transfixed as he'd ever been in reverse.

'Oh,' said Xavier.
A Trace of Pleasure or Regret

Chapter Summary

Erik gets a souvenir. It ain't a stick of Blackpool rock...

... 

... 

...exactly.

And that was how Erik came to be administering a fairly amateur-hour blow-job, three minutes later, to an internationally famous playboy and filmstar, in his poorly-lit and slightly disordered front room.

Or, to be accurate, it was one stage in a sequence, which he was entirely failing to understand. Oh, he could recollect it, just fine: he just didn't understand how the heck they'd got to this point, in under one hundred and eighty seconds.

And, let it be said, and said loud: he wasn't complaining. He just didn't understand.

There was the kiss, to begin with, Xavier drawing closer, slow but not slow enough not to fog Erik's mind. And that while he thought at an insane speed, no, no, this can't be what it seems to be. 'So is this okay?' Xavier murmured softly, too close – all at once – for any pretence of clumsiness or lack of intentionality.

Erik rather supposed he must have nodded, or something: he hardly knew. Xavier spoke as if they were continuing a conversation: but what? And, pulled down into a kiss, he disremembered where he'd put his head, or what he'd ever thought about anything ever. He hadn't had this – not anything like it – often enough, to be able to lay hands on his brain during it. So any notions of control, or thinking about anything, were as academic as could be. There was no control going on, and certainly no thinking: he opened up, that was all, body, mind, heart. And all the rest was a lot beyond his control, acres and acres beyond.

Only, he was vaguely aware of whimpering a bit when, no, Xavier pulled away, drew back, no, and resisted, hands on Erik's shoulders, when Erik tried to push back in again.

No. (He wasn't entirely sure where that one came from.)

But then like a guide, like a focus, Xavier's eyes pulled him back in again, gave him an anchor to concentrate on, a compass to navigate by. And the pressure on his shoulders was different: downwards, not backwards, but only slight. A question, not a demand. Xavier smiled, and eased up closer. 'Well?' he breathed in Erik's ear. 'What do you think?'

What the hell are you talking about, would have been the... easy, and glib, and extremely dishonest answer.

Erik knew perfectly well what they were talking about. And sliding to his knees was so easy, he might have done it more than twice ever previously. Undoing Xavier's fly – his, his jeans, after all! - might have been the last intolerable shy-making step, a hurdle he couldn't vault. But Xavier was
there before him, so that was all right.

Erik had only sucked cock twice before, once with one of his final year undergrad college tutors. The chap hadn't been especially attractive, but Erik was curious, and knew the fellow would keep his mouth shut, if only out of self-interest. Mostly, it had been harder work and more uncomfortable than he expected, as well as very short on any kind of comfort or affection or even rudimentary civility afterwards.

The second time had been at a works party, before he took over the shop from Uncle Sylvester, amongst a crowd with a certain reputation. Once he'd got what he was looking for, the man who'd homed in on Erik disappeared, and then later got the same service from someone else. It was immensely casual, and very depressing to Erik.

Always, since he'd had knowledge and understanding, he'd had a phobia of cottaging. The fear was of criminal prosecution, of the shame and danger for his family. The thought of any harm coming to them, as a consequence of his nature, was unacceptable.

This – in the realm of fantasy, utterly unreal, nothing he could recognise except as his own id's wish-fulfilment – was quite different. He was in such a dream he couldn't concentrate, couldn't focus, couldn't follow a sequential time-path: couldn't remember making a beginning. He was just here, and Xavier's cock in his mouth, hard and roused and urgent, and he was making no doubt a horrible hash of a job that who knew how many had done much, much better.

'No, no, you're doing fine, love,' Xavier assured him, breathlessly, and probably the accompanying hip-jerks were unintentional, from the loss of concentration resulting from trying to talk at the same time. Erik didn't mind.

'In fact, you're doing awfully well. Naturally talented, perhaps,' Xavier continued. Then he seemed to lose coherence, and Erik was so pleased by the praise he didn't care enough to try to maintain a decorous self-effacing servility. Instead he ran a free hand – the one not clutching onto a jeans-clad thigh, straying sideways in a shy little aborted attempt at a caress – and ran it over his own hair. There at the back, that was where it was too long, the reason why Raven had been nagging him the past three weeks about the barbers. He didn't care how sluttily exhibitionist it might look: nothing was ever going to be better than this. His jaw ached, and he was ready to choke on salt bitterness, and frankly he could have done with less gentle mannerliness, and it was still wonderful.

Though Xavier seemed to get the point, and slid a hand round his head, trapping his own, pulled him closer, held his skull still as he slid into it. Erik didn't want any more control than that, and had none. He was thinking only that he wished he'd dispensed with the minimal practice he'd had prior to this and let this be his first time, because it so nearly was after all, and he would have liked it to be.

'Christ, darling, you have to stop thinking like that,' Xavier said. That was a lot closer to a rolling growl than Erik could bear, unable to get a hand down to his own fly with Xavier having captured both of his. 'Because I'm never going to last another minute, and, well, there you see,' he panted, and Erik hadn't quite expected him to come yet, wasn't quite ready. Not that he didn't make a creditable enough effort, to swallow it down. (And, by Christ, twice before was never going to be enough habituation not to cough, watery-eyed, at the taste. But that was hardly the most important thing at the moment, nor enough to douse the elation, like a burning coal bumping against his ribs.)

Erik took some weight, and liked taking it, Xavier's hands heavy on his shoulders as the first and last fierce waves of coming ran through his body. He gasped out, loud and uneven and unsteady, some distinctly uncivilised, un-WASPy things that pleased Erik very much to hear. You didn't hear that in any of those charming, polite, glittering screenplays. Then – reluctantly removing his mouth as Xavier winced and gasped with tenderness – Erik finally settled back on his knees, weight back,
eyes down. Everything was still utterly shot through with unreality. That had really just happened: he just had a little trouble convincing himself.

There was a little moment of quiet, and then Xavier said – voice a bit hoarse – ‘I’m awfully sorry about that. I swear to God I usually have better control.’ He reached for Erik’s hand again, and Erik gave it, and allowed himself to be pulled up. He felt rather a bride, hand in hand there and the nuptials over: no harm in a little extra fantasy, to add to the dreamworld he appeared to be living in.

He felt the flush on his face as their eyes met, but shyness couldn't last long. It was corroded like acid on metal, or maybe on lightly flowered gauze veiling, as Xavier pulled him in, face serious and purposive. Another kiss, then: but, ‘Sorry for what?’ Erik managed to murmur, before their mouths met and he was too busy committing this to memory.

Nothing about that had not been perfect. He had his souvenir.

And Xavier pulled away just a little – breathing hard, seeming impossibly as stirred as Erik – adjusted his attire a bit, and said, ‘Oh, darling, we're not done yet.’ The little push backwards was unexpected: and even when his brain processed it and understood, he didn't understand. Because Xavier was rather firmly guiding him backwards towards the sofa: and the reason for that that immediately sprung to mind couldn't, well, couldn't possibly be the reason.

Maybe, maybe a nice quiet sit down, he thought dazedly: a period of recovery and reflection, after a very intense experience. Except Xavier wasn’t sitting him down. No, he was very swiftly and efficiently manoeuvred into lying down, instead, as far as possible, his legs hanging off the end of the short two-seater sofa. And Xavier explained, as he climbed over Erik and edged further down his body, perching carefully on really insufficient square footage. Explained, but how much use was that, when the roar in Erik’s ears merely announced oh good God and Xavier! and climbing on top of me!

‘Now I don’t object a bit to getting on my knees normally, love,’ Xavier said chattily, as he eased in between Erik’s legs. He took swift hands to Erik's fly, that Erik couldn't but flinchingly reach to stop, before he asked himself what the hell he was doing. ‘But you see, my last flick but one, I had to re-take that slalom scene eighteen times, and that bastard Preminger wouldn't use a double. My knees are shot: they haven't been at all the same since.’

Erik was fully hard already: had been for quite some time now. But it was one thing as a discreet bulge in his slacks that he intended to take care of himself later: entirely another laid out for Xavier's inspection. An inspection that involved a raised eyebrow and a faintly startled expression.

And then Xavier took a breath and adopted a look of resolve, saying, ‘Oh well, I do like a challenge.’

And what Erik mostly liked, or would have, was a bit of warning, because, all right, he entirely should have been ready for this but he so very much wasn't. How on earth could he be expected to be? Barely any preparation or finessing was involved: Xavier just ran a hand firmly down his shaft to the base – and he couldn't at all help the loud groan that yanked out of him – and then dived like a labrador that's just been shouted at not to go swim in the lake.

If it was remotely any kind of a possibility, he might have attempted to maintain some kind of decorum, limit whines and yelps to a bare minimum, keep his pelvis frozen. To merely gratefully accept Xavier's impossibly unexpected and blissful ministrations. (Especially, impossible.) But it clearly wasn't possible, so he didn't even try, probably wisest since the attempt would have been surely doomed. It wasn't, after all, just a matter of Xavier sucking his cock: but also the first time anyone had sucked him. What was a boy supposed to do, affect an air of sang-froid and criticise an international star's tongue technique? Which was... well, how was he supposed to know or judge?
He only knew that watching was intolerable and wonderful, as Xavier sucked him down almost to the root and then travelled slowly back up, all the while meeting Erik's eye with what was utterly an evil twinkle in his own.

But Erik had never had a full blowjob, or indeed any. The second fellow of his experience, the one at the rather sordid party, he had finished Erik off by hand – acting as if it was the greatest favour – after observing that both sucking and swallowing were disgusting and something he just didn't do. (After Erik had got off his own knees and wiped his mouth.) Xavier, on the other hand...

Well, something was wrong, because Xavier had stilled completely, and there was a look of red-faced shock about him, and he wasn't meeting Erik's eye any more.

Erik let go of the velour cushion he was gripping, and hit himself in the head. Obviously he'd done something wrong. Obviously he'd just gone and ruined what was easily the best thing ever to happen ever. God damn. But then, a voice – Xavier's voice – said to him, 'Calm down, love. I was just a bit shocked, is all. What an absolutely rude cock of a fellow.' And the incongruity, the heavy dose of Brit vernacular contained within that genteel upper-crust Eastern Seaboard accent, it almost distracted him.

Almost, but not quite. Because what it nearly distracted him from, was the fact that Xavier wasn't speaking. His mouth, after all, was still otherwise occupied. And yet he was... which meant he was... That was definitely the beginnings of a grin on Xavier's face, as far as was possible given the logistics.

'Go on. You'll get there, you can do it,' Xavier encouraged him – a warm, gentle voice, easing into his mind like melted caramel round the crannies of a scoop of vanilla icecream.

'You're a telepath!' Erik gasped, and got a splutter of a stifled laugh in return for his brilliant deduction. And a renewed assault on his cock, which fractured all attempts to turn over and examine the realisation, that had of course been evident for, oh, many minutes now. But Erik thought that he could be excused for missing it, for the inability to concentrate.

Nor could he think any better now, not with Xavier's mouth wet on his dick and the feeling of being about to come gaining urgency. Not as Xavier gripped his hand and murmured comforting, filthy things into his mind, as Erik watched his lips firm and lock around Erik and his Adam's apple jerk like a diving duck as he swallowed down Erik's seed, swallowed and swallowed. Like it wasn't disgusting at all: rather as if he liked it.

It took a good five minutes afterwards: after Xavier rearranged them, cleaned him up, settled in beside him and kissed him again, thorough and pleased and maybe a bit smug, for Erik to wonder about all the metal implements in the house.

Well, if he had to shell out for fresh sets, of the everyday and the guest cutlery both, it seemed a price entirely worth paying.
So Private And So Proud

Chapter Summary

Noffink 'appens.


Chapter Notes

ETA: sanctions, not strictures. jfc, words are important.

And when someone came hammering at the door ten minutes later, he didn't want to know anything about it. His eyes were closed, he was quietly curled into the body that was curled around his, and he considered just pretending he was asleep.

They'd had a good ten minutes, though, excellent. It was more important, Erik thought, in a way, than what came before. Well, as good as, anyway. Quiet murmurs and holding each other, sudden smiles of discovery and realisation. And first of all, the gentle enquiry of Xavier's – well, Charles', perhaps, really, at this point – mind against his own. Do you mind? Charles asked, gentle but confident, the same excitement making the internal voice pop and fizz, something like the way he was feeling himself inside his skin. And Erik wanted, rather, to tell Charles to make himself free – drop in anytime, wander the corridors of my mind.

But there was too much to give him pause, and he knew what could be found in those corridors. Deeper tunnels, a labyrinth, dungeons eventually. There were monsters, a Styx, a minotaur down below. Places he tended not to visit himself, as far as he could help it.

If there was one thing he didn't want, it was Charles going on a walking tour through his head. There were things in there – well. Things he wished – often – not to know himself. As for someone whose good opinion he valued, well heaven forfend. It was a conflict, unarguably: but after a moment, he said, stiffly, his eyes drifting away to the far wall, its anaglypta and dark grey gloss paint, 'I'd rather you didn't. If you don't mind.' That last, phrased as a question, was clearly anything but, and he wished he'd searched a moment longer, tried harder for something less abrupt.

It created an awkwardness, certainly. And even without familiarity with the sensation, he could feel it: the hurried withdrawal of even the slightest tendril of Charles' mind from his. Wait, don't go, I didn't mean that much, nothing so drastic, he wanted to say. But he clamped his lips together against the protest. It was better thus. No risks, no nasty discoveries. There wasn't only himself to think of.

'I'm so sorry,' Charles said, and there was a little catch in it. 'With, well, before, you know, it seemed as if you were comfortable with it, but I shouldn't have just assumed. I should certainly have discussed it with you first.'

It shouldn't have necessitated a physical withdrawal, and didn't, exactly. But they were there with
their arms around each other – enough it itself to make him dizzy – and both of them were suddenly aware of it. (Erik also aware of the horrendously stiff and scratchy sage-green sofa coverings, that the entire room was overdue a good dusting, of Uncle Sylvester's fondness for old-fashioned moss green velvet drapes.) There was a little involuntary shift back and apart, on both sides, a covert withdrawal. All wrong, quite wrong and unacceptably unnecessary. And with decision he resisted, moved in again closer, pulling in hard against Xavier's warmth, and the scent of something that probably cost eight guineas a pop on his neck. 'Well, you did,' he said, more reasonably. 'I didn't mind before. I just – I'm a little bit uncomfortable with it now. If you don't mind.' The wording, the same: but tone could do a lot.

Xavier relaxed against him. And if they weren't quite cheek against cheek, as Erik stared sightlessly at godawful ugly cushion covers that must be replaced with all speed... then it was near enough to feel the warmth.

'All right. Okay,' Xavier said. And touched Erik's hair, awfully light but perceptible: one more on the list of things to remember.

That breached the physical distance, but they weren't quite back on the same footing. Erik was conscious of the polite loneliness in his head, and wondered if Xavier thought him fearfully rude, after everything. After all their easy conversation, and abrupt intimacy, it was awfully quiet, the two of them lying there. But he made the best of it: more than he could reasonably have expected, after all. And then, the godawful hammering at the door.

'Are you expecting anyone?' Charles asked softly in his ear. But the hammering transferred to the window, a shade against the drawn curtains. And then there was something more than odd about it, because it was associated, for Erik, with a highly detailed metallic mass, and Erik had a strong feeling that a) he didn't like people trying to break down his glaziering, and b) there was something he could do about it. So he did.

A deep, throaty, angry squawk came through the badly glazed windows, their elderly frames. (God, everything on the house needed attending to. Useful bequeathments aside, the place was a money pit and going to eat up the profits from the shop this year.) 'Hey! What the hell! Who is doing that, let me the hell go, and there's going to be a ruckus otherwise! Also, Charles? Get the hell out of there, whatever and whoever you happen to be doing!'

'Oh, good God,' Charles muttered. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut, but now he opened them, and looked directly into Erik's. It was still something of a jolt, that blue. 'Ah, that's, what you might call my keeper. Security staff. Personal assistant. Some combination of those three.'

Erik stared back at him, mostly conscious that they were huddled together on his couch, whispering like a couple of kids with a secret. The thrill was something he might never get over.

'And is there a reason why he's covered all over in metal?' he asked, still whispering. He genuinely wanted to know: but also liked that top secret treehouse club feeling, and strongly felt he wouldn't mind some more of it, strongly approved it, liked being part of special secret him 'n' Xavier.

'Not covered,' Charles whispered back. 'It's his skeleton: he's a mutant who can heal from pretty much anything, and via a very long story, his skeleton is completely covered in adamantium. Well, basically, what happened:'

But he was arrested in the long story, because there was a roar from outside. 'I'm right here! And my hearing is excellent! And however you're doing it, let me the hell go or the entire street is going to know about it!'
Oh, oops. Erik had quite forgotten about that. He released Charles’ – keeper? What was that all about? There was a wordless roar of approval, at that – still a trifle indignant – and then a word of advice. 'Okay, Charles, and whatever little friend you've made – you'd better let me in. On pain of publicity, bub: and also other sanctions and penalties I've got at my disposal. You know what I'm talking about, Charlie.'

'Oh hell,' Charles murmured. 'I'd better go talk to him.' And Erik stirred, and so did Charles, and then they were awkwardly getting up, and smoothing themselves down, straightening their hair, and Erik answered the door.

The man on his doorstep brought Mamma to mind immediately, because there was really only one person this could be. What had Mamma said? Big sideburns... metallic attachments... oh, and a handsome fellow.

He really had to make sure Mamma and this fellow didn't have the pleasure of meeting up again.
Where She Goes

Chapter Summary

A bit of standing about on a draughty doorstep.

Charles actually is a slut. Logan seems to think so anyway.

Chapter Notes

'Those Magnificent Men In Their Flying Machines' ref.

So this was Logan. They eyed each other carefully, a fraction of a second: then Erik said – politely – 'Can I help you?'

There was a zing in the air – like an avalanche of coppers roaring out of a fruit machine – and this wolf-man, this disreputable looking type – for all that his tailoring was quite as nice as Charles' – nodded at him, and began to examine the manicure of one hand, with the blades he'd just shaken out of the fingers of the other.

'Bub. … Lehnsherr, right? I believe you have an item belonging to me in there.' He jerked his head at the shadows of the hallway. Erik could hear some rustling and muttering from the front room: Charles gathering together his possessions? 'Your sister – nice kid, she needs to tone it down though – sent me over here to retrieve it.'

Erik really, really didn't care for the proprietorial tone. Or the still more proprietorial words. And Charles, right then, eased up beside him, bag in hand with his mangled suit inside it. There was a hand on Erik's bicep, gentle, claiming his attention back from his stiff disapproval of the interloper. 'He doesn't mean what you're thinking, Erik. Or,' Charles amended, as their eyes met, 'What you must be thinking. Because,' and here he put his hands up in the air, all expressive of innocence, good intentions, 'I mind my manners. It's the only thing my mother taught me, and I take it very seriously as result.'

There was a dry cough, theatrical as a drag from a shepherd's crook offstage. 'Charlie. The hell you wearing?'

Charles looked down – at the rolled-up jeans, the turtleneck, the utterly unsuited Italian loafers. 'Ah yes.' He looked back at Logan, and there was a whole silent conversation going on there. No doubt literally, Erik thought, with a sudden sour dislike of Xavier sharing that particular intimacy with anyone else.

Logan re-sheathed his blades – his blades, good God – and Erik grimaced as the savage mouthed a drop of blood from one finger-tip. He shook his head at Charles. 'Why am I not surprised? You manage to shake me off for an afternoon, and now there's a change of clothes and a new friend.' The last two words got a very heavy emphasis, delivered with a heavy hand, and Logan turned his attention to Erik's face. 'Well. Pretty enough. If you like that sort of thing. Bit of a tight-ass for your
usual style, isn't he, Charlie? That whole *repressed Brit librarian in eyeglasses* thing?

Erik felt his face tighten – and he was about to open his mouth and issue a few choice observations of his own, because there was a *limit*, and this ruffian had reached it. But Logan grinned, appreciative, and stuck his hand out – all sheathed, but Erik examined it warily. 'Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. Logan Howlett, pal, shake my hand. I don't bite, or only upon request. And I never slice and dice a personal friend, and any kid of Edie's comes under that category. You'll be Erik, right?

Well. Since his mother had been unwise enough to befriend the lout, Erik could scarcely rebuke him. He shook reluctantly, and Howlett's handshake was a bizarre and dramatic flourish. Probably to point up that they were *jolly good friends* now – unfortunately – and no show of strength and dominance was proffered or required.

'Your mother's a doll, bud,' Logan then said, craning in earnestly. This must have presumably provoked an entirely natural and unconscious response in Erik, showing up in his face. Because Logan backed off half a step and threw his hands up. 'Hey, in a very respectful way!' he said, and laughed, and gave Erik a scrutinizing look. 'I take it you're the one who had some fun putting me through a few tricks just now? Lucky there was no-one around, pal: I was *sailing through the air with the greatest of ease*. I take it you're one of us circus freaks?'

Dammit. Erik didn't feel like apologising. Not to this fellow. Who had some apparent non-specific claim upon Charles. 'I'm sorry about that,' he said stiffly. 'I was concerned you were about to put my window through. And yes, I do have certain *aptitudes*,' he said, with careful emphasis. A well-placed euphemism was never out of place, Erik strongly felt.

'Mutant,' Logan nodded, total approval in every line as he rocked on his feet. 'Could have lots of fun with that, bub. You and me, light entertainment, novelty act, we could make a lot of money.'

'Stop harassing the man, Logan,' Charles said, and his hand was on Erik again, and Erik clamped his own down on it. He had a claim of his own, of a kind, after all. He was pretty sure – pretty sure – there were some intimacies Logan wasn't privy to. 'I take it you had some reason for disturbing us?' There was something arch and meaning in it: especially the *disturbing* part.

Logan grinned, unsympathetic. 'God forbid I interrupt you getting some, Charlie.' His tone turned businesslike. 'But anyway. They've fucked up the contract for the site and we have to be out by six p.m. tomorrow. Which leaves less than twenty-four hours to pack the rest of the schedule into.'

Charles hissed a bit, chewed at fingernails Erik noticed suddenly were less than kempt: professional care battling occasional savage attacks. 'Can't be done, Logan. Can't be done.'

Logan looked like he enjoyed being the bearer of bad news. 'Yeah, sure it can. Everything's re-scheduled: it just means you kissing a sweet goodbye to any prospect of sleep until some time tomorrow night. Speaking of goodbyes... and kissing...' and oh, that grin was sly, 'you'd better hand me that bag, make your excuses and come alonga me, sonny. We've got to skedaddle. Want me to give you two lovebirds a moment alone?'

Erik might have almost kissed him for that – sidies and all – but for the fact that the offer clearly involved as much malice as tact. And it did them no good in any case. Because Charles turned to him – brow creased up with something like worry, something like puzzlement – and beneath it nothing he could read. Something *there*, but nothing he could read, and nothing he was being told. *Speak to me*, he wanted to say, *any way you like*, and all they did was stare at each other.

And then Raven ran into the alley the house backed upon, and rushed up to them grinning, and all
the meaningful silence was silenced.
you want me to act like we've never kissed

Chapter Summary

Az is, like, the world's worst at passing messages on.

Chapter Notes

Title from Patsy Cline's 'I Fall To Pieces'.

She was all over Charles, blond-form and laughing and quite lovely, while making pop-eyed
significant faces at Erik which she presumably thought were terribly discreet.

'Here's the wanted fugitive! I sent Logan over here to find out if Erik had locked you in his dungeon,'
she said agreeably, hanging off Charles' arm in the most propertorial manner. That, with Erik giving
her death-ray eyes as discreetly as he could manage, considering Howlett was giving them all a
thorough inspection that struck him as both amused and very, very shrewd. 'Then I thought I'd better
make sure he didn't lock Logan away too.'

'You did right, girlie,' Logan said. 'You didn't warn me what his parlour trick was: your brother had
me hanging round this street like a balloon at a kids' party. Now, it's been a pleasure to meet you
guys – hasn't it, Charlie?' he asked, with the most meaning and unsubtle look at his charge, a jerk of
the head, a reptilian twitch and narrowing of the eyes. Charles gave him quite a startling evil look
back. 'But we gotta vamoose. Ain't that right?' He and Charles exchanged looks some more, and
then Charles sighed.

'Unfortunately so,' he conceded, and turned first to Raven: perhaps because she still had her best
attempt at a stranglehold on him. 'But I certainly hope we'll meet again quite soon: not that I want to
be angling for an open invitation...' His smile was very, very charming, and the look up through his
lashes positively sly. It was all that was necessary: and had Raven squealing assurances, while he
turned and gave Erik a sharper, quite unsmiling look.

And couldn't the damned man just look at him and know there was at least a temporary cessation of
all bans and strictures on mental communications? Why couldn't he just say whatever it was he was
looking: because, after all, it wasn't as if it was Erik who was the mind-reader?

But no – he just reached out and shook Erik by the hand. (By the hand!) And kissed Raven's cheek,
before she grabbed and kissed him on the mouth. (Dear god, Raven! And also, how dare she?) And
then – Erik couldn't quite work out how it had happened. But in a mess and maze of chatter and
goodbyes, another handshake from Logan and he also being harassed with hugs and kisses (from
Raven: from Raven of course), they were gone. Quite gone, and quite sudden, unrecoverable in a
way Erik had trouble reconciling himself to.

The street seemed awfully quiet. Raven ran after them, as they climbed into a discreet Bentley driven
by Logan, and waved. But Erik didn't. It would have felt – well, it shouldn't have felt pathetic. He
should have been able to keep his spirits up and wish the fellow well and goodbye. It just wasn't
quite that easy.

He felt quite dispirited, all through Raven and Hank's excitement, for the rest of the day. And the rest of the week, as he of course waited for a call, a visit, that never came.

xxx

A week and a half later, and by then he'd stopped – no, that was a lie. About three quarters of Erik was still coming up with stories. Stories about how a week and a half wasn't really all that long, not when you thought about it carefully, and did some mental nudging to fudge the figures. That was even with the shop, and his Mamma (who had been thrilled with her highly edited recounted version of Xavier's second visit), and Raven, and even Az to take his mind off it.

Especially Az. Az was driving him crazy, which in an odd way he was quite grateful for, when he stopped to think about it.

But mostly, just making him crazy. What with signing up for token two-line parts in police dramas, as the standard malign and untrustworthy visible mutant arousing constabulary suspicion. (Erik very much wished he wouldn't. Dixon of Dock Green was one of Mamma's favourites, and it would only upset her to see a stylized and hostile representation of mutants. Also, a raised profile and higher visibility was not, he strongly felt, a good thing. Let them all lead a quiet life, might they not? Attract no attention to themselves, be good and untroublesome citizens. Integration without inflammation, that was the thing.)

But if only that was all. He'd still not got any better about not leaving the house like a hurricane had just passed through. (And his mode of transportation was no excuse at all. He had perfect control, as Erik well knew. And even if he hadn't, he could still have cleared up after himself.)

Worst of all was his romantic life, though. It was funny, because Erik had never minded before, when you would have thought it would rub a sore spot more. Back when he didn't know what he was missing, it had bothered him little when Az had quite often brought someone back to stay the night. Provided they were quiet, civil and left the house with extreme dispatch in the mornings, he had little interest in Az's exploits or romantic life. That his inamoratos tended to be male was the only delicate point; and that only for reasons of discretion regarding the neighbours, and any resulting gossip that might ensue. (Az's highly visible mutation made them enough of a target of gossip and speculation: there had been the odd tense moment with the few genuinely bigoted types amongst them. But overall, Erik's peaceable and conciliatory manner, and his record of good community standing and voluntary activities, stood them in good stead and left them safe from interference.

And this day, Wednesday, ten days on from his own adventure, Az was up to his tricks again. Erik found it so when he came down for breakfast, to a strange fellow in the kitchen, handsome and half-naked. Wielding a fish slice with a pan of eggs, and turning around with a smile both solemn and silent. Az was sitting at the kitchen table, hiding behind the morning paper, as Erik leaned against the door-frame, arms folded, and waited for any kind of greeting beyond the smile from his man-friend.

It hurt rather sharply, the tableau. That was himself and Charles, not much more than a week ago. He clamped down on the foolishness, and stepped forward, pulled the paper down from in front of Az's face. Jerking his head at the third in their little group, he enquired, 'Your friend. Cat got his tongue? Not a native speaker? Likes my eggs but not my face?'

Az, clad in a vest and y-fronts in a mix that was, to Erik, unappetizing, swished his tail forward as if to pat Erik's face. Erik fended it off, and glared in a way that meant business, until Az relented. 'Light conversation is not one of his talents, Erik. They lie in other directions,' he leered, and the gyrations
of his features had him looking more the red devil their less enlightened neighbours muttered of than ever.

A plate appeared at Erik's elbow, and Az's friend gave him a peaceable smile. 'My cooking is good,' he observed, voice low and accented, perhaps Eastern European.

'I don't think that's what Az was referring to,' Erik said drily, but he accepted the peace offering, and sat down next to Az. Who observed him as he ate, not that Erik cared. Not about that or much of anything, at the moment.

Az didn't speak, though: not for a good few minutes, but just continued to watch Erik, who refused to admit to being aware of it, or to look back at him. Finally, though, he observed, 'Why so glum, chum?' His thick Russian accent sat oddly with the Carry on Britflick lingo, but Erik was used to it. He was used to rather less tender concern from Az, though. He must have been a miserable bugger the last week or so, to have brought this on.

'I'm fine,' Erik said, feeling only slight foreboding, and started on the plate of eggs from Janos who at least, so it turned out, could cook quite tolerably well.

Under the table, Az tickled his knees with a reprehensibly prehensile-ly agile tail, and studied him with some dubiety. 'Yes, fine. Except for the part where you look like you're walking around with a storm cloud over your head all the time, pissing on your parade. Come,' he said, leering in and leering and leering. 'Tell Uncle Az what's the matter?'

'Leave him alone, Az,' Janos said quietly, turning china noisily into the washing up bowl.

Erik would have bridled at the patronage, from a bloody uninvited guest in his house. But it was actually a little bit comforting. There was something soothingly peaceful about the fellow, and he wasn't up to dealing with Az right now.

'You know nothing,' Az said impatiently, waving a hand at his night's companion without taking his beady eyes off Erik. Erik merely ignored him as best he could, while chewing toast and eggs morosely. Then Az snapped his fingers, with vigour and flair, and quite a lot of volume.

'You know what you need,' he asked Erik, but it was clearly rhetorical, because he didn't pause for breath in the least. 'Get laid, Erik! I'm not saying it would solve all your problems – most of your problems, maybe, but not all. But it might just sweeten your lousy temper, at the moment. What's with you?' His half-Cockney, half-Eastern European twang came over more puzzled than irritable: sorrowful, if anything. 'Why not give that Charles geezer a call? I mean, he has to be pretty keen, two calls in a week, right?'

It was amazing, but Erik didn't need to ask him to repeat himself, or for clarification. It was, instantaneously, right there, perfectly clear. Erik might as well have been suddenly struck by lightning, breaking the window-pane and scorching the dulling, yellowing lace curtains of the kitchen window. What was also amazing was that he didn't, right then, stab Az in the eye with his fork. No, Erik just carried on stolidly eating his eggs. Good eggs. The toast, nicely browned. He couldn't deal, for a moment or two, with the rest, which loomed and hovered at the rim of his awareness, roiling and shouting like the ocean.

Erik had had considerable practice at repression, at control so he didn't explode, and he didn't, amazingly, take a hold of Az by the throat and choke the life out of him, without requiring further details. No. His voice, in fact, was mild – deceptively mild – when he put down his knife and fork – parallel, diagonally on his plate, nice and orderly like Edie had taught him – and looked at Az, eyebrows raised.
'Messages?' he asked. He was impressed with himself, the restraint. There was only a hint of menace in his tone, the slightest suggestion that he'd killed men for lesser infractions. Which was entirely not true.

He'd only ever killed for the most heinous crimes and pressing reasons. For that, he could exculpate himself and stand with clean hands before God.

'Yeah,' Az replied breezily, shovelling down bacon like he'd killed the pig personally and was looking to hide the evidence. 'The messages I told you about, the guy with the funny accent who was trying to get ahold of you. He's got to be pretty keen, I mean. Two calls in three days, looks a bit desperate if you ask me. And what's better than desperation for a love-starved individual like yourself, considering-'

There was an absolute full stop to his monologue, as if he'd come to an abrupt realization, that he had failed to take into account pertinent facts regarding the current case. That may have had something to do with Erik's knife and fork. Both of them had abruptly quit their temporary home on his breakfast plate, and found themselves hanging – quivering – a few short centimetres from Az's ruddy nose. Sharp, shiny ends to the fore, of course.

So Erik rested his chin in his hand, and balefully regarded what he was swiftly coming to regard as the bane of his life. 'Charles called?' he asked, but it was really just a request for confirmation. It wasn't as if he didn't know full well by this point.

'Ah,' said Az, trying not to go cross-eyed with the effort of not going cross-eyed, watching the cutlery hovering in front of his face. 'I was, admittedly, under the impression that I'd already passed that little bit of information on to you at some point in the last week. Clearly, that is not the case, Erik, and I can only deeply, deeply apologise for – eep-'

This was the point at which Erik jabbed the knife and fork that bit further forward, just to ensure his point was clearly and fully made. And then he let them drop.

Because he wasn't actually going to take out Az's eyeball – probably – since clean-up would be disagreeable, and it was his house, after all, his kitchen. And he was out of practice. And also, Janos had drifted behind him and put a light hand on his shoulder: a civil, apologetic request, to which Erik acceded reluctantly. He still wasn't best pleased though. And he leaned over and prodded Az, hard, in the chest, beneath the string vest.

'Give me every detail, and right now. And I might consider not eviscerating you,' he advised, tight of lip and wild of eye. The damage was done, of course. But perhaps something might be retrievable? A letter, another meeting – encounter, his wily mind whispered – at a later date?

Az was still understandably wary, eyes shifting between Erik and Janos and back again, as if he might at any minute appeal to the latter for help, succour and shelter from the storm of Erik's wrath. 'Right, right. Ah, couple of calls, yes? Um, Monday, he asked if you were in and I said I'd let him know you'd called. Then – uh – Wednesday, I think, you know when I subbed for Hank 'cause he had a practical? Re-scheduled? He called there at the shop, said he'd be at the Ritz for another day or two if you felt like giving him a call. Keen, heh? As I say.'

The mixture of elation and crushing disappointment was indigestible. Still, there was only one thing for it: he stood up, frantically barging the kitchen chair back behind him, and dashed out to the phone in the hall. While the operator put him through to the Ritz, he thought frantically: 'a day or two,' according to Az. Well, that could be open to interpretation – either literally two days, or simply 'a few' days. Charles might still be there. Even if it was a rather dim hope.
And just as the operator was announcing, 'I'll put you through, sir,' was when Az decided to, right that moment, make the fullest use of his gifts. With a whiff and a puff of smoke, he appeared right behind Erik, hand on his shoulder, and arrested his attention further by means of a long red tail whipping out and catching his wrist. Erik was too old a hand at this, now, to jump. But not to yell. 'How many times, Az? Not in the house except in your room! Not in the house!' Erik glowered at him, full-strength. 'It had better be good, Az,' he hissed. 'And make it quick.'

'Ah, right,' Az agreed, unloosing Erik's wrist right speedily. 'Thing is, you don't want to be asking for a Charles, right? He said something about an alias – X? Something...' Az's expression was quite foozled and vague enough to justify thumping him, or raining down metallic vengeance, if only for the purpose of refining and clarifying his thought processes. But Erik just loomed in close, still holding the receiver, and gripped his forearm tightly, and that seemed to do the job just as well. He was hesitant to mention a surname – Az was perhaps a fool, but not quite an idiot. But the light dawned, and he didn't need to.

'Doctor X! Az thundered, looking, at that blast of lightning, considerably more pleased with himself that he had any right to. 'Ask for Doctor X!'

And Erik was just in the act of putting the receiver to his ear, when Az suddenly jumped a mile, and leaned forward. He hissed in Erik's ear – a lot more of an intimate touch than Erik ever wanted to experience from Az – 'Professor! I'm absolutely sure it was Professor X!'

And Erik gave him a look full of misgivings: but on the other hand, it seemed likely enough. Or as likely as anything else. Receiver to ear, and there was already a terribly well-spoken fellow asking slightly impatiently what room he'd like to speak to.

In for a penny in for a pound, then. 'Can you put me through to Professor X's room?' he asked, wincing a little at the implausibility of it. The certainty that he was a fool, shortly to be rebuffed with a flea in his ear.

But, apparently... 'Yes, sir, right away,' was the response elicited just like magic, just beyond belief, and a couple of clicks and the phone was brrr'ing in his ear again. Someone picked up, and said, 'Home of the Professor, can I help?'

It was an outrage, ridiculous, how his heart was hammering. Completely absurd. His breaths were involuntarily long and slow, and time seemed quite distorted, a second with durance of an age. 'Can I speak to Professor X?'

'Sure thing. May I take a name, please?'

He gave his name. Maybe it was a magic ticket, maybe it was an automatic veto. There was barely a second or two, a loud clang and brrr of line static, and then a voice. A different voice.

'Well, hello stranger.' And Erik could hear the smile, wide and sweet, could feel it all the way down to his toes. It was like a shot of liquor injected, twice as strong as you were expecting. 'I'd quite given up on you, you've had me dangling on a string, wondering when or if you were going to call, just like a puppet. Are you always such a one for playing games?' It was clearly only teasing. It was shameless.

'Oh,' Erik said, and after that auspicious start, he had to clear his throat, a positively great-uncle-y and phlegmy affair. 'No, no, I was... he floundered, then resolved, he would be a man.' Actually my house-mate's an idiot, and that's the long and short of it. He clean forgot he hadn't passed on your messages.'
'Ah.' He wasn't entirely sure that Charles believed him, from that. But why would he lie? 'So,' Charles continued, quite pleasant, quite light, 'I thought perhaps it would be pleasant to meet up, again. What do you say?'

The question seemed so superfluous, the answer such a foregone conclusion, that Erik was almost too busy grinning like a loon, eyes squeezed closed with it. Then he opened them up and realized he was still being benevolently eyed up by Az from the doorway, and he threw, no-handed, a brass candlestick from the phone-stand at him.

He was only prompted by Charles' pause, then a slightly quieter, 'Erik?'

Oh, of course. 'I, yes, I'd love to. Whenever, wherever... whenever? When can you fit me in?'

Curses, he thought. He sounded like a damned mobile barber or something.

'Would four be okay?' Charles asked. 'Yes. Come round for tea. Okay?'

Tea. Well, all right, Erik thought. He rather hoped it was a euphemism, or at least not the only thing on the menu, but it wasn't as if he wasn't an expert on the subject.

He opened his mouth to confirm just how happy he'd be to take tea with Charles Xavier, any old day. Too late, because Charles said hurriedly, 'I have to go now, so sorry, love. See you this afternoon then?' And that was it, a click on the line and he was gone.

The elation wasn't, though. When he battered Az around the head as he passed through the doorway, it was in a spirit of purely jocular brotherhood, positively good-humoured.

Az certainly took it in good part, and cheered all the way as he trailed Erik into the kitchen. 'Ehhhh! I can't believe it, at last! Erik's getting some. He's getting his end away, Jan, can you credit it, the miserable old bugger.'

Janos rolled his eyes in what appeared to be the required levels of incredulity. He seemed to have begun the washing-up while they'd been gone – had a pinny round his handsome, virile form and a dishcloth in his hand – and Erik briefly spared a thought to the possibility of exchanging Az as a house-mate for this pearl amongst men. Not only handy around the house, but also practically silent. Truly, a jewel. (And with no visible mutation, and how much more agreeable life in this neighbourhood would be that way. But he pushed away the ignoble thought quickly. Edie would not approve, and she was after all the final arbiter. And had landed him with Az as a house-mate in the first place, which was really the final word on the matter.

But, much more than that, his brain fizzed with the thought that today, today, he'd see Charles again. And in a world where that could happen, anything else was possible. Anything at all.

xxx

Of course it would have helped so much if Hank hadn't turned up late to cover for him. That was apparently after a 'friendly' discussion with a suspicious copper about whether his boots weren't a grave danger to man, beast and police horses. Erik ran late, he was sweating, the Ritz doorman looked like he'd like to give him the bum's rush as an undesirable. No matter: in minutes he was in a lift up to the third floor, giddy as a kid on a first date. Of course that was exactly what he was, in a way. You couldn't exactly count an impromptu afternoon's dalliance... Well, and there he shut himself down.

It must have been pretty obvious: he couldn't help repeatedly grinning to himself, stroking a finger down the metallic rail lift as he went step by toe-curling step through every stage, every stage, of
their one afternoon together.

So far. Their one afternoon together so far.

When he trundled down the third floor corridor, anxiously checking his collar, his shave, his armpits and the creases in his slacks, and knocked on door 301, he was expecting... what?

Perhaps a long pause, having to knock again. Perhaps being shown into an anteroom by a flunkie, or being abruptly informed that it was all a regrettable mistake and misunderstanding. To hie him off, and bestir himself, and delay not upon the order of his going.

But no, no no, what he got was a door that opened up at a single light rap. Opened up to reveal that hirsute and amiable chap Logan, maybe a bit stern-looking but still smiling, all but grabbing him by the collar and dragging him in.

And handing him a... A camera, for some obscure reason. Rather a nice camera too: nothing like his old Brownie with the dicky lever and the broken strap, not even like Uncle Hugo's Leica that no-one was allowed to touch upon pain of death.

Erik looked at it, turned it around in his hands. 'And this is...'

'Your camera. Right?' Logan said, emphatic. As he spoke, an extraordinarily pretty brunette girl walked in the room, beautifully dressed, looking tired and harassed. Giving a questing look in their direction, she only raised an eyebrow in query.

'Photographer from the Telegraph,' Logan explained easily, hands in pockets. Erik thought he looked so relaxed that anyone would have been suspicious. 'You remember the pictures weren't up to scratch, you gave 'em hell?'

The pretty girl stopped, arrested, thought a moment. 'Yes. But I don't remember re-scheduling yet.'

'They called up this morning, asked if we could squeeze it in. Charlie was in favour, so I told 'em to come on round if they could make it before six.'

That appeared sufficient, and she gave Erik a brisk, faintly friendly smile. 'Fine. See what you can get: pity we haven't got the hair and beauty girls in. He's as vain as a cat, but he'll just have to lump it. Tell him being a little rough and ready makes him look more manly, he'll eat it up.'

Erik wouldn't have described himself as often flummoxed. This occasion, he thought, might possibly turn out to be an exception. It was lucky, really, that she was already hurrying into an adjoining room, shuffling a sheaf of papers and sighing heavily.

As Logan took his arm and guided him in the opposite direction, he murmured in Erik's ear, 'That's our Moira. Charles' agent. Lovely terrifying Moira, I'd sooner go up against a prehistoric pachyderm or something fire-breathing with wings. It's best to fly under the radar when she's around. Not that I'll hear a word against her – in fact, I'd be quite happy to fulfil her every instruction in extreme detail with total obedience. Prone, submissive and involving raspberry jelly, maybe.'

That was plenty too much information, but Erik let it slide. His brain was too busy to protest, because he was being gently shown into an indecently over-decorated white and gilt room with a view over St James, Piccadilly and beyond. It wasn't half as beautiful as Charles, who was sitting putting at a baby grand piano in the corner, and turned to grin at him as he was ushered in by Logan.

Erik just came to a dead stop, and tried to get his brain working again. Much like you might punch an old clock, when the winding mechanism has packed up.
He was slightly aware of Logan standing behind him, wrestling with a cigar and a cutter, giving Charles a meaning look. 'Things I do for you, Charlie. Pimp isn't actually on my job description, you know. See if you can get some decent pictures out of that thing together, or Moira might want to know why not, okay?'

'Oh, shut up, Logan. And thank you,' Charles said, luminously amused, sparing Logan a moment's attention as he backed out of the room, closing the double doors very quietly.

'He's so insulting sometimes,' Charles said, getting up and coming over to Erik. 'I'm not half such a tart as he likes to imply. I do assure you.' That was a hand on his arm, and Erik probably looked terribly owlish and innocent looking down at it, before blinking as he looked back up again at Charles.

Really... Charles was... really... It was no good. He simply couldn't think in the face of this, so it was a jolly good thing when Charles drew his head down and kissed him, lighter than before, and moved away a little, which was a shame.

But Erik coughed, and tolerated it, because this was such a promising start. And Charles took a hold of and examined the camera, pointed it at Erik and clicked with his tongue, as if Erik was anything worth taking a picture of. He flushed.

'But of course,' Charles added, 'he's pretty sharp, and he thinks of everything, God bless him. If it was up to me, I'd just have invited you over without a thought, Moira would have wanted to know what was going on, there'd have been a whole inquisition and eventually hell to pay. And then I'd have stormed out and dragged you with me, and really it would have been too terribly petulant and embarrassing in retrospect. So. A little subterfuge, and we needn't worry our heads. Eh? Want to play?'

Erik wasn't entirely sure what Charles meant, until the camera was pressed into his hand and he had to grasp it to keep from dropping it. He felt odd, he felt mixed, and he couldn't work out why. Was it because the 'play' wasn't, well, in the bedroom? Because – he couldn't help but think – the afternoon was young, yet...

It couldn't be the subterfuge, the fudging of the facts. He was all in favour. Why, he lived his life with 'safety first' as his watchwords. Didn't he?

And in any case, there was no universe in which Charles Xavier was going to go public, and announce that his new life-partner was a shy, bespectacled, German-British bookshop owner. That was right, wasn't it? It was facing facts. It was reasonable.

Erik wasn't disappointed.

And anyway, he didn't have time to be. Charles prodded him in the chest, gave him a slow look from under heavy lids, and that was enough to make his heart beat hard enough to make him feel sick, shake his ribs, to beat like the big bass drum in the orchestra.

'See what you can capture,' Charles said, leaning in to his ear. 'Like what you see?' And he promptly eased himself away, before draping himself over the piano, various bits of furniture, around the room, onto the balcony.

Erik got the idea, began following him around, tinkering with the wind lever, playing with the timer and getting one photo of them together, not all that close – well, depending on how it turned out. Until Charles stopped – straddled over the piano stool – and shouted out a laugh. Then he was at Erik's side, and moved the camera in Erik's hands, tinkered with something quickly.
He grinned up at Erik, eye-contact lasting a moment longer than strictly necessary. 'Cap on the lens,' he explained, and Erik felt himself blush right down to the roots of his hair.

But, it was only a moment, and then Charles was back to posing, and Erik to snapping away just as if he knew what the hell he was doing. (He hoped Logan wasn't serious about expecting anything actually usable. It wasn't as if he could focus at all on the actual photographs.)

'I'm so glad you called, finally,' Charles said earnestly. Though Erik could barely concentrate on his words. Not considering Charles was currently lying on a chaise-longue, gazing up at Erik with those eyes. And with one hand fiddling with the hem of his shirt, so that Erik could perfectly well see that it wasn't properly tucked in and -

He didn't know. He did at least know enough to know that he didn't know a damn thing: not whether he was mis-reading the signals, not whether there were any or no signals to misread in the first place. He didn't know where they were heading and he didn't know what the hell to do.

'So sorry about the mix-up,' he mumbled, and fluffed another shot completely. None of this roll of film was going to be usable.

Erik was quite perspicacious enough to know that he was awash, deep in the middle of something that was much more about infatuation than love. How could he even know if love was on the cards? He hadn't been asked to give anything up for Charles, not yet: hadn't had to make a single sacrifice. It had been all pleasure and receiving things.

He didn't know if Charles was worth sacrificing for, suffering for, not yet. Didn't know if he could put him in the same category as Raven and Mamma and Pappa, not yet. He thought he had a good idea on the subject, though: had a very strong feeling. That his category of important people was in the near future going to undergo expansion. Love: it was a very big word.
Chapter Summary

Not quite the Mad Hatter's Tea-Party, but not awfully far off it.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Patsy Cline's 'I Fall To Pieces'.

Bigger than tea, by one letter, in fact. And oh, it was one he preferred vastly, because damn it all to hell, an actual tea party was not what he'd been hoping for. But a knock at the door had the both of them abruptly pausing in their activities – Charles, leaning back over the baby grand with his arms splayed out over it, and an expression in his eyes that was surely deliberately seductive. And Erik, possibly perhaps maybe leaning in a little closer than necessary, to a measured distance that was surely going to bugger up the focus horribly. But honestly, who cared? Missy Moira could pay for some decent pictures elsewhere, he was pretty sure it would be in the budget. Erik had considerably more important priorities at the moment. He also had his heart pounding in his chest, like a prisoner in gaol about to make a break for it. A large part of it was down to being unable to separate out the man barely a foot away from him, and the celluloid double he'd spent many a furtive and clandestine afternoon at the flicks worshipping.

Well, of course it was a very different thing, the flesh and blood human being, as opposed to a mirage he'd pleasantly, secretly fantasized about for months and months on end. To conflate the two was probably unwise. Charles had already made plain enough his egalitarian preferences, all hail-fellow-well-met. He seemed about as much of a Maoist Little Red Book reader as one could possibly be, given a cut-glass accent from the combination of a patrician start in life on the East Coast, and largely British public schooling. (Groton was in the mix there somewhere, and Erik honestly wished he himself was less creeped out by the fact that he'd gone to the trouble of discovering that, and his mind found it worth retaining.) The less he could seem like an obsessive fan, and the more like a casually met pick-up, not liable to prove hard to shake or an embarrassment, the less likely he was to be rapidly dispensed with and forgotten.

Even if Charles had had sufficient of a scoot around in his head to have a fair idea that any savoir-faire and blasé approach he might affect, was just that exactly: affected. But for now, any plans and dreams and sly schemes he might be cooking up, were blown away with the four winds in any case. Since they were no longer alone, he himself, Charles and the camera. The knock on the door was rapidly followed by Charles looking up – his expression quite different. And he called out, “All right, come join us,” with a slightly miffed look on his suddenly less carefree face.

A companion levered himself through the door, weighted down with a tea-tray complete with silver teapot, sugar bowl, milk jug etc etc, all of the finest bone china. It was quite up to any standard Edie might require, even if the contents would have her screwing up her face and declaring, "Liebling, willst du mich vergiften?"
Erik half, unconsciously, expected a servile and deferential approach to, after all, the named
inhabitant of the suite, and star of the silver screen. (And probably to be roundly ignored himself, a
mere – theoretical – member of the press, and leech upon the entertainment industry's backside. He
knew he'd expected it, by how much of a jolt it was to hear Charles addressed thus: “Quit posing,
Charles, I've brewed up for you. Although why you drink this weed-water is still a mystery to me.
Logan sent me with this for you to make sure you're playing nice. And not putting any of your
filming schedules and contractual obligations in jeopardy. Or that's what he said, anyway. Direct
quote, there. Although what he means, exactly – regarding you and the photographer,” and here he
cast a suddenly cool and brittle glance at Erik, “beats me. Anyway, it's tea for three and three for tea,
apparently.” And he – young, blond, handsome, and with a grin both cocky and knowingly fetching
– slammed the tray down on a fragile coffee-table, and settled his arse in the spindly, probably
antique armchair up close. “I'll be mother, eh?”

Charles looked some considerable distance from elated: the narrowing of his eyes, the gathering
frown between his fine brows pleased Erik a fair bit. At least they were both on the same page with
this. He didn't move away from his pose draped over the piano: although his body language was a
damn sight less relaxed than it had been. (So Erik didn't either. Damned if he was going to surrender
a tactical advantage. Not just because a snot-nosed tow-haired kid with a tea-tray in his hand,
interpolated himself into the cosy rapport he was feeling building between himself and Charles.
(Well. He was pretty sure he wasn't imagining it, anyhow.)

“And what?” Charles drawled, irritation making his Katharine Hepburn with a xenon inhaler accent
considerably more grating, perhaps wilfully so. “He told you to stick around and play chaperone
too?”

Alex didn't even bother looking his way: just carried on setting out delicate dolls'-tea-party china
cups and sugar cube tongs on the table, as if it was a totally absorbing task. Erik noticed that he was
quite a handsome youth, and wondered if Charles had noticed it too. Well, how wouldn't he, if they
were in constant proximity? “Yep, got it in one,” this kid answered pertly. “Two sugars for you,
Charles, right?”

Charles closed his eyes. And he was so clearly not on board with this new development, so evidently
willing to bust up the pretty china as soon as drink out of it, that Erik fully expected him to snap out
an instruction to get the hell out, and take the damn tea-tray with him, to this unwelcome intruder.
But he didn't: and the irritability was suddenly and swiftly wiped off his face, replaced as he opened
his eyes with a ruefully amused smile that didn't quite ring true, to Erik. “Well,” he said to Erik, “I
suppose that as I did actually invite you to tea, and Alex here has been good enough to bring us a
pot... Then we may as well partake. After you, Erik!” And he exaggeratedly waved Erik into a
wingback chair facing the window. But before joining them, he went to the doorway and leaned out.

There was no response for a moment. And then Erik heard, very dimly from some other room,
“Can't hear you, Charlie. La la la la fingers in my ears!... Ow!” It might have been followed by a
very soft chuckle. Erik wasn't sure.

Charles sighed, and rubbed his face: then came over and took himself a chair, at right angles to Erik,
facing Alex.

It was a little bit hard to swallow, that they'd been out-maneuvered so easily. And also, that Charles
had knuckled under to it with so little protest. It wasn't as if Erik couldn't conceive of any counter-
amaneuuvres himself. Silver had used to be a problem for him, once upon a time, something about the
nuclear mass not being in resonance with the vibrational level of his power. But he'd fine-tuned his
skills a long time ago: and even with cutlery-level EPNS he could do wonders. As Az had reason to
know. With the fancy tableware on show here, it was still easier, nothing to dilute and corrupt the connection between himself and the electron zing from molecule to molecule, travelling and re-shaping with the current. (First-year chemistry had helped him understand his gift and something of how it functioned with quotidian and quantum physical realities. It had also left his chemistry tutor confused and boggled, and perhaps questioning the nature of events – and Erik – at a couple of incidents he'd spotted when he wasn't supposed to. But it wasn't as if Erik was in any hurry to come out as a mutant. Let the fellow write it off to a bad hangover or a psychotic episode, whatever he liked. Not Erik's problem.)

If he wanted, Alex could perfectly well get the same treatment as Az had enjoyed, this morning. And it was horribly tempting, looking at his smug Aryan little face. He held out a cup and saucer to Erik, with an expression that clearly said he knew exactly how much of a cock-block he was being, and was finding the task quite enjoyable into the bargain.

But Charles made it all right – that knack he had – by removing the cup out of Alex's hand, and passing it to Erik himself, on the pretext of the two of them being too far apart. As their eyes met, the cup passing from hand to hand, Charles' fingers brushed against his hand too firmly for even a pretence of accident. Comforting, it was, and grounding. Charles smiled at him, blue eyes crinkled, with enough rueful apology to make it right twice over, and his face turned enough away from Alex that the little bugger couldn't see that half of the look passing between them.

Heaven knew what his own face looked like, a love-struck yokel with straw in his hair, he very much supposed, and very little cared. He could breathe easier and relax in his chair, and even give a little back to his opponent if he was set on making such a nuisance of himself. Handily, he was grasping the camera in the hand that wasn't occupied. (By a cup of tea that wasn't properly brewed, adequately sugared or quite hot enough).

Good God, Erik had standards, and especially when it came to tea. And he put it down, because he wouldn't be damn well drinking it, and fiddled with the camera a little instead. Pointed it at Alex, adjusted the focus. And he smiled from behind it, without any of his usual care to modify his grin into something not liable to terrify the populace, especially kittens and small children. “So, Alex,” he asked, pleasant in the way that generally had Az or Hank edging away from him carefully, anticipating storms. “What do you do around here, anyway? Anything worth documenting for posterity in this photo-shoot? Assistant to the stars, would-be director, would-be actor, tea-boy for the glitterati? D'you fancy being immortalized in a centrespread?”

Damn. Erik was quite enjoying himself, if not in the way he'd eagerly anticipated. Charles snorted quietly near to him, and the rigid tremors of his torso suggested that he was trying not to succumb to amusement. But Alex's chin came up, and he looked more annoyed than intimidated. “Tea-boy, yeah,” he agreed, dropping an extra sugar-cube in his own cup and creating a minor tsunami, tea slopping into the saucer. “Nanny, pet-walker, hi-you-go-fetch, you could say... Same as most employees around here. Eh, Charles?” he continued. But although Charles turned and regarded him – looking quite good-humoured, contemplative, not riled at all – he carried on to Erik. “So – sorry, man, I don't think Charles gave me your name, did you, real slip-up there, where's your usual politesse and courtesy, Charles? - what magazine is it you're shooting for? Where should I be looking for a full-colour spread of Charlie pouting and giving it the full Havana cabin-boy treatment?”

At this, Charles evidently did take enough offence to cuff him lightly around the head, repressing a smirk enough to suggest it wasn't seriously meant. “Mind your manners, cub,” he advised just the same. “You may take your orders from Moira, and direction from Logan, but I'm still the one paying your salary. Good question, though. What magazine did Logan say you were from, Erik?” And that was both of them looking at Erik, blue eyes both full-strength, and a paler hue for the Nordic-looking kid, innocently enquiring.
Damn it, and Erik was on the spot. Buggered if he could remember what magazine Logan had actually specified, in his cover story to the beauteous and apparently intimidating Moira. Perhaps he hesitated more than a moment too long, because Alex’s face creased up into an involuntary snicker, and he corpsed, bending over and putting his hands over his face. Charles, on the other hand, kept his eyes steady on Erik’s, but there was a twitching smirk at the corner of his pretty mouth. And Erik felt played, definitely played.

“He knows,” he said, possibly a little accusingly, to Charles. Who only smiled, let his lashes brush down and up again. Before giving Erik the shockingly indecent kind of look that had him flushing up hot, and really wishing that they didn’t have extraneous company, more than superfluous to requirements.

But the mirth of the young – what, keeper? Security guard? Sanatorium-nurse? – was abruptly over, and he relaxed back in his chair and gave Erik a very level look. “What? That the only photos you're liable to be taking are of thumbs and feet? Cover stories are generally for Moira's benefit around here, buddy.” And he smiled too: not friendly, more a spectator watching the monkeys at the zoo.

Well, the revelation only made him seem more of an intolerably irritating hindrance. “So you're really just here to bring the tea?” Erik asked pointedly. He didn't actually add well, in that case, you could perfectly well just piss off now and give us a little privacy, eh? Probably didn't need to: he was pretty sure that his face was saying it for him.

Alex raised an eyebrow, and seemed about to open his mouth. Erik had the feeling he’d just thrown down a gauntlet, battle lines were being drawn, and somewhere a trumpeter was sounding the clarion for the battle charge. But Charles coughed, abruptly and loudly, and his foot nudged up against Erik's. He reached across the coffee-table for a stand of, what, madeleines and macaroons, that Alex had brought in on the tray also.

“Well,” he said, in the pacifying and conciliatory tones that made him sound a little like a kindergarten teacher. As if he was holding two three-year-olds at arms' length from each other, and saying now now don’t hit little Billy that's not friendly. “Now that that's established, more tea anyone? Erik, would you like, what have we here, a meringue? Not that it's liable to be half as good as Edie's coffee cake, which I'm still wistfully dreaming about three weeks later.” And he gave Erik a charming smile. “How is darling Edie, Erik? Once-met by dim bookstore light, and I still miss her terribly. Do you think a thank-you note with a request for the recipe would be too much of a hint for an invite?”

His eyes were very steady on Erik’s, and Erik felt how his brain seized up and hiccuped, at the steady regard. And not a little, at the compliment to Edie. A compliment to Edie was always a surefire way to Erik's heart, not that it was really necessary to get the job done at this point. He beamed, pleased, and was about to answer, except that this so-annoying snot-nosed kid got in ahead of him, and what was he still doing here, anyway? “Oh, is that the lady you met in the bookshop, Charlie?” he asked, clearly fairly well genned-up and immediately interested. “The terrifying and queenly one?”

Erik didn’t honestly know whether to bristle or bridle coquetishly, at that. Still, deal with one thing at a time, eh? “Terrifying?” he asked, raising a pointed eyebrow in Charles' direction. “My mother?”

Laughing, Charles patted his hand, immediately soothing. “Well, you honestly can’t deny it, Erik! And I mean it in the most complimentary way possible. Rather a Boudicca, she is, wouldn't you say? Or perhaps more of a Viking goddess – a warlike Freya, you think? Either way, I certainly wouldn’t care to get in the way of her and any objective she had in mind. Offer assistance, light the blue-touch paper and stand well back, one rather feels. No?”
It was hard to argue the point. He knew his mother rather too well for that. And, even on so brief an acquaintance, so did Charles, it seemed. “You may have a point,” he conceded, felt a smile with a trace of shyness flicker around his lips.

“And she's certainly a queen,” Charles pointed out. “All of us her grateful subjects.”

“Hey, is it true about the fist-fight in John Lewis's story?” the kid intervened, suddenly interested. “Charles said your mom put some bitch down in the middle of the ladies' hosiery and frillies? She was cussing out your little sister for not having a good handle on controlling her mutant thing?”

No, no, everything – most things – so pleasant until now, but this shook Erik out of his complacency. Made him wonder for a moment: what was he doing here? Acting like he could trust someone on a bare day's acquaintance, like trust and vulnerability weren't chinks in your armour, to be used against you. And love was the very thing that had you sweating and begging in a mundane shadowed office with an untidy desk, while someone pointed a gun at your mother and someone else said move it, Erik, prove what you can do. Move the coin!

Sweating suddenly now, he was. But he calmed in an instant. Because he had, hadn't he? The bastard hadn't expected that: had thought his powers not yet matured, that the shock of a sudden bereavement and the demonstration of his powerlessness would bring him to heel, make of him a useful weapon.

Erik hadn't thought his powers mature. They'd barely been a parlour trick, something he brought out shyly for only immediate family at high days and holidays, a secret that he knew well enough to keep. He was Jewish, he knew even at such a tender age that he was going to be another Uncle Hugo in the family – confirmed bachelor, they called it, a pleasant-mannered code – and his family were both Semitic and rich, which was enough to draw unpleasant attention. To have the odd powers that people talked of, one of the oddities that were increasingly being locked away in institutions where family were barred from visiting, it was not something to speak of.

But he'd surprised himself, put to the test. And Schmidt had certainly been surprised, the bastard. A hole in his forehead and his tight little cat's-arse mouth dropped open, before he fell down on the desk. And the soldier had screamed, and dropped the gun that was suddenly molten-hot in his hands, burning him. And ran.

He'd not run far enough or fast enough. Erik had tied up that loose end quick sharp. Not brought to heel, then. Only taught to wait until the ripest moment, to bite.

So Erik had looked after his family, eleven years old and knowing that Jakob would never be quite right again, after the camps, that he'd have to shoulder some of the responsibility. And now, now he'd failed them: because of a dazzled infatuation, because of pretty blue eyes and a pretty mouth. (And because of what that mouth could do, had done to him, his mind traitorously whispered. What kind of a slut would give away the safety of his dear ones for that?)

Panic could melt into anger in an instant for Erik, he well knew. But the hand on his arm arrested the minute gradations of the hair-trigger, and he looked first at Charles' hand, and then up at his face. He supposed his own must be transparent. He'd been staring at Alex, he was dimly aware, and probably not in any friendly way. The kid had a hard edge, but he looked pretty spooked. “Erik,” Charles said. His grip was firm and warm, and refused to be spooked or any simulacrum of it. “Alex isn't someone you need to be concerned about, regarding mutant issues. To begin with, I trust him completely as far as discretion is concerned. But more than that, he has skin in the game: he's one of us, and so is his little brother. I'm sorry for disclosing your sister's status to him, after visiting with your family. I admit I was rather over-excited, and probably over-shared, for that matter. Alex and Logan have both heard much more about it than they ever wished to know! But,” he added emphatically, “only them. I
certainly wouldn't share anything touching upon sensitive issues with anyone else, even baseline humans such as Moira, even though I trust her implicitly. But again, you're clearly not happy about it, and I can only apologise very sincerely, and hope that you'll forgive me.”

Well, that did the trick. His primary instantaneous worry, verging on panic, was assuaged: because Raven was damn careless and defiant enough about mutancy herself, without anyone knowing through Erik. Anyone who wasn't someone with damn good reason to keep his mouth shut, certainly. And he had to concede to himself that the way Charles put it didn't hurt, either. He hadn't exactly envisaged Charles bubbling over with enthusiasm over their afternoon spent together, unable to stop himself chatting about it with his (safely mutant) paid companions. If anything, he'd assumed it an afternoon's dalliance, that Charles would have trouble recalling to mind days and weeks later. And perhaps he was overstating the case, but still it was... pleasant, to think on.

As long as he'd drawn the line at a certain point in his confidences, anyway. There were certain things that Erik would prefer not to have the mental image of Logan smirking over and teasing Charles about. Because the bloody man would be highly amused, Erik was pretty damn sure.

But in any case, he put his hand over Charles' hand on his arm, and smiled at him. There they were for a moment, Charles smiling back, and Erik felt perfectly content. Until the little blond git in the chair opposite shifted in his seat and groaned, “Oh man,” in a voice designed to be deniably audible. Charles laughed, and pulled away, and Erik mentally added that to the tab of things that Alex was going to be held responsible for, at some future point. Maybe some point when he had less compunction, and had developed sneakier ways with his powers.

In the meantime, if they were stuck with him, then gathering a little intel probably wouldn't hurt. And Erik picked up his lukewarm tea, in a show of emphatic ease, as he said, “Mutant too, eh? Fascinating. Why don't you give me a demonstration of what you can do, Alex?” Like it's going to be anything so very impressive, his tone said. Probably speeding up the growth of flowers, or something equally effete, from this whiny pretty-boy.

But Alex's eyes glittered, like he'd heard a challenge he liked the sound of, and he straightened up in his chair. But before he could even open his mouth, Charles raised a hand firmly in the air, like he was directing traffic and Alex was getting a strict *nolle prosequi*. “Or on the other hand, Alex, don't. Apologies, Erik, but if you were already acquainted with Alex's powers then you'd understand. He's a good lad, I trust him with my secrets, my laundry and my wine-cellar: but not my furniture. You have to draw the line somewhere, and this is it. His power is being able to fire plasma blasts from his chest, you see.”

Alex was looking distinctly pouty at being barred from a bit of showing off. Erik almost felt bad for the little sod. “Very impressive,” he admitted, slightly soothing.

“Not if you're the one clearing up after him if he decides to give everyone a demo after a couple of drinks,” Charles tutted. “The way he did when we were staying at the Crillon in Paris six months ago. The *Crillon*. Can you imagine the bill for damages? He's still working it off: I own his ass for about the next ten years, eh, Alex?”

Alex made a lot of play at that, of an alarmed facial expression and a bit of rearing back, and Charles laughed at him. “Don't flatter yourself,” Charles advised him drily. “I mean strictly in terms of sweated labour and indentured servitude, nothing to frighten the horses.”

And Erik was glad to hear it: because it would be inconvenient to have to track Alex down later, find somewhere to dispose of the body and make sure none of the leads of the case could be traced back to him. Maybe some of that came through in his expression, because Alex snickered and directed his next words right at Erik. “I don't think you have anything to worry about, buddy. *I'm* not his type.
He likes a bit more authority and gravitas: and someone with about ten years on me, isn't that right, Charlie? Ladies and fellas both: but that's about as flexible as his requirements get.”

And then he flinched, because a sugar-cube had just hit him right in the forehead, but when Erik turned fast as light to look at Charles, he was innocently shooting his cuffs with a very, very tranquil expression on his lovely face. And then coughed, like punctuation and a swift indication that it was time to change the subject, before saying, “And in any case, Erik, this is why I recommend never inviting Alex to your house. Or not unless you've had everything fire-proofed and reinforced beforehand, and you're extremely well-insured. Eh, Alex?”

“Hey, don't give the guy a bad impression of me before we've really got to know each other, Charlie. After your account, I definitely want to hang out with his mom, swap stories of bad-ass retribution and wreaking havoc,” Alex was protesting immediately. But Erik wasn't really listening to the protests. He was thinking, couldn't help but make the connection, that Charles was harping on invitations rather a lot. It kept coming up. And Edie would be holding her usual Friday-night open-house dinner tonight, with a motley raggle-taggle bunch of guests just the same as always. A curate's egg in the extreme, but always including himself and Raven, and these days often enough Hank. And sometimes, if they were unlucky, Az too.

And nothing would please him more – well, nothing with a child-friendly Universal rating, at any rate - than to ask Charles along. Edie would be thrilled, Charles would, he suspected strongly, also be very happy, and... Alex would invite himself along into the bargain. And probably Logan too. And that was the best case scenario: if the entire idea wasn't discreetly veto'd, and mysterious pressure brought to bear, so that the dinner was nixed. And then Charles would probably be incommunicado and unavailable for the remainder of his stay in the UK.

Erik really didn't care for the idea of a chaperoned visit, with Charles watched by a couple of officious busybody hawks. And he cared still less for a regretful refusal, or a happy acceptance that was later apologetically cancelled. Perhaps at third-hand. And perhaps he was frowning rather noticeably, because he became aware that Charles was looking his way, a very meaningful look indeed. And saying, “But don't you agree, Erik?”

Damn and blast. What had he missed, and what was he agreeing to? Alex was giving him an innocently amused look, the little bugger, as if he knew very well that Erik’s attention and brain had been temporarily out of commission. “It's hard to say,” he said carefully, because how could that be wrong?

And something about the pronounced dip of Charles' head in response, the blink-and-miss widening of his eyes, was tipping Erik off that something was amiss, some deeper meaning afoot. But what?

“Oh hell. Maybe it was. How could Erik know? Charles was resting his head in his hand, now, a couple of those clever fingers tapping at his temple. Repetitively, and noticeably.

Erik felt a mysterious occult tap, elsewhere, impossible to precisely locate, almost. But definitely not in a strictly physical location. Ohhh, and the light dawned, bright and beautiful. Without that particular power, it was hard to know how to respond: but he could still think an emphatic yes, yes, you're welcome: you're welcome, do come in.
Chapter Summary

In the run-up to meeting up with Charles again, Erik has a bunch of ruffians in the bookshop to contend with. Who are these Beatles fellows, and what's all this nonsense about their fab new beat combo?

Chapter Notes

I have little excuse for this self-indulgent bit of RP interpolation into the narrative. Except that damn it, it's 1963, and Magneto's living in Britain as a naturalized resident. How would he possibly not bump into John, Paul, George and Ringo? (And Brian Epstein.)

Are you sure? Charles asked. Not in any way that blasted Alex was going to pick up on, of course. Even inside Erik's head, though, his voice was low and murmurous, entirely unnecessarily seductive. Unnecessary, because any seductive tools in his arsenal were completely superfluous to requirements at this point. Erik was aware that he couldn't have been more completely a sure thing, and he resented it not at all. Also unnecessary, because no-one else was going to hear a word of this super-secret private communication, however much of an Ian Fleming espionage of the heart, spy in the house of love air it amused Charles to affect.

Erik didn't mind. Whatever hoops and dramas and traditional stages Charles wanted to work his way through, he'd be happy to indulge him in. Quite sure, Erik said, thinking it loud and with extreme clarity, picturing the words on great giant flash-cards and wondering how well it was getting through.

Well enough, anyway. That's good, the voice in his head said smoothly. Because this little swine isn't going anywhere, as long as he thinks that I might be up to no good. And the words unfolded quietly in Erik's head – God, so welcome, although Erik was surely going to have to be careful, to make clear that this was a special one-time deal and not to be presumed upon on a regular basis. Well, in fact, he was rather getting ahead of himself. It wasn't as if Charles wasn't still speaking, far more important at the moment. And Charles grinned at an irritable-looking Alex, shoving the plate of Madeleines under his nose with an agreeable smirk, as he said, We should see each other again, but somewhere with more privacy. Don't you think? at the same time as he said out loud to Alex, “Go on, stuff your face, sonny. You need to keep your strength up, if you're going to watch me every hour of every day.”

Maybe it was a joke, but there seemed to be a serious undercurrent to it. And Erik had to wonder what the heck the surveillance was all about. And also, to rather admire Charles' impressive ability to speak with lips and brain at the same time, rather like those folk who could hum and sing two tunes simultaneously. But there were more important issues here to consider, and he was busier with them. Watching Alex for any sign of dawning suspicion, covertly though he seemed oblivious. Which wasn't too clever, considering he knew he was dealing with a telepath. Erik said – announced in his
head – My mother's making dinner tonight...? Everyone comes on a Friday night.

And he hesitated, because he loved his mamma's dinners, and she was a ferocious, persnickety and legendary cook. But... a Lehnsherr household dinner could not honestly be described as a glamorous event. What with the combination of Raven insisting on dumplings with every course, sweet or savoury... Edie's décor having more to do with a sentimental cramming in of every gift ever given her by family, friend, man and beast, rather than aesthetics... And Edie's dim and over-friendly chocolate Labrador trying to eat off everyone's plate, until firmly ejected from the premises... It was always a fun and chatty and delicious and affectionate evening. But definitely not glamorous. For sure, nowhere you'd ever expect to find an international film star, a celebrity. He wanted to invite Charles, for sure. But he couldn't quite get past that hesitation, that uncertainty.

No problem, though, because Charles got them right over the little moment of awkwardness. Oh, love, do you think darling Edie could squeeze in an extra chair for little old me? It was positively wheedling, as if that was necessary, and Erik had to drop his head to hide a quick little grin. Alex was, for sure, going to be getting suspicious in a moment, if he didn't do a better job of hiding his responses to the internal duologue.

And just his emotional glow must have been a good enough answer, because he could actually hear Charles chuckle inside his head. It made him feel a little high and dizzy. Oh, darling, you might not be so pleased once I get my feet under the table. Easy to invite me in, harder to get rid of me.

And as if he'd want to, as if. But they should have got further along by now, should have concentrated more on specifics and practicalities and itinerary. Because Alex was still talking – and why, because no one else here was really listening. And saying, Erik realised, “Okay, man, that's the tea gone, no-one's eating the cakes and Moira's gonna be back soon and want you to go over the new script re-write. If I take this tray out and see what Logan's got faxed through for the set specs, can I trust you not to do anything that's gonna get your contract broken, and me out panhandling for change to pay my brother's college tuition, for like eight whole minutes?”

It was extraordinarily patronising. And Erik couldn't figure why it didn't seem to offend Charles whatsoever. He gave Alex a moment's look with the slightest smile, and then said simply, “No.” Which was an answer that looked like it might have caused Alex to snuff it from an apoplexy at an extraordinarily young age, if they hadn't been interrupted.

It was Logan, of course, the door abruptly punching open, and him swinging in like he'd just jumped off a bucking bronco, kissed the heroine and was hanging off a jerking helicopter in mid-air while quipping madly. He had a hand over his eyes, for mysterious reasons, until he announced, “If I'm interrupting a three-way, then for God's sake I don't want to see what I've missed. Can everybody just disengage and put their clothes back on?”

Alex squawked indignantly, and Erik bridled a bit too. As if he would consent to share, as if he would participate even if offered. Well, that said, he would have to think carefully before absolutely barring any suggestion of Charles', but... Anyhow, no time to think about that, because Logan was giving a mean laugh, and grabbing the camera off the table and examining it. “So, you get anything decent, Edie's boy?” he asked. “And by decent, I mean any good, and also not porno? Not that it takes much to persuade Charlie here to get 'em off and give 'em a few cheesecake shots. It's generally more of a problem persuading him not to, especially if he's had a few. Or the photographer's pretty enough. Eh, Charlie?”

Erik was outraged. He'd have liked to offer the scoundrel a few sharp words. Except that unfortunately Charles appeared to find this rubbish uproariously funny, and heaved, helpless with laughter. Logan grinned, crinkling up his eyes at Erik meanly, like he knew perfectly well that he
wasn't half so amused. “Anyhow, whatever you got, it's going to have to be good enough. Moira's
due back here in ten, and I'm kicking you out, bud. Guess you had a nice time visiting – Charlie's
real hospitable, ain't that so, Charlie? And Alex is pretty... well, he's pretty. That's right, he's an
aesthetic decoration, too.” Oh, the bastard was thoroughly amused. And pleased with himself. And
about to get his comeuppance, without even being aware of it.

“It was a joy,” Erik responded sharply. But at the same time, he thought, harsh and loud and as
directed as he could make it, Mamma’s house is in Paddington. If you take the Underground to
Edgware Road, then ten minutes walk asking for Howley Crescent, you'll find us. It's the house with
the stone cherubs and the seal in the water fountain. And if you bring a bottle of Martini Rosso then
Edie will love you a little longer than forever, since forever is pretty much guaranteed anyhow. Any
time after seven: we'll hope to see you, if you can get away.

He was rising from his chair, because Charles was, and had evidently recognised the inarguability
and validity of Logan's claim. But it wasn't such a bitter pill, when after a little pause – Logan fussing
with the camera, and Alex nearly dropping the tray of silverware as he juggled with it, causing havoc
even without flying plasma blasts – a quiet voice seemed to peer around a corner in his mind, pull
him aside as he headed for the door. I will absolutely be there. Hell or highwater, love.

It wasn't difficult at all, after that, to make polite pro forma farewells, to tolerate Alex’s barbs, before
Logan escorted him to the door of the suite. He would more than likely have simply drifted out in a
pleasurable daze, barely even registering Logan's presence, so wrapped up in the afternoon’s
interplay, secrets and intrigue. Except that Logan clapped him on the shoulder as they hit the outside
corridor – bloody familiar, the crazy wild-man was – and grinned. “Don't send him back too worked
over and het up,” he said slyly. “We're the ones who've got to keep him presentable and marketable,
man. That rode hard and put away wet look is not going to fly with the investors who pay for cat-
burgling Cary Grant dude mixed with a little aristocratic Eurotrash and a little serious thespian
artiste vibe. He's a capital asset, that a lot of powerful assholes have invested serious moolah in. Try
to remember that, when he's riding your leg and suggesting a walk in the moonlight followed by a
romp in the bushes.”

“What?” Erik said, stalled, startled.

And Logan's grin only got more pleased with itself, offensively so. “Come off it, bub,” he said
pleasantly. “Who you think you're fooling? Just keep it discreet, all right, okay? Three little words,
man – under the radar. Or maybe I mean, wear a rubber.” And he shut the suite door in Erik's face,
which was no bad thing. That open-mouthed look probably wasn't flattering him any.

xxx

He turned it over in his mind for what remained of the rest of the afternoon, but it was hardly the
only thing he had to think about. Raven charged him a couple of times, between his arrival back at
the shop, and closing time, with keeping secrets. (He thought she was probably just joking, her usual
sibling needling. But there must have been something in his manner to inspire it, unconsciously
pleased and secretive.) And it wasn't as if it wasn't perfectly true. If he managed to keep the smile
wiped off his face most of the time that she was actually within ten feet of him, then it was as much
as he could do.

Of course, he could just have come flat out and told her that Charles would be attending the family
dinner that night. But where would the fun have been in that? Besides, he was superstitious about it,
and not yet really convinced that Charles would show his face. Oh, there was no doubt that his
intentions were good. But that wasn't exactly the same thing as finding the time and the opportunity
to successfully slip past his keepers – so solicitous as they were, very tender jailers – and making his
way to Mamma's house without detection. Erik didn't want to rely upon it so much that a failure to show would lead to a truly crushing dejection. And he also didn't want to get Raven and Mamma so excited, when it might still all be for naught.

And also, he wasn't sure that his eardrums could take the strain, of Raven's reaction to the news that Charles Xavier might be attending their Friday night family dinner.

Even without the advance tip-off, it wasn't as if the subject or that particular name didn't come up. Not from Erik's end of the conversation, either. Three times, Raven managed to drag Charles into the conversation. Maudlin wonderings about whether he was out of the country yet. Speculations about whether he'd be back for rounds of publicity for the new film. Finally coming to rest the tip of her chin on his shoulder from behind, as he struggled to get a stupidly large shipment of new atlases shelved, slipping her arms around Erik's waist and whining a bit. “I did think Charles might come see us again before he buggered off back to Hollywood. Didn't you, love? I did. Do you think...”

It was pretty damn amazing that Erik didn't either snap and engage in a spot of fratricide, or snort with laughter. But it's amazing what a beloved little sister can get away with, too, and he held his peace, and Raven kept her head attached to her neck. Perhaps partly because the shop doorbell went at that moment, so that they were interrupted and his train of thought derailed.

At least it got him a modicum of peace, a break from her wistful Charles-related whining. Because as soon as her head went up like a baby meerkat, to check out the new customers, Raven tautened like a fish on the line, and all her attention was entirely lost to him. For which Erik could only call blessings down upon their floppy, mop-topped heads.

“Oh my god!” Raven hissed at him, prodding at his ribcage with a remarkably sharp index finger. “Look who it is!”

Erik had no idea what she was talking about. Who it was? Well, then who was it? He peered over his spectacles at the four unremarkable young men who were trooping in one by one over the threshold, and could see nothing distinctive about them. More smartly dressed than one might see for that age group in these degenerate days, which was all to the good. Erik deprecated the fashions of Raven's Bohemian crowd, and could only deplore the trend for casual apparel and frankly, a mechanic's items of outerwear worn in a social milieu to which they were quite inappropriate. In fact, one of these fellows – the most baby-faced and doe-eyed, pretty as any girl – was wearing Levis and a leather jacket. If Erik had had his way, and had not Edie to answer to, that would have been sufficient reason to bar him from the shop immediately. His pretty face did not at all excuse his crime, and especially not now that Erik had solid and promising romantic interests located elsewhere, and his eye was less likely to be drawn by fetching but probably juvenile offending youths, headed for Borstal. Erik's old sergeant major during his period of national service would have fired a watercannon at the jacket-wearer and set him scrubbing the latrines with a toothbrush, not to mention giving him an immediate short back 'n' sides. His hair was long enough for pigtails, or at least little bobby-pins with cherries and flower decorations stuck to them, the way Raven had worn it as a gap-toothed snub-nosed kid.

They were milling about in that way that expressed imminent trouble amongst young men of that type – or at least a gobby and exuberant bit bit of bonhomie, over-familiar and under-respectful to an older generation. And a slightly older gentleman had stepped into the shop behind them, standing a little to one side and listening to their banter with earnest attention, as they chaffed him with the familiarity of close acquaintance. (And with accents from the west of the Pennines, thick enough to make the ear strain at comprehension.) A little chinless, the older one, in a nice camel-hair coat, Jewish lower-middle with pretensions or Erik would eat his copy of L'Étranger. If he was from anywhere in the South-East then Edie probably knew his mother.
“Well, who is it, then?” Erik asked, in a muttered undertone to Raven. Maybe it was a bit irritable, but he had all the glamour and celebrity he required in his life right about now. Was his respectable family business to be turned into a hotbed of vice, glamour and international fame and notoriety? Edie would... well, actually, Edie would probably love it. But he couldn't be pandering to his mother's taste for society and excitement all of the time. It wasn't good for her.

Predictably, Raven wasn't listening, and had swiftly turned her attention to the young men. Bouncing over to them with batting eyes, and a sashay to her hips that he'd learnt boded some relentless and shameless flirting wielded at her hapless victims, she had one hand at her waist and the other to her heart. Which was conveniently located per her bosom, also accentuated as she played with the little gold heart peeking from her cleavage, a gift from Mamma for her eighteenth. And there was a distinct flounce of the hair as she landed about six inches away from the tallest, and what looked to be slightly the oldest of the four young ruffians. Angular faced, with a singular nose and beady eyes, Erik had to give him some credit. Not many men managed to pay sod all attention to Raven, when she landed practically on their toes and heaved her bosom at them.

And he knew damn well that she'd clocked him not noticing her, but she wasn't going to give it away. Instead she turned up the wattage of her beautiful smile, and announced, loud, clear and very BBC announcer, “Oh my! The Beatles! I'm simply thrilled to welcome you to our little shop! Is there anything I can help you with today, gentlemen? I can assure you, there's nothing that's too much trouble!”

And her eyelashes were in danger of taking wing, if she insisted on batting them that way, Erik thought, amused. Or at least setting up the potential for a change in local weather conditions, and perhaps initiating a cyclone. What had she called them, anyhow? The... Beatles?

Hmm. Some kind of modern beat combo, then, Erik assumed. And what a ridiculous pun. As if a musical group with a name as stupid as that was ever going to really take off.

But fair play to this fellow, he was still oblivious to Erik's little sister's shenanigans. Or reckoning on to be, at least. Erik was pretty sure that at least a couple of the others had taken note of the pretty buxom blonde on the premises: the one with the narrow smirky face, leaning against a stand of Puffin new releases and reading off the blurb on the back of a Professor Branestawm paperback, had definitely cast her an offensively assessing look out of the corner of his eye. The leather-jacketed pretty-boy was grinning as he drifted away and started examining a Norman Wisdom biography, head down.

But Raven wasn't to be beaten, because God knows, male attention wasn't something she was used to having withheld. She cleared her throat, loud, and twitched her head around to get a little more in the face of the fellow who was cruisin' for a bruisin', no matter how famous, if he didn't understand that she was not to be trifled with. “Is there anything in particular that you're looking for?” she enquired, soft, sibilant, dangerous as a snake getting the measure of a mongoose, just as graceful and sinuous. And Erik settled in, pulling his stool around to the side of the till, because this promised to be a show.

And maybe he picked up on the warning signs, a little bit there. Because Raven at least got a hand gesture flipped out vaguely, and an assurance that, “I'll find it, love, don't worry,” delivered in a harsh Scouse accent. So there! A happy customer, and Raven would be happy with that, right?

And then Erik missed the next few seconds, because the older guy wandered up to the till, smiled at him with an uncertain and beaverish expression, and asked about the breadth of range of the shop's musical history books, a question which Erik was fully qualified to answer in detail – in minute, exhaustive, exhausting detail. And he'd just launched upon that explanation, when something caught
his attention out of the corner of his eye.

Something blue. Because failing a bit of forthright flirtation, Raven had found since infancy that a sure tactic for gaining ascendancy and being the cynosure of all eyes in any given situation, had a lot to do with how she used the gifts that nature had given her. And, despite years of scolding, pleading and earnest older-brother lectures, she still had damn all caution, good sense or native self-preservation. For God’s sake.

Erik was off his stool and into the melée, the instant he caught that flash of blue, but too late, quite too late. Even as his brogues hit the dusty sage-green squared-off carpeting of the shop floor, Raven was giving the tightly-packed throng of a small audience she’d instantaneously collected, a *twirl*. There was triumph as well as coquettishness in the set of her tightly tucked-in chin, as she kept her eyes on what seemed to be the unimpressed leader of the pack. He *had* been unimpressed, at least. Now he was gawking at her with unfeigned and unmixed admiration, mouth a little hung open.

And Erik got a foot in between the pair of them, and set a heavy hand on his little sis's shoulder, stilling her prancing and showing off for all comers. “Raven! What the hell do you think you’re playing at? Will you kindly stop playing the fool and get in the back room, I'll have words with you in a moment. I'll serve these – gentlemen – and then I’m shutting up the shop. Bloody *hell*."

It interrupted the cries of, “Little girl blue!” and “Mutant and proud!” and, “Christ, Ringo, get your nose out of that *Beezer* annual and get a load of this!” that were going up on all sides of her from these disreputable lads. Cries that pinged on something way down deep in Erik's consciousness, news stories and blaring headlines he quickly turned the pages of the daily Telegraph to ignore, presenter comments on the Light programme on the radio that had him reaching for the switch, so he could make his toast or stew his tea in blessed silence. Associations with CND marches and Speakers' Corner ranters and murmurs over unionisation and workers' assemblies, hints of militancy and discontent in the mutant ranks that rendered him uneasy. That made him wonder if the peace he'd relied on this long could hold out.

There was no *need* for that sort of thing. Britain was the home of tolerance and community support, a haven of peace and blind-eye-turning. A paradise, where as long as you stayed off your neighbour's lawn, and never imputed that he mistreated his dog, or threw rather than bowled in cricket, then he had no quarrel with you, and indeed no interest in you. They had chosen it as safe haven, as home at last after persecution and loss, precisely because they would never *need* to stand and fight for their very right to exist. Not in this land where the Tolpuddle Martyrs, the suffragettes, the Roundheads and Magna Carta and *habeas corpus*, had done the work for them, years and decades and centuries back. And the known history and consequences of native pogroms, the influx of especially mutant immigration before and after the war and the careful programme of education and legislation to counter the inevitable backlash, had ensured a muted but genuine welcome. A civilised land, aged and wise and wily about the ruthless means and gentle courtesies necessary to maintain decent standards of behaviour and the beauties and gentillesse of civilisation, to keep peace even with those who wilfully insisted on being wrong and strange and *different*. There would never be camps and yellow stars, spitting and ugly names and beatings in the streets, not here. It took a callow young state, rich in arrogance and short on civilisation, to foster and *enjoy* that much hate.

'If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh?’ Shakespeare had had Shylock say, after all. And Erik thought there was a reason it had come from the mouth of a lad up from the lower-middles, a near-Brummie of the sixteenth century in the heart of the Midlands. Mutants, Jews, homosexuals and the whole boiling lot of them, even Brummies, even Scousers, all Brits together, all tickling and bleeding. And sometimes revenging.

And therefore no need for discord with one's neighbours, for radicalism and militant uprising and
protest. Never again, hopefully. He'd shed enough blood for a lifetime, and hoped fervently that it would never again prove necessary. Never again would be a damn sight too soon.

But there was definitely some association of that kind, struggling to make the connection with this vocal and lippy shower in his head. And he was stood, breaching the enforced gap in the middle of them, and giving Raven the eye of authority that she respected so little, except from Mamma. Only to have her twinkle up at him, blue as Blue John down in the caves of the Peak District (where she'd hidden on trips as a kid, thinking it to give her the protective coloration to give her camouflage and himself and Edie a fright.)

And, damn her, she chucked his cheek, before saying, “Don't be such an old fusspot, Erik. It's the Beatles! Oh, do you never pay any attention to the latest sensation that's sweeping the nation, for God's sake? The Beatles! Number One with a bullet and top of the hit parade, and not only that, either! Did you not check the Daily Mail headlines last week? 'Throw these conchie mutant freaks off our Beeb'? 'Mutant lovers go back to Scouseland'? Enoch Powell frothing at the mouth on Any Questions on the Home Service, and demanding that musical groups be registered and pre-approved by the Arts Council to ensure they're not corrupting our decent pure young womanhood with perverted mutant sympathies?'

And the one with the longest hair, and the biggest nose, chuckled. “Think they didn't like us much, la'? What did we ever do to them, barring suggest the Queen Mum's a mutant on live radio, eh?”

And yes, it was all springing to mind more clearly for Erik, now. (He'd been a little wrapped up in the whole Charles business, last week. He felt he could be excused an understandable lack of interest and attention paid, to the urgent political and social issues of the day). But even so, a little had crept into his consciousness. A live studio performance on Ready Steady Go!, a few unguarded pro-mutant remarks by the popular beat group of the day, and suddenly the consequence of a few days of national sensation, manufactured outrage and calls for public flogging.

And now – he rather assumed – here they were. In his shop, milling about his sister in an admiring fashion, and giving him some rather sceptically amused looks. “And what's with you, mate?” the beaky-nosed one asked, switching from his vacant gawping at Raven, to give him a look that proved a bit more coolly hostile. “You don't like the mutant style either, eh? What you going to do, chuck her out with us? Put her out of a job just because she don't look like you do? Listen, love, you don't need this,” he said forcefully in Raven's direction. “You come with us, we can get you a job at Parlophone in a minute. We just signed with 'em, if they don't like a blue receptionist maybe they don't like selling millions of our next record either. Come on, tell this wanker where to stuff it, sag off with us for the afternoon and we'll take you down the Purple Pussycat in SoHo, have a few words with the manager, pal of ours, and get you a job–”

“I think not,” Erik said firmly, because there was a definite limit. If these oiks were also mutant musical oiks, then that was at least one concern off his plate. But coaxing his little sister into alternative employment that would probably involve a sight less clothing than usual, and over her blue scales too, was still a fair stride over the line.

“Hey,” this lad said, face hurt. “I wasn't going to suggest anything I wouldn't put my auntie forward for! He needs a secretary! Well,” he amended – and Erik would give him that he had an honest face, if not a precisely handsome one, “part-time it's secretarial, anyhow. It's a highly, er, adaptable position, you could say. Oh Jesus, you norms,” he went on to protest, at the look that elicited from Erik, “you don't understand what it's like for an honest mutant trying to make a buck and get by in the world, what it's like being different!”

'You norms', eh? Erik might be sober, respectable and conventional – and proud of it – but he was
getting a little tired of being painted as *the man*, as a reactionary force, by these clueless teen-idols. (As if they knew anything about rebellion. As if they had a clue what it could cost.) And with one hand outstretched, he summoned to hand the metre-long metal rule he kept behind the till, handy for knifing open book deliveries from their boxes and keeping the petty cash book ruled off and in good order. And now, handy for a demonstration of just how 'normal' he wasn't.

To hand, but not quite in his hand, not grasped and supported. Only hovering, quivering, an inch or two from his outstretched fingers, vibrating in mid-air like he'd summoned it into an eager unlife of its own, like the mops and buckets in *Fantasia*, ready for work, for mischief and for play. And then he began to make it describe an angle subtended by an arc, lifting up – like a cane, lifted to punish and instruct a waiting arse – and then thwacking back into position, much faster, with the promise of violence. You could do a lot with a promise, manipulating apprehension. Once word was out in the camp of his powers, with Schmidt dead and Erik diving and searching through huts and labs and workrooms to find Jakob, plain fear had done a lot. If he'd had to kill or maim every soldier and functionary who'd got in his way, between him and safe possession and protection of two whole parents, then he'd have been done for, and so would they. His powers would never have held out: untrained, they'd been exhausted after the fourth or fifth kill. But a few dead bodies behind you can do enough to subdue the live ones blocking the way in front of you.

“Well,” he said, to a boggle-eyed crew who were suddenly a lot less gobby and a lot more subdued, “what was that you were saying, about me not understanding? About being different?” And he made the rule give an extra little wiggle, like an admonitory finger-wagging from a sharp schoolteacher.

They were all transfixed, but the cocky and especially gobby one, the one with a face designed with a set square, him especially so. He came right up close to Erik, and to the cane – not in any aggressive or provocative manner, but like a moth drawn in to something brighter than the sun, an ape watching the invention of fire. (Yes, an ape, definitely. Apposite, Erik thought approvingly.) Awed, he looked, definitely enchanted. And crouching down a little by the knees, so that he could look at the rule more closely as it tingled and twitched. Erik could easily imagine he might have been quite a pleasant small boy, well-behaved and wonderstruck in museums and art galleries, whatever kind of an arse he'd grown up into.

“Magical,” the lout breathed, and maybe he wasn't quite so bad as all that.

“Mutant,” Raven said sourly, and began to run right through the rainbow in an attempt to wrest back the attention rightfully hers from the brotherly usurpation that had stolen her thunder. It got her some perfunctory glances, a polite smattering of applause from the big-nosed fella, and a vague, “Very pretty, love,” from the pretty boy, who was in a position to know. They were absolutely all still more interested in Erik's magical magnetic mutant trick-show, and even the older uncle-y type of fella in the camel-hair coat abandoned his un-helped and unhindered search for the relevant bit of coffee-table arthouse completist reference work he was after, and came and joined in the admiring heaving that was getting up a bit too close.

“Hey, you got rhythm, mate?” asked the pretty-boy suddenly, as one seized by a great idea. “What I mean to say, if we got you a set of metal drumsticks, could you lay down a blues beat – look, ma, no hands – and prop us up while we run through a five-track set, 'cause we're due on the Ed Sullivan show next month and we wanna make a splash, first time on American TV, right? That'd knock their socks off!”

“Hey!” protested Big-nose, elbowing his way in to take issue with his fellow band-member. “You've already got a drummer, Paul! In case you hadn't noticed! Two is surplus to requirements, buddy boy! What you suggesting? I'll get the Musician's Union on ya!”
This started up a bit of general argy-bargy, jostling and joking amongst the youngsters, while the older fellow watched as Erik got bored and began to have the rule rotate slowly through the air, attracting metallic oddments – one by one, and as he chose, from around the shop, including some loose change from out of the pockets of the thin and smirky – well, Beatle, he supposed, although these ridiculous self-assigned monickers did stick in the craw somewhat. His yelp as the shrapnel issued out from his black serge suit pants was quite acceptably amusing. Let Raven try to outshine that! The thought of her actually managing to acquire a pop-star boyfriend was enough to make him shudder. And Hank would not be happy.

The older fellow smiled as he watched, amused too. Then he stuck out a hand to Erik. “Brian Epstein,” he said cordially. “Manager to this band of young ne'er-do-wells. It's a wonder I have any hair left. Nice shop you have here: and a very interesting ability, too,” he added, nodding at the rule as Erik set it off widdershins too, stuck all over with metallic what-nots. Then set it on to chase after Raven and make threatening moves towards smacking her backside, the persistently impudent minx. Clearly she did not mind at all: the ensuing upheaval and merriment was rowdy and lively enough, with her at the heart of it, to please her. “Don't suppose you have any... current representation?” camel-hair chap asked, with a lifted eyebrow.

Erik laughed, reached out and fondled the rule as it spun past a little faster, a sign he was getting too caught up in this nonsense. “You're the second person who's suggested show business as an alternative career route to me in the past fortnight,” he observed. “But I think I'll pass. I like my life.” Peaceful, he thought. Quiet, unobtrusive. And now the advent of Charles... No, he wasn't complaining, at all.

This scene wasn't peaceful, though, not at all, and he adjudged it time to bring a little peace and order to what was, after all, a place of business. The rule obeyed his command and returned to his hand, grasped firmly this time – and if only Raven herself was ever as obedient. Like a troupe of meerkats the horde – well, four seemed a horde, with this rowdy lot – of young men followed it, still charmed and half-hypnotised by all appearances.

“Blooming amazing, pal,” the bolshy, angular leader said, nodding vigorously at him, at the rule, and the rest chimed in enthusiastically, more musical than a Scouse accent could normally manage, perhaps promisingly for their careers. “You sure you're gonna nix that drumming idea? Cuz that would be a top attraction, even if it was just a special one-off event–”

“Oh!” And Big-nose was not impressed, once again. “I told Paul, and I'll tell you an' all, John, you have a drummer! A special one-off drummer, one of a kind, let me introduce to you the one and only Ringo, Ringo Starr, drummer to the Beatles and what's more the only drummer for the Beatles–”

And Raven had trailed up behind the chattering, arguing group of her erstwhile camp-followers, her hunting party for an eager fox – face a bit sulky, perhaps, at once again taking a most unused second place to Erik in the attention stakes. For which she had a ready solution, however, and Erik should have known better than not to expect it. “Are you quite sure about that?” she cooed prettily, leaning in behind the sticksman who was still vociferously defending his turf.

And, as the boys turned to look at her, mildly miffed at the interruption to a threatening all-out war between the rhythm section and the leads, Erik winced, and closed his eyes. For sure, it was too late to rescue the cat and put it back in the bag. But pretty colours were one thing, a fireworks display of the pelt, and letting on about this particular aspect of her gift was another. Still, if they were mutants themselves...

Because now the Beatles had two drummers, obviously. One, the original, staring in open-mouthed shock – Erik was worried about having to administer mouth-to-mouth, his first aid skills were a mite
rusty – while standing in his natty slightly non-trad suiting, his brothers in rhythm standing equally stunned at his back, all totally swivelled around and riveted, now.

Upon a second edition of that selfsame drummer, except now kitted up in a pretty navy-blue pencil skirt – a bit tight at the seams, what with the transmogrification – and a high-collared sleeveless coral shirt. Plus the heels, of course. Erik was willing to bet they were a bugger to walk or even stand in, with feet four sizes bigger, and in masculine sizings too. And even as the thought passed through his mind, this pseudo-moptop, ersatz edition, kicked off her shoes – unsuitably high for the shop and being on her feet all day, in any case – and grinned at her stunned audience. It wasn't her usual smile, pretty, coquettish, girlish, the one that could coax extra pocket money and sweets out of Edie ever since she was a stumbling, lisping, engagingly violet-hued toddler. No, this one was wide-eyed, and thickly-fringed, and masculine in an ingenuous cave-man style, and... well... big-nosed. It was the drummer, the curiously-monickered Ringo, but Mk. II, all over again.

And predictably, the resulting uproar quite dwarfed the stir his own gifts had stirred up. Especially the aspect of the modish ladies' wear the second version was kitted out in. “Had my doubts about you, kid!” the leader chap – John? - was instantly crowing. “You know what, he's got the legs for it, too,” smirky fellow – George, Erik rather thought – observed more critically. “Go on, put the heels back on, love, give us a twirl.”

While the leather-jacketed prettyboy, Paul, folded his arms and directed his verdict in Erik's direction. “Two for the price of one, bargain! Look, mate, if it's all the same to you, how about we swap ya? We'll leave you the clueless workshy one in the gents' suiting, we'll have the beyootiful lady with the alternating colour-scheme, whaddya say?”

And – possibly quite legitimately – the original chap was fairly incensed at this. He made his views known at a distance of about three inches from Paul's face, and a bit louder than would have suggested he was taking it all in good part. “Swap? Whaddya mean, swap? You think 'cuz she looks like me she's got the skills? You think you can just set her down in front of my kit and she can produce the goods, eh, ya waster, ya tool? You can cock off with that shite!”

And utterly unfazed, the pretty one gave him an immensely, impressively indifferent shrug. “Look at it this way – it's not like she's gonna be any worse, see what I mean?” And as a newly-muscled and weight-hefting Raven was physically interceding in the threatening altercation – and it had to be admitted that her powers sometimes came in useful for crowd-control, and a bit of bouncing of undesirables from the premises – the smirky fellow had his say too.

“That's Pete! What Pete? Pete? What?” That was John. And Erik had a notion this response was deliberately inflammatory, although he couldn't have said why.

As they watched apparent twin brothers, one in a dress, struggle as one prevented the other from severing life and limb in the case of pretty-boy, the camel-coated fellow leaned in to Erik, and had a word himself. “Sorry about this. They are a bit of a handful at times. Although your assistant seems well capable of dealing with it. Very impressive abilities there.”

Erik watched critically as Raven successfully went for the headlock, and demanded to know if Ringo was going to be a good boy and play nice with his pal. “I don't know, she's probably more trouble than all four of them. Want to swap after all?”

“I'll take the offer under advisement,” the manager decided. “Possible rain-check?”
“Right you are.” And Erik noticed, as the scene calmed, and pretty young fellows dusted themselves down and smirked a bit sheepishly, that the fellow they called John was watching him and their minder confabbing together.

“Well, well, cosy or what,” he drawled, and Erik didn't altogether like the look on his face. “Looks like you've found a soul-mate there, Brian buddy-boy, eh? Homosexual, Jewish, a loving son to Mum, mutant and proud: the pair of you tick all the boxes, they'll have to set up a protest march just for the pair of ya, am I right?”

No, Erik didn't care for his attitude, but just the same his face seemed to confirm a lucky hit for the cocky little sod. “Aaaah, I thought so,” he said, nodding and grinning at Erik. “It wasn't your lovely assistant's arse you had your eye on, while those two were trying to rip each other's throats out!”

“She's my sister, not just my assistant!” Erik said indignantly, and it only got him a rasping laugh in return.

“What's that got to say to it? You got a lot of pervert French poets on these shelves, pal, don't you ever read 'em?” It wasn't quite an unreasonable question, which was half of why Erik ignored it.

The outside of enough, it was, and quite enough to have Erik leaving go the rule in his hand, to let it spring forth and jerk threateningly in this insolent young thug's direction. Who flinched quite satisfyingly, and changed his tune with appropriate speed. “Hey, hey, leave off! No offence intended, pal,” he added, with a squinting grin Erik's way, that actually seemed somewhat sincere. A trouble-causer, but perhaps not actively malicious, Erik diagnosed. “We pull Brian's pigtails, there, a bit,” he added, nodding at Erik's uncomfortably twitching companion. “But we don't really give a flying one, and he knows it. Live and let love, I say.”

“Damn good of you,” the aforementioned Brian said beside him, tart. “Now, we only came in for some reading matter for the train journey. Shift yourselves, pick up what you're going to get, and let's leave these good folks in some peace. God knows they've been extremely tolerant.”

And surprisingly enough, the overly-spirited lads took his admonition to heart – or at least humoured him a bit. And began to shuffle around the shelves, flicking through paperbacks and magazines, tossing each other likely reads and loudly quoting amusing or obscene bits of whatever they were looking at. Considering the swiftly growing pile of prospective sales they started stacking up at the counter, Erik considered it wisest and best for business to turn a blind eye to their less than bourgeoisie-friendly conduct.

Brian called him in to help out with the choice of the previously-discussed music history reference work, and a good quarter of an hour passed until all purchases were finally decided upon. And when Erik finally homed back in on the till, arms loaded with comic books, poetry and Just William – these were strange lads indeed – he found Raven back to her more usual form, and deep in discussion with John.

Evidently complaining about dating issues and the mutant life combined, going by his response. The way he was patting her hand seemed genuinely avuncular – and it wasn't as if Erik didn't scrutinize it pretty closely for lechery. “Nah, love, don't worry about it,” he was saying earnestly, elbow leaning on a stack of books towering at the side of the till. “If they don't want to know once they know you're mutant... Well, look, Groucho got it wrong. Clubs that don't want you for a member, they're not going to be your sort anyway, right? Probably serve mulligatawny every day, don't appreciate a bit of handball in the dining room! No dancin' on tables, mysterious objections to conga lines in the hallways. Waste of time! You want a bloke that's never going to conga with ya? Daily Mail at the breakfast table, something in the city, kids off to boarding school and you going off your nut with nothing ever happening, life passing you by? That Hank fella, he sounds a better bet...” And then the
pair of them appeared to notice Erik bearing down on them. John patted Raven's hand more firmly, coughed and stood a little apart from her. “Anyway, love! You mind yer Uncle John's words of wisdom!”

“Gor, you getting old, John?” came a contemptuous voice from the other side of the stacks, and it proved to be George, wobbling around so weighed down that he was liable to topple over any moment. “It's a long time since you volunteered to be some top bird's uncle, Christ's sake! I think he's getting old,” he said confidentially, to Erik, presumably because he was handy. “It must be being married that does it. Normally he loves the mutant birds, can't get enough. Shame Cynthia's strictly norm, can't see it lasting if some powered chickie gets her claws into him.” The last was in a confidential undertone, but apparently not confidential enough, as it still got him cuffed round the head, as he hit the counter and slammed his books and magazines down.

“Oi!” he cried. But mama-bear John ignored him with sublime tranquillity, and carried on monologuing at Raven. (Including Erik with a meaning eye-roll at George, a slapped-down cub who was clutching his head and muttering dark, dark things. Dark things, about vengeance is mine saith the Lord, and ale, and aspirin, and telling Auntie Mimi on him.)

“What I mean to say, love, is Decca turned us down eighteen months back, and who's sorry now, eh? Connie Francis could not be more sorry than those buggers!” And John tapped the side of his nose, beaky if not as ample as that of his drummer buddy.

“I still say we should do a benefit concert for their accounts department, busking outside the main entrance,” Ringo suggested, calmer now, dragging a wheeling basket of noir pulp detective novels and home baking books behind him, as he rounded the corner of a shelf.

“We seem to have made off with half the contents of your shelves,” Brian observed, bringing up the rear. “I do apologise. Still, all good for the coffers, eh!” he pointed out, brightening.

It certainly bloody was. A few more days of business like this, and Erik could shut up shop for the rest of the quarter, take Mamma and Raven on a Caribbean cruise. Although it wasn't really the time to be doing that. He had pressing concerns to keep him at home, just now. He didn't elaborate upon the thought further, but he smiled slightly to himself.

Still, it was strenuous work putting all of their selections through the register, long-winded enough that he had to bestir himself to make some polite chit-chat while hammering away on the keys, totalling up, pinging the register. The weather, politics and the youth of today exhausted, he felt a little desperate, and less inclined to respect convention. “So,” he observed, holding up a volume of political caricatures and squinting at the scratch over the price. Two shillings and six? Four? “You've had a pretty good demonstration of my family's powers this past half hour. And the boys mentioned you're mutant yourself...?”

“Control of sound wave volume,” Brian responded instantly. “Can come in awfully handy at live concerts. Augmenting the sound system if it's insufficient, you know. Pity I'm absolutely tone-deaf, would have been wonderful as an opera singer....”

“And the band?” Erik inquired, squinting over to the window where Raven was giving another demo in response to dares from the lads, this time going for a rainbow array of shades that he knew from past history was massively effortful and liable to land her with a migraine later than evening. The little show-off. Although their joy and admiration pleased him almost as much as it evidently did her. She got little enough joy out of her mutant status, no more than he half the time, and he couldn't grudge her this taste of it.

“Oh, no, no,” Brian said, with a startled look, and clearly surprised at Erik's own surprise. “All the
boys are norm, a hundred per cent. Did they give you that impression? They are very pro-mutant, of course – it's the latest trendy cause, and they are such a bunch of bolshy little pinkos. Love them as I do. Eh, lads?” he called over.

“Thanks a bunch, Brian,” Paul called back sulkily, as he flipped through a home décor catalogue and showed Raven the exact pattern he was after, before she replicated it. “Tell our new mates all about our secret shame, why don't you? Boring norms, yeah, thanks a lot!”

“There are a lot of mutants in musical groups, though,” Brian went on conversationally, before he was interrupted.

“Christ, don't be pimping out Mick Jagger some more! Remember who actually pays you your fifteen per cent! Prancing bloody ninny, thinks he's competition! Here, love, you're not interested in the Stones, are you?” George looked genuinely upset, like someone had libelled his granny, or ruffled his careful pompadour.

“Who?” Raven asked innocently, which seemed to please them all, as they settled back, relaxed, from a taut and anxious state.

“Time-waster,” John said cheerfully. “Synthetic blues outfit, wasting their time, that scene's past it. He has got some cracking powers, though,” he added wistfully. “That whole rubber limbs thing... I heard he got a call from the Fantastic Four over in New York, they wanted him to join them.”

“Fantastic Four?” Raven asked, looking a bit lost and all at sea, by this point.

“Sub-Velvet Underground, love. Steer well clear, nice girl like you,” Ringo advised her. “Sue Storm could get you into all kinds of trouble. She likes a nice innocent flower-bud to corrupt. Anyway, Brian, you nearly done there?”

He’d heard the ping of the till, Erik tallying up the final total, as Brian got out his wallet and paid for the lot with a roll of the eyes. “We are indeed,” Brian confirmed. “And many thanks to you, sir – and madam – you've put up with this shower with positively superhuman – should I say mutant – tolerance and patience.”

It hadn’t really been a hardship, though, in the end. And their final shambling exit from the shop was executed with a lot of assurances of continued custom, of invitations back (which Raven was largely responsible for), and promises from the lads of concert tickets winging their way next time they played in the UK. John was the last in the shop, lingering a little and called back to by his band-mates and manager, but still lingering and smiling, more genuine and warmer than before. “They're good lads,” he said cheerfully, apparently vouching for his band-mates. “Just a bit nuts. Nice to hang out with you two freaks. We felt right at home.”

“Thank you so much,” Erik said drily, and Raven giggled.

And Brian came and leaned back in the door of the shop, a little exasperated. “Come on, John, the taxi's waiting. My wallet isn't actually bottomless, you know.”

And as he disappeared John smiled after him, still in a rosy good mood, still benevolent. “Old Bri, it's done him good. Meeting a like mind, similar background and issues, you know,” he said, glancing at Erik. “The two of you should stay in touch. He gave you his number, right? No? Christ, the bloke's slow or something. Let me write it down for you...”

And Erik would have protested, but couldn't very well, not without saying actually I have a prior interest, and Raven would have got a damn sight too excited about that. But when John handed the
scrap of paper over, perhaps his face betrayed something of his lack of excitement, because the lad looked rueful. “Nothing doing, pal? Oh well, doesn't hurt to try. Stay in touch anyway: all freaks together, right? Old Bri, he likes that celebrity touch, anyway. Always yearning after someone he can't have, know what I mean?”

And as he bade Raven a, “Take care of yourself, love,” and kissed her cheek, strolled out of the shop with all the savoir faire and lack of hurry in the world, to a steaming, fuming band of companions, Erik felt a little rueful, too. One more thing they had in common, then, him and Brian. One more thing.
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers

Chapter Summary

Edie has a weekly dinner at her house, and is used to unexpected guests.

Perhaps not quite this unexpected.

Chapter Notes

Not the most appropriate title - quoted from Henry V. Subject to change when I think of something more appropriate. Other Henry V and Henry IV parts i and ii liable in the rest of the text including retroactively, now I've twigged how very Prince Hal they both are. Or Erik, perhaps more a Katherine at times.

Answering the doorbell that evening was nerve-wracking. But it was better than allowing Az to do the job. Because yes, the absolute arse had managed to invite himself along for dinner again. And not only that, but he'd not even had the decency to turn up solo. He'd arrived with that fellow Janos on his arm, instead. And if Erik hadn't already been predisposed in Janos's favour, then he might have taken a dim view of it. But as it was, Az got a severe look, and a finger drawn swiftly across Erik's throat, when Edie was safely looking the other way. Since Az was for some mysterious reason rather a pet of hers. Janos, on the other hand, received a curt nod, and an appreciative glance over the excellently tailored cut of his discreet dark suit. Really, an exceptional specimen. However Az managed to reel in the romantic interests that he did, was a mystery on par with the Marie Celeste or Nessie, to Erik.

Given his druthers, it would have been more comfortable for Erik to arrive at the last minute prior to the time he'd given Charles – on the dot for when Edie punctually dished up week after week after week. Thus, he'd have avoided having to answer the door, time after time, to one guest after another who proved to be not Charles. But the only son and elder child of Edie Lehnsherr was well trained, and knew his duty to a tee, most especially in respect of the sacrosanct ritual of a Friday night dinner. Chopping vegetables, setting the table, tidying the lawn furniture out the way in case his mother's guests might care to spill out onto the back garden lawn and admire the sunset, all of these were a regular part of his duties. As was answering the door, if Raven didn't get there before him. On this particular night, however, Raven had not a chance of hitting the finishing line a single moment before him. Hell, he could probably have done a sub-four minute mile, if he'd had an undisturbed stretch of road and a ribbon to aim for.

“Darling, so restless!” Edie exclaimed finally, the fourth time he'd hurriedly thrown down a vegetable knife or a spatula, and executed a quick three quarter turn in the direction of the doorbell. The first time, it was Az and Janos – Janos holding out a bunch of rather nice magenta crysanthemaths with a beaming smile. And Az, breezily squeezing in past Erik, and greeting Raven with a sly wink and a bit of innuendo about housewarming gifts and warm welcomes, just as if he was generally inclined that way, or Raven had never heard any of Erik's restrained and judicious complaints about the housemate foisted upon him.
Then Hank, and Raven almost beat him to that one. The boy scrubbed up surprisingly well when required. Some young immigrant friend of Raven's arrived third. That was Armando, a student friend of Raven's who was pulling double time learning the Knowledge and integrating with the local largely Caribbean immigrant population. And with him came a young woman called Angel, who was new to Erik. When he politely enquired about the nature of her university course, he received a kick in the shins from Raven. Further consultation with Hank in the hallway led to the revelation that the young lady's vocational description was less art student, more exotic dancer. Which was less than reassuring news, after he'd done his best to steer Raven away from bad influences in the form of would-be stars of the beat, blues and skiffle music scenes, and the hot-head mutant rights' activists at her college, and Az, and possibly their mother, and...

It was possibly time for Erik to admit that Raven constituted her own bad influence, on herself and others. Erik put that thought aside to consider later. His mind was well-occupied in any case: and when the doorbell rang for a fourth time, he had a feeling. It was sharp and urgent and thrilling in a way Erik wasn't used to associating with the bell-chimes that hammered out an arpeggio borrowed from Elgar. The bell had been chosen by their mother when they'd first moved in from their initial rented quarters, after the first months of acclimatisation in Britain. That was once their papers were settled, stamped, approved, Uncles Hugo and Sylvester both kicking in substantial sums towards the deposit on a house-purchase, with Jakob unable to fully mobilise his own funds and liquidise enough ready cash, from Axis and collaborator-nation accounts, trusts, shares and properties. And he was fragile enough, that without that family support then perhaps their escape and survival would have foundered and come to naught in any case, ending in penury or a rejection of their applications. But the Lehnsherr brothers had rallied, and Jakob's last years had been...

Erik caught himself up there, as he generally did. Repression and British phlegm were really all that made certain memories endurable. Jakob's last years had been happy, and free. It was all that need be dwelt upon.

The doorbell, then, and the feelings it evoked. But it was only a feeling, and it would certainly prove to be officious Mr Coulson from the local residents' association with another courteous reminder about noise levels every Friday evening. Or Mrs Cassidy over the road, with an invite for Edie to one of her brood's musical recitals. Or that miserable old bigot Stryker, whom only Edie could sweeten and coax around. (Or sock in the jaw with impunity, and an innocent face for the long arm of the law: but it had never quite come to that yet in a dozen years of faux neighbourliness.)

And yet he still moved at a pace that would have had him tripping up a cheetah and overtaking, if it got in his damn way. And still found himself sucking in a breath and hesitating, for the briefest fraction of a second, as he ground to a halt before the shiny polished teak of the outer porchway front door. Hesitating, second-guessing himself in his absurd hopes. It was amazing how much thought could be packed into the briefest span of time: it seemed as if there was enough to admit to himself that he was hoping it would be Charles, there in the porchway, blinking in the humid air, the faintly spitting rain. Turning to him from surveying the garden, the faux-stonework fountain, the amateur topiary of an exuberant Raven, the birdbath and lawn ornaments and gnomes and all the pleasantly taste-free and frankly hedonistic, vulgar, monied lower-middle class touches that Edie relished, to smile at Erik and...

And even with his hand raising to the latch and the door-knob, Erik also had time to mentally kick himself in the shins, for exactly this much-rehearsed little fantasy. The revolutions of his psyche, turning and turning about to be one instant cow-eyed dreamer, and the next the cold-eyed realist pouring cold water on innocent hopeful lechery and dreams, had attained at this point positively Olympic levels of gymnastics. With the switch repeated, faster and faster, as he unloosed the door-chain, and turned the door-knob. It would, wouldn't, might, mightn't, be Charles, and his palms were sweaty and his stomach churning anyway at the very possibility, and...
Of course it wouldn't be Charles. What an idiot he was to even allow himself to anticipate it, to invite a crushing disappointment.

Then he opened the door, and his heart swooped around like a trapped bird because it was Charles, after all, and what a rollercoaster ride to put himself through over such idiocy. Charles, yes, in fact, turned away and looking out over the lawn and the gates and hedges, with crystals of rain in his hair. (That still hadn't received a decent haircut, and would need hairgrips and ribbons any day now just as much as any Beatle. Was there no longer a barber to be found the length and breadth of England?)

Erik coughed slightly, just enough to barely draw attention. And he was rewarded, as Charles stopped gazing out in probably refined blue-blood wonderment at how the other half lived, and turned around to look at him. And smiled.

A thing of wonder, that smile, and Erik couldn't look away. Charles neither, seemly, and it was ridiculous to both stand here on the threshold of his mother's house, wordless, and simply beam at each other with never a word passing between them. Most probably he was imagining it, and yet Charles' expression seemed loaded with every bit the same anticipation and pent-up wonder that he was feeling himself, the same drive to know intimately, the focus. Brimful with it, the way he felt himself.

Thus it was without doubt a very good thing, for Erik to hear the clack of his mother's pretty Italian mules on the hallway parquet, as he stood like a dumb fool in the dim light of the porch, its translucent glass, its slightly dusty umbrella stand and discarded wellington boots and the gardening coats on the rack. The small spider and its web, too, up in the corner, that had evaded Edie's somewhat, admittedly, haphazard housekeeping. (So much else to do, after all. So much else in life, when one had been granted a second chance at it, hovering as close to death as the breath of a missed bullet against one's cheek in one second, and the next reprieved and free. Edie had better things to do, half the time, and it wasn't a bit surprising.)

“Darling,” she was saying, “do we have another guest? Heavens, are you keeping someone shivering out there on the doorstep, you dreadful boy? Is it Mrs Spencer with the cobbler recipe she promised me? Bring her in for a sherry, darling! Is it...”

Then the clack of her footsteps faltered, and then they stopped. “Darling, is that...” Erik was aware of the subtle switch in focus of the brilliant blue that had been all his a moment before. Past him, and to Edie, and the smile a shade brighter, even.

“Hello, Mama Edie,” Charles said.
"I have given his heart to the dogs to tear, little sister."

Chapter Summary

Friday night dinner at the Lehnsherrs', bring a bottle. Mutants, film-stars and cardigan-wearers, come one, come all, O come all ye faithful.

Erik and Raven, love never dies.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Mary Stewart's very wonderful The Wind Off The Small Isles, itself a mangling of the Kipling quotation about giving your heart to a dog to tear.

Henry V quote.

Racially insensitive slang expression used, period-appropriate. ETA: Charles isn't altogether the charming cultured idealist he's presenting himself as. He's been warped a little - maybe a lot - by a childhood with Kurt and Sharon, and minus the emotional refuge and stabilising influence of Raven. Not that he actively means harm: but he's ruled by emotions, pet causes and enthusiasms, will ride out to champion people and causes he feels passionately about, but lacks ethical grounding and qualities of character to enable him to perceive issues and injustices relating to things he isn't at least half in love with. So he's passionately stirred up by anti-Semitism and anti-mutant bias, here: while being capable of casual unthinking racism elsewhere. He's all passionate infatuations and good manners (for the time) but the substance and the spine is lacking (re: his reluctance to put himself on the line when it comes to coming out due to concern for his career if openly mutant, for example, even to a small and discreet group.) (While Erik is vigorously repressing his stronger ethical system and political philosophy, because in this AU he has something to lose.) I didn't want to explicate this far previously, as it speaks to later character development and plot points, but reading relevant discussion on DW made me think that a more explicit explanation was necessary. Sadly, 'cuz now I may as well write, 'THE END!' No not rly.)

With his mother embracing Charles and fondly patting his cheek, air kisses everywhere, chiding him for giving no prior warning so that she might have prepared for him specially, Erik had plenty of time on his hands, a good two minutes at least. He might have spent it fretting about Charles being taken out of his hands and becoming his mother's special guest and pet for the evening, instead. (In fact, he rather felt a reflex impulse of that's my mother, damn it, excuse me, I think you've overstepped a trifle.)

Not that Edie didn't make her own decisions for herself and no mistake, let there be no error of comprehension regarding the matter. Neither of her children were fool enough to think that treating her as if it was otherwise was a matter liable to result in anything other than personal disaster and chastisement. Still, damn it, enough was enough, and when hugging and exclamations were done,
Erik felt quite in possession of sufficient authority to step forward and claim what was his.

Or, at least, what he certainly had a prior claim to, over most other folk present at dinner. If not Edie herself, it occurred to him, with already a proprietorial hand upon Charles' shoulder to steer and guide him... Well, perhaps honestly merely to stake his prior claim and have done with it. And even as he turned in towards Charles, ready to subtly remind him who was host here, suggesting a pre-dinner drink and perhaps a venture out onto the patio to take the evening air, he was remembering that after all it was Edie who had the privilege of first acquaintanceship with this wild card, this upsetter of all norms and proprieties in Erik's life. Not that he had overmuch time to consider the issue: not as the pair of them turned towards him and yes, both were smiling benignly, much as one might at a charming and obstreperous pug dog or toddler.

“My love,” Edie said, patting his arm just as if he was Goldie, the chocolate labrador. (Although the dratted hound was fortunately housed at a neighbour's for the evening) “Why don't you take dear Charles here, and pour him a drink, take him out to see the garden?”

Well. That was a damn good question, to be honest. Why didn't he, after all? Right now, the main reason, if he was strictly truthful on the matter, would have been a sulky adolescent response to being told what to do. And, upon mature reflection, a response of, “Why should I?” or, “Why don't you do it if he's so wonderful?” was perhaps not the way to impress upon Charles his status as a mature and responsible adult, well able to conduct himself discreetly and sign up for a long-term transatlantic attachment, as well as a dutiful son. And in fact what could be better? Except that he wasn't entirely confident of his ability to mask his state of being suddenly a squealing three year old, not from his family and friends. (And Az.) It was so much easier alone with Charles. Everything was so much easier.

Perhaps a little bit of hesitation was showing too transparently on his face. At least, something made Charles pause. (And yes, it was Charles – right here, not imaginary, and frankly Erik was maybe turning into Lydia Bennett. Because he felt a little inclined to run screaming mad and announce Lud it is so strange, as well as to hyperventilate and swap gossip about the exciting new redcoats/movie-stars in town.) But at any rate, Charles touched Erik's shoulder, just the barest brush of fingertips to the sober and rigorously ironed fabric of his dress-shirt. (Which Erik hadn't at all spent twenty minutes choosing and deciding on earlier, anxiously wavering between special occasion white silk and the regular perfectly sensible blue rayon/cotton mix that he had a dozen of, that were quite good enough for both work and home. And for Charles, for that matter. What difference was a shirt going to make, for God's sake? He was losing his mind. It hadn't been more than a quarter of an hour, at all.)

And Charles looked... tentative. Also luminously lovely and faintly disheveled, but mostly, tentative. Which was ludicrous, obviously. “Of course,” he began, “if you're busy with dinner preparations, I'll be perfectly fine foisted off on Raven, especially if you have a full house of guests to attend to.” (The matter was fairly evident: from out of the occupied front room, their conversation had to be almost inaudible under the steady stream of chatter and the horns and yowling choruses of the 'Man From Laramie' soundtrack that Edie had taken an inexplicable and violent fancy to this week. Country twangs and yippi-i-ays accompanied visits, every time Erik popped in to fetch shopping or mow the lawn, from the fancy new stereo record-player that he'd very unwisely given Edie when last quarter's shop takings had busted all previous upper limits. He'd added to her stack of vinyl long-players at the time with a rather random selection of his own, mostly Rat Pack offerings, a little Nat King Cole and Ella Fitzgerald. Unfortunately she'd not taken the hint, and he had yet to hear 'Unforgettable' or 'At Last', given an airing in the old homestead.)

It was a ludicrous and exquisitely courteous suggestion, and somehow completely, characteristically Charles. Which he felt he knew something about, even on the basis of a very sketchy and pretty
disreputable bare-bones acquaintanceship. From an abrupt reversion to nervous and surly adolescent, Erik regained what measure of adult sophistication and urbanity he’d ever possessed, felt suddenly warmly comfortable in company with Charles. Even with his abnormally socially-acute mother right there, ready to detect any hint of him behaving like a schoolgirl, pressing lipstick kisses on her bobbysoxer posters. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he said lightly. “What’s your poison? We’ve some Spanish red open in the kitchen, or perhaps a gin and lime? We definitely had a couple of inches of gin left, unless Az has got at it in the meantime...”

“Oh. As to that,” Charles said slightly vaguely, and held up his hand where it had been lingering invisibly by his side. He proved to be in possession of a jumbo bottle of, yes, Martini Rosso, as per Erik’s last-minute suggestion. Erik winced slightly: the sticky liquor, with its faint tang of cough-mixture and tonic wine, was far from being a personal favourite. Edie, on the other hand, was reprehensibly addicted to the stuff, and her palate was a long way beyond re-education.

“Oh, my dear!” she exclaimed, as she accepted it from Charles, with a rather surprisingly bashful smile. “My favorite! However did you know – well, in fact, I suppose that I know very well how you came to have inside information on my personal tastes.” And she sparkled at him, just like some match-making mamma who was on the lookout for a likely marriage prospect for her eligible, ripe, very nearly on-the-shelf son. Which was ridiculous, and very clearly not what was actually going on. But still, the impression it gave! He could feel from the burning of his cheeks that he was blushing up a storm, the way he hadn’t since he was fourteen, and any embarrassment went straight to his ears.

And oh, hell, that was definitely his earlobes getting hot. Which meant that they were lighting up like belisha beacons, of course. Which was quite sufficient incentive for him to lay hands on the neck of Edie's precious bottle and reply, not at all a propos but very firmly, “Well, shall I pour you a glass, Mamma? Plenty of ice, yes?” And with one hand at Charles' elbow, he did his polite best to steer them out of the datted porch, and out of the way of his loose cannon of a mamma. Who could be relied upon to say blooming anything, at any time, and never mind the proprieties, and her son's companions and the impression they were getting.

But Charles, it seemed, wasn't co-operating, and moved not an inch despite Erik's attempt to re-locate him some distance from the unexploded bomb that was Erik's darling mamma. Underneath the really beautiful pearl grey suit and silk shirt, tieless, there had to be a rather impressive substratum of muscle packed into that compact form, to stay rooted and solid as a rock, despite Erik's politely urgent best efforts. Boxing at Cambridge, Erik remembered, looming out from some politely helpful cranny of his mind. As well as wrestling, and fencing and damn it, no doubt the Boat Race as well. Really, he could do with a delicate lace hankie to mop his fevered brow. But the course of events was fast overtaking him, as Charles gently laid his own hands on Erik's, and removed the bottle out of Edie's hands. At which Erik melted bonelessly, nervelessly, conscious of Charles' hands on his as if they'd been on fire. “Let me do that for you, Edie. And, more to the point, is there anything I can do to help out in the kitchen? I'm quite handy with a potato peeler and a sack of spuds, you know.” His smile was winning, even if Erik couldn't accommodate the notion of Charles Xavier wielding a potato peeler into his worldview. Worlds might split apart before he could quite manage to summon such a scenario.

And he could see Edie opening her mouth to nix the idea. Because, although regular guests were often assigned their specific roles and tasks in the grand objective of getting dinner done and on the table in a timely fashion, first-time guests were generally plonked down in the front room with a drink, and an admonition to mix, mingle and stay well out of the centre of culinary operations.

She was pipped at the post, however, by Az. Az, leaning sideways out of the open kitchen doorway, at the end of the hall, and calling out, “Oi! Bit of an emergency on our hands, here, Mrs L! We're ten
minutes late for dishing up at the dinner-table, someone's forgotten to braise the onions for the chicken dumpling sauce, we haven't got a lid for the potato dish and the pudding pastry's frozen solid after someone put it in the freezer instead of the refrigerator to chill! Oh, what a faux pas!” And his wicked little tail whipped out behind him, a vegetable knife tightly bound up in its strong but delicate coils, as he whisked it intensively, with a stern suggestion of boot camp and spud-peeling.

Which was a) bad news – as it was the highest priority for Edie to to dish up on time, and have their weekly social be a reliable and predictable event on the calendar. And b), disrupted all of his intentions. Since Charles was immediately attentive and focused, at the appearance of an interesting new mutation in their midst. (And perhaps genetics had in fact lost out, at his defection to Hollywood.) He raised his bottle skywards and promptly answered. “You have a volunteer, sir. Point me in the direction of the knife and chopping board and I'll have you every vegetable in sight diced in a trice. Ice, yes?” He checked, with an interrogative eye on Edie, as he disappeared determinedly out of Erik's orbit and towards a beckoning Az. And was rapidly followed by Edie, exclaiming, “Oh, heavens, and my butterscotch sauce will be burning!” as she quickly followed them, tip-tapping her way down the hall. Just as if all the order of the celestial heavens hadn't been subverted and upended, for the sake of Az's damn onions.

Which left Erik stood gawping and left bereft, on his tod in the porchway. So he shut up his mouth quick-sharp, and followed in the direction of where the action was.

And indeed the Lehnsherr kitchen was a warm steamy hub of activity. Az was wielding a vegetable knife with his dexterous tail, chatting to Charles. Who was just, as Erik rounded the corner into the doorway, pointing out and handing off a glass of alcoholic gloop to Edie. Hank, Janos and Angel, beyond them, were setting out plates for separate courses in order on the kitchen table, as he found her a little more ice. Edie was sweetly apologising for the inconvenience, Janos admirably calm as a saucepan of something vital bubbled over, and Hank muttering something about stress, and the blessed eventless haven of the bookshop, leaning out the kitchen door for a breath of cool air.

It was a pleasantly domestic scene: the more so, as Charles turned to Az, and caught the two large Spanish onions the other fellow snatched up from the vegetable rack, juggled a little and lobbed at him.

It was incredible – laughable – to see, as Charles quite nonchalantly turned to a clear work-surface, and topped and tailed the onions with large strong capable hands – Erik knew very well how capable. He promptly set about demolishing them into a neat pile of translucent squares and cubes, flawlessly symmetrical and evenly-sized as any expert sous-chef. Where had he learnt to do that, as casually offhand and sure of his touch as if he worked in the Ritz kitchens, rather than being resident in one of their foremost suites, currently?

Well. Competence in multiple fields was one extra attraction, Erik could admit.

And yet still, the incongruity of the scene was a bit of a shock, and he'd have protested instinctively. (This wasn't how it was supposed to go, in this first introduction to the Lehnsherr domestic home scene for Charles. There was supposed to be a gentle lead-up to soften him up for the shock to the system. A drink right now, as per Edie’s own suggestion: they were supposed to be sheltering in the ivy-trailed gazebo in the back garden, grabbing a few quiet private moments. (Before the pleasant chaos of the dinnerable.)

Of course he didn't get the opportunity, was too busy juggling himself, with the strainer of garden peas and the china server Janos passed him wordlessly. (With an eyebrow raise that somehow expressed purpose, direction and thanks all in one.)

And Edie was sipping appreciatively at her glass, engaged with the most casual of introductions:
Hank already acquainted with Charles, nodding awkwardly at some vague approximation of his direction. And Edie admonishing Janos and Az to, "Oh, darlings, just get it on the table, I'm sure it will be fine. If we've forgotten anything I'll send Erik for it, he won't mind a bit. Az, I'm sure we can do without parsley chopped for the new potatoes, don't bother dear Charles with it. The poor boy has enough to do with those onions, isn't that so, my love?"

And Az wasn't even blinking, at being assigned an assistant who might as well have had *star of stage and screen* tattooed across his forehead. (And, of course, Janos was so taciturn and inscrutable. It was quite impossible to deduce if he was aware of the secret identity of their new fellow guest/indentured kitchen slave, or otherwise.)

Az, though: Az was nodding appreciatively at the results of Charles' superlative vegetable prep technique, and went so far as to say, "Nice work, pal! Is it in your line, then? You in the trade, hotel business, restaurant chef?"

Oh. Dear God, Erik thought, with private enjoyment of Az's ludicrous lack of awareness and general knowledge. And he settled in, as he buttered and minted the peas for serving, readying himself for a bit of *schadenfreude* at the discomfiture of Az. Surely Charles wouldn't pass up the chance to make a little gentle fun? The matter was irresistible. (And how was Az so oblivious to all other luminaries in his chosen career, barring natural cretinism?)

"Actually no," Charles allowed. And yes, yes, in the same moment he slid a look beneath his lashes, and caught Erik's eye, a sly smile warping those comely lips. "I'm an actor, in fact – I've just spent a lot of my life in kitchens, with a veg knife in my hand and instructions to make myself useful."

(In his own family's great house kitchens, Erik diagnosed: a simultaneously spoilt and neglected child, pet to the nannies and housemaids. Perhaps more dear to the hired staff than to his own flesh and blood, judging by Edie's offhand comments on their conversation. How the aristocracy live, Erik thought, and shivered: as if they were another and alien race entirely, to the warm-blooded rest of the human species.)

Az, in any case, was moderately intrigued. "That right, pal?" (He finished rolling the pastry out, and set it atop a monstrous dish of plums, banging it into a fiercely hot oven, roaring and smoking.)

"How's business going? Got to say, when I saw you standing in the doorway, I thought there was something familiar about your face. It's ringing a bell, buddy, but I can't think of what I've seen you in. I'm in the biz too, though, maybe you've seen me in Coronation Street, right? I played young Ken Barlow's dodgy crim pal, natch: opens up a few doors, having a bit of a memorable look!" And he practically gave a twirl to emphasize his words, flouncing a bit with the sway, and his tail lashing out with grace but also force. Erik reached out to protect the chinaware that almost got flicked off the table. Az, though. Bloody Az. Only Az.

"Really?" Charles enquired, with a sideways look and a grin that he was clearly trying his best, and failing, to repress. "I'll have to make a point to catch it. But your visual manifestations are really amazingly impressive. Do you have any gifts that are less immediately present to the naked eye? I'm something of an enthusiast for all the manifestations of genetic variation and mutation, you see."

(And wasn't he just, Erik thought, perhaps a little sharp: and it was really the outside of enough, that he had to fight for the attention of a wayward and impressionable lover with any passerby who had a particularly gaudy mutation to show off.)

But on this occasion, there was no possibility that there was going to be a public demonstration of Az's particular talent, here on the point of serving up dinner. "Don't even think about it, Az," he said sharply, into the ear of the mutant of the moment, who was looking a lot too thoughtful. And was also holding a tray of delicate tarts, that were vulnerable to the least oscillation or jerk.
“I don't get the least chance to show off my gifts around these parts,” Az said regretfully, taking time gathering up the icing sugar shaker and pouring cream jug. “Old fuddy-duddy Erik, he has no true appreciation of all the wonder and diversity of mutant experience and manifestation! Or of my tail! That Erik? The man might as well be norm, for all the joy in the brotherhood of mutation that he has to show.”

It was accompanied with a cheeky grin, and Az specialised in those, so you couldn't miss it. Bloody cheek. Erik vibrated with disapproval, as he tartly noted, “And if you could translocate from one room to the other without knocking something over or breaking vintage glassware – every time, Az, every damn time – then I wouldn't make an issue of it. And there wouldn't be an embargo on public display of your gifts, and your invite to this house might not be conditional on good behaviour? Eh?”

It should have cowed him, and was designed to. But Az was made of sterner stuff. It was Charles at whom he directed a sad cow-eyed look, as he observed, “Harsh taskmaster, old Erik, don't you find? Won't let a poor mutant thesp get away with a damn thing. Strict,” he emphasized. As he batted his lashes that were the shade of a fire engine, limned with cheap Boots' brush 'n' water mascara and liquid eyeliner. Because Az respected no conventions, and admitted the existence of no social expectations or appropriate venues for certain behaviours.

Taken all in all, he was a handsome creature, if alarming, though. It couldn't be argued. And Charles certainly had a tendency, and a seeming weakness, where other mutants were concerned.

But Erik's barely formed suspicions and apprehensions were brushed away, because Charles was in fact gazing between one and the other of them, a thoughtful look on his face. (The face that was luminously strange, with that starry fairydust that famous folk surely carried everywhere with them. That subtle indefinable difference and singularity marking him out, beneath Edie's pretty glass lampshades and in the heat and glow of a kitchen that was host to a hundred different dishes at once, or near enough. If Erik had not known him or known of him, he would still, standing six feet apart in his mother's kitchen, have known instinctively that Charles was a famous personage, with a whole host of baggage attached to his person, he felt quite certain.) “Is he?” he asked, with a slow, quiet innocence – too practised and careful – and it took Erik quite a moment to realise that Charles was referring to Az's description of himself, Erik.

Was he strict, in effect, Charles was asking. And the eye-contact that subtly accompanied the enquiry, was enough to make him a little faint, a little ready to sway and lean against the kitchen wall, and demand sal volatile and a pitcher of beer. (As if Charles with his suit-jacket discarded and his shirt-sleeves casually rolled up, workmanlike and ready for manual labour, all the subtle interplay and flex of muscle and tendon, didn't have Erik carefully averting his eyes and thinking about, oh, kisses from whiskery great-aunts, and cold tinned cod roe and caterpillars wandering amiably about the peapods. Anything, anything other.

And although Charles didn't seem to expect an actual answer, and returned to his chopping with just the faintest smile rendering him that bit more unfairly devastating, the picking-up on the point, the wording, was enough to alert Az somehow, someway, to something. Az was, unfortunately, as Erik had noted before this moment, not quite an idiot. (Only mostly.) He was the one looking between the other two points of the triangle, now: but he kept his mouth shut, and though the air was pregnant with possible comments, those particular ones remained unmade.

(And fair play to Az, he had since first moving in, and without the subject ever being brought up, managed to instinctively pick up the unspoken admonition to observe the strictures of tact and diplomacy regarding Erik's homosexuality, at least in his mother's presence. Not with Erik alone, mind you, nor even in other and less emotionally charged company – under those circumstances Az was a despiser of tact and a monster of indiscretion. But one had to concede that he recognised and
followed the fundamental rule: make no assumptions that a man is out of the closet to his mother.
Given that Erik had never even conceded the issue of his own sexual orientation in conversation with Az, and yet the wily bugger had somehow instinctively divined it, and proceeded to pick up on Charles’ significance, even if he’d bugged up the issue of his subsequent calls.)

Edie, fortunately, was sufficiently distanced on the other side of the spacious and roomy kitchen, debating with Hank and Janos over spices and honey, not to be paying a great deal of attention.

Not that Erik wasn’t exasperated, wasn’t left tense and on the alert. Picking up the meat mallet, he was on edge enough to feel like braining Az with it. Even if Az hadn't chosen to appropriate Charles' onions, and then to observe, “Well, you know, if parts are a bit thin on the ground, I've got two lines and a bit of a setpiece in the new Harold Pinter at the Lyric. They’ve got an open casting call for the Greek chorus he's bunged in, I hear: maybe you might want to come along with me, see if you can score a bit of usher work or a line or two? If you haven't any practice with current experimental live work I could go over the play with you, see if I can help you brush up your delivery and putting it over?”

Oh, oh, oh Christ. Really, only Az... And if he’d been mostly suspicious of Az's intentions, of possible lechery and dishonourable speculations directed Charles' way, then it would have been frightful enough. But, transfixed with the cleaver in his hands, and perhaps a less than intelligently interested expression on his face, he took in the animated friendliness of Az's expression, and mostly exonerated him. (Right at that moment, anyhow.) No, it was largely well-intentioned, as offers of career assistance and acting tips went. Bless the idiot.

And Charles – Charles was struggling to answer, concentrating on the chives and basil that came after the onions, and licking his bottom lip in, apparently, the deepest concentration. (Enough to make Erik uncomfortable, and quickly divert his attention.) Or maybe, to keep himself from laughing. It looked like the struggle was possibly overcoming and overmastering him. So it was a great service and kindness that Janos did, when he dispensed with the spice mix he was debating with Edie, laid it down on the work surface and drifted up behind his lover. Then he stuffed a bread roll without warning in his mouth, in order to shut him up and stop him elaborating on his plans to function as both Charles' amanuensis and mentor, in his future career. God knew what his inaudible murmur in Az's ear was, but it probably did the trick as far as getting the message across was concerned. Janos: not at all lacking in perspicuity, then. Only discreet and sparing with the verbiage, that was all. *Men of few words are the best men,* Erik thought. Definitely. Erik was resolved that he was going to issue the fellow an open and permanent invitation to all Lehnsherr residences, for sparing Az's blushes – as far as anyone could tell – and maintaining a polite social fiction that Charles was merely another guest at the dinner, unremarkable and anonymous, and contributing to everyone's ease and comfort thereby. And no doubt he would have done so – with only the most subtle smirk at Az's discomfort, at his sudden pop-eyed and uncharacteristic speechlessness, his swift concentration upon tasks small and barely necessary - except he wasn't given the chance, and Janos' mercy mission was rendered inutile after all.

As was inevitable with Raven bursting in on them. Erik had just been congratulating himself upon stage-managing the scene. Charles' entry and first impressions of and upon the household had been given a relatively benign environment to unfold in without interference, Raven in particular hived off in the front room at a distance where nothing could be heard and no warning given. (Despite the fact that he himself had no responsibility in the matter, and really had both Edie and Az to thank for the fact that up until this point Raven had been thoroughly excluded from proceedings. Never mind *that,* however: the important point being that Raven had not been given the opportunity to impress herself upon the course of events and change its direction. Until now, perhaps.

Now, though – after all the impressive and effortful exercise of tact and judgement, on the part of
individuals who normally had more use for crude cluelessness and putting their foot right in it – there was a great enthusiastic cry of, “Charles! Charles Xavier! Oh, my God!”

Yes, it was Raven of course. Alerted by who knew what whisper of excitement, or familiar tone of voice floating out to the celebrity-free desert of the front room, surrounded by the familiar and the habitual. Or merely following the impulses of greed and boredom to seek out either diversion or snacky sustenance, until someone actually fed her.

Oh, and Erik would not like this, not if he didn't know that the impulses being followed were purely fraternal, sisterly, platonic in type of affection. He sincerely trusted to it, in any case. Trusted to it, as Raven squealed in the doorway of the kitchen, done up in heels and a nice ladylike shirtwaister with Edie’s seal of approval. And as Charles looked up from a chopping board heaped with fiercely hot spice, and smiled, suddenly, with warm and unaffected pleasure.

They moved towards each other with speed and arms out, rather as if Heathcliff and Cathy had lacked any decent melodramatic instinct and failed to wreck each other's lives and incestuously subvert the fraternal bond.

It wasn't unreasonable, either, not to care for it overmuch still, not his sister embracing his... romantic interest, that much was safe to say. In the midst of his mother's kitchen, with her own quasi-boyfriend and a couple of casual acquaintances looking on too. Damn it. He was taking it a million miles too much to heart already, if the faint possibility of Charles' interest straying elsewhere, even this close to home, twinged this sharply and deep, already. He felt his own face shutter off and close down with careful inattention, immediately, even as Edie was alerted from her intensive discussions with Hank, and moved in swiftly with a fond face.

Her hand gentle upon Raven's shoulder somehow put an end to Raven's inappropriately excitable embrace of a celebrated, notorious Hollywood star in Edie's kitchen, even without the use of any inarguable physical vigour to persuade her out of mauling him further. Perhaps because Raven had reproaches in mind: “Mamma, you didn't even tell me that Charles was here! Charles! You're here!” Probably even Charles' strong and manly hands would never be quite the same again, after Raven's enthusiastic mangling, but he'd survive anyhow: and Mamma had a grasp on the situation now in any case.

“Very true: but now you know, darling. And also you're here just in time, because dear Hank needs a hand mixing the dumplings for the chicken, as well as dressing the salad. Along you go, and help him grate the chicken-fat!”

Now, Erik could have tried that gambit. But on the one hand, he would probably not have noticed, or not quickly enough, that Hank was suffering the pains of jealousy and half-returned love, and moved to assist with re-directing Raven's attentions. (Or only unreliable and on the least whim, and only if his own romantic agonies weren't preoccupying him too profoundly in the meantime.) And on the other, Raven would have listened with around twenty percent the serious attentiveness and respect that she afforded Edie's every utterance, whatever emphasis and sententiousness he cared to put into his announcement and persuasions.

But Edie, on the other hand, had only to utter the lightest wish and Raven – a devoted daughter, if dutiful and obedient in no other respect – rushed to fulfil it. And now, Hank suddenly had a devoted helper and attentive girlfriend, where a moment ago his dreamlover had been all eyes and ears for the new star on the scene. Really, if Edie had charge of the universe, or perhaps even the British Isles and their Houses of Parliament, how smoothly, with what clockwork precision and minute attention to detail everything would run, no hitches, not a hiccup and not a quirk...

And now that her attention was truly on the overall running of the dinner, and not the minutiae of individual dishes and courses, none of them stood a chance. Az and Janos were summarily organised
into serving the starters and sent off with three dishes apiece: leaving, with Raven and Hank already exited, loaded down with cutlery as well as condiments, only himself and Charles left without occupation and in her line of sight.

And half of him had expected it to be Charles sent off with the last dishes, and himself cornered and singled out for a detailed and slightly stern word in a kitchen corner, regarding covert operations, and how Charles came to be mysteriously on the Lehnsherr family doorstep, and an unexpected – however welcome – guest at their Friday dinner. But no, it was not quite so, because Edie was never quite predictable. (Or controllable, manipulable or pacifiable. Regarding those dead neighbours, Erik was less and less inclined, over time, to doubt the truth of Edie's own account.)

No, because Edie discarded her apron and took the vegetable knife away from Charles – utterly dismissive of his unfinished task. And she homed in upon him, and took his hands, smiling up at him with the perfect confidence of warm affection with which she generally approached anyone she particularly liked. And she shook his hands a little reprovingly. "My dear!" she exclaimed. "Really, I am so happy to see you here! I had thought that perhaps we might not get to see you again – and heavens, the pining that that would have meant from my dear girl! Your name has not been off her lips since meeting yourself and lovely Mr Howlett, and your second visit to the family business. How is dear Logan? I must confess I'm a little disappointed not to see him here with you tonight: I'm sure I issued an open invitation the last time we spoke, when he entertained us all with his poetry recital! You must be sure to pass on the message and tell him he will not be excused next time, Charles dear!"

Well. Erik bowed his head a little further as he decorated a plate of stuffed vine leaves with olives. (There was little rhyme or reason, in culinary terms, to one of Edie's dinners, beyond including everyone's favourite dishes. It had been a long time since they'd kept anything like strict kosher, although Edie periodically made resolutions and they started over for a little while. Really they were observant only in attendance at temple, not even keeping the Sabbath strictly. But experience had failed to make an atheist or cynic out of Edie, and that failure was what he counted his greatest success.)

He'd begun Edie's speech ready for a little twinge, if she set about match-making between Raven and Charles. He hadn't thought to anticipate a burst of horror and appalled resolve at Edie's shameless angling for news of and hints given to Logan. Really. If Erik had his druthers then Logan was never going to cross the threshold of his mamma's house, no, no, not as long as he had his strength. That was not the kind of stepfather he was willing to welcome to the family home.

"But I'm an escapee from work and duty, my love," Charles replied cheerfully, clasping her hands back and squeezing just as if they were alone. (Erik almost felt like asking if they needed him to give them a moment.) "Once he knows I've visited here without him, I'll be in trouble like you can't imagine, honest injun. I may have to go into hiding to escape his wrath. I'm not sure if he was more taken with you or your cake, Edie, but either way he's been insufferably bent upon a return trip to your establishment ever since. He's never stopped trying to get me to play hooky and drop in on you: and if scheduling had allowed, you wouldn't have been able to get rid of either of us, certainly."

It was quite impossible for Erik not to despairingly hiss, "Do not encourage her," in response to that. Receiving a little snort of amusement from Charles, and a pealing laugh from his mamma. Who firmly put Charles away from her, now, patting his hands and loading him up with a tray of bread rolls.

"Go and take those in for me, darling," she admonished him. "And find Raven and get her to pour you a drink, since it seems my boy has quite failed in his hostly duty, despite my reminder. Since I'm
sure you must be here for the sake of the charms of one of my offspring. And Erik apparently has no charm at all to spare tonight: not even for his old mamma.” Oh, oh dear oh Lord, and accompanying that, Erik got a very pointed and sniperish look out of the corner of Edie’s eye. Edie, who had a great big heart of gold, and tipped her arrows with poison when she really intended to go in for the kill. Erik had a confoundedly hunted feeling, suddenly.

But Charles was evidently going to choose to treat Edie's subtle threats as merely pleasantry: probably the wisest move, not to get involved. “Not a bit of it, my love,” he avowed, hoisting the tray up a little higher, and beaming at her as if she hung the stars in the sky and outshone the sun (Which Edie indeed did, and Erik approved. When she wasn't ruling in Hell, and jabbing sinners with a pitchfork, that was.) “No, no, I'm only here for you, Edie,” Charles assured her, with a sideways smile that looked perfectly sincere. Erik wasn't really completely sure that it was anything other. If he'd had to swear to it, as to whether Charles was here with seduction, cake, or stealing Erik's mamma as his primary end in view, he might have hesitated a little.

But Edie only laughed at it, and told him, “Go along now. I have a son here to reprimand, and you don't want to be around to witness the tears and the tantrums, darling. The rolling around and kicking the floor. Let the bloom remain upon the rose a little while longer, before you witness the rod of iron with which I rule my household. And how my Erik takes a telling-off.”

And Charles was still laughing as he exited the kitchen, tray in hands. All very well for him: he wasn't the one in trouble with Edie. Erik hoisted his own tray, finished and with the whole dinner about ready for final serving: but he gave Edie a quiet assessing look out the corner of his eye, as she moved in close and stealthy to his side. “Am I in trouble, Mamma?” he asked apprehensively. Because it wouldn't be unknown. He was a spoilt and beloved firstborn son, Erik was well aware, but that didn't mean that Edie wasn't capable of discipline and disapproval.

“Darling,” she said, well-plucked brows raised. “Why would I not be happy? You know very well that all of your and darling Raven's friends are welcome in my home at any time. And he's a dear boy: not to mention that he didn't forget to bring me a bottle of Rosso, which I make no doubt you tipped him off about, darling. Why would you think I might not be happy to see the sweet boy again?”

Erik hesitated: now that the deed was done, and it was too late to go back and rectify what he'd do differently, given his druthers. “I did rather spring it on you, Mamma,” he admitted, aware that he was meeting his mamma's eye a good deal less than was habitual between them, and fidgeting a little awkwardly with the hem of his collar, just as if he was indeed fourteen again. “You had no warning up until the point when he appeared on the doorstep, and it's an extra plate at the table, a chair to find, a space to make room for...”

“None of which we have not coped with quite adequately before now, my darling,” his mamma pointed out quite briskly. “Why on earth are you fretting so, this particular time? From the moment the doorbell rang, with the two of you mooning around in the porchway, up until now, why, you're behaving like a cat on hot bricks, Erik. And go and keep your guest company, while I add the Cointreau to the pudding sauce and set it on the hob to simmer! Heavens, my son, have I taught you...
nothing?”

And since that was definitely the note in Edie's voice that brooked no opposition nor even the most tentative query, Erik went, and stayed not upon the order of his going. But he did pause in the kitchen doorway, only disturbed a moment by a stray thought. “Mamma. You didn't think that perhaps Charles was here on account of Raven?” Why he asked he couldn't say, except that there was no reason why not. And yet it seemed never to have occurred to Edie as an alternative option. And by 'on account of', he of course meant 'by invitation of'. The 'on account of' issue had not yet been settled.

But the query barely occupied Edie enough to merit a glance away from her saucepan. “Why, apart from the fact that your little sister did her best to raise the rafters, when she saw we had a celebrity at table with us this evening?” Edie enquired of him placidly. As she stirred the fruit sauce, and dolloped in, on second thoughts, rather more of the Cointreau than Erik was sure the recipe actually called for. “Let alone, as I say, that the two of you would have lingered out there on the doorstep the whole night through. If I hadn't come out there and dragged the pair of you indoors, that is. Isn't it so, my love?” And now, now, she turned her head a little, and grinned at her elder child over her shoulder. “Now, which of you was behaving as if standing around tingling with expectation over a very special guest, this evening? And which of you was almost putting on running shoes and sprinting like Mr Bannister, every time the doorbell rang?”

Love never precluded a little mockery, not in Edie's case. And Erik decided that the better part of valour was a very prompt retreat, now, and the assembled guests were probably in urgent need of his attention. Not to speak of Charles and his awaited drink, which Raven could only be half-relied upon to provide, rather than to forget excitably while jumping and pawing at him much in the manner of Goldie. (Who was at least banished to a neighbour's house for the duration of the supper. If only the same might be said of Raven.)

He was a third of the way down the hall to the dining room, when he heard Edie call out to him again, loud enough to carry, but still low and musical, a little discreet for further-off ears. “We'll discuss all this more seriously later, Erik,” Edie promised him, or threatened perhaps. “At a later date.”

Erik wasn't quite sure what his mamma meant by that, or with what kind of import. But he kept going, in any case. There was much too much to be done, and enjoyed, to worry about it now.

xxx

Fifteen minutes later, and the assembled company was assembled indeed around the large dinner table, with the spare leaves folded out and two tablecloths covering the expanse, overlapping and with the edges folded to protect against hot dishes. Seating arrangements had been finalised by consultation between Raven, Erik and an unnecessarily opinionated Az, with a final approval from Edie when she slipped into the front room to summon all the company to the table. There was Edie presiding at the head of the table, Erik and Raven on opposite sides halfway down, and new arrivals alternating with old hands in the rest of the seating. He wasn't next to Charles. Not unreasonably, for reasons of facilitating mixing and getting to know each other amongst all the company, and not monopolising one's personal guests, but still... It had not gone unnoticed by either Raven or Mamma, his covert and innocent-faced attempts to re-order the initial suggested structure, and subvert their social and seating-arrangement intentions. And he'd let it drop – wisely. But he was still quietly cursing the damned rotten luck and unreasonable cruelties of fate. Charles was between Az and the young lady Angel, and he himself was fielding the Armando taxi-driving chap (who appeared to be nick-named Darwin for some inexplicable reason) and Janos (about which he had no complaints).
At least Az was a little subdued, from his usual irrepressible level of insouciance, after his faux pas with the acting lessons offer. A little bit: at least enough for Erik, who was used to him, to discern it. Well, Erik thought he could probably discern a slight diminution in the oik's normal bumptiousness, at least.)

Now starters of soup and gefilte fish were done with, and Charles fully acquainted with those guests he hadn't shared spud duty with in the kitchen, and they were all serving themselves and each other Russian-style from the variety of main course dishes crammed on the table and sideboard. Erik was conscious of a little buzz of awareness and consciousness, regarding Charles' identity and fame in the air, now that even those who hadn't twigged to it initially had been tipped off. Although no-one, very carefully now, was talking about it. But a little ways in, and it was getting more comfortable, just a little undercurrent of excitement that Charles must be well-used at this point to ignoring as mere background noise wherever he went. (Not to speak of the fact that it probably constituted literal background noise, what with the hum of thoughts he must field from those who thought a little too loudly and excitably. Or Erik was rather under that impression, at least.)

He couldn't help expecting disaster and social solecism at any minute, given the presence at table of not only Raven but also Az. But still, even Erik was beginning to feel a little more comfortable, as he passed the green beans to Hank, and explained the constituents of the savoury dumplings to Darwin. At least until...

“Mrs Lehnsherr, are those caramelized carrots? May I try some?” Angel asked sweetly. (And if Raven started adopting her new friend's manners, if not her career choice, then Erik would be only too happy about it.)

“Darling, of course,” Edie responded, hefting the large willow-pattern china four-legged dish and passing it via Erik. “Angel, my sweet Raven tells me that you're a dancer, is that correct? How wonderful! I used to go out and swing-dance with my darling late Jakob, but I have always wished for the grace of a true dancer. What kind of a dancer are you, darling?” she asked.

Oh, heavens. One could always trust Edie to get to the heart of a socially sensitive issue, ferreting it out with an unerring compass. And also immense tact, usually, but it was still a tense moment. Erik felt a vibration of alarm. But one could scarcely lay hands on a guest in one's mother's home and manhandle her out of the room, before she could announce herself an adult entertainer and exotic performer. Unfortunately. Perhaps given time and enough warning, he might have engineered a noisy and disruptive metal-based incident. But there was no such pause for thought, and he was at the mercy of fate. Fate, in the form of this exquisitely tactful young lady, however, exchanged highly charged and pregnant glances with Raven – Erik wasn't a fool, he could intercept such perfectly well – and smiled even more sweetly at Edie. “You could say that I'm an, uh, performance artist with an aesthetic specialty, Mrs L,” she offered. And, saying it, she whipped off the decorative little bolero-style jacket she was wearing, over a dress cut low in the back, shook her head and straightened her shoulders a little, and...

Oh. It was unarguably lovely, and a collective sigh swept around the table, before outcries and exclamations at the beauty of her butterfly wings, everyone craning for a better view and rushing to compliment their loveliness. Raven patted her friend's hand, no doubt in appreciation of her tactful turning of attention to another aspect of her occupation. And Edie sighed, hands to her face, and exclaimed, “My love, how beautiful you are, and how proud of you your loved ones must be. I am sure your dancing is every bit as lovely, too!”

Erik could not help that his attention was drawn, helpless, to see Charles' reaction to this – admittedly very pretty, mutation and girl both – development. And yes, of course he was charmed and fascinated, all of it writ quite clear there on his face. As he leaned in across the table a little closer,
and enquired in a rather soft voice, “May I ask, are your wings functional? Very beautiful, of course, but – you can levitate yourself with them a little?”

The question seemed to actively please Angel. “Mr Xavier. So few men ask that question, or have any interest beyond appearances. Yes: and more than a little.”

“Oh!” Edie’s face was wistful, hearing this. “I suppose it would be very presumptuous, to ask if you would mind demonstrating...” Around the table there was a little wave of agreement and entreaty, shy, and not shy, and in some cases clamorous.

Angel beamed around at them, a little pink in the face, but clearly flattered. “Of course. I’d love to, although there’s perhaps not quite enough room in here. Perhaps after dinner, in the garden?”

That got her a chorus of approval: although Az’s face was clownish and lugubrious as he joined in. “But it makes me sad,” he pouted. “No-one asks me for a demo of my extraordinary mutation. In fact Erik lays down the law about it, good and proper. I think he’d tie a knot in my tail and tie me to a lamp-post to keep me in one place, if he could!”

“Not in the house, that’s all I say,” Erik reminded him, exasperated. (Perhaps also slightly stressed, his nose a little out of joint at just how obviously Charles had admired and been fascinated by Raven's friend's wings and powers. Perhaps along with her pretty Latin looks, and faintly seductive air.) “If you want to translocate after dinner, in the garden, and help to put on a show to keep everyone entertained, then I have no problem with that!”

“Translocation? Really?” Charles asked, and now he was all about Az, and leaning in a whole new direction. Erik put a hand to his face and sighed: but the barrel was rolling, and now Darwin, Janos and Hank were joining in the chorus of enthusiasm.

“Well, I think there should be a third performer on the bill, and I'm willing to put myself forward,” Raven announced. “Don't you think so, Charles?” She pouted at him with a wilful provocation, and he laughed indulgently and agreed.

“No mutant variety show would be complete without you, Raven my love,” he said, smiling as she reached to grab his hand – and shot a smirking, triumphant look Erik's way. “Is anyone else going to volunteer themselves for the bill?”

Erik wasn’t quite sure what nature of veiled enquiry that was: whether any of the rest of the company present were also mutant, and willing to identify as such? Or if Erik himself was willing to join in the fun after dinner, since a semi-spontaneous amateur-hour mutant show now seemed an inevitability. (And left something roiling in Erik’s gut, not that he was quite sure why. There was no harm in it. It was a free choice, wasn’t it, no-one coerced?) He could not decide quite in that moment what he wanted to do. If it was seemly and wise, to throw his hat in the ring and do a bit of metal-bending to please a select company of sympathetic friends of his mamma? Surely in fact there was no harm in it. Hadn't he spontaneously done the exact same thing only days ago himself, for a bunch of musical louts who alternately sneered and cheered their way through it?)

But in any case others were ahead of him: Darwin for one, who was shaking his head as he broke a piece of flatbread cracker into his stew, looking doubtful. “Man, I would be down for it, but I don't know what kind of act I could do. See, my gift is different every time it manifests – that's its nature.” Perhaps he sensed the narrowing and focusing of attention on himself, as he spoke: he cast a quick glance around the table, nodded to himself and cleared his throat. “I adapt to things,” he said quietly. Then shot a flickering, grinning glance around to them all. “Hence Darwin, right? It's just a question of what I'm adapting to. I mean, if you had a swimming pool...” The grin flashed out again, bright and white and increasing in confidence, in trust. “See, when I was a kid my brother used to hold my
head underwater at the local leisure centre.”

He didn't immediately continue what was set up as an anecdote. And after a second, Hank coughed politely. And then Raven prompted, “As a part of training your mutation...?”

“No,” Darwin said absently, picking breadcrumbs apart and letting them crumble into his dish. “He was just an asshole. But he never could get me to cry uncle or give in or stop fighting. Or not without being afraid I was going to actually drown from it, and then he'd have had our mother to answer to. But he couldn't understand how I could stay under so long, and never feel any ill effects. The dick – oh, ah, excuse me, Mrs L – well, he can't have been too observant. And I mean he was never Brain of Britain or anything, 'cause he failed to notice – this over like months – that I wasn't the same when he did it. I got a temporary adaptation that let me breathe under the water, just as easy as if I'd been up above.” And he poked a finger meaningfully into the side of his neck, raising an eyebrow around at everyone as if he was waiting for the first one to come up with the correct answer, like a quiz show host.

“Gills!” Charles exclaimed. And it wasn't too surprising, that he was the first one to understand. “Really? And they don't come and stay, but only last as long as required to adapt to temporary circumstances?” His hands were flat down on Edie's nice well-laundered table linens, and his knuckles a little compressed and white, as if he needed some anchor and restraint to prevent himself simply floating away with delight. Really if this continued, then Erik was going to find himself compelled to put on an immediate impromptu show with the table silverware, just for self-respect and to make a point. Surely, yes, he knew, and couldn't avoid knowing, that Charles had a quasi-professional, as well as personal, interest in mutations. But damn it, he hadn't got quite that look on his face, that wonder crossed with fierce curiosity, not even when he'd had Erik on his knees and sucking his cock like Columbus exploring a new world. (Or, very well, almost new. Columbus had had precursors too, after all.)

What did a fellow have to do, really?

“That's right,” Darwin said, nodding. “But the result varies with the stimulus. So, you know, being half-drowned makes me sprout gills, but being burned or poisoned or stuck with cactus spikes might get a different result, you see what I mean?...”

“We have a pond in the back,” Raven offered. To general laughter, and a severe cry from Edie.

“Darling, that pond is full of weed and frogs and koi carp! It is no venue for swimming – or growing gills – to offer a guest!”

In any case the cause of the after-dinner show was picking up supporters, contributors and enthusiasm, and Erik's indignant little internal monologue would just have to be shelved and filed away until a later date. Now, Hank himself – and who'd have thought it – was shyly catching Charles' eye – since he was clearly the most avid audience, barring perhaps Edie, out of the entire assembled company. He lifted his foot up with equally strong, large, mobile hands, to indicate the geographic area of his mutation. (Thankfully his workboots were nowhere to be seen, and were replaced tonight with carefully-nurtured and polished dress shoes. He must surely have had them specially made, for the feet that were clearly unusually structured as well as outsize.) “If there's a big enough tree outside,” he murmured – almost too quiet under the buzz and chatter of reactions to the mutations already revealed – “then I could–”

“Show us what you can do?” Charles guessed. And Hank smiled bashfully, his social contribution made, and returned his feet to their proper place, and his gaze to his plate. Raven, all ears and wide eyes, caught his words, though, and it went over big with her.
“Oh my God, Hank, really?” She turned about, to announce to the table at large, “He never shows anyone what, well, never mind, just wait and see! He only told me about it and showed me because I ferreted it out and nagged him into it!” She was beamingly pleased, patting at Hank's rounded shoulder with perhaps a trace more maternal fondness than most chaps would care for in a girlfriend or semi-girlfriend. Hank didn't appear to take it amiss, though, and smirked around at her with a little shrug, to be rewarded with a kiss on the cheek.

Across the table, Az was having a little squabble with Janos on the other side of Erik – barely audible, as seemed par for the course with Janos, electively mute ninety percent of the time as he was. And then he gave a great gusty sigh, louder than Erik had thus far heard him speak, even. And he said for the benefit of all assembled, looking about, “Well, Az is a very persuasive gent, is he not? Or a great bully, depending upon your perspective, of course. And he has given me sufficient incentive,” he added – nudging Az in the ribs, heavily and pointedly - “to add my name to the list of participants, in this greatest mutant show on earth.”

“In a back garden. In a back garden, anyway,” Raven added, in a meditative tone. “I don't think it's going to be any great competition to Billy Smart, or any of the old mutant carneys in the stories, you know.”

Angel leaned in to her side and they smiled at Janos together, two pretty girls focused in on the same target, as Angel said, “You have something impressive to show us, as a gift? I'll just bet it's something amazing,” to Janos. Who widened his eyes a little, with Az's tail lashing out suddenly to wrap itself tight – mine, mine – around his forearm. Damn, but Erik hadn't been wrong, that he'd need to keep a sharp eye on Charles around that damned frilly-winged siren. If he'd had a tail himself he'd have been following Az's example, as Charles joined in the pleas and hints, the inquiries.

Perhaps with a hint of seduction himself – and a worldwide celebrity had to be still more intoxicating than the siren song of a pretty winged exotic dancer, as intoxicants went, especially for one proven susceptible to masculine charms like Janos – as he added to their pleas his own. “Can we persuade you to tell us? Some way or another?” With his eyes glinting up through lashes that might as well have had Raven's curlers at 'em, in a way that – for someone constantly snapped and hounded by the leading photographers of the day – was not possibly unconscious or other than deliberate.

Janos was rather suddenly not Erik's favourite out of their guests, and indeed might find himself blackballed quite soon, if he didn't buck his ideas up a bit. Still, the unregistered fact appeared to perturb him not at all. He cast a thoughtful glance over the girls, and a more measuring, assessing gaze that rested upon Charles' face. It rested for at least a split-second too long not to try Az' patience, as well as Erik's. (Judging, at least, by the sudden sharp wince upon his regular, classically handsome features, that Erik would have bet folding money accompanied a heightened pressure of the loops of tendon and muscle braceleting his arm beneath lustrous white silk.) And yet Az got no more than a reproving twitch of the lips, and a dig in the ribs. Janos said, “It is a tool of destruction – more, perhaps, than should be given free rein even outside of the house. Not to speak of the houses of your neighbours. I am, you might say, a human centrifuge, and can generate the force to produce a whirlwind: more specifically, I can summon a typhoon. Amongst other things, some less amusing, more dangerous: but my control is good.” And it occurred to Erik that this was perhaps only the third time he had heard the fellow actually open his mouth and speak.

And, very well, if put to the stake and forced to give an opinion, Erik would have admitted that, even compared to the rest of the gifts revealed in these past minutes, that was a little impressive. Although no doubt the fellow was right about the potential destruction involved, and the unwisdom of letting it loose in their nice quiet bourgeois neighbourhood.

But of course, that was no disincentive to Raven, nor perhaps to half the rest of their guests. Even
though it was Edie who actually leaned forward from her presiding place at the table, with a very persuasive smile on her thin clever face. (Not thin like it had been back in the camps, not hollow-cheeked and haggard. Elegant now, gold and opals at ears and in the dip of her collarbone, a plumping of flesh about cheekbones and chin from their years of good living and love and good fortune, since. Not that one forgot, not ever.) “Do you think,” Edie said, and in her tone there was – after all these years – the little-girl wheedling of one who has been a much-loved child, an adored spouse, a cherished parent, and is used, like a little queen, to being indulged in her whims - “do you think you might manage a very small one? For us? Perhaps just a little baby typhoon?”

“Nothing that would rip up Mr Stryker's cypresses,” Raven clarified, rolling her eyes. “His garden borders on ours, and I swear he has an unhealthy relationship with his leylandii. The freak.”

“No, my love,” Edie replied in warning – being much too used to hearing that particular word directed towards mutants, and sometimes mutants she held very dear, and was willing to defend with fists and words, and maybe more than that.

Raven nodded and squeezed her face up in mute contrition, before continuing with less emphasis and more agreeableness. “So,” she said, counting off on her fingers, “that's me, and Angel, and Darwin for our little show. And Az? And – Janos, yes?” she asked, waiting for his characteristically mute nod. “And Hank, with his Boots of Secrets, and the trees!” (And Hank laughed quietly into his plate of chicken and dumplings.) “So, I make that – six performers, for our little show, shortly! Any more? Any takers? Erik,” she said, pouting prettily at him, with the usual smirk behind the pout. “Now I know you don't mind giving a performance, when the fancy takes you. And how do I know it?” she asked, waggling her eyebrows around like they were about to fly off her head and take wing at any given moment.

For that threat, she got the finger across the throat, one that he did not even trouble to try to disguise from Mamma. And Raven laughed in response, across the vocal disapproval of Mamma and the gentle mockery of some of their guests, used to more sober dignity from him. He did not care to have his silly adventures advertised to all and sundry, fooling around with metal implements and musical stars. For reasons of... well, probably for reasons of dignity. And sobriety, as she well knew.

“Ohhh, Erik, pleeeesease,” she wheedled, and Erik sighed.

“Fine, fine,” he capitulated. “Add me to the list, if you must. I will make the lawnmower dance about the garden, do the cha-cha. It will be very pretty and hopefully shut you up, temporarily. Possibly it may clonk Az on the head, quite accidentally.”

And Raven sang out a little whoop of triumph, and let herself flush up with a wave of lavender blue to mark her victory, too. While Angel leaned into her again, grinning, and let her wings flap out a vivid accompaniment. Not that Raven was yet done, or satisfied. (Not that Raven was ever satisfied.) “Do we have any more takers?” she asked, peering around the table with a bright pleased satisfied smile, hungry for more too. “Anyone who'd like to 'fess up to an astounding gift and give us a little demonstration? Mamma, I know...”

And oh, Edie had a very sad face at that. “It is my grief, my daughter,” she agreed. “How I would like a gift as amazing as yours and Erik's. But I rejoice in the wonder that is the pair of you, and it is enough for me.”

Really, Raven's smile at their mamma's words was... It was enough. At moments like these, Erik knew that everything... everything, had been worthwhile. All of it, and he'd do the lot of it a hundred times again for the same result. His little sister's face shimmered a brief blue, and then she turned to Charles. And he could forgive the flirtation on her face and in her voice, because he knew it was a game. His little sister, the most precious little sister on earth, and how very well she knew that Erik
would forgive her and give her anything.

“So, Charles, what about you?” she asked, coy as a maid in a medieval mystery play. “Do you have a mutant kink in your DNA too, something obscure and fascinating? Is there something that the cinema-ticket buying public doesn't know about you, and what you can do? A secret gift that you'd like to show off?”

Erik really was the most colossal idiot, he thought, a little faintly. Of course this had been coming, had been imminent all along. How on earth had he failed to see that? (Would Charles forgive him for failing to see it, failing to head it off at the pass?) (Would Charles want to see him again, ever, after this?)

Charles’ eyes were amazingly steady, in response, bluer than the sky and every bit as unmoved, impassive, inhuman really. And his voice was completely steady, too. “Alas,” he said – with a smile that wasn't the quick outflashing of feeling and mischief Erik had had out of him already a dozen times, that was practised, that was acting. “I'll have to take a pass and be just a very, very appreciative member of the unremarkable, mundane audience, I'm afraid.”

That wasn't really a direct answer, but it seemed as if Erik was the only one who noticed it. Raven pouted a little in response, sympathetic, but said, “Oh, Charles, I would never describe you as unremarkable!” And Angel murmured something about thousands of women worldwide agreeing with her, and then the whole table was set off with a deluge of teasing and flirting and mockery. The entire work of an hour or more, of pretending that their companion at table and chopping onions in the kitchen and debating the ins and outs of a mutant amateur talent show, was exactly the same as the rest of them, just another regular joe with a regular job and rent to pay, no superstar... all gone for a burton.

And Charles didn't seem to mind a bit, played right along, laughed at the jokes and flirted back and really there was nothing that could shake that savoir faire, Erik thought, how could you ever know that anything an actor said or did was real? Weren't they always onstage, weren't they always acting? But he didn't quite meet Erik's eyes in the aftermath, not quite, not once. There was something evasive, determinedly elusive in them, giving Erik the slip just the same way as he'd avoided dealing with the question.

There was no need for it, though. Erik was not disappointed. A mutant film-star? How could he ever say or admit anything, even in such company? (It only seemed like not singing for one's supper, a little: to stay and listen and joke as everyone made a clean breast of it, and offered up trust with the truth. And all the time to keep one's own truth locked up.)

But Erik understood perfectly. He had secrets locked up too, and he was very careful with the key. It was fair enough. He decided not to think about it further.

In which endeavour he was assisted by his mother, who made a decisive assessment of the state of the table – dishes half-demolished, plates mostly cleared, glasses smeared and lipsticked with the half-attentions of folk more interested in the conversation going on. The best kind of evening, the very best, then, certainly due to go down in history as one of Edie's favourites. She stood at her place at the head of the table, and announced magisterially, “Well, darlings, exciting plans afoot, then! But first we shall have pudding: and if I can get a couple of volunteers to help me in clearing the table, then I will serve up the dishes from here on the sideboard,” she said, indicating the great lush tray of Greek baklava and the plum pie.

Angel and Janos were the quickest to leap to their feet, thanked duly and effusively by Edie, and Angel especially was quick as light and light as air on her feet, floating – almost – around the table and collecting up stacked crockery. Her wings were out and fluttering delicately, as she swayed and
balanced. And Edie paused in the act of dishing up, pudding bowls and ladles stilled, to watch her go by. “Oh, my love, really too pretty,” she said a little wistfully to the girl. “Are your wings covered up underneath your costume, when you dance professionally? It would be such a shame, not to have them on view.”

And Angel was struggling, a little, with a slightly dicey tower of plates and a gravy-jug, as Erik gathered his determination and resolved that yes, he must get up and help. Instead of sitting here exchanging furtive glances with Charles, while Az discussed the proposed show ’n’ tell with Hank and Darwin. Perhaps it was the reason why her attention was distracted, and she replied very simply, “Oh, not covered up, no. I dance nude, you see.”

It was after all a good thing that Erik had finished his stew, because otherwise he might have choked. As it was, Angel seemed immediately to realize that she had failed in tact and social discretion, and attempted to quickly backpedal. “I mean, ah, you see, um– ” Her eyes went straight to Erik’s, with a wide-eyed apology and pleading that did not mitigate the disaster whatsoever in his eyes.

Or wouldn’t have, if he was bothering to blame her at all. No, he blamed, and was glaring at, Raven – for having her as a buddy in the first place, for pouring her that last glass of wine, for – well, things were generally Raven's fault! That was that! And he could scarcely blame Edie's guest for her own faux pas, after all!

But Edie only laughed. Perhaps a little nudity didn't count for much in your overall worldview, not when you'd been held at gunpoint, and survived the camps, and been robbed of your family's assets without it mattering, because you still had your family. “Oh, my dear, really? But how wonderful! Heavens, but you should see your face! Please don't look so horrified, darling: the human body is a beautiful thing, and there isn't a thing wrong in the world with demonstrating that! Why, if my body had been half as good at your age, then I'd probably have done a little erotic dancing in the clubs of Berlin back in my misspent youth!”

“Mamma!” And, unusually, that interjection wasn't Erik, but Raven: and he would enjoy, very much, reminding her of her tight-lipped horror at this moment, at some select later point.

“Oh, heavens,” Edie said, relaxed and casual. “Angel, darling, can you believe what snobs and prudes my lovely children are? Darlings, both of them, and I won't hear a word against them: and yet to hear them talk you'd think they had no idea at all of all the manner and variety of folk and habits and ways of being that there are in the world. Not to speak of the importance of communal support of disenfranchised and demonized groups – and both of them mutant, too, the shame!” She was back to busily ladling out pudding, now, and yet still managed to give both Erik and Raven a hard look. “In fact,” she continued, “at Speakers Corner only the other week, there was a speaker on the conjunction of feminist and socialist issues who had some very interesting ideas on the unionization of women in socially liminal occupations, perhaps you would have been interested, or might be interested in attending with me some other weekend, Angel my dear–”

Erik groaned quietly, his hand to his face, and thought perhaps that on the other side of the table, Raven did the same. (Raven, for whom conventionality was a guilty secret, one she indulged as discreetly and infrequently as possible, not proud and blatant like Erik.) And he was already dimly aware that Charles had got up and begun to assist Angel and Janos, by gathering in the glassware off the table. But he hadn't realised how close Charles was, reaching almost over him now for discarded wineglasses and bottles. And quite close enough to lightly touch the hand over Erik's face, a fingertip waking him up, bringing him to alert life.

He was smiling directly at Erik, with a devastating invitation to shared amusement, as Erik let his hands drop slowly. And it seemed only natural to give a tiny secret smile back, before railing
helplessly at Edie a little bit. “Oh, Mamma, you didn't go again – you – oh–”. Erik gave up, and
looked helplessly Charles' way. “In the disarmament and socialist worker groups, they call her 'Red
Ed'”, he observed, resigned.

“And the mutant mothers' ones, too, darling,” Edie said comfortably, not at all put out. She clearly
took the monicker as a fulsome compliment, however it was actually intended. The terrible,
wonderful woman was a radicalised firebrand, which Erik only sometimes wished he could douse.
“You needn't go overboard with the disapproval,” she added, going round the table and dispensing
bowls of sweet syrupy plum crisp, Raven having brought the warm sauce in from the kitchen. ‘I
only attended, that's all: I didn't actually get up on a soap-box and begin preaching the Good Word to
the unconverted, my love.”

“This time,” Erik said, suspiciously, because he was no fool, and he knew his mamma.

“This time,” Edie agreed equably, and when she met Charles' eye, Erik rather thought that she
winked. Certainly that was a repressed snort of laughter from Charles' direction, and the last thing
that Erik needed was the two of them ganging up on him.

Charles was clearly too transfixed to really be making himself useful clearing the table. And when
Hank firmly removed the glasses out of his lax hands, his attention elsewhere, he seemed to allow it
with only a modicum of awareness. And simply sat himself down next to Erik, stealing Az's chair
(which was more than fine in Erik's book.) And within minutes, Edie was giving the jug of cream on
the sideboard a final whipping, as she was earnestly talking politics at Charles – without any prior
consultation to discover if he had any interest in the subject.

A minute more, and they were mostly, by and large, reassembled and settled around the table, eating
plums and pastry and cream and dessert wine, the star-points of their constellation re-aligned with
only a little kerfuffle and disgruntlement. And Edie had pulled out her chair and dragged it around
the side of the table, the better to talk to Charles and continue their conversation, while eating. If, by
talk, one might intend 'harangue', and by conversation one could signify 'monologue'. (Erik was not
completely sympathetic. Charles had laughed at the wink, after all.)

And Charles had her pretty, well-creamed hand in the two of his, had utterly clearly lost interest in
his (delicious) pudding. He was listening to her solemnly, and nodding along, without at any point
verbally committing himself to actually agreeing with any of her hair-raising political-firebrand points
of view.

At some point, Edie realised that she was being, if not humoured as such, then listened to with great
love and very little seriousness. And she let her monologue trail off, and put her free hand to Charles'
cheek. “Ah, my dear,” she said, with that light but noticeable German accent she was happy to
retain, “perhaps you don't agree, not with bolshevik old Edie. My sweet son thinks I am a terrible
extremist old lunatic. But you disagree so very charmingly. I will always be happy for my boy to
bring you home to eat with us en famille.”

And if you could frame a quasi-filial relationship with the trappings of romance, you could call it a
coup de foudre, perhaps. Erik supposed that if it had been anyone else but Charles, then he might
have been jealous.

Pudding over, waistlines stretched, Erik bestirred himself for the final clearing of the table, with the
assistance of Darwin and Az. Charles tried to join them, but Erik veto'd it firmly, and sent him
briskly out into the garden where the rest of the guests were drifting, glasses in hand. He might be
gone from Britain's shores in days, or weeks. Let Raven and Mamma get a little of the benefit, while
he was still here, Erik thought. It wasn't as if they weren't both a little in love with him too, in a
platonic manner, in a family way.
Joining the rest of the dinner guests when they'd made shift to clear up the debris and aftermath after a fashion, Erik followed his fellow labourers out into the late sunset and the floral magnificence of the garden, and into bliss. He didn't glom onto Charles, follow him about as Edie showed him her favourite blooms, or chirruped with him at the frogs in the lily-pond. It wasn't necessary: it was enough just that he was there, and their minds, if not in communion, were intimately familiar with each other. He thought that he could feel Charles' warm contentment, in the midst of beauty and communal harmony, and it echoed his own.

And then one by one – not formally or with fanfare, but with a casual friendly ease and confidence – those of them who were frankly Gifted began to show and demonstrate it. Hank went first – without waiting for invitation or suggestion, an uncharacteristically carefree and spontaneous show of trust and social ease. And after he'd casually peeled off his shoes and socks – revealing prehensile lengthy toes and thumb-equivalents, ape-like and completely functional – he was in seconds climbing the great old plane-tree at the end of the garden, and talking. Talking about the shame and anxiety he'd associated with his feet from an early age, inculcated by his parents' worry, by the reactions of others, by the exhortations to hide, hide, always hide his feet, his gift. And, conversely, as he'd grown and given himself more leeway to explore and to disagree, the joy and the freedom and self-expression he had come, was coming to associate with the free and unhindered use of them. It was as he hung from one of the highest branches, upside down and toes curled around an unnervingly thin branch, looking flushed and excited and happier than Erik had ever seen him, that he called down, seeming quite spontaneous, “This is when I'm happiest. This is who I'm supposed to be.”

Az followed, less hesitant initially, less vulnerably careful, much more of a piss-taker, looking for the comic angle, looking to prod and poke at Erik. But still truth-telling, still allowing the rest of them in to a vulnerable place, as far as Erik could tell. Of course he had to start off by appearing and disappearing from slap bang in front of Erik, to behind his back, to spring out from the laburnum bush Erik was hovering by. (Watching Charles settle, intent and absorbed, at Edie's shoulder. But never mind that.) When he'd made of himself sufficient of an irritant to please him, though, he contented himself with flickering in and out of presence/absence/presence, hieing himself off who knew where in the transitory, intervening moments. And telling them his tale in the moments he was with them: or half of it, from which they were forced to deduce the rest. “In Russia it was – and then the first time – almost caught – a howling mob – devil, you see – the revolution, and had survived – a home – a home – and here – a pantomime me – near enough – and here, this is me, too.”

And with that it seemed he was done, for in his final apparition he landed a little aslant to a rosebed, and barely saved himself from a tumble into it. He managed to convert his stumble into a proud bow, tail aloft, and looked thoroughly pleased with the little round of applause that it earned him. And with a hell of a lot of sang-froid, he took a glass of sherry off the tray that sat on the rickety garden table, and saluted his audience with an assured gesture that spoke of an actor's training. “You up next, Janos?” he enquired of his lover. “Because if you are, I'm taking cover in the bike-shed, okey-dokey?”

And Janos seemed to deem a roll of the eyes sufficient response, which was not too terribly surprising given the rest of Erik's acquaintance with him. That he opened his mouth to talk about his gift and mutation at all was a little surprising, and perhaps mostly conditioned by those who'd preceded him. But he didn't have a lot to say: rather, he demonstrated. One hand out, flat to the ground as he stood a little forward from his initial position in the group, he seemed to draw storm up out of the earth, the grass and the brickwork: spinning and darkening and gathering mass and force as it spun, malevolence in miniature. There was a little hum of gasps and murmurs, possibly of alarm: and Erik only wished, for safety's sake, that his sister was anything like a model young lady, gentle and timid, and would hang back. Instead of peering forward with breathless inquisition.

“This is how I felt when my mother told me my mutation was a curse,” Janos said softly, nodding at
the tiny hurricane. It grew darker, a little bigger, louder, and he nodded again. “And this is how I felt, when the town elders made her send me away to an institution, where I was medicated until I ceased to manifest.” He closed his eyes: and the storm seemed darker, the low rumbling deeper.

“This is me, when the Red army attacked, and I was the only one who could see them off finally, despite the best efforts of our soldiers,” he added, the tiny typhoon growing pale, slowing, gentle in comparison – then reverting to violent fury, when he added, “and here I am, when they would not let me return home anyway.” He pulled his hand away, into a fist, and the storm, the turbulence disappeared. “And this is the peace I feel, with my present companion,” he said, smiling at Az.

Perhaps it was trite, and Erik felt a fool to be moved. Still he had to wipe his eyes, furtively.

Darwin was the one who stepped up next, rubbing his head with a puzzled, ruefully amused look on his face. “Well, I don't know exactly what I'm going to do here,” he confessed, and laughed along with them. “I mean, I could – ”. And then he clearly got an idea, and grinned. “No, you know what, Angel, you go ahead of me,” he suggested. “I'm just going to go prepare a little.”

So Angel replaced him as he disappeared into the background, sniffing at a rose that Edie had just cut for her, pretty as a picture in her low-backed blouse, like a butterfly sipping and drinking from the choicest blooms.

And like a butterfly, almost too subtly and delicately for conscious perception, she was hovering an inch, two inches, then half a foot off the ground, as she began to speak. “My Gramma brought me up, and I loved her,” she said, smiling around, shy and sweet. Then she smiled at Edie, particularly. “My Gramma was like Mrs L in lots of ways.” Her smile was doused a little, as she added, “But not all. She told me that my wings were a gift from God, and made me like the angels, as well as the birds of the air that our Lord loved, and like pretty butterflies, and –. She said they were beautiful, and that I should hide them. Hide them always, hide them ruthlessly, hide them at all costs. Because other people wouldn't understand.” And she gave a considering nod, as she began to flit about between one and another of them, smiling, stealing a bonbon and a glass of sherry, giving her rose away in Charles' case. (Who accepted it with a smile, and a blown kiss, that lit up Erik's spine with a sharp observantness.) “She was right,” Angel called out, as she flew higher, higher, a little higher still. “Mostly. But less and less.” She was two-thirds of the way up the tree, with Hank watching her from where he was climbing at the very top. “And every time I am more honest about who I am, and another person does not reject me for it, I feel a little more free.” Now she swooped up to the very top, and now, as they all looked up to where she was heading, there were three people visible: Hank, Angel and Darwin. Who had climbed up to join Hank, but much more precariously without the gift of such agility of foot. And now, Hank was firmly tying Darwin's hands behind his back, fast little mutters passing between the three of them.

Before, utterly abrupt and without warning, Darwin launched himself out of the tree – a hundred feet up at least – with his hands bound. And swooping with wings that suddenly looked a whole heck of a lot less decorative and more businesslike, Angel followed him, directional and focused and choosing it, clearly sprinting through the air, struggling to make it. At the same time, Hank launched himself downwards too, branch to branch, half climbing and half falling, mostly throwing himself down and catching hold, here and there where he could.

One of them, the ones on the ground, one of them screamed. Erik's heart was in his throat, admittedly. But Darwin had trusted his mutation, and his trust had come good. He pulled up so close, so sharp, almost kissing the ground, defied all non-mutant laws of god and man and physics. He did, and he did it with the aid of a fierce, strong set of what looked like kestrel wings, or perhaps a small eagle’s. They had ripped open the cotton of his nice pressed dress shirt, which would never be the same again. And Angel was tipsily swerving and bucketing through the air, following him and half-
shrieking, half laughing. Hank was on the ground, now, running from one side to the other, leaping and trying to tag Darwin. He was leaping to reach him, and looking half-drunk with hilarity and panic and relief. No wonder, the irresponsible young mutant fools, and Erik felt inclined to give them all a smack around the head. And then to hug them, and perhaps to shed a few more tears, if mostly of sudden relief of tension. Darwin seemed, then, to abruptly lose the power of flight, but from a few feet up instead of hundreds. And then it was clear that his abruptly sprouted wings had as abruptly withdrawn their labour, and retreated back from whence they came,

But there was no harm done, barring a sudden landing on his arse and minor bruising, and the show was almost over, now. Erik looked over at Raven, dazed as all the rest of them. And he was almost ready to open his mouth and prod her, about taking her turn and getting on with her account of the impact of mutation on her life, with her display of her own particular powers. So he thought, except that she was the first one to reprove him instead, and he was quite willing to get his turn over and done with. “Erik!” she squealed, impatiently. “You're up, love!”

He stood and gazed at her, then, and could feel his mouth twitching as it tried to smile against his wishes. She was nothing but a toddler even now, over-excitable, demanding, petulant, sure of indulgence... And he was still willing to please and indulge her, if with a bit of moaning and groaning involved. As he stepped into the middle of the small decorative bordered lawn, prior to the trees and pond and wilderness, that they seemed to be using as an impromptu stage, he caught Charles' eye on the other side of the green expanse. And Charles lifted his glass, in silent salute, eyes on him but not a word echoing in his mind. Not a word, but Erik thought he could feel the faint press of a presence – not in there and listening in, but keeping him comfortable company at a slight distance, lingering in the porchway much the same way they had already, earlier in the evening.

But there was a task at hand, and Erik was an orderly man, methodical and rational. “Well,” he observed, looking around at them – family and fellow mutants and guests in his mother's house – and a lover he'd barely begun to reel in carefully, to do his best to bind to himself with invisible hoops of steel. (Steel, since steel was one of his favourites, manipulable and yet strong and immovably imperishable, immune to rot and corruption once forged.) All of them, all his audience in a little community of freaks, declared and undeclared. “What am I supposed to be doing here? Show and tell about my mutation, and a bit about my experience of it?” He shrugged, and looked about him, around the garden, implements and furniture and occupants. There were some metalwork tulips stuck in pots up on the garden wall, that Edie liked to set about the rosebeds sometimes. They would do the job.

One hand up in the air, and they came flying to him, taking a circuitous route to avoid lopping off anyone's head along the way. And he kept them there, hovering in the air a little above his hand, as he looked around again, at expectant faces. There was interest and expectation there, and doesn't everyone enjoy an audience? Even Erik, a little. “Well,” he said, meditatively, as impassive as he could make himself. “This is my mutation: I can manipulate metal. As you see!”

And he gave one of the tulips a little twitch – not so little – to which Az, the nearest, responded with, “Mind how you go with that bloody thing! You could have someone's eye out!”

Erik gave him a look in response. “Yes. I could.” And that shut the stroppy swine up, good and proper. But Erik dismissed him with a flick of the wrist, and let the coppery petals of the tulip spread and blossom, as he continued. “I – well, in fact, my mother there –” and he gave a nod to Edie, her hand to her necklace and a fond, proud smile on her face, and she curtsied a little – “first noticed it when I was quite small. But it wasn't very strong back then: I'd just move cutlery around on the dinner table, and levitate a fountain pen a little way, perhaps. Even when I was older – nine, ten – it wasn't anything very impressive. The best I could do was to use my powers to play chess with my father's set, ebony bound with brass. Nothing to write home about.” He was silent a moment. It was
strange to remember a time when he had accounted himself a puny six-stone weakling, as mutants went, considering what his gift had done for him since. And anyway, the next part was difficult to speak of. He cleared his throat, conscious of Charles' eyes on him, without returning the look. “Well, the war came,” he said, brusquely, not making much of a spectacle or declamation of it: merely factual. “We were interned in one of the camps, being Jewish. It wasn't good. I hid my gift – we all know what happened, back then, to anyone openly mutant, still less mutant and Jewish too. The first weeks, mostly I was keeping my head down, my parents too.” It was true. One of his strongest memories was of thinking that Edie did not seem like Edie, not meekly following orders from brutal guffawing guards, not pulling him close against her and counseling quietness, watchfulness, caution. But she had of course understood the seriousness of the situation as a child could not, quite: she had him and Jakob to think of, not only herself. His hands were trembling a little, so it was a good thing he had his gift. If the flower he was unconsciously mangling, pulling off petal after petal, had been in his hands, it would have shown.

“Darling,” Edie said now, hesitantly, and he thought he couldn't bear it if she intervened. If he got a bit too emotional. What did one become British for, anyhow, if not to learn what a stiff upper lip was and how to maintain it?

But he shook his head, to repair the blurring of his vision, and went on. “Then children under a certain age were picked out, removed, to be taken off to... I don’t know. They tried to take me, and I was almost into the lorry, all the children crying. I could see my father dimly in the distance, caught up in the press of the crowd. I'd seen one of the guards hit my mother as I was dragged off.” Even out in the summer air and heat and light, he felt confined, and chilled. “I didn't expect it to work, when I tried my power,” he said. “It felt pathetic, last-ditch, desperate... I ripped the gates open, anyhow. I should have done more – melting the guards' guns would have been a start. But I was eleven years old, and I ran back to my mother. I was crying.”

He wiped his face, now. “Well. It wasn't the smartest move, in the short term. It got me in Herr Schmidt's personal office, and Mamma too.” He nodded in her direction, barely looking. “Sebastian Schmidt was a doctor in the camp, and an SS officer, and a monster. He had a very personal interest in mutants.”

“Some of his genetic experiments are on record,” Charles said quietly from across the lawn. His arms were folded, his head bowed a little. “They were appalling.” Erik did not look at him. He had come so far in his account, and he did not want to freeze up now.

“He gave me a choice,” Erik said, looking up at the darkening violet-blue sky, through the spinning steel stems of the faux-flowers he was still keeping aloft. It was the colour of Raven, when she blushed. “He put a coin on the desk, and told me to move it, only with my mind. Or to watch my mother die.” Someone whimpered a little bit, but then girls were soft like that, all tender hearts. But a man must be strong, for his family. “The guard had a gun trained on Mamma. But he wasn't as quick as me, and he hesitated where I didn't. I put the coin through Schmidt's skull – right the way through. And then,” he began to add, feeling something ease in his chest, the way it always did when he got to this point in the recitation. Though he was usually reciting it mentally to himself, going over the holy litany of their struggle and their survival, as if one of these days the outcome might change fatally, without careful attention and curation, selectively picking out the key moments, pivots that could have gone much differently. “Then I did for the guard, too. No witnesses. No alarm raised.”

Edie was moving, and then her hand was very light on his back. He didn't shake her off, acknowledge her, take any notice. Anything could derail him now: it took an effort of will to keep going. It seemed a duty, to keep going: hadn't they all borne witness, however casual and extemporaneous, tonight? Mostly all. “And then,” he recounted faithfully, “I asked Mamma to stay in the office, to lock herself in and make no answer if anyone knocked on the door, to hide as best she
might if someone came. Because I needed to find my father, and I left her alone to do it, waiting for me to return.” Edie’s arm stole around his waist, now, and squeezed. He could feel the little dabs – ah, she’d found her handkerchief – but she was dignified and quiet at his side.

This was a difficult part, upcoming. He could remember the horrible panic, the awareness that in all the camp he had no idea where Jakob might be, or even if he was still in the camp any longer. He might have been removed to another camp or a mine or anything, so easily, in the thirty-six hours since Erik had shown his hand and made them targets. “I tried the most likely places,” he said. “The workrooms, the holding cells, the exercise ground and dormitories. I had to be quick and avoid notice and it was difficult. To avoid the alarm being raised I had to kill a few guards along the way: it was impossible to avoid attention entirely. But I ran out of places that were most likely, and then I was just searching blind. I was panicking, it was random, by that point I thought we had no chance of being reunited.” He had been sobbing, in fact, on the point of being ready to kill anyone in his path in fury, instead of it being a stolid unpleasant requirement of survival.

“There were the laboratories, attached to the hospital buildings,” he remembered. “Camp inmates were afraid of them: no good things were whispered of them. But they were the haunt and the domain of Schmidt, and he had noticed us, and had myself and my mother moved about like chess pieces at his whim. So, perhaps my father also. Also my father had been sick, even before the war. So I had not covered all the likely places, you see, after all.” Erik saw that Raven was quietly holding onto Hank: and now pushed her face into his shoulder. Good, it was good she had that comfort.

“I tried the inmate wards first, pushing my cap over my face and claiming a message being taken to two orderlies who tried to stop me. Nothing, and then the first lab, which was open. And one beyond it, for which I had to fiddle with the metal surplate surrounding the bolt on the door to enter, and knock out a lab tech with a fire extinguisher. In these labs, there was only machinery and shining glassware. And nothing beyond them, it seemed, and I despaired. And then I saw that in the little ginnel between them stocked like a dispensing room, there were stairs down to the basement, and I tried that. The basement was an underground lab. Also locked, but you see I could take care of that now.” He closed his eyes, against this overwhelming memory, and the luminous blare and haze of the sunset was gold against his eyelids.

“This lab was not like the others,” he managed, then. “It was not sterile and clean and full of beeping machinery and calculations and blackboards and sterilisers, not an ecstatic tribute to modern science. This one was full of specimens – live specimens.” He paused, brooding. “In cages, stacked up six or eight high, row upon row, ripe and stinking and dank, dirty, and with the noise of despair and wordless pleas for mercy in the air. Wordless, too young to have speech or have learnt it, mostly.”

Oh, damn, someone else crying now. Erik had no time for it: he was nearly done, and wanted to be. “They were children,” he added, though it was probably superfluous. “Mutant children, all, I think, though I could not say for sure. There was no sign of my father here, either. And I was beginning to let go hope of finding him. I would perhaps have to go back and retrieve my mother and escape with her only, and we would never know what had happened to my father. In fact we would have abandoned him. I think that thought was what made me impulsive. I couldn’t go back to Mamma with empty arms, that was what I thought. And I looked at the tower of cages in front of me. In the middle of the first column, at chest height for me then or a little higher, there was a little mutant girl – two years old, maybe, or a very small three. So she was the nearest, and the easiest. She was blue, with thick crimson hair and yellow slitted eyes. And though she’d been howling when I jemmied my way in, she watched me quietly now, while most of the others still yowled and cried and caterwauled. She had no greeting for me, but her eyes were intelligent, and I thought that so many children could not be locked away for any good reason. No naughtiness or even downright evil justified this. The lock on her cage was nothing that could withstand me, not now, and I melted it off, and held out my arms, and she climbed into them just as if it wasn’t the case that she’d never seen me
He remembered how that had felt, with such clarity. Suddenly the little blue one with no name, who clung to him so trustingly that in that moment he had a sister where he'd had none a day previous. “I ran, then,” he said. “With her in my arms. I only had one set of arms, and I couldn’t carry more than one child. I did what I could do. For the rest of them I did the only thing I could: melted the lock off every cage, and broke the locks of every lab and ward door behind me as I ran, for my mother.”

It was difficult to breathe, now. And Erik felt drops of rain on his face, but what, was he going to stop now? The finish line was in sight, the same way as it had been then. “A mutant child in my arms was nothing I could explain away. I killed an orderly along the way, and wasn't quick enough with a second. I caught him a glancing blow with a heavy lab stand as he ran – zinc or something I could make my servant in it – and he staggered, but then he was out of the building. I didn't know if it was enough, or if the cry was going up of escape and blue bloody murder. But as I forced my – our – way out of the last ward between myself and the block of administrative functionaries with Schmidt's office and my mother in it, an inmate was being escorted in. My father.” Yes. The thrill of triumph, of having put the puzzle pieces of his family back together, he could still feel it now.

“He was sick, and mistreated, and it was hard for him to keep pace,” Erik remembered. “In the end I was dragging him along by the metal buttons on his work-shirt, half keeping him upright. We couldn't slacken off – had to outrun the word of our escape, from the orderly who'd got away. But one hides in plain sight, isn't that best usually? In the checkpoint kiosk at the gates – quickly replaced, after my assault – the guard was not expecting a cosh to the back of the head, from the steel-plated clock on the wall behind him. And then my father installed himself in it, the guard's cap upon his head, and the child – Raven – hiding beneath the desk. And I went back to get my mother – and hardly anyone died for it.” He smiled around, and really it was funny, the raised eyebrows, the faint alarm. It was true that he was proud: proud not to have killed more than need be. “We did not escape notice entirely,” he added. “But the unit of guards who did stumble over us, had heard word of what had happened and what I could do, already, I think. Threats sufficed, and waving around a steel-edged door that I ripped off its hinges, and stopping up their guns to explode if they used them. That did kill one: but then, if a man tries to shoot a poor sick prisoner and her son, doesn’t he deserve a harsh judgement? The others I had lock themselves away in a storeroom: then melted the lock to a solid lump.”

He was tired, and at this point it all just seemed a fairy story someone had told him a long time ago. Unreality always did creep in for him by this point: as if the hand of God had been upon them, guiding him, and he'd had little choice or responsibility in his fate, not really. “So we got my Mamma out too, and then there was a truckload of prisoners being taken out of the camp somewhere, and I knocked out the driver. He wasn't one of the camp guards. I arrested the engine, and he was trying to work out what the trouble was, his head under the hood. I only hit him hard enough, with a paperweight I'd picked up along the way, to render him unconscious,” he pointed out. These small points were important. “We stole the truck: it wasn't as if the prisoners were about to raise the alarm. And their escape would distract attention and resources from our own, the same as the children in the lab. Although it wasn't purely my intent to use them in that way. And it was Jakob and the baby at the checkpoint: so there we were, out, and whole, and free. With an extra little one into the bargain.”

It was hard to remember the purpose of his little speech now, now that he was stirred up and emotional to a regrettable degree. “So that is what my mutation means to me,” Erik said vaguely. “It means that my family is free.”

And now Edie was truly clinging on to him, sighing in the phase where tears are over but speech is difficult. And he had another armful too, Raven launching into him more like a missile from a cannon, than a young lady affectionately embracing her dutiful – and much put-upon – older brother.
The rain was barely spitting, but his shirt was rapidly distinctly damp.

Erik was embarrassed by the display, and didn't look around and into the eyes of their guests, their companions and co-mutants. But he didn't need to be a telepath, to feel the support, the community and the love, of a kind. Isn't that love, to listen to a story like that and never call a man a murdering maniac, or yawn? And to keep one's mouth shut, afterwards. Tears shed and dried or not, that's only the last five percent of the deal. Erik knew, was sure they were all safe in this garden. In a perfect Edenic garden, the snake long dead and the mutants free to roam.

And he didn't need to look at Charles to be perfectly aware of where he was, leaning against one corner of the garden shed, and looking down at his glass of sherry, perhaps a little further back than most of the rest, perfectly still. The grey-blue silk of his shirt was like a waterlogged storm-cloud, compared to the clear sky-blue of his eyes.

And now Raven pushed Erik back and out of the limelight – he had hogged it for an unconscionable period of time, after all – and assumed her place as the final performer in this farcical little amateur-hour drama-student's interlude. Edie patted his hand and moved a little away – knowing better than to make more of this than it was. Which was everything, and also merely the background of their lives, plain fact.

“I hardly have anything to say!” Raven announced, now, and laughed. “Erik's told you half my story, and he never warned me he was going to do it!” She was extra bright in the dimming light, a gorgeous Gainsborough milkmaid with cherries at her cheeks and a milky brow – just now. And if her eyes were over-bright, and her dried eyes threatened continual overflow, well, no-one was about to comment on it. “But I can tell you what remains, and a few extra details besides. Oh, and show you, too,” she added. She abandoned her conventional form: and if Erik protested her true face too often, perhaps, it seemed fitting and appropriate at this moment. It also complemented her dress beautifully – amethyst with a fine turquoise stripe. Perhaps even better than her more usual and conventional form.

“Oh, you are a bobby-dazzler, Miss Raven,” Az sighed. “Lord love you, I swear to God, in your true form I would abandon my natural inclinations for you.” (Hank wasn't thrilled at this passionate declaration: and edged a little closer to Raven, with a narrow-eyed glare at Az.)

And the little smirk on her lavender-blue lips was the only indication that she'd even heard Az's heartfelt avowal, but still her mood was noticeably elevated. Still without any hesitation she continued. “Well, that's it, basically. I can't tell you where I came from, or who my original parents were. I barely remember even any of what Erik has already told you. Only that I do remember being caged – I don't think anyone would forget that.” Then it seemed to come back to her and come home to her, what she was talking about. And all the lightness fell from her face. “I remember that all days were the same, and none were good. Abandonment by my birth mother, and then being a medical curiosity for sadists in respectable white coats, that was what my mutation brought me. Perhaps that was my whole life up until then, I have to assume so. And then a day a little different, and noise, and disturbance, and someone bursting into the... I won't have known it was a lab. It was the place, the only place I knew, it was hell really. I don't think that that's exaggeration. A face I didn't know, someone bigger than me except everyone was, except the other captives. And then the door of my prison open, and anyone who freed me had to be good. Had to be good. Was better than what I was leaving, and if he was willing to take me then I would follow him anywhere.”

She opened her mouth, and failed to say anything. But Erik knew she wasn't finished, what the rest was. It was what woke her up in nightmares sometimes, dreadful nightmares he couldn't help her with much, since their substance couldn't be argued. “I was the nearest – you heard, Erik said so,” she said, with a feigned lightness. “The nearest, that's all. Not cute, or special, or good. Not
deserving. Sometimes I wonder, what if I'd been a couple of cages further down? What then? What about the others, the unlucky ones? I won the lottery: at their expense.”

She went very quiet, lost suddenly in the slough of depression she sometimes got caught up in, thinking about ancient history. Erik would have vastly preferred tears. Tears he could do something about. Then she rallied. “I was in a cage, I was an animal, fodder with no hope, not even speech to flesh out my thoughts of hate and fury. And then, I had a brother, and I was free. I would have killed to maintain that new status quo. But I didn't need to.”

Erik looked down at his hands, at the twisted metal flowers on the ground, that had fallen when he ceased to manipulate them or to pay attention or to care, and smiled a little ruefully.

“I had a brother, to do it for me,” Raven added. And she pulled him over to her, and rested her head on his shoulder.
"Well, damn my knees."

Chapter Summary

A stroll in the park at midnight, what could be more romantic? A blow-job in the park under the star-light, what could be more... er...

Chapter Notes

Erik turns out to have some fairly old-school attitudes sexually. And he definitely doesn't know the first thing about geishas. Cut him some slack, he's practically a virgin and we're talking six decades back.

Charles quotes an old wartime song - 'goodbye darling I must leave you'. I do not know what the song is and cannot locate it.

C.S. LEWIS CHRONICLES OF NARNIA SPOILERS>>>>>>>>>

ETA: Dammit, I was not consciously aware while writing of the reason why Erik read The Magician's Nephew as a kid and new British national. Except it's bleeding obvious now: of course, considering the fact that Digory SAVED HIS MUM'S LIFE with the magic apple that Aslan let him take from the enchanted orchard - orchard! - in a newly created Narnia. Of course he did. Of course. Bloody hell. IDS ARE SNEAKY.

When the evening was over – no, actually, the evening wasn't over. Az was still lingering in the kitchens declaiming bits of Dickens in an alleged impression of his young buddy Simon Callow, and Raven and Angel had pretty much cornered Janos in the living room, flirting manically enough that even that suave fellow was a little bit flustered. But Charles caught Erik a moment in the hallway, and said softly that it was very difficult to tear himself away, but he should probably be thinking of making a move. That Logan's carefully engineered poker game, through a mutual acquaintance in what Erik took, via significant looks and meaningful gestures, to be the London underworld – couldn't be guaranteed to go on all night, although it well might. "Plus Alex's night out at the dogs can only last as long as his walking-around money, which he'll have burned through like zinc in water. And Moira may return from her date early enough to check in with the rest of the household."

He looked at Erik, regrettfully – Erik thought it was regret, that was what it looked like – and he added, "Goodbye darling I must leave you, I'm sorry but I really have to go--"

It wasn't as simple as that, making their escape, though. Thankyous and farewells for Charles, with Mamma and Raven and all the rest of his fellow-guests, took what Erik thought was going to be a good quarter-hour. Which turned out to be an under-estimate, since there was another ten minutes of good wishes and exchanges of phone numbers and addresses, at least.

Even then, Erik had a little trouble detaching himself: Raven in particular got him in a stranglehold of a hug, half in order to have opportunity to whisper in his ear. "Don't let him get away with no more
than a handshake, love.” At least she was uncharacteristically discreet in her care about volume and tone.

*Oh, little sister, if you only knew,* he thought, privately, but repressed the smile and appreciated the thought, which was good at its core.

And Mamma had a fond farewell for Charles too, a kiss on the cheek and an admonition to visit more often next time he was in the UK. “I will be very sad if you don’t, my dear. And Erik will tell you, that when I am unhappy, everyone is unhappy!”

Charles laughed, and promised, “You'll be sick of the sight of me, Edie. Now I've had a taste of your cooking, there'll be no stopping me.”

“Bless you my dear, you can come and chop vegetables in my kitchen any time. If you get tired of the glamorous life you could come and be my kitchen-boy,” she said, with one hand at his cheek and a light embrace, a kiss that seemed sincere and a little serious, after all their flirtation and joking. And then the two of them were out into the cold night air.

An eruption of squeals and cheers went up, audibly, in the Lehnsherr household, as they hit the front garden gate. Erik paused, and turned around with Charles to take a disconcerted look at the lit-up front of the house. “I must say, I'm a bit wounded,” he observed. “They're not usually that happy to see the back of me...”

Charles laughed, and Erik felt quite undone, a little dazed and scattered in his thoughts. He did manage to gather himself enough to say, fastening the gate and turning back to Charles, “I'm sorry, I didn't actually check that you wanted me to walk you to the station...? I just thought it might be better to have a guide and companion, what with not being familiar with these parts?”

And he hesitated out of instinct, to give Charles a chance to demur, to express thanks but to assure Erik that he was fine to find his way back by himself.

But Charles just touched his arm, and said, “Heavens no, love. I've about as much sense of direction as a baby chick, what with being ferried about by others on a regular basis. Very infantilising, it is, really. I shouldn't allow Logan to take charge of logistics as much as he does, but I've grown lazy compared to my student days here. And anyway,” he added – taking Erik's arm, as they turned and strolled along the pavement, “we've hardly had a moment alone together all evening. You're not going to ditch me now, are you?”

Well. Hardly. Erik smiled, and looked away blushing a little, at that moment. But his lack of active response might have given Charles pause for thought. Because after a little moment, he added in a quieter voice, “Of course, if it's inconvenient at all, I could absolutely give Logan a bell and ask him to pick me up, instead. He'll only give me a bit of earache for slipping off on the quiet. If Edie wouldn't mind me nipping back and commandeering her hallway phone? For a minute or two.”

And he actually paused a moment, stood stock still in the middle of the path, as if he seriously thought that Erik might take him up on the offer.

Erik only laughed, because what could he say to that? And he patted Charles' shoulder – because, well, if Charles was going to get handsy, then surely he might too – and grabbed at his elbow. To turn him around one hundred and eighty degrees, because they were heading in the wrong direction, and he'd been too much absorbed in present company to realise, until then.

Charles' face fell – obviously thinking that Erik was taking him up on his get-out clause. And Erik had to explain quickly – rather shame-faced, because damn it, what with cameras and whatnot, how
many times was he going to make himself look a damn fool? - that it was only that they'd set off in
the wrong direction.

“Oh, if that's all it is,” Charles said breezily, looking relieved. And he didn't let go of Erik's arm, at
all, even with their route well-established. But took a firm grip instead, quite as if Erik was the one
pursued and captured.

Even Charles' comment about it being almost their first moment alone together was enough to make
him a little dizzy. Walking along the darkened street, lit by a few street-lamps that were a soft yellow
fuzzy illumination, it was damned hard to concentrate on the man's courteous inquisition, about how
long he'd been living at the other family house associated with the shop, and what he felt about the
book-selling business, about what uncles Hugo and Syl were up to now in retirement. (Careering
about Europe in a comic, knowing, fiercely-relished exploration of all the territories that the Axis
powers might have sought to scrub them and their kind from, erased without trace. But that would
have been an involved discussion, with many many anecdotes from Hugo and Syl's postcards.)
About family and how Raven had done in school and how she'd come to choose her art school. If all
seemed a little inconsequential, really, and especially after the deep and soul-searching discussions of
the party.

But that didn't make him any the less surprised to be suddenly shoved up against the wall of an old
orchard, at the end of the road at the corner before crossing for the nearest Tube station, and kissed
with some thoroughness and application. Much as if all the water in his body was replaced with gin,
and Charles was a dipso in desperate need of a drink. (He should have picked up on Charles'
intention, from the quick and silent scan the length of the street that he took, but maybe he just wasn't
up to speed for picking up on the signs, yet.

At any rate, it wasn't as if he was complaining, and even though the risk and the danger gave him an
adrenaline surge powerful enough to make him weak at the knees, he wasn't resisting either.
Hallucinating, possibly, but not resisting. I'll have bruises, tomorrow, he thought dimly, feeling
Charles' thumbs bite into his hipbones, and hold him in place. And nor was that a complaint.

He wasn't sure about the root cause of the weakness of his knees, not really. It might have had more
to do with the purposefulness on Charles' face, backing him up at speed against the background of
nice plush flats and divided-up mansions, populated with respectable old couples and bachelor aunts.
And then there was nothing to hold him up, when Charles every bit as suddenly let him go, and set
off in the direction they'd been headed, without even waiting to make sure that Erik was following
him.

Purposeful, that was definitely the word. And as Erik straightened and made a move to follow,
Charles impatiently looked back and beckoned at him – much as if to say, come on, I haven't got all
night.

Well, perhaps imperious was the word, after all, Erik thought. But that didn't mean he didn't hurry to
catch up. And when he did – with Charles forging on, not even looking back to him any more –
Charles stuck a hand out behind him – while looking about questingly at the junction they'd reached,
still mired in residential roads, looking in all possible directions.

And Erik took his hand, because... because, well. It was night, and who was going to see? And
Charles, Charles was very authoritative. “Well, love,” Charles said – quite as if he was continuing a
conversation they'd been broken off in the middle of, and with no reference to, to, to anything, “I'm
not one hundred percent certain, but I believe we should go straight on, and it's to the left at the end
of this street.”

(No reference to grabbings and bruising kisses. Well, plenty, actually, but only in his own mind. Of
course. It wasn't as if he was currently capable of thinking about anything else. Although Charles appeared to be doing just fine with that. Erik wasn't sure it was even in his top five preoccupations at this moment.)

“Actually, we need to take a left,” he said, as Charles let go his hand and surged ahead again. “For the Tube station. To get you back to your hotel?” If he was beginning to feel perhaps a bit exasperated – as well as discombobulated, and het-up and flushed – then Erik felt that he could hardly be blamed. And he caught up, slipped his arm through Charles’ again, and made a civil but persistent effort to steer him in the correct direction.

Charles was utterly unco-operative, eyes light and distracted and a little wild in this light, face calmly intent, set upon his objective, and carrying Erik along in his wake. “Oh, never mind about that, love,” he said breezily, and gave Erik a quick, fierce grin. “Why would we want to do that?”

Erik was mostly aware, at the same time as he expostulated, “Then where are we going?”, that whatever he might be saying, he was still following along behind Charles like an eager puppy, a tug-boat in the wake of a great schooner.

He began to feel a little sympathy, secretly, for Logan. And perhaps even that little bastard Alex. Those gnomic remarks and dark hints were beginning to build some kind of picture and make a rather alarming sense. Charles called out – because he was still providing all the motive force in their progress forward, still pulling ahead - “Erik, I believe that there's a sweet little park around this way. One that we should go and investigate. Did I tell you that I'm the worst, most inveterate tourist? Last time we were in London, I insisted on visiting all – or as close to all as we could manage – of the churches in the borough. And this time, I researched all of the parks and gardens, and made some progress until the filming schedule really inconsiderately began to take up too much of my time. Poor Logan: if he loses his hair he'll be sending the bills for his trichologist consultations my way.”

Parks? Erik was lost: but apparently, Charles was lost no longer. They'd reached about a mid-point between the last junction and the end of the street, and Charles came to an abrupt halt, holding onto Erik as he kept going a moment with the sheer force of the momentum they'd built up. “And here we are,” he announced, turning around to face... a long barrier of enamelled ironwork railings, partially backed by neatly-trimmed laurel hedging. Thirty or forty feet of railings, with the nearest residences way off on the other side of the square at the end of the street. “There should be a plaque around here. A little park, isn't it?” Charles enquired. “I'm sure it was on the list of parks I had,” he added, scanning up and down the railings, the street, searching and maintaining surveillance at the same time.

And he seemed very certain, for someone claiming not to be able to keep a map in his head. Erik felt he had cause to wonder, if Charles was much of a proponent of full disclosure and free communication. The man's discreet ambiguity and resolute hedging at dinner, regarding mutant status, popped up in his mind. It still wasn't his business, though. A mutant had a right to disclose or not, as he chose. “Charles,” he said, with slight unease, “yes, it's a park. A private park, though, I think: it belongs to the resident's association for the flats in the buildings around the square. You see?” he said, indicating.

He was aware that Charles had turned away from the railings, then, and turned towards him. And he was almost aware that Charles was smiling, at him. Almost certain. And he had a bad feeling about it. He looked, and checked. Yes, Charles was smiling: beatific in the glowing yellow light of the lamps, warmer than a British summer, his eyes travelling over Erik's face with a rather admiring expression. (Which sounded dreadful, even in his own head. But Erik was a stickler for facts and the truth, and very especially for not lying to himself. It was accurate.) “Yes,” Charles agreed. “I do. Shall we explore?”
That smile was definitely not free of malice. Or not malice, perhaps, but mischief. Recklessness. It would be difficult to define it exactly. One would need to study the subject for a good long time. “It's private,” Erik repeated, a little helplessly. “It's locked, for that matter: I can feel the padlock, on the gate around the corner,” he admitted.

“Oh, dear,” Charles said, solemnly. His face was very sober and earnest. “Oh, well. If it's locked, that's quite different.” And he took another quick scan of the street, side to side: and stepped back. Erik was all ready to draw a breath of relief, to take his arm, to lead him off in the direction of the Tube.

Except that that was the moment that Charles chose to launch himself forward and up at the railing in the most kamikaze death-or-freedom vault that Erik had ever laid eyes on. (And considering his history, he'd seen some pretty concerted and deadly serious attempts.) A foothold on the decorative heraldic flower flourishes in the spines of the rail, his other leg up – or almost up – to the lethal-looking spikes and the spaces in between along the top of the rails, and--. Almost, almost, he almost managed it, with Erik standing frozen and appalled. And then he fell back with a curse that he'd certainly never learnt in the gently-bred drawing rooms of Westchester.

Erik did break out of his frozen trance, as Charles lost impetus and balance, and was there to help break and steady his fall, and help him regain footing and stability. And perhaps to turn halfway into Edie, scolding and fuming out of a terrier-like anxiety and concern, telling Charles off rather as if he was an errant small boy retrieved from danger. “For God's sake, what are you playing at, Charles? You could have impaled yourself! I'm pretty sure Logan would have had plenty to say to me about it, not to mention the backers of your next film! Do you have a death-wish, or something? Come here, let me check that you're in one piece. Mamma would never forgive me if I let you meet your end while I'm supposed to be looking after you.”

Hi stone was sharp, and fierce. But it softened a bit, as Charles submitted – with only a slight tongue-in-cheek shamefacedness – to Erik's pulling him close by the shoulders, patting at arms and chest and, all right, waist and hips. And that was pulling him a bit closer than need be. And it felt utterly inevitable to drift closer together than that, and they were already kissing before a distant clock chime recalled Erik to himself. (And oh, he'd waited all day for this, precisely this, and how had he waited so long?) And he recalled that they were out in the open in a public street, even late in the evening and the dark, and anyone might happen past at any moment.

He pulled away, and put Charles a little away from him. Regretfully, and not without a measure of reluctance. “We shouldn't...” he said softly, a little apologetic. “These are my neighbours.”

“Well, love,” Charles said, easily, not seeming offended. “That was how come I thought the park could be very interesting. Or useful, at least. Unfortunately, although I did a fair bit of athletics at Oxford, that didn't stretch to include hurdling or pole-vaulting, the only sports that would really come in useful at this point.” And he looked back at the railings, with an expression that Erik misliked, seeing as it was a damn sight too assessing and unbowed, sizing up an opponent, a worthy foe. “Although I didn't really give it enough run-up, probably. Now if I came at it from a good twenty feet away, perhaps..."

And he was already making as if to step away, when Erik grabbed him by the shoulders, and held him firmly in one place. (And he wriggled a bit, under Erik's hands: but not in the manner of someone who was sincerely trying to get away. No, it was distinctly more provocative than that.) Erik closed his eyes a moment, because it was a big leap to take. He honestly couldn't believe what he was about to do – so rebellious! So uncharacteristic! Property damage, anti-capitalistic public disobedience and a disrespect for social mores! Edie would be proud! And yet he knew damn well – without actually deciding a thing, purely instinct, purely impulse and necessity – that he was still
going to do it. That if it came down to a choice between a Charles safe and whole and intact, 
prevented from risking life and limb on hare-brained impulsive death-lungets, and inciting havoc, 
unrest and rioting in the sedate streets of well-to-do Paddington, then there was no choice to be made 
at all.

His eyes opened, and he did it freely and knowingly. “No,” he said severely, giving Charles a good 
hard look straight in the eye. “Don't you dare. Look, there's an easier way. Watch.” And with a 
fierce little emphasis to his grip, he nodded his head at the railings. And they creaked, at his bidding.

Creaked, and more than that. They shimmered, under light that was half starlight and half soft yellow 
sulphurous lamplight courtesy of the local gas and electric company, the county electricity board.

(The street-lamps in this moneyed area were elaborately decorative, much nicer than the standard 
municipal council standard issue. Curlicued, decorative and elaborate, the metalwork looked much 
like the illustrations for the living street-lamp that Queen Jadis planted in fury in a newborn Narnia, 
in *The Magician's Nephew*. It had been one of the first English books Erik had read, as a new 
transplant in a British post-war grammar school, an earnest youngster determined to master the lingo 
and to fit in. And to forget many things, to be a perfectly ordinary British eleven-year-old. The 
lamps weren't quite, perfectly true to the illustrations, though: and every time that Erik saw them, his 
power itched to make a few fine adjustments, and correct them to accord immaculately with C.S.
Lewis's illustrator, Pauline Baynes' creative vision.)

They shimmered, and protested, and gave as if a great circus muscleman had a meaty fist, one to 
each side of a fistful each of two or three ironwork columns. They melted, and wobbled, and pushed 
out into a circle and then wider, wider, wider. Wide enough for a fair-sized human male to pass 
through, with a bit of squeezing and a few complaints re: ears and arse.

“Darling,” Charles said softly. He spoke to Erik, and squeezed his shoulder as he spoke, but his eyes 
were all on the ironwork that was hewing and bending to Erik’s power. “How amazing.”

“Well,” Erik said roughly – because it would be ludicrous, to melt at a few soft words, to flush and 
preen and flex – “what are you waiting for? You were eager enough when it could have landed you 
in casualty at St. Georges or the Royal Infirmary. If you want to explore, then there you are. Unless it 
isn't as enticing, now you don't have to risk life and limb over it? Are you only interested if you have 
to fight and possibly die for something?”

He was looking the other way too. He only felt, didn't see, when Charles pressed up against him, and 
what had to be a kiss was pressed into the hard angle of his jaw. Only a moment's worth: and then 
Charles was disappearing through the railings like Alice down the rabbit hole, or Pevensies into a 
wardrobe. And Erik had to shake himself a moment, before he thought to follow on. The gap wasn't 
quite wide enough to be comfortable. But the alloy that the railing posts were made of was a little 
over-malleable, and he didn't want to risk being unable to put them back as he’d found them, 
perfectly and without sag or metal fatigue. Bad enough that the enamel paint was never going to be 
the same again, or not without another coat: would be found flaked and shed in the morning, 
mysteriously moulting although the railings themselves were in perfect shape.

And once he'd pushed through the gap, leaving one of his ears a little tugged and the worse for wear, 
he stood and turned back to the mangled and stretched out metal posts, and applied a little more 
power to put them back, straight and true, as if he and Charles had never slipped into this private, 
dark little garden together, through them.

And he felt Charles come up behind him, close at his shoulder, as he did it, and they both watched 
the buckle and the stagger of the metal firm up and re-form into upright rods and perfectly modelled 
centre-decorations. Erik was particular, reproduced every petal and curlicue against the pattern of the
staves further down the fencing, immaculate. Raven accused him of perfectionism often enough: but since it was no fault, he didn't see why she needed to accuse in the first place. And as he finished the last flourish, the final leaf, flower and heraldic flourish, Charles put his hand on Erik's shoulder.

“That's so beautiful,” he said quietly. “You never considered being an artist, a sculptor?”

Erik smiled. “It would be cheating,” he pointed out. “And it's not as if it's original work. In any case: I have always found machines more beautiful. When you can feel each moving part and the movement and interplay between them, like a symphony or a dance...”

“Oh. Yes, it must be glorious,” Charles agreed. “But you gave up engineering for the family business? You didn't mind that?” He slipped his arm into Erik's again, and they slipped naturally into a stroll around the dim green garden, not presented at its best in the dim late-evening light and with the view from most sides largely obscured by laurel hedges within the railings. The privacy and obscuring of the view from the street wasn't perfect, but it was fairly comprehensive. Erik felt very much that he was alone with Charles, in the garden, and possibly in Paddington and the world. They might as well have been the last two people awake in London this night, staring up at the sky.

And he shrugged. “Nothing is more important than family,” he said, and it was true. Giving up a promising career had been a little bit of a wrench: but the small chain of Uncle Sylvester's bookshops would have gone under without the loving care of familial supervision, when Uncle Syl had had heart issues. Erik couldn't have allowed that, after his uncles had done so much for the smaller, poorer, more obscure branch of the family.

Charles was watching him, and he could feel it making him flush, over-aware. He concentrated on the garden instead: not perfectly tended, a little wild, the bushes overgrown and thin-leaved but the flowers beautiful, and a great stone statue and inscription slap in the middle of all of it. “I know that's true, for you,” he said, quite softly, as they walked up to the statue to read the inscription, in accord. “You've proved it tonight, and to them, a hundred times over.” There was a fervent warmth in his voice that was certainly responsible for the tips if Erik's ears lighting up the night around them.

And more than embarrassment, he felt a twinge of concern. Charles would never mention anything, of course, to anyone... Although he hadn't been perfectly discreet in the case of Logan and Alex, of course. That fact had to be admitted. “Of course, a great many things said tonight, I wouldn't have disclosed except to my mother's friends, and a mutant audience,” he began cautiously. And cursed Raven's heavy pouring hand, when it came to a gin and lime, although he knew perfectly well that that hadn't been the only, or even the main, thing that he'd been a little intoxicated with, this night.

Charles was a long way from being dense, or unable to pick up on a cue, of course. “Oh, heavens,” he said, pulling his hand away from Erik's arm, and twisting his hands together a little. In the lamplight his face was fallen and frowning a little, deeply concerned. “Erik, I absolutely vow on – well, not my mother's grave, it would be inappropriate and meaningless, and located in a very hot place besides – but I swear, whatever I may have given you reason to believe, I do know how to keep my mouth shut. And more than that, I will do so. Not that you have anything to conceal, except due to your own natural desire for privacy,” he added.

And oh, he was craning around a little, to look Erik in the face and, damn it, he absolutely should not have the gall to look at Erik in that way. Erik didn't have a word for the look, barring that it was very warm, and earnest, and made Erik feel as if he had something to live up to that he couldn't possibly. That no ordinary chap could, living a quiet respectable unexceptional life, a good neighbour and an upstanding citizen and never likely to set the world afire, not in any way.

“Terrible things happen in wartime, everyone knows it,” Charles added very seriously. And, damn it, still looking, so that Erik couldn't precisely meet his eye. “But everything you did was absolutely
heroic, and admirable, and necessary, and considering how old you were at the time utterly amazing and resourceful of you. Not to mention selfless, considering how much you risked in rescuing Raven–"

"Heroic!" The air was knocked out of Erik with a strangled laugh, and he had to clear his throat to hide a nervous second spurt of laughter, and pull away from Charles' side to resume walking. Because the air was too thick with tension and some build-up of meaning and feeling to be borne. He had to – to normalise the situation somehow, to restore order and sanity. Not that there was any escape, what with Charles' ardent pursuit – there didn't appear to be any other suitable phrase for it. And even as he thought it, Charles was capturing his arm again, to walk in stride with him, as Erik pretended to admire the pretty, vastly expensive Regency houses on the far side of the square.

"I wouldn't describe it that way," Erik said, calming a little, mostly due to his steady denial and refusal to acknowledge plain fact.

"Then how would you?" Charles quizzed him, with a definite teasing note to his warm cultured voice. (And also, while capturing Erik's hand as well as his arm, so that they weren't merely walking arm in arm but hand in hand.) It was so nice and intimate and heart-to-heart, that if Erik had let himself think about it all, he would have begun writing all kinds of romantic unrealistic film scenarios in his head. Things involving Charles renouncing his film career and taking an academic post at Imperial College or Kings or LSE, ready to hand and a long-term romantic prospect, discreetly committed. They could be as close to going steady or engaged as two men were ever likely to get in this world, at least as far as Erik could see, whatever socialistic utopian dreams Raven liked to spin, influenced in idealism and airy-fairy romance by Mamma.

Erik wasn't quite such a fool, though. Some things happened in sappy romantic films, that made Mamma dab her eyes with resolutely denied tears, and Raven drag him along to the flicks for two or three showings. And some happened in real life, and had to be kept distinctly more sub rosa and under the radar.

"I would say," he hedged, carefully, "that you were right when you described it as necessary. I did what had to be done, because I didn't have a choice. I wasn't given one."

And Charles dipped his head – as if he was accepting Erik's version of the facts. Although he used it to give Erik a sly look up and sideways, and Erik actually wasn't a fool and did catch that look. And felt he had enough ability to interpret Charles' looks, here, now, to read it as Charles reserving his right to his own interpretation, while mollifying Erik with an apparent acceptance of his re-writing history. "All right," he said quietly. "But it must have been difficult when you came to England, too. Getting out of Germany in the first place, and travelling through occupied territories, getting to England, being accepted as refugees and getting your naturalisation papers... Not to mention settling in... And becoming so very English."

Oh, there was definitely a little smirk on Charles' face, as he uttered that last bit. He smiled up at the stars coming out, but that was no romantic stargazer look on his face. That was the look of someone doing a little bit of needling for amusement, and cruisin' for a bruisin' while he was at it. "Really," Erik said drily – prodding him a little bit in the shoulder, because Charles Xavier wasn't the only one here who could take a liberty or two. "I strike you as completely Anglicized, then? I'll take that as a compliment... I suppose." He got a swift wicked grin for his pains, and went on swiftly himself.

Because it might conceal the little clutch at the heart it gave him, that particular intimacy of mickey-taking and funning they'd seemingly rapidly reached. This would hurt, this part, when it was gone. When Charles was gone.

"It was work," he says, and shrugs. "Our uncles helped, when we arrived, and began to settle. We
had somewhere to go, and help setting up in business, with money... It was more than most refugees have. Thank God for Papa's Anglophile brothers! They set up home here before the war, in Golders Green for residential, and picking up businesses and premises wherever they could find a bargain. Half a dozen businesses, jewellers and booksellers and in the rag trade. And I spoke, well, not good English at that point. But a lot better than most German-Jewish eleven year olds, what with Mamma being an English teacher and visiting Hugo and Syl some years. Of course Raven has some German, being part of the family. But she grew up, from so small, here in England, and English is her mother tongue, and this life is ninety-nine percent of all she remembers. I wish it was everything: those vestigial memories of her origins she does have serve her no purpose."

“An English teacher!” Charles exclaimed, intrigued.

“Oh yes,” Erik agreed equably. “It didn't strike you, that we speak English even amongst ourselves? Mamma decided it was better, when we arrived: that I would reach fluency quicker, and Raven would integrate better. She established an edict on the subject: and no man may argue with an edict from Edie!”

Charles laughed. “I can well believe it. She still teaches?”

“A little,” Erik allowed. “Some private lessons for the local immigrant populations, and a class at a local tradesmen's college, along with basic business book-keeping. For the working man must have language as a tool and a weapon in the class war, you know!” He rolled his eyes, eyebrows to heaven. “And that's how Raven got her name, too, of course,” he continued. They'd reached the very end of the garden opposite to where they'd made a felonious entrance. And they were faced with two twinned flowerbeds, plaqued with names of the donors who'd left legacies to the housing association for the leasehold flats dotted around the park, to fund their upkeep. Then there were the laurel hedges and railings keeping out the external unmagical world, protecting himself and Charles in a heavenly bubble of transparent glass. It felt very like being inside a snow globe, and if a few flakes had fallen Erik would have started to wonder about inhabiting a fairy story. They stood and looked at the flowers, the sky, the pretty Georgian houses in the distance, for a peaceful moment. “Of course she didn't have one that we knew of, when I picked her up and ran with her. But Mama's love of English and American literature came to the rescue.”

“Edgar Allen Poe?” Charles guessed? One would have thought he was intent on astronomy, examining the constellations in the sky and the unplumbable inky depths beyond. But his hand was very warm on Erik's, and squeezed.

“Yes!” Erik confirmed, pleased. “Right first time! 'Nevermore', Mamma was thinking, of course. In reference to the Shoah, you know. 'Is there balm in Gilead?', et cetera. A little gloomy, perhaps, but Raven's grown into it well. I think it suits her.”

“It's beautiful,” Charles agreed, warmly, turning a little to him. “And so is she – and intelligent, and funny, and a dear girl altogether. A credit to you, you and Edie both, and she owes you everything. Everything.”

“Oh. Well,” Erik said uncomfortably, and tugged Charles to begin walking again. (They had reached the limits of what this miniature park had to offer, perhaps. Not that he wanted to admit it, or bring their unscheduled explorations to a close. It was too soon for the night to end, but the trouble was that it always would be, for him. He was well aware.) “That isn't how I like to think of it: or to have her think of it. She's been a blessing, in our lives. Not that I would say so to her very often, because she would send me in the bill, perhaps not even metaphorically!”

“You saved her,” Charles said anyhow, dogmatic, repeating the sense of it if not the words. “Saved all your family, freed the ones that you couldn't take with you, stood and fought the ones who'd have
destroyed you, took them on and you were eleven, eleven... I think I was at boarding school, at the
time. Sending griping letters home about the food and my French teacher throwing board rubbers at
pupils. Not fighting fascists, anyway.” Erik took a look at his face, a little glimpse, because his voice
was odd, a little wild. And his face was, too, set and intense, eyes glazed as blue china marbles. His
grip on Erik's hand was very tight, almost enough to be painful, and though he was saying plenty he
looked to be thinking even more. “You gave everything. You risked everything. You can't educate
an eleven-year-old into that, with religion and philosophy and moral education. It's a matter of the
heart.”

They came to a halt, pausing in front of the only wooden bench in the whole garden, small and with
a little plaque too, on the other side of the statue and fountain. Erik felt flushed and uncomfortable at
the praise, unable to co-ordinate any of his thoughts. And not least because of a small voice at the
back of his mind that certainly wasn't Charles – that was a memory of Mamma. Mamma saying,
disbelieving as Erik hurried her on, to the truck, the checkpoint, the gates and freedom, with news of
her new daughter, sight unseen, only just vouchsafed her – ‘But Erik, how many? How many
children? But we must go back! We could take more!”

And – oh, it echoed wearilying in his head sometimes, chased off sleep like ogres in nightmare – his
own high unbroken eleven-year-old voice, in reply: 'We can go back, and rescue more. Or we can
live. Which do you want, Mamma?’

“I didn't do so much,” he said harshly, now, to Charles. “I didn't do everything I could have. I was
too concerned with protecting what was mine, and keeping it safe.” He had not disappointed his
Mamma often, in thirty-three years, after all. He had taken care not to: those few occasions were so
bitterly memorable.

“You kept them safe,” Charles breathed, and Erik could swear that he wasn't really being attentively
listened to. Especially as Charles pressed in closer, still holding his hand tight, but chest to chest and
staring into his face as if trying to read Erik's heart in his eyes, without any cheating telepathic
nonsense. Erik could hear, far off a couple of streets down, some drunken revellers wandering home
after a good bar-night, and it wasn't enough to make him cautious. Not tonight, when after all they
were closed away, locked in and safe. And in any case it seemed that madness was infectious, and he
felt quite as reckless as Charles was clearly capable of being.

Charles brought his hand up close to his lips, and kissed it, and smiled brilliantly at him: brilliant and
devious, Erik thought, dim and faraway and not listening to his own instincts, brilliant and self-
sabotaging, brilliant and reckless. He hadn't expected so much, from the smooth air-brushed
heartthrob in his magazines: had expected a lot less, but all of it more manageable and orderly and

He said it with his cheek lingering, almost touching against Erik's own, and the fingers of his free
hand tracing a barely-there tattoo against his face. Erik might as well have been hypnotised, could
not have pulled away to save a dozen lives. “You repress who you are, and what you want, and give
up the things you'd like, to provide, to keep them safe. But you shouldn't have to give up
everything.” he murmured, with his free hand travelling. Over Erik's shoulder, chest, waist, hip: and
then giving him a mighty shove, with no warning.

If he was going to protest, to push back, that would have been the moment. But Erik found himself
amazingly docile and obedient, as Charles kept pushing, kept him off-balance and moving
backwards. And he backed Erik up until the back of his legs hit the bench and he went down heavy,
only his hand clasped in Charles' to keep him steady as his arse hit the bench. The suddenness of it
sent the air *bam* out of his lungs.
Charles smiled down at him. In the lamplight, the moonlight, it was very sweet, and only faintly demonic. “You should have something for yourself,” he continued, conversationally. Erik wasn't keeping up well enough to follow the thread of the conversation. It could have been referring to anything. (And he knew well enough that he could have stopped this. You had to want to, beforehand, that was the thing.)

He could also have stopped it, when Charles abruptly dropped to his knees. Abruptly, but with enough warning Erik's way, because he rested a hand, heavy, on Erik's knee as he went down, offloading a fair amount of the weight before his knees hit the pavement. He could have, but a verbal protest seemed like about enough. (You had to want to stop something, to stop it. And sincerity seemed like a Herculean task, at this moment.) “But your knees,” he said weakly. And might have added something about skiing, and slalom, and Otto Preminger, to prove he'd been paying attention at the time, as well as anyone possibly could under the circumstances. But his throat was ticklingly hoarse and his skin was on fire and his crotch throbbed, and what, was he the counsel for the prosecution, trying to talk himself out of what he wanted most?

“Oh, damn my knees,” Charles said casually, and reached for Erik's fly. Erik didn't have enough sincerity in him to even bat him off with the lightest fake-slap: and instead simply watched – oh, agog, transfixed – as Charles unzipped and revealed him with the same matter-of-fact brutal efficiency that he'd lent to chopping vegetables and pouring nasty tonic-wine down Edie, earlier in the evening. And Charles gave the column of his dick a little transverse and up-and-down friction and working, to harden it up to his satisfaction. Erik closed his eyes a moment: it required absolute concentration, not making a fool of himself. Then Charles met Erik's eye – with Erik’s dick still in his hand – and batted his eyelashes with absolutely flagrant deliberation. “You ought to look up at the sky,” he said, “and tell me some nice folk tales about the constellations. While I suck you off. You know, romance me a little. Or,” he suggested, as he lowered his head, and Erik thought he might hyperventilate, what with simultaneously grasping and struggling for a breath, and whining like a sulky pet dog refused the choicest leftovers at table, “recite me a little poetry. You're a bookseller, love, you should know a hell of a lot of poetry. How about...How art thou fallen from Heaven, oh Lucifer Son of the Morning...” he began, reaching for anything blindly, and it wasn't at all what he'd meant vaguely to begin with, only that it seemed right and the words sprang from his mouth unbidden. And when he risked a glimpse down at Charles, it clicked and he understood why, watching the shifting blonded-chestnut waves of his hair, colourless...
in the leaching starlight, monochrome and shining, and the shadow of his lashes fanning out, his closed eyelids. His rosepetal mouth – a girl's mouth, really, not that you'd credit or register it up on the big screen, in hard-edged heartbreaker roles and with his hair cropped close, charming some lady off-screen and into bed with that dark rich voice – closing on Erik's cock and giving him all the close warm merciless attention he'd been denying Erik a moment ago. Definitely, it would be hard to peg Charles for certain as either devil or angel.

Which was enough to put Erik's brain on the fritz like Edie's small new-fangled black-and-white television, when the aerial wasn't positioned quite right, or someone walked in front of it, or it was just having a moody generally. Certainly it was enough to wipe any thought of poetry and literature and spinning pretty lines to woo his pretty dark star right out of his head. He was too busy yelping and half-lifting right off the hard wooden bench with the force of shocking shudders of feeling, fighting helplessly against the strong hands that were preventing him, holding him down.

Then they didn't have to hold him down any more, because there was a cessation of stimulus that made it much easier not to wriggle and to fight, with a head between his knees paying not a blind bit of notice. Not that Charles lifted his mouth off Erik completely. No, it was just back to the teasing routine, to a barely-there dancing of teethpoints and a skimming of lips against veiny shaft, and Erik should probably have been grateful. It made things much easier to bear, except for being unbearable in itself, and he didn't feel inclined to gratitude. (If he did give in completely, and slide one hand down from the bench-back and over Charles' neck, applying the very faintest pressure that was more of a hint than a demand, then Charles would surely understand. If one was so very adept at insufferable teasing, then one expected a certain type of response. But Charles' hand clamped down on his own, and replaced it firmly on the bench. And Charles' head stilled – no motion, no friction, none of that sensation that still felt utterly forbidden and strange.

(Because once, once ever, was hardly enough time to get used to the feeling of Charles Xavier's mouth on your cock. Maybe a hundred times would do the job, and Erik would happily volunteer for that experiment.)

And, damn it, Charles lifted his head up, his mouth off Erik completely. And gave Erik a look: a look clearly intended to be meaningful, from there on his knees with his hands on Erik's thighs, in the near-dark but with the light of the street-lamp a little too close for comfort, perhaps. If only Erik had the means to interpret it, instead of half-lying there panting like a damn fool. But in any case Charles helped him out – flushed, and mussed-haired, and smiling – and said, “What, no wooing? I don't call that an equitable arrangement, to be without a little music or praise in verse to my cocksucking skills, love. You can do better than that, can't you?” The glint in his eyes explained almost as clearly as his words, though: that this was a dare, and a challenge, and a non-negotiable contract stipulation. And he had better come good on it, if he wanted to, er, come good.

And if Charles wanted a little conversation while he went to town, and paens to his skills, then Erik thought of how he'd been the one on his knees, two weeks and a half ago. And how Charles had praised him, the exact manner. It tensed him a little to think of it... It was risky, and went against every careful good practice he'd established regarding mutation, since he'd settled and found safety, here, in his quiet backwaters life... But still, he was hard even without playful attention, just thinking of it, and he said, “If you want to hear me woo you, then why don’t you come in and hear it at first-hand?”

And he tapped his temple, two-fingered. Charles set himself back on his heels, eyes wide. “Darling. Are you sure?” His hands, that had been hard and a little forceful, were suddenly gentle on Erik's legs: smoothing over the herringbone twill of his trousers. And Charles' head cocked a little to one side, as if he was trying to judge Erik's sincerity.
Truth be told, Erik wasn't one hundred percent sure. But he wasn't backing down: just tapped again, and gave Charles a challenging gaze of his own. That seemed to be enough: because he felt a tap inside his head, too, a wordless hello. And he settled back against the bench, as Charles settled his mouth over the head of Erik's cock, and slid down, wet, graceful, skilled and practised. Poems, he thought, urgently. But his mind was painfully blank, as he felt Charles' mouth and throat tighten in a suck that wasn't messing around, was meant in earnest. He really ought to be able to think of something, Keats, he ought to be able to come up with some Keats, and not just the Hyperion. Or he knew Donne inside out, that would do. There was something about a dirty-minded clerical lothario that brought Charles to mind...immediately...

Someone was laughing inside Erik's mind, and it wasn't him. It was deeply disconcerting, and perhaps half of why he'd been so leery of any explicit invitation to come and stay and visit. But there was a wave of something – that didn't even need words, and yet was perfectly clear – from Charles, that communicated to him that it wasn't necessary, didn't matter. Now. Not if you don't mind me being this close, he got, then, fully worded, clear.

I like it, Erik thought dumbly, and that was the truth, and perhaps the problem. I liked it when you had me down on my knees, sucking as if I knew what I was doing and you telling me that it was good and I was doing well, and me too clumsy and caught up in it to even understand you were here, here inside. And Charles' hands flexed painfully on Erik's thighs, and the expert tongue service he was giving was suddenly so much fiercer and more detailed, intensive, that Erik understood that what was affecting him was affecting Charles too. And they were entwined deeper, much deeper than those first tentative explorations, those cautious steps of Charles inside his thoughts, because he could feel what Charles was feeling, and didn't just know that he was aroused in his turn, but felt it too. God, felt it!

And didn't only feel that, that warm buzzing surge of sensation, but something twingeingly disagreeable and startling, painful but faraway and disregarded, lower and unimportant. Oh, hell, Charles' knees, of course, Erik thought, quite dismayed. And he struggled a little, pushed at Charles' shoulders, tried to pull his hands up and away from Erik's thighs. Because if he was in real pain then of course – although it was a wrench – of course they should stop, should do something different, should – oh, hell – call it a night and return home.

Charles was inarguably not co-operating, though: unmoved as a rock by Erik's efforts, and not ceasing in his own. Don't worry about it, love, he said, seductive as a soundless purr. Tell me more, about how you liked it, being on your knees for me. Because I liked it too, and I like to hear about it. And tell me how you like this, he added, and removed his hands from where they were constraining Erik in place, as if Charles was worried he might take a sprint and vault over the railings in the manner Charles hadn't quite managed. And he put them to work elsewhere, with a gentle massaging at Erik's balls and a figure of eight rotation at the root of his cock, that allowed him to concentrate less on doing all the work with mouth and throat, and more on a more delicate massage and teasing of Erik's head and shaft with tongue and lips and teeth, very fine artistic work.

How do you like that, sweetheart? Charles prompted. Tell me how you like me on my knees, serving you? How do you like me with your dick down my throat, is this like you imagined it when you were just reading your magazines and going to see my films? Did you touch yourself afterwards, in your room, did you? Darling, put your hands in my hair again, that's right, lace your fingers through it.

And damn, even in the brief unasked glimpses he'd got, before Erik had politely (perhaps not so politely) asked him to keep his telepathy to himself, of course Charles had got a fair idea of just the type of pining and fever-dreams that Erik had cherished. Damn it, but it was hard to care, what with his every fantasy coming true right this minute, and his hands, yes, laced at the back of Charles' head. Not pressing, not forcing, but a perceptible weight that both of them knew was there. This was so
much more than the single one-time souvenir that had been the most that he'd hoped for, that first day.

None of this was expressible in words, so it was lucky that Charles was a telepath. And telepathy was a wonder, because Charles seemed to get the gist of all of it, and the stroke of his hand along Erik's thigh was utterly gentle, tender. *Darling*, echoes in his head proclaimed, *I'm glad you do like it. Because, you know, I wouldn't do this for just anyone.* And his tongue ran the circumference of the hood of Erik's cock, grooved over the slit and pulled a gasp out of Erik's throat that was quite musical, considering he was close to tone-deaf. Erik, staring up at the purple-black skies of North London again, wondered just how true that was, and what it meant, if anything, if it was. And then he gave up on thinking, what with his trousers opened to the night air and any exposed skin the colder what with the shiver of drying spit and the unexposed skin protected and kneaded by warm wet skin and muscle and, well, Charles.

It was almost enough to put Erik right over the edge, but that task was left to the rest of what Charles had to say. But he said it as Erik caught the sudden flash of fire, the pain that shot through first one knee-cap and then the other, as Charles leaned forward a little more heavily. It felt as if it was going to burn right through and fuse bone to bone. *If it pleases you, well, I like to please you, love. If I suffer a little doing it, I'm happy to do that, too. Happy on my knees, willing to pay the price, happy for you to take what you want. Take what you want, Erik.* It was the softest murmur, but also an order, and Erik thought that Charles might make the bossiest of compliant geishas that he could possibly conceive. And it was as he thought it, that Charles let his hands fall away, behind his back in the most suggestive way, and took Erik down to the root with those delicate pretty lips closing right up against the fuzz of his pubes, his head obediently bowed under Erik's hands.

Erik came, and the pain and service and submission and pleasure all mixed up with it would probably scar and change him for life. As far as an invert could ever be described as sexually normal and non-deviant, any chance he had at normally adjusted sexual psychology was almost certainly gone for a burton. Right in the moment he didn't care, and it certainly didn't stop him from the fullest and most vocal appreciation of services rendered. In fact his response was utterly out of control, unconscious, uninhibited, and he only came to the fullest appreciation of that fact as his climax – long, thorough and bone-deep – began to ebb slowly away, and Charles finally released him and lifted his head.

It really wasn't like Erik to lose control so completely, like that. As Charles smiled up at him – innocent as if he'd just arrived from church, and with his mouth delicately smeared with come – he became aware in retrospect, the last one hundred and eighty seconds telescoping out in his memory, that he'd, God, shouted the place down. And not in the privacy of his own house and bedroom, thin-walled and with neighbours either side as it might be. Not even in a more vulnerable location but less exposed and on his own manor. No, in a garden – a private garden, he reminded himself – not a quarter of a mile from Mamma's own house. God almighty.

He should have cared a lot more than he did, too. But it was impossible, categorically impossible, to work himself up into the requisite lather. Not with Charles uncoiling as if he'd released almost as much tension as Erik, and smiling up at him from the paving-stones with a wilfully amused expression. “Oh, love,” he chided, hands on the front slat of the bench and trapping Erik where he lay, exhausted and happy – happy, a little careful about it, but still happy. “You should see your face – dismayed, darling, you look dismayed. I normally expect quite a different response to my best efforts, I'll have you know.”

There was such a sweet mockery in it, that Erik couldn't help himself. He leaned forward a little, fast – still untogether and recovering, exposed and unzipped – and caught that pleasantly mocking face between his two hands. Firmly, very firmly. And kissed Charles with vigour and without mercy, as if
hungry, as if he'd been doing it for years and perfected the practice completely.

It took a while – that much smugness took a good deal of kissing away, after all. And when he finally pulled away, to take a good look at the overall effects, he was pleased by the expression on Charles' face. Dreamy, you might call it. “What was that you were saying?” he enquired. It was his best stern schoolmaster tone that he put to use, the one he generally found effective. Well, with Hank, and Rufus, at least. Not with Raven and Mamma, obviously.

“I said something? Was I saying something?” Charles enquired. “Love, I forget completely.” And he pushed forward into Erik's arms, pushed his face against Erik's shirt, to just rest and breathe there for a moment, warm and sweet against Erik's ribs. It was unendurably foolish to feel as if he might cry with it. With Charles still on his knees, too, and with all things considered, something needed to be done.

“Come along, up with you,” Erik said gently, moving his arms to Charles' armpits, and giving him a gentle tug, then moving to adjust his clothes with slight embarrassment, before standing. He had to make a quick job of it, though. Because although Charles was co-operative enough – stood along with him, and seemed only too willing to help him in adjusting his zipper – it was a state of affairs that didn't last for long. Almost immediately he groaned, and swore. It was some good old Anglo-Saxon terminology, that had been amongst the final additions to Erik's vocabulary, what with the company he was keeping at the time he made the adjustment to his nationality and his first language.

Erik rushed to support him – was obliged to, as Charles staggered and put all of his weight upon one leg, favouring the left knee and the other appearing to give out altogether. But it was no hardship, of course, to hold Charles close and feel him tremble, even under such circumstances and with a sharp concern. “I knew you shouldn't be on your knees,” Erik said bitterly, immediately ready to berate himself for being such a selfish git. “This is my fault, you might be lamed, you could have done permanent damage!”

And Charles laughed into Erik's shoulder, where he was leaning rather heavily. He put his head back, and said – bright-eyed, a little pink, wincing still slightly - “Don't be daft, Erik.” And the wince turned – if by an effort of will – into something more seductive. Charles' lips didn't move as he continued: Didn't I volunteer for it? And didn't I like it, too? You know that I liked it. And he offered inarguable proof – pressing his hips hard up against Erik's side, where he was held, and offering up damned clear evidence of it.

It was exasperating. A little flattering, but definitely exasperating. As well as troubling, since it forced him to say, “Charles, would you mind... not...?”

He didn't like to see a little of the light go out of Charles' face, though, however necessary for establishing ground rules for anything still to come. It made him hurry to please, to soothe, even as Charles said, “Oh, of course, of course... I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking.” It looked to pain him at least as much as his knees: but it was his knees that needed dealing with most immediately.

“Never mind that,” Erik said quickly, holding him a little tighter. His face was quite white, even given the leaching of the lamplight, and the pain had to be significant. “Do you need a doctor? Shall I run back to Mamma's and call them – or bring her car, and drive you to St., George's, perhaps?”

Charles only laughed, sounding a little tired. “It's nothing so serious, Erik,” he assured him. “Nothing I'm not used to, in fact. There's hardly any cartilage left in there, particularly in the left. It's pretty much bone grinding up against bone, frankly, and a few chips and splinters for added entertainment value: not surprising if it acts up occasionally. It'll be fine with rest and my usual medication: but I'd probably best get back to the hotel, to do that. And anyway,” he added – pressing up against Erik still harder, “it's been pleasant, to visit the local beauty spots. But at this point, a bed would be nicer
Erik was horrified at the new clarity on Charles' mobility issues, but it was pretty clear that Charles wasn't interested in apologies and breast-beating, but more concerned with getting gone and getting some pain relief and rest. And he hesitated, too, wondering if he was interpreting Charles' apparent hint correctly. “There's a taxi rank three streets away,” he said cautiously. “I could put you in it and send you off. I'm sure Logan is quite capable of taking care of you…”

“Oh, hell with that, love,” Charles interrupted, firmly. He was almost hanging off Erik's shoulder, now: and Erik wasn't certain if it was from pain and unsteadiness, standing. Or if there were other motives and incentives involved. Certainly Charles was giving some fairly clear indications that way. “I'm not letting go of you yet tonight; We have unfinished business, my friend,” he added, and the grin in his voice made visibility of his face a purely academic matter. “I might have to wake you up and kick you out a little early,” he added, sounding utterly apologetic. “For the sake of discretion, you know. But other than that, I'm sure we can swing it and evade detection, the wrath of Moira.”

No doubt it was very unwise. But Erik had already been so very unwise, in so many ways, with regard to Charles Xavier. This one more step hardly seemed to be something to cavil at. He barely hesitated for a moment, before saying, “Well, the sooner we get you back the better, then.” And swiftly hoisting Charles up, in a bridal carry, to walk him through the obediently unlocking gates of the park, and on to the taxi rank. Because his knees must be spared any further stress and damage for the night, obviously. “Are you comfortable, there, love?” he asked, over the splutter of amusement and possibly faint protest, from Charles. And he was aware that it was the first endearment he'd allowed himself, that he'd dared, towards Charles. “Your knees, I mean.”

In fact the best plans of bookshop owners and movie stars this time ganged agley, at least when it was Erik who was plotting them. Fine enough when they were sauntering in the direction of the taxi rank – Charles having rather insisted on being put down once they were out of the garden, and Erik could see the sense of it, even if he was rather reluctant to concede it. Of course it slowed them down a bit, what with Charles being in pain and having to lean on Erik's arm a little, so that really it wrenched at Erik's heart a bit and left him feeling idiotically protective.

But it depended on if you saw slowing down as any disadvantage, Erik thought dreamily, with the stars shining down on them, and Charles' weight a little pronounced on his arm, as he talked earnestly up into Erik's ear about the architecture of local churches and the texts feeding into his interpretation of his latest role. For himself, he could have happily sauntered that way down Paddington walkways all night long. *I have often walked, down this street before, but the pavement always stayed beneath my feet before*, he found himself humming. And of course, Charles laughed, and joined in. His voice was beautiful, which Erik already knew, from That Musical. But he also knew well enough – special and privileged information! - that it was a musical Never To Be Mentioned. And so he did not refer, whatever the temptation, to Charles' role, as Erik perfectly well knew, as aristocratic young fool Freddie in My Fair Lady, in the production a number of years back opposite Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn.

Or, if only it had been so. Because of course Erik was in fact indiscreet enough to bring it up – or greedy enough for intimacy, privilege and a special place in Charles' confidences. And since he got it, well, fair play to dirty tricks, and he couldn't feel sorry for it. Instead he coaxed Charles into a rendition of the complete song, in the taxi – possibly by some underhanded means including sneaky nuzzles, undercover groping and blackmail. And he was walking on air when they arrived at the Ritz – even when Charles adroitly avoided the attentions of the doormen, after paying off a slightly disgruntled and unmusical taxi-driver, and led him quickly round endless little alleys and through dark archways, to reach finally the walled-off yards out back, behind the hotel kitchens.

He could feel nothing but triumph, when he had Charles giddy and indiscreet enough to still be singing five minutes later. That was after being led by a lured-out bell-boy, summoned with a coded whistle, through highways, byways, staff lifts and servants' backstairs, to reach the same suite as the morning except by hidden and covert routes. Still singing, and smiling at Erik through it, with a finger to his lips as he put the key to the lock, and they tiptoed into the little waiting room of the suite, before the living quarters proper.

And Charles seemed to relax and stretch out – yes, all five feet six and a half inches of him, and Erik was yet to be convinced about that extra half-inch – now that they'd reached safe haven, and he had the promise of a warm bed, a nightcap and his doctors' pain prescription before him. Catching at Erik's arm, he pressed up against his shoulder a moment – the smile on his face pleased and private,
and his eyes briefly closed, and Erik could only speculate what he was plotting. “I'm just going to go pop a couple of pills, love – nothing heavy-duty, I'll still be fit for active service.” (That was accompanied with an outrageously unsubtle wink, and honestly... It was possibly much too early to be feeling that type of fond exasperation. Erik felt it anyway.) “Would you do the honours while I'm gone? A neat Bowmore for me, please, no ice.” And he nodded at the drinks trolley in the corner, before disappearing stage left.

Erik did as he was bid. He couldn't help thoughts about the advisability of combining pain medication and alcohol, but it was definitely too early to be chastising a grown man for unwise health decisions, on a... second date? Erik decided he could probably call it a second date. Or a third, even – there'd been a break in the programme since the morning, after all. He swung the bottle of single malt in his hand, speculated about what it had cost – he was generally perfectly content with a cheap blend himself, there was nothing wrong with Bell's or Johnnie Walker Black Label – and gave himself a stingy tot of Blue Sapphire, drowning it with tonic. He'd had plenty enough himself tonight, even if Charles didn't seem to recognise the concept.

He was too busy and occupied and happy – ignoring the happiness, chastising himself for it, because what it was definitely too early for, was getting over-excited about this, building castles in the air and spinning dream weddings out of the clouds – to be paying attention, or listening. He didn't hear the outer door click, and was only perhaps subtly aware of the swish of the internal door a few feet behind him. The words took him by surprise.

“Well, hello, pretty stranger,” they came, light and smooth and perfectly assured, a homogenized unidentifiable American accent like mass-produced caramel, plastic and perfect. “And who might you be?”

Erik sloshed the gin out of his glass a little, turning around so fast. It was Emma Frost.

Emma Frost, in a high-neck knee-skimming white slip-dress, shimmering and with a hint of delicate rhinestone glitter over the bodice. High heels like blades, like something she could kill a man with, a charming assassin. And looking at Erik, with a politely impassive face, only very slightly smiling.

Emma Frost, international film-star, every bit as gloriously notorious as Charles. And – reportedly, and allegedly – his former fiancée. Right here in his hotel suite, and looking right at home.

And smiling at Erik as she talked, the full curve of that lovely mouth completely still. Talking into his mind, just as comfortable as if she'd been invited, no need for words, no need for a sound, no need at all.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from On The Street Where You Live, itself from My Fair Lady, in which Charles took the role of Freddy opposite Audrey Hepburn. Yes, for the purposes of this fic, he did. The film must also be assumed to have been made several years earlier than it actually was, cuz, AU already hello.
went out in the world, too much for my nerves

Chapter Summary

Erik has two movie-star buddies now - count 'em! Well, perhaps Emma Frost's more of a cobra, cosying up to Erik's mongoose. “Rikk-tikk-tikki-tikki-tchk!”

Chapter Notes

Chapter title, woefully anachronistic, joyously apposite, is from Roger Daltrey's 'Giving It All Away' - 'Just A Boy, giving it all away...'

It was cold, brisk, and extremely matter of fact – the quick inspection of the surface of his mind. And it was also over, almost before it had begun. Really he only had time to gasp, to feel his mouth drop open and an angry flush start up on his cheeks. And then he felt the ping of her departure. It was almost physically perceptible, someone clicking the door quietly behind them. Perhaps with a dismissive sniff, suggesting that they wouldn't expect the place to set the property market alight.

“Well,” she said lightly, eyes skimming over his face like she was pricing that up too. “Hasn't dear Charles been busy, then! You have kept the lad occupied, while we've been apart. I suppose I should even perhaps thank you for that… Erik.”

She was moving over to the drinks trolley as she spoke, and it put them up close. Of course she would know his name – now. Along with quite a lot of other things, too. His cheeks were hotter, thinking of it.

Yet in spite of that, he had a confused feeling that he ought to be the one fixing her drink, a pleasant little act of deference to the lady in the room. She didn't wait for that, but busied herself with scotch and mixer, just as unceremonious as she had been with some delightful and cherished recent memories. Extremely private recent memories. Or they had been, up until a moment ago.

“Miss Frost,” he acknowledged her, tight and a few degrees colder than she had been. “I'd ask how you come to be under that impression. But it hardly seems necessary.” And his hands flexed quickly, unconsiously, almost without intent. There was an echo from the silvered implements in the ice-pitcher, on the trolley. It wasn't intentional, an overt bit of intimidation. But anything that spoke to his mutation was liable to get restive, when he was emotionally overheated.

It didn't escape her notice. She reached out to put a hand on his arm – which was damned familiar of her – and took a sip of her drink. “Steady, there, my dear. Even from a quick dust around the shelving in your mind, I know perfectly well that you're not going to take my eye out with a hallmarked bit of silverware, no matter what. You're a nice boy, my dear. Charles wouldn't have taken up with you, otherwise.”

She smiled at him, without a trace of feeling. “He does have a such a weakness for a hero. A rigid ethical code, someone with ideals, and standards, and lines in the sand. Because he couldn't be further from that himself, of course. That's what he and I have in common.” She was taking a little
turn about the beautifully appointed room. From leaning out to peer at the sly old crone of a city, she turned back to smile at him coolly.

That smile, he'd seen it shining out from dozens of magazines. He'd seen her photographed on Charles' arm, amongst others, with a chill sparkle to her glamour, and the most beautiful loaned finery imaginable. It was sparkling now, all right. “Thank you,” he said rigidly. “Nice for you to have such an advantage, getting the measure of someone's character. Perhaps you didn't examine the premises as minutely as you might have. Not if those are the conclusions you come to.” Certainly he was feeling as if the business end of a pair of ice tongs between the eyes, for Miss Frost, was something that would ease his feelings considerably, right then.

But she only laughed, and came up close to him again. Close enough for dancing, and weren't they dancing in any case, after a fashion? She put a hand to his chest, and then he gripped her hand in warning as he looked down at her, a warning she ignored. “Oh, I think I'm a pretty good judge of character, darling, and of you, too. You're not the type to kill for love. Or at least, not to kill the one you love, or a rival, certainly. You, Erik—” and here she put a finger to his chin as if she might kiss him – “you'd kill to save the one you love – wouldn't you, Erik? But not a crime passionel – no.”

Maybe you don't know me quite as well as you think, even snooping around inside my mind, Erik thought. But he only thought it, didn't say it. Whether she chose to dig around and decipher it, or not. “Really,” he only said, stone-faced as he could manage. “That must be reassuring for you.”

Her laugh was pretty, silver bells. And if only the silver had been real, he might have choked her with it. As she pressed up closer, an inch or two more – almost of a height with Erik, in those high blade heels – and looked him right in the eye. (How did Charles tolerate it, such an advantage over him, towering that way? Except perhaps he liked it, after all, Erik thought, catholic and recognising no conventions in his tastes, or perhaps he had her kneel usually, or–.)

It was confrontational, no mistaking that now. “You needn't take half such offence at a little poke up and down in there, dear,” she chastised him lightly. “It's not as if you can possibly be completely unused to the experience, keeping company with Charles. However squeamish and finicky the dear boy can get, about his abundant God-given gifts. But in any case,” she added dismissively, “that has nothing to say to anything, barring your own personal reactions and preferences. It's not as if I'm interested in anything about you, barring what you might have been up to with my bit of mislaid property. Because he does tend to stray a bit and go haywire, when we've been apart for too long and he gets bored, the dear boy.”

She mused visibly, scrutinising Erik's face, and the rest of him, too – with a look that was simultaneously chilly, and uncomfortably lecherous. (If Erik had been brought up in such a way as to label a lady in such a manner, that is. Edie would probably still classify Emma Frost as a lady. Her judgements were few, and her classifications generous.) “Considering you appear to be of so unrelentingly quite an alternate persuasion... Not at all like Charles. He only requires a certain level of intellect and a flexible habit of mind, along with a pretty face. Really he's quite casual in his requirements regarding the external sexual characteristics... As you know. No, my dear – Erik—” she said, starry chill grey eyes still flashing an inhuman stare upon him, “if you were only a little more willing to negotiate and to widen the parameters of your acceptable limits – dear, pretty boy – then I might be a good deal more interested in your own tastes, and your own person, my dear. And more welcoming, perhaps.”
What's Been Said Between Your Heart and Mine

Chapter Summary

Erik vs. Emma, no quarter, no holds barred, all holds permissible. Gouging, kicking, metal implements and mind-meddling.

Chapter Notes

It strikes me now - a little late - that I've rendered Erik, rather implausibly and unintentionally, as uncircumcised. And almost spelt it, just now, as uncircumscribed. Must go back and fix that sometime, though I hear it's quite uncomfortable in adulthood.

Chapter title from 'When You Say Nothing At All', by Ronan Keating and from the Notting Hill soundtrack. Wonderfully appropriate song.

There's a ref. - very anachronistic - that's halfway between a Stones song and Kenny Roger's 'The Gambler' here.

It was a standoff that couldn't be maintained indefinitely, and Miss Frost seemed to recognise the fact. The perfect immobile calm of her face relaxed a little, and she deigned, then, to speak aloud, to accord him that minimal courtesy.

“Well, my dear – you can see that this situation could be a little difficult. Barring a very unorthodox solution – which I shan't even trouble to propose, since I can tell in advance, that your rigid tastes would preclude any such – one of us must go.”

Her eyes seemed bluer, as she gazed upon him, now. Bluer, but not softer, blue like sapphires, like rare diamonds. Like something forged in an inhospitable environment for organic life. “And really, Erik. Do you think it will be me?”

Perhaps he should have struggled more for his pride's sake, should have been willing to fight for what he wanted, and the things close to his heart. Hadn't he always been willing to spill blood for the sake of love?

Except that he was a rational, educated, mature man, and those days were a very long time ago. And his brain was making the case against his own best interests, using Miss Frost's own arguments, even as she spoke.

“Really – Erik, dear – I think I'm being quite reasonable. Being the incumbent here, and yourself the interloper, I could hardly be more tolerant. Have I called security to have you ejected from the premises, after all? Or, more to the point, Charles' agent. Have you met Miss MacTaggert, yet, Erik? An admirable person, if something of a Tasmanian Devil in human form. Don't place yourself in between Moira and her objective, Erik – just a little tip for you.”

Of course, she knew perfectly well – that Erik had met the admirable Moira, and a great many other
things besides. She just had to dig a little bit, to underline how everything stood against him, how the little foothold he’d managed to stake in Charles’ life was nothing he would be able to hang onto.

“You're the other woman, Erik,” Miss Frost added. The little smirk was positively cruel, and so was the little flick up and down of her eyes. “Even if you haven't quite the requisite equipment, darling. Tell me, if you were to manage to suborn and seduce Charles, the poor love, to choose you, how would that benefit you? I'll concede that he's a susceptible fool, on occasion. And certainly, from one little glimpse, he's inarguably very taken with you. But really, truly, Erik...” Was that a tut?

She’d tutted at him. If he'd allowed himself such emotionally florid self-indulgence – or if he'd taken after Edie a little more, Jakob a little less – he'd have slapped her.

“Be realistic,” she said, and she had no idea how very close she'd come to an all-out catfight. Or perhaps she did. “How is the poor boy supposed to show you off on the red carpet, Erik? You have beautiful eyes, dear. Your bone structure is delightful. But I don't think it would be shown off at its best by heels and pearls, don't you agree?”

Really, the smirk was hateful. Still more so as she added, leaning back against an ornately upholstered chair-back after a sip of her Scotch, folding her arms at him, “You'd do well to end it yourself, dear. Retain a scrap of dignity that way, and walk. Before I make you run. Because, my love, take into account all possible outcomes and eventualities. Who do you think he'll choose, if you're fool enough to make him?”

Yes, hateful was the word, for the self-assurance and the assumption of an easy victory, no need to actually unsheathe a weapon. Such exertion might be deemed unladylike, after all.

Erik had to be more of a fool than he’d ever accounted himself. Staid, sober Erik Lehnsherr, pillar of the community. Repressed, and a little shy, and always careful to do the right and wise and decorous thing. Where had that self gone, that he'd taken such pains to construct and to shore up, all these years? The persona of the earnest librarian (though he'd never trained as one) and a personality amounting to wallpaper. His mask had slipped. Someone had thrown it on the bonfire, doused it with petrol and set it alight, flames crackling. Erik was burning.

“You don't know,” he said, mulish, frustrated. He'd forgotten how it felt to feel this way. He was all fired up and ready to mow down armies, willing to bring down destruction on his own head, and his enemy's. Just so long as only one was left standing, at the end of it. To take it all the way, to take no prisoners, sweeping the pieces off the chessboard and inviting the devil to place a stake. “There's no way to know, for sure,” he added. Not without actually putting it to the test, he thought. But did he really want to do that, to invite certainty and disappointment?

He'd almost forgotten, by now, thirty-two years old and grown and with so much to lose, that he'd ever been an eleven-year-old warrior. That he'd sliced down German soldiers, scything them like so much wheat in the field. Reaped, beaten, taken in tribute because they stood between himself and love.

And, just, if only. This wasn't an opponent he could slice in half with a repurposed wheelhub or metal gatepost, used as a dagger or a chakram. He couldn't silence her or put an unarguable end to her mosquito presence. Words were all he had to stand and fight with, to stand against her. That, and the conviction he tried to hold onto that Charles was someone who dealt in sincerity and honestly coined feeling, who had no truck with pretty promises and weaselly masks of synthetic selves.

But then he hadn't promised Erik much at all, of course.

“Oh, I think I know,” Emma said pleasantly. And she didn't even trouble to glance his way in saying
it, to see how he received it. She was occupied, instead, in topping up her own glass. And in going on to say, “I think that you know too, Erik. Isn't that right? You know. Now, darling,” she added, one finger on the cap of a bottle of vermouth, tipping it at an angle to cast a critical eye over the label, “What's your poison?”

For a moment, Erik thought that perhaps she was talking to him. But no, of course not. He felt a taut prick of attention that pulled his head around towards the doorway at the other end of the reception room.

It was Charles. Of course, who else? Returned from his errand, pain meds presumably located, standing in the doorway and looking at both of his guests. Looking from one to another, slowly, as if he was watching a tennis deathmatch. His shirt was pulled loose out of his waistband, barefoot now, and his sleeves rolled up. He was quite white in the face, and Erik did not think it was altogether physical pain.

Emma looked up at him, now, though she must have been telepathically aware of his approach before Erik had known he was there. “Oh, silly me. Of course, Erik has already poured you a drink, Charles. Isn't it good of him? Although I think he has to go, now. Don't you, Erik?”

There it was, the dismissal. It was no surprise. But he could make a last stand, just the same. He was an obedient son to Edie out of love, tolerated much from Raven because she was his, and he was devoted to the things and people that were his, took the greatest care of them. Every one of his English grammar school teachers had described him as a model pupil. Perhaps it gave people a mistaken impression of him, let them think him a gentle mild fellow, even submissive.

Erik knew himself, and knew better. He met Charles' eye – determinedly, and allowing him no escape. “I don't know,” he said. “Perhaps it would be better.” Because there was no choice involved, not without allowing Charles an out. “But I'm Charles' guest, after all,” he added, addressing her without the courtesy of looking her way. “What do you think, Charles?” he asked, voice nice and even and steady, and his heart doing its level best to thunder and flay its way out of his chest. “Would it be better? For me to go?”

He listened, hard, and not only with his ears. But it was perfectly quiet in his head. There was no-one there but him.

“Yes,” Charles said. And Erik hardened his heart, and wouldn't listen to the discomfort and reluctance in Charles' voice, saying it. A good Jew, and all he could think of was Peter and Gethsemane, the cock crowing three times. The important point of a reluctant betrayal was really not the reluctance. They'd had good neighbours, in Bonn, after all. Including a couple of dead ones.

“Perhaps it would be better,” Charles said.
How Can A Loser Ever Win?

Chapter Summary

Icecream, vino and a shoulder to cry on, stat! Erik's having an emergency Bridget Jones scenario.

Chapter Notes

Title from 'How Can You Mend A Broken Heart', Notting Hill soundtrack, Al Green.

Erik's journey home probably owes a little to Anita Brookner's heroine's similar, longer trip in 'Look At Me'. Not a rec, it's brilliant and also an emotional horror story.

Homophobic terms attributed to imaginary third parties.

Erik remembered the forty-eight or so hours following with perfectly adequate clarity. Or he could have, if he'd wanted or needed to. He had the discipline and control not to consult the memories even as they were being made, that was all. He'd learnt it from the worst of being in the camps – that just because experience was undergone and memories minted, didn't mean that you had to keep trawling back through them, a masochist in ecstasy. Even as he was living through the journey back home – walking the whole way, because there was nothing to rush for or look forward to, not now – he seemed to be experiencing it through a dark filter. The streetlights were raw, the traffic sounds roared, the silences echoed in his ears. There was a huge gulf between himself and the rest of creation. He could have kept Lucifer company, perhaps, but he couldn't think of anyone else who might understand.

He was an immense idiot in love, on the basis of almost nothing at all – oh, well done, clap hands, he could see that now when it was too late – and incendiary in his fury too, ready to explode. And he nurtured the fury carefully, because it kept him safe from Charles. Safe from trying to contact him, safe from accepting any contact.

Not that Charles did try anything, not via the telephone, not in person, and not anything more mutant-powered either. Erik was vigilant, every second, but no. There was nothing. He rigidly refused to recognise anything in his alertness as hope.

And surely something of his inner turmoil must have shown in his exterior appearance, over the next days. Except that his usual stone-faced demeanour was sufficient cover, it seemed. At least, neither Raven nor Az seemed to pick up on anything untoward, and he was careful to avoid any reason to pop in at his mamma's house, and limited phone calls quite strictly.

Seventy-two hours, trying to settle to sleep for a third night, afterwards. Not that he was having trouble sleeping. His brain seemed only too eager to cut out, to slump into unconsciousness in preference to a brutal awareness. And he was just beginning to feel the oncoming darkness, to gladly relinquish wakeful awareness, when he started awake again. To a faint queasy unease, the knowledge that someone was present here, without knowing who or how, for three or four seconds.
Something was different. The sweeping tide of awareness had him flinching in that fifth second. Except that there was something else diluting the swift blistering onslaught of wreckage and abandonment. Something much more drowsily friendly and anticipatory, and reaching up close and...

Damn it. Perhaps if he'd had a moment to think, perhaps if Charles hadn't clearly been at minimum half-asleep and not at all consciously intending this unannounced mental intrusion, then Erik might have responded more mildly. As it was, he didn't even know how he did it, how he gave the great psychological shove he administered, the unspoken snarl that set a boundary, and a watchdog at the gates. But it was done just the same. He knew, the moment that Charles felt himself handed off and kept out. Knew it from the swift, wordless wave of wincing regret, and the stumbling, vehemently hasty withdrawal from his mind.

Damn Charles, damn him. And damn him especially, for taking his dismissal with such alacrity. Erik did not sleep especially well for the next few nights. He'd slept like the dead these past three, but from then on his slumbers were disturbed. As if Charles might creep, metaphorically, into his mind or his room at any second.

It didn't happen, however. And after a while, Erik realised – and later, accepted – that it wasn't going to. He kept up his routine – kept the shop open and ticking over – kept his familial and community obligations fulfilled. He kept up a good front, and only sometimes wondered why. A revisionist version of the past few weeks made it easier. He'd been seduced by an experienced charmer, he decided. What with the wide-eyed innocent he'd been, he'd made it easy enough, after all. It had been an exciting experience, nothing to regret. And now it was over. Erik had his family, and the business, and a useful ordered productive life. These things were much more important, than a fling he would barely remember in a year or two. Unless he was fool enough to continue to attend Xavier's movies. But of course, he wouldn't do that. He had better things to occupy his time.

So he told himself, teeth gritted. If he repeated it enough times, then that would make it so.

He didn't hold the line against the enemy with perfect consistency and determination, of course. The odd soft-headed hormone-driven fantasy managed to squirm its way through his defences, especially when he was tired or had allowed himself a beer or two after shutting up the shop.

What if, he thought one evening, when he hadn't troubled to put the lights on in the sitting room, and Az was out of the house, and– He was alone, and frankly, he was tired of rigid control, and good sense, and not having what he wanted. Of being a machine, who might as well be made of the steel he could shape if it pleased him. He was a flesh and blood man, he was, for all the iron in his blood, and he wanted. What if, say, Ia Frost had never turned up, and he and Charles – and Xavier – had gone to see one of Xavier's own films at the flicks? One that he'd seen himself a dozen times, so that he wouldn't have needed to pay any particular attention to the action up on the screen. No, he'd be a damn sight more interested in the action going on in the cheap seats. Perhaps it would be a very quiet matinee, hardly anyone else in the house. That would be convenient.

It would have been untrue to say that Erik managed to restrain himself, in picturing this cosy little scenario, such that it didn't culminate in eyes closed and flies undone, both in fantasy and actuality. The only difference being, when he opened his eyes with his breath still catching, blinking at the room's shadows that were darker than the dusk outside, he was alone. No gasping, lip-biting, giggling shared collusion going on, here. The fantasy was so vastly preferable, that Erik accounted himself a restrained and moderate man, not to promptly break every breakable object in the house with the nearest metallic implement.

That wasn't the little evasion of reality that he castigated himself over the most, though. That would be the one that found him some days later, eleven a.m. in the shop and working solo, standing
vacantly in the back, between Modern History and Physical Sciences shelving. Vacantly, not even sure of how he came to be there, waking up from a waking dream and – smiling. Like the fool he evidently still was.

It was lucky that Raven and Hank were both absent, working furiously on final-year assignments. And Az, off at rehearsals for a two-hander he was putting together with Angel for the Edinburgh Fringe, apparently, making their own work where parts were in short supply. (Not as if they’d be the only mutants there: reviews last year had suggested that the proportion of mutant performers at the festival were beginning to outnumber baseliners, unsurprisingly.)

He’d almost rather have been surprised with his hands down his pants than this – the foolish grin of one caught out in an innocent, sexless romantic fantasy. In his head, he was out at a restaurant with Charles – somewhere nice. The details were vague enough in his head, that that about covered it.

For the meal itself, their interactions, he wasn’t quite fatuous enough to script out much in the way of conversation, to pretend that he was interested in the aesthetics of set design and new roles, and discussing the intricacies of book retail, and handling returns, the tension between stocking according to the demands of commerce and personal taste. It was all an excuse, and he only returned again and again, to eye contact and smiles and hands brushing beneath the cover of the tablecloth. And that was very good, and satisfactory as far as it went, but it lacked some edge of emotional intensity he required to be fully pleasing. Idiotically, his mind sprang first to the camps, because if he was saving Charles from something then wouldn’t that be – ?

Oh, and he didn't need any smack on the wrist from Edie, to feel immediately how that trivialised things that must remain sacrosanct, that it encroached upon sacred ground that had better remain hallowed if he wanted to be able to look himself in the eye in the mirror, shaving in the mornings. But wasn’t there some adequate substitute, some – ah, and then he had it. They might be dining together, and then – there would be a table around the corner, and a discussion going on, audible. Audibly about mutants, and about mutation, and – and it would be objectionable. There would be talk of camps, and the Nazis having had the right idea, and oh, ‘taking our jobs’ – didn't that always come up? The ‘freak’ word would be much in use, no doubt, and speculations about mutant girls and their supposed variations and appetites, and it would be hateful, hateful.

And Erik would – no, Erik would do nothing, say nothing, of course. Not immediately – he would take caution to be the better part, and only press his lips together a little, disapproving. It would be Charles – yes, it was easy to imagine Charles, incandescent, on a hobby-horse, caught up in his outrage and suddenly slamming his chair back. Springing up and rounding the corner, red-faced, to tell off a tableful of overpaid, spivvily-dressed City goons, and all of it most unwise. Pocket-sized, and they'd be overgrown rugger buggers, of course, and well, Logan wasn't a stressed and muscular nanny to his charge for nothing. Asking for trouble – Erik would rush after him, and yes, there Charles would be, mid-lecture. Half his audience furious, belligerent. And the other half amused, speculative – eyeing Charles up and down, and it would be blatant, right there in their eyes. That Charles was pretty as any girl, and weren't half these Hollywood prettyboys benders anyway, and it hardly counted as queer to take advantage of a mouth like that –

It would require no telepathy, to read their minds. And Erik's response – shaking the earth under them, rupturing seams of ore to do it, lifting cutlery and having it swing threateningly at vulnerable throats – well, it would be no more than was reasonable.

That would shut their dirty speculations right up. And their anti-mutant tirades, too – yes, Erik riding in on his white charger, saving Charles from the beating that would undoubtedly follow his pro-mutant zeal where it had led him. A beating or worse, but Erik would protect him –
Well, it was only a fantasy. Of course, Erik would never do any such thing in real life. He was a quiet man, with a blissfully quiet life. A man might be a hero by default, when no alternative presented itself, but those times and those ways were done with.

And he was a great fool, still pining away over something that had never been more than a bit of fun, that couldn't have been more one-sided. He wiped the smile off his face, re-shelved the Iris Murdoch that some customer hadn't cared to restore to its proper home, and turned the sign in the door to 'Closed', while he went to file the month's invoices in the backroom. Romance was over, for him. But business was still business.

xxx

And when he finally accepted that Charles was gone, and that episode was done with and put away in lavender, he got a lot done. Papered his mamma's box-room, painted the conservatory, ordered in stock for two new sections in the bookshop. Got Az trained up to do the paperwork in the shop as well as work the till, and helped to set up the photography show for Raven's final exhibition for her bachelor's degree.

He also had a lot of sex, considering he'd been seduced and abandoned and was technically a fussy old bachelor, a spurned Miss Havisham with extremely particular and demanding tastes. Perhaps the homosexual equivalent of a cat that's been habitually fed on filet mignon, and then the owner tries it with Kit-e-Kat.

But he found it was something he couldn't do without, not any more, not the way he could back when he wasn't really aware what he was missing. True, there'd been his cautious maiden explorations, but nothing you could qualify as a real induction into the subject until Charles. And maybe he'd have to go a long way for anything that would fill the hole that Charles had left, would put a stop to the sputtering permanent ache round the ribs, the weight in his eyes that was probably a gallon or two of saline. He hadn't cried. If he'd barely cried at eleven, not beyond that first horror of being dragged away from his parents and getting the fuel to rip gates from gateposts, then he was a long way beyond it now.

But on the other hand, just because it wasn't going to do a bit of good for the ache in his chest, didn't mean that adding to that an ache in his y-fronts was a good idea. No, and he didn't even plan it out really. It wasn't a concerted detailed blueprint to get Charles out of his head through a programme of regular shagging and continual helpful usefulness and chores. As if that would ever have worked in any case.

He just... well, the most popular cottaging points in their part of London weren't exactly a state secret. And if certain parts of the Common, and Hampstead Heath were unusually populated on warm summer evenings, that was handy also. Beyond that, he made a point – no, that sounded a lot more pre-planned than it was. No, it was just that one morning with his pot of tea going cold, his toast and Bovril unchewed before him, he came to and found himself just staring, out the kitchen window. And when he realised he'd been calculating how long it had been since Charles had sat right there, had pulled him out of himself and made it so easy to tell him all kinds of things, to abandon every last bit of reserve and self-protection... Then, he said to himself, 'No, no, buggery this.' Because his self-protection had sprung back elastically with force and violence, now he'd learnt that trust invites wounds. And he really was not prepared to pine forever. Edie wouldn't like it. Not however much she had liked Charles himself. Erik was still her baby, and still came first.

Instead he combed through his address book, and got back in touch with a few old colleagues, and two chaps he'd been at Imperial College with – fellows of a particular persuasion, of course. Not for the sake of their own charms, though they were all middling pleasant-faced men with steady jobs and
discreet tastes, perfectly eligible. Not his sort, though he wasn't sure he'd ever meet his sort again, not with the tastes he'd developed. But also, the ones who were fancy-free seemed the type to expect to build something to a steady attachment. Whereas Erik only required an itch scratching, and no emotional foolery following on. Hadn't he had enough of that? For a good long while, he thought, a very good long while.

Instead, he exchanged the usual pleasantries, re-established friendly terms, and then prodded strongly for access to any upcoming gatherings they might be planning. Which, in due course of time, led to a few one-offs, and a couple of standing arrangements with attractive young things who also wished for nothing more demanding than a bit of fun behind closed doors. And then, a swift adieu mon ami, ça ne fait rien once the post-coital tristesse set in afterwards.

He found that he very strongly wanted nothing that was a pale echo of what he'd already had. How could someone else measure up, at least while memory remained vivid, an annoyingly intense living ghost that still talked to him in dreams and occupied his fantasies? (All of his own doing, of course. He acquitted Charles completely of any mind-tampering at such great distance. It was hardly likely, even if desired, which it presumably wasn't. At this point, reports put the bastard out of Britain, again. First Hollywood, and then filming in Hungary, some hard-boiled thriller that Erik knew as little of as he could manage. But he couldn't manage to know nothing of it at all.)

He could not conceive of anyone else making such an impression on his heart and mind. Well, look at what they would have to compete with! A distant idol who had resolved from still, perfect images on passing buses, the charming, elusive representation up on the silver screen, into a flesh and blood man. One with quirks and flaws, a will and a forceful personality that was, truly, nothing he might have predicted or expected. And now he felt he might never again know anyone so thoroughly. Charles had seemed to assume they were friends, almost brothers, practically lovers from the off, and his assumption had made it so. (Of course Charles felt he knew people straight away. No doubt Erik was no special case in that way. It was depressing to think how mundane and everyday an experience it must be, for Charles. And of course Erik had been fertile ground for growing and fostering an attachment, with a prior admiration at a distance that put him in favour of Charles, predisposed to find him devastating, in every way imaginable. He could analyse it, pick it apart now, see now he'd been such an easy mark, a flower gagging to be plucked. But for him, it had been once in a lifetime, surely. For Charles, the fling of the fortnight, a little amusement in a foreign city, with his girlfriend absent and time to kill.)

He'd used up and exhausted all of Erik's capacity for intimacy, with such an intensive and thorough knowing, until such time as it might be restored. He hadn't even needed to use his telepathy, much of the time, to achieve it.

Well, that was Erik's excuse, in any case. Or perhaps, in fact, if he couldn't order à la carte, then you could keep your bloody set meal.
You Get Me Smiling Even When It Hurts

Chapter Summary

Interlude: Charles POV.

Chapter Notes

Charles and Emma, sometime between one UK visit for Charles and the next.

Chapter title from 'You've Got A Way' by Shania Twain, from the Notting Hill soundtrack.

“Just lie still. I've never known anyone fidget so, fussbudget.” In the candlelit half-darkness of the room, Charles twisted restlessly in his bonds. But he quieted obediently, at the instruction.

And Emma Frost stepped out of the darkness. None of her adoring, and slightly intimidated public would have recognised the woman as she appeared. In a dressing-gown – a dressing-gown that was more marabou feathers and satin, than candlewick and curlers, true. But still a dressing-gown. She had the last trace of cosmetics cold-creamed off her face. When she rested her hand on the back of Charles' head, he startled at the unexpected touch.

“I'm only giving you a massage,” she chided him. “What are you expecting?”

He struggled to look around, to meet her eye. “Take a look inside my cranium, if you want to know,” he suggested. “I don't keep any secrets from you, Em.”

“Oh, darling, I know,” Emma agreed, running a hand over his shoulder-blade, smooth and warm. “Otherwise I might have married you by now. About as many surprises and excitements as an old married couple already, you and me, that's the trouble. Or brother and sister.”

She noticed the faint stir of interest that the suggestion provoked. “Oh, Charles, you old sinner. Would you really be playing Byron and Augusta by now, if sainted Sharon Xavier had unfrozen her loins for long enough to provide you with a sibling?”

Charles smiled quietly, pressing his face into the bedcovers to conceal it. “Not really, Em. That isn't what I'd have liked a sister for.”

Long delicate fingers rested in and played with the short hair at the nape of his neck, ferociously barbered, fresh from a photoshoot.

“I know, love,” she said. “Really, I ought to be familiar with the contents of your noddle, by now.” And her fingers tapped out a borrowed two-fingered salute, at his temple. “Barring the parts you've squirrelled away from me, under lock and key. That nice Jewish boy from last year, for example.”

Under her hand, Charles shook his head slightly. It could have meant the subject wasn't up for discussion, or that he didn't know what she was talking about, or some other thing altogether.
“Oh, don’t think you can get something past me, darling,” she advised. And delivered a slap to his arse to set the air ringing, for emphasis. “You could talk to me about it, you know.”

“Nothing to talk about,” Charles murmured, now. “Do get on with it, Em. If you're not going to knead me, and you're not going to beat me... You could have warned me you were only going to tie me up and jaw me to death, like a kinky prelate in the pulpit. I'd have given it a miss.” From muffled, he was yawning now. But Emma's eyes were narrowed, a cat on the hunt.

“I'm sure,” she said herself. “Except I'm not the fool you take me for, Charlie-boy. I do know what joy feels like, you know. At least, at second-hand.”

But Charles didn't commit himself to another word. And finally Emma, worn down by stonewalling silence, gave him a more punishing backrub than he'd readied himself for. It was the least he deserved for holding out on her.
Erik is fine. And that's the truth. Up to a point.

Chapter Notes

Ref. - 'Life is just one damn thing after another.' God knows who it should be attributed to. There is extensive online discussion on the subject.

Chapter title is a fragment from the following - 'Men have died and the worms have eaten them, but not for love.' From Anne of Green Gables' L.M. Montgomery, I think.

September went by, and autumn, the university textbook influx and the corresponding bump in takings. And any number of birthdays, stock-taking weekends in the shop, brises, book-fairs, relentlessly 'one damn thing after another'. Life continued, that's what, exactly the same way as ever.

Erik was fine. He actually was, eventually, with enough distance. That was the trouble. He kept checking, prodding at and testing the memories to see if he could get a rise out of himself, a flinch. But if he was fine – then shouldn't he have forgotten all about it by this time?
Chapter Summary

Raven, being a good sister. There are limits, though. She has to snap sometime.

True sibling attachment, devotion. Erik loves Raven, maybe a little overmuch even. In certain moods, and lights, and hues.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Boyzone's 'No Matter What', from the Notting Hill soundtrack.

Jane Russell reference.

Fine enough for Raven to comment on it, even.

Well, to his own perception, he was fine, in any case. One afternoon Raven even walked in to catch him whistling in the shop, as he re-stacked the display that had become a little disordered in the course of the poetry reading the previous evening. Well, someone had knocked over a pile of books, anyway. That was when the miserable poet/librarian chap, down from Hull, had glared at him for laughing at a punchline. And left a few bourbon cream crumbs on the table.

Whistling, damn it. Did a man suffering the anguish of an unrequited attachment whistle a jaunty tune? Well, all right, in fact he was channeling Mimi, having a bit of a tizzy in La Bohème. Staggering around with her lungs being eaten away, and lamenting the defection of her lover. And what did that have to say to anything at all?

And the first he knew of it, was Raven creeping up behind him to lay her hands on his shoulders, and whisper in his ear. “For God's sake, can you stow it with that racket?” she murmured, like any loving little sis would. “I thought somebody was strangling a cat when I walked in.”

Erik was a trifle offended. It hadn't been the flipping Funeral March, after all.

This necessitated a brief and perfunctory sibling tiff, en garde, battling for the snippiest riposte. It concluded in Erik making tea for them both, and shutting up the shop ten minutes early. And Raven perched on the shop counter, as they sipped at their mugs, free from the annoyance of customers.

“It's nice to see you finally perking up a bit,” Raven said, stirring furiously at her unsweetened black tea. She was on some dam-fool diet again. As if she wasn't perfectly beautiful, just the way she was. Especially the way she was, right then, daubed with paint from the life drawing class she was teaching now at the college.

There was a smudge of blue on the rosy curve of her pretty rounded cheek. A few blonde strands had escaped from her ponytail, her face was scrubbed clean and quite virgin of make-up. Erik thought to himself, that it would be rather a wrench, when he finally had to lead her to the altar on his
arm. (In Jakob's place, a wrench in itself.) To give her away, to some quite undeserving chap who could have done nothing to earn such a prize. Whomever she picked, finally, quite undeserving.

“What do you mean, perk up?” was what he actually said, though. His tone might have been very slightly affronted.

She wasn't looking at him, again. She kept her head down, and gave the bottom of her mug some more hammer with the teaspoon. It was relentless as a woodpecker, or as if she were trying to drill down to Australia.

“Oh, you know,” she answered, a little listlessly.

Then she put her mug down on the counter, hard. It sloshed over on the cashbook and invoices that he'd laid out to work on.

“Oh, come off it, Erik,” she expostulated, like second thoughts and an irresistible impulse. It was much fiercer. She met his eye now, all right. “You've been loitering and looming around the place for months, now, like a romantic poet with a tragic sodding past. So that we've all been playing tippy-toe around you, been scared to open our mouths and say one wrong word. In case it pushed you over the edge, and you, I don't know, ran off to Australia, or joined a flipping monastery. If there was a war going on, and you were a minor character in a nineteenth century novel, you'd have joined up and died heroically in the first three chapters. So as to leave the heroine to make her own stupid decisions, about who to marry.”

She stopped talking suddenly. Erik had his mouth stopped up with dismay, was silenced completely. (He'd been more covert and discreet than that, hadn't he? Hadn't broadcast heartbreak and despair on all frequencies of emotion, blatant as a drunk shouting abuse in the street at three a.m.?)

Hadin't he?)

Raven's cantilevered bosom heaved a bit under her bohemian beatnik-girl turtleneck, an impressive vision. She seemed on the verge of deciding to have done with it, burst into tears properly. And then she sighed, rubbed a hand across her face, and jumped off the counter to lunge at him.

“He isn't worth it, darling,” she said, hugging him. “He was never worth it. I'm very disappointed in him. But I'm glad you feel better now.”

And two minutes later, she was gone from the shop. The bell rang on the door.
'Owe no-one anything except to love one another.'

Chapter Summary

Dammit, can a man not nurse a broken heart in peace, without his loved ones - and his not-so loved ones - spying it out?

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from the Book of Romans, Ch. 13, verse 8. Not vastly appropriate for a chapter mostly about the Jewish characters, but it's what I have to hand. Subject to change.

Steptoe & Son reference, apparently not anachronistic on checking! Yay!

V. gen chapter.

But with Az, at least, he was safe. Surely. There was no way on earth that Az had the insight, or the social acuity, to detect someone else's discomfort or emotional upheaval. He felt quite comfortable in assuring himself of the fact.

And in the evening, when he came home and started putting together a store-cupboard chilli in the kitchen, there Az was. Already standing at the kitchen-counter, eating jam with a spoon. (Edie's jam, from the gooseberries in her garden, the cheeky bugger. And how he managed to keep in the shape he was in, even with the Royal Canadian Airforce workout regimen he made such a fuss about doing morning and evening, was a mystery to Erik. And he got in the way considerably with his dam-fool calisthenics, too.)

Still, one thing you could say for Az: he was the kind of self-absorbed affable idiot who could never have even noticed that Erik hadn't been entirely heart-whole, these last few months. Still less pick up on signs of emotional turmoil and depression.

Erik could concede it to himself. He'd been restless, irritable, too conscious that his stint as Cinderella was over. But Az, picking up on that? Not likely.

It made him feel quite well-disposed to the arsehole. Even so much as to offer him one of the imported German beers he'd been keeping cold in the pantry, under a sack of rice and out of sight of the wrong 'un, and his thieving hands (and tail.) They were the beer that had been favoured by Jakob, one of the few links Erik cherished to the past. It was a concession to roots that were more complex and difficult than the self he wore comfortably now, like it was all of him. It wasn't as if they were easy to get hold of: even now, with rationing over, he had to trek over three boroughs to cart them home in bulk, and that was when the specialist offie had them in stock. Well, not that beer had ever been rationed, as such. But in the immediate post-war period, manufacturing and exports hadn't been exactly immediately back up to speed, in the old country. Some things had been no more than a distant dream half the time, stockings and lemons and imported beer. Not that it hadn't been well worth small privations, their new home.
But Edie had had ways and means, and precious little respect for ration books and regulations. To the horror of a scandalized, rigidly law-abiding and citizenly teenaged Erik, she had had any number of friends perpetually gifting her with delicious goodies – straight off the backs of mysterious lorries.

Oh, Edie. Still, Jakob had rarely gone without his favourite beer, that was the thing.

“Cripes!” was the gracious thanks Erik got now in return, however. And a very cautious look from Az's gleaming baby-reds. “What's got into you, Erik? And, um, ta.”

“Why does anything need to have got into me?” Erik asked, slightly nettled, returning to chopping a pepper, setting the pan on to heat. “Damn it, a man makes a civil gesture to his pain-in-the-arse housemate, and suddenly it's twenty questions. Wish I hadn't bothered,” he added.

He took a swig himself, and added, “Everything's fine. I'm perfectly normal. Just as usual. What do you even mean?” Not that Az could get him rattled.

In response, he got a long, thoughtful look, Az drawn back with a distant, dignified look and examining him. Just as if he were Lady Bracknell, or planning to play her. Ridiculous. Edith Evans, whatever.

“That's exactly what I mean,” Az replied. He twiddled his bottle around, between two red webbed fingers, and scratched his arse in the awful old-man hand-me-down trousers (complete with collarless shirt) that he wore when he didn't have anyone to impress at an audition. Albert Steptoe would have been Fred Astaire in comparison.

“You're practically your old self again,” Az pointed out. “Moody, yes. Tetchy, God knows. Getting out and about a lot more than you used to – and that's not all you're getting, a little bird has told me. But with a bit of spirit back in you. The old bounce back in your step, ready to terrorise man, beast, shoplifters, and anyone who dares to suggest that suchandsuch is a better translator of Thomas Mann than whoochamacallit – just like the old days. Before him.”

He reached forward, to clink bottles with an unwilling Erik. “It's good to see, compadre. Good to see.”

And on that note, he put the jam back in the cupboard, and sailed out of the kitchen, bottle in hand.

The absolute perisher.

If there was a single person that he'd thought he could rely on for a complete absence of tact and perspicacity, then it was Az.

Tact. From Az. The end times were surely upon them.

xxx

Of course, Edie was a different kettle of fish entirely. Erik was perfectly confident of the issue. Perhaps he had betrayed himself, unawares, to the casual observer. But only through unwariness and a downcast spirit, at odd moments when he'd thought himself unobserved.

But with Edie, of course, he only ever presented a smiling face. He was so grateful to have her still in his life, when he'd so nearly lost her forever.

It was with that comfortable certainty that he set out to finish off a few tasks in Edie's garden, the Sunday following. As well as to put up new lamps and shelves in the spare bedroom – formerly his own – that she'd recently had him redecorate.
He whistled through that, too, with Edie off at a bridge game with some of her fancy county lady-friends. He felt grand, in fact.
He was so caught up in a medley from Oklahoma, that she managed to surprise him completely, in fact. Patting him on the calf, where he was half-way up a stepladder and trying to catch the bulb screw on the worn thread of the wall-lamp, and making him jump enough that she had to grab a hold and steady him.

“Darling! Be careful!” she lectured him, with one hand still holding on to his leg. His heart beat out a swift rat-a-tat, and his imagination played out the scenario of himself lying on the bedroom floor with a nice thorough open fracture, like someone had shot him in the shinbone.

He took a moment, to get his breath and keep his temper. Before smiling down at her where she stood, dressed up for the cold and evidently back from her hellraising, robbing the upper-crust widows and scnessetters of the community of their ill-gotten inheritances. “Hallo Mamma,” he said. “Did you have a nice time? What will you be spending your winnings on?”

“Oh, darling,” she chastised him, a severe priss to her lipsticked Cupid's bow. “We don't play for money, you know that – only for skill and for pleasure. Those are very nice, well-bred English ladies I keep company with. The real games I keep for other company entirely, you ought to know that.”

He sighed just a little, as he climbed halfway down from the stepladder to keep company with his mamma himself. “Just as you say, Mamma. Just as long as I don't have to come rescue you if you get yourself in too deep, and wrap chicken-wire round any necks, here. This isn't the old country, my love. They wouldn't take kindly, bear it in mind.”

Her smile was lovely, luminous. “Oh, Erik, darling. I know you would always save me. Now, I'm going to brew up, my love. And I have brought syrup cake. If you get yourself finished up here, I will expect you downstairs post-haste!”

With her gone, pit-patting down the stairs, he rested his chin on the top step of the step-ladder and sighed. To have saved a parent from annihilation and untimely death was a tremendous responsibility, of course. Every day of her continued existence, one must refrain from exasperated thoughts about not having bargained for this and letting her stew in the results of her own shenanigans.
And then again, he melted a bit when he arrived downstairs, and she had cake and gingersnaps set out on doilies on the coffeetable, and was busy cutting up delicate sandwiches into crustless triangles. Just as if he was eleven again. Well, eleven again once they'd been conditionally approved and documented, housed in a tiny rented flat at first and vouched for by uncles Syl and Hugo. (Who'd subsidised them too, and whose guarantees had saved them from the threat of internment.) Not before that, on a commandeered boat with a surly bribed owner, sweating and half-starved and never at rest until they hit the shores of Britain at Portsmouth, and gave themselves up into official custody sans papieres, awaiting their uncles' string-pulling saviour act. Their guarantees that these were the right kind of Jews, the Lehnsherrs, the virtuous, persecuted and deserving kind. The kind that Britain could safely take to its bosom.

(Erik never had thoughts like these. Or rarely enough to call it never. He put them away from him now, firmly.)

To see Edie so, put him back into the past as if he were in fact that child once more. And he crossed the room to kiss his mamma's cheek, and sit obediently at her side while she poured him a cup and set out his plate with sandwiches and bunstuff. He had a mamma, and when she patted his hand, and prodded him in the back to begin on his plateful, he obeyed as if she'd just been restored to him five minutes since.

Then came the regular quiz, to which he was too inured to to pay the least attention. His answers were quite by rote, regarding doings in the shop and his official social life and plans for the coming week. His mind was more on the past – and an assignation of a pragmatically fleshly nature he was due to keep in a few hours – than on monitoring the information he was presenting to Edie. But instinct would no doubt serve. In her company he had not a single doubt of who he was. He was the son who had never given her a moment's trouble, who had saved her because any other course of action was unthinkable, who was the rock upon which his family was founded, the cornerstone.

So he had no misgiving, in listening to her chatter, giving the assent to her pouring him a second cup of tea, and accounting for the latest news he had of Az, Hank, Angel, Janos and every other friend and acquaintance they had in common.

There was an ideal version of himself that he presented to his mother. The son she could be proud of, who in course of time was sure to bring home the ideal daughter-in-law. He would never dream of ruffling the surface of that perfect reflection, and in turn he could rely on her to never question it. There was nothing false in it, not a phoney mask. It was only who he wished to be, for Edie. Because she deserved the best of sons, as with everything else.

“Oh, you must finish up the bakewell, Erik,” she told him sunnily, pushing the plate at him. The remainder was firmly transferred onto his plate despite his protests. “I believe you've lost a little weight over the last year, my love. Not that it doesn't suit you very well,” she added, with a light, considering fingertip touch at his cheekbones. “But all the same, I like to know that my boy goes home well-fed, when he's been putting in some hard labour fixing the joint up. Now, there was something else I meant to ask you, I believe. Is there anyone I've forgotten to ask after? Your lovely friends, darling, and Raven's too. I wish you'd bring them on a Friday more often, new acquaintances as well as old.”

Oh, and there was a millstone of a hint landing on his foot. Not as if Erik couldn't read the signs. He sighed mentally, and almost rolled his eyes at the thought of introducing to his mamma any of the acquaintances he'd made of late. Certainly, none of them were the sort that you brought home to mother. And he wondered if it was perhaps time to invent a whole new mystery girl.

Someone he could audibly pine and sigh over, while retaining sufficient maidenly reticence for Edie
to only press him so far and no further, respecting his boundaries.

He wasn't elated at the thought. Certainly, he'd done enough actual real-life pining to have developed an active distaste for feigning the state. But he was given pause, in any case, when Edie patted his hand, and added, "Charles. That's it, I remember now. How is Charles, darling? It's been so long since I heard you mention him. And I don't recall you mentioning having gone to see that last film of his, either. Didn't he play a government spy, opposite that lovely girl Audrey Hepburn? Why, my love, I remember a time when you'd have gone to the first matinee and evening showings, the late showing, and then gone back again the next day into the bargain! Or have you just become blasé, what with becoming such good friends with the dear boy?"

Now that was overstating the case by about a mile and a half, even when Charles had been in the country, a good year back now. Leaving anything more intimate out of the picture, they'd been barely so much as acquaintances, looked at realistically. And how exactly did his mamma come to know so much regarding his cinema-going habits, particularly with respect to the filmography of Charles Xavier? Considering she'd vowed ignorance of him even being particularly interested in the bastard, back when he'd irrupted into their lives.

It was a bolt from the blue, just to hear his name on Erik's mamma's lips. He'd thought it odd – in the immediate aftermath – that she only asked after Charles once or twice. And she'd failed to pursue the matter, when he'd avoided the subject, and fobbed her off with vague and meaningless platitudes. It was very unlike Mamma, not to pursue with tenacity a matter she was curious about. And she had taken such a fancy to Charles, too.

Going by her normal behaviour, he would have expected her to pursue the issue like a terrier hunting rats. But she'd let him get away with fobbing her off, and he'd been too abstracted and depressed to even notice it at the time.

Until now. Now, when Mamma put her hand on his arm, and smiled at him. His mamma's smiles were sunshine, but she had enough guile that he knew better than to trust them without reservation. She'd smiled at the shopkeeper, during the war, who'd called her – well, better not to remember what he'd called her. A Jewess, of course, but with a great deal of pejorative embroidery upon the mere classification. And the fellow had served their family pleasantly in his establishment for years before that, until the political tide had turned and he'd felt the intoxication of the upper hand. He'd been one of the neighbours who – well, that was one more thing it was better not to remember.

So now, his mamma smiled, and Erik was wary. "I don't know how he is, Mamma. I haven't – we haven't seen him in – well, I don't expect to see him again. Really we barely knew him, Mamma. I expect that taking up with a nice bourgeois Jewish family was just how he chose to amuse himself during that particular film shoot.” It was gall, every word, and he enunciated it the more clearly as a result. He was telling himself, not just Edie.

“Really, darling? I would be surprised,” Edie said. And she watched him with kind, crafty black eyes, not a whit of expression on her face. “I thought him a nice boy. Perhaps a little careless, but no-one is perfect. Darling, you know that you can always, at any time, tell me anything, don't you?” The swerve, the tangent, left Erik dizzy. He groped for words, but it was much easier to grope for a piece of cake, and eat instead of speaking.

Edie would normally have chattered on. But now she let the silence yawn, and Erik wondered if this was how French aristocrats had felt, led up to and waiting on the guillotine. His mind scrabbled for some distraction, to hold her off. He'd just decided that he had conceived an improbable passion for the ice-cream girl at the local Regal, when Edie got in before him.
She touched his cheek again, something he disliked. Not in itself, but because it usually meant she was worrying over him, and he never wanted Edie to suffer a moment's concern over her children, nor a moment's care for the rest of her life. “It's so good to see you entirely yourself again, my love,” she said quietly. “I have been a little troubled.”

Oh, damn it. Erik was not so transparent. He wasn't. “What are you talking about, Mamma?” he asked, obstinately uncomprehending.

“Well, darling,” Edie said, and hesitated. “For a long while, you have been – well, I am going to call it subdued. No more than that. You are my son, Erik. I notice things.”

And if she was going to call it subdued, then no doubt that meant she had innumerable other damning synonyms, more strongly stated, that she had decided to censor. As if he were a touchy teenager, and she was wary of setting him off. Mammas everywhere, a blessing straight from the devil himself.

It was an immense relief that she stood at this moment, saving him from having to find some reply. Instead of glaring down at his cake as if it was some heinous criminal, slightly flushed. “I'll bring in the coffee, darling,” she said, lightly. And she raised a hand to ward off protest. “No, darling, I'll do it. You've done plenty today, run yourself ragged for your mamma. Don't you dare move.”

She hesitated a moment, standing there with a tray of china and crumbs. And then she bent, and kissed his cheek. “There's nothing you could ever tell me that would make me love you less, Erik. You are my son forever, the light of my life.”

She waited, for a moment. And Erik, uncertain, said, “Er... thank you, Mamma?”

Edie nodded briskly. As if it was nothing of note. And exited for the kitchen, leaving a slightly stunned Erik still giving almond cake the evil eye.

He was stuffed full of cake. Foxed, and flummoxed, and with rings run round him. Possibly feeling just a little peeved, too.

And not quite sure – not positive – as to whether he'd just come out as homosexual, to his mother.
'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point however is to change it.'

Chapter Summary

Erik's homosexuality isn't quite as secret at this point as he could wish it to be. Not to mention that his nearest and dearest are taking it upon themselves to try to fix him up with a new boyfriend. The almighty gall of it!

Erik is also disapproving of Edie's rampant political activism. Edie doesn't appear to give a damn, and still gets him roped into it. Poor Erik.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is the quote from Marx that is engraved upon his tomb in Highgate Cemetery. I conceive of this version of Erik quite often sneaking into the cemetery, at all hours. It isn't as if the railings would give him any problems. And it's a very ecumenical place, with plenty of Jewish luminaries to ponder over and pay respects to.

Erik is disclosed to have been an N.C.O - non-commissioned officer, a lance-corporal to be precise - during his conscripted National Service and his further period of service in the armed forces defending his adopted country.

Steve Rogers appears - up and out of the ice much earlier than in movie canon, but with 'Captain America' officially still dead, and living under the radar regarding his wartime service. And he's a Rhodes scholar at Oxford University.

There's a Frasier mis-quote in there somewhere - 'swift and terrible sword of justice'.

Whatever the true facts, however, Erik opted for a head in the sand approach to the question in subsequent weeks. It became a little difficult to keep the blinders on, when it began to feel as if his nearest and dearest had revolted against his version of reality. But he grimly hung on to them, muttering mantras of denial to himself, as reality assaulted his carefully-constructed little world.

It simply wasn't acceptable – Erik thought, a little resentfully – for Raven to casually invite fellow-tutors to Edie's Friday night dinners. Of course, they were reliably the best-looking and most overtly homosexual of her colleagues, surely. And then, for her to manipulate seating arrangements so that Erik was stuck with them, for half the evening!

(Apart from anything else, did she think he was incapable of finding his own paramours, making his own amusement? He'd proven that false to his own satisfaction in recent months, certainly. Although he hesitated to boast of it, to the people who suddenly seemed the most concerned that he should have an adequate and satisfactory love-life. The great busybodies!)

In ways he tried not to think about, it was endearing – painfully touching. His baby sister loved him, accepted him – and repeatedly attempted to discuss the issue with him, despite his resistance. And
she wanted him to be happy. Even if that happiness flouted all social norms and expectations, and made their unconventional, non-standard issue little family more visible and transgressive within their community than he was comfortable with. Even if it meant another man flirting with him, at their mamma's dinner-table!

(Damn it, but it took a lot to make him think of Charles with approval and fondness, at this point. But at least the bastard had exhibited some discretion and awareness of limits, interacting with Erik in company, and particularly in the presence of Edie. He hadn't batted his lashes, and put his hand over Erik's at the dinner table. He hadn't acted as if it was normal, socially acceptable and not dicing with disaster and inviting criminal prosecution, to flaunt homosexuality in respectable, largely 'straight' world company.

Well, no. He really hadn't. Erik hadn't, it occurred to him now, ever expected to find an individual more rigidly and obsessively closeted than himself, in this world. And yet, if one existed – and despite his taste for adventure and risk, his reckless misbehaviour and sexual omnivorism – then Charles Xavier was probably that individual.)

They reached the giddy limit the evening that Raven turned up with a fellow who looked more like an undergraduate than one of Raven's colleagues, baby-faced and smooth-cheeked and barely out of the nursery. “This is Bobby, darling!” was how she introduced him to Erik, as she tried to foist the infant off on a brother who'd grown wary of her manoeuvres, lately. “His mutation is actually useful – the two of you could open a pub together! The beer would never be warm, and you'd never lose at shove ha'penny, Erik!”

And she scampered, made herself scarce quicker than Az could have managed it, in search of Hank. Leaving Erik babysitting this youngster, who seemed a bit dumbfounded himself. He smiled hopefully and ingenuously at Erik, and lifted a hand, wiggled his fingers in explanation. A brace of icecubes immediately tumbled out of nowhere into Erik's glass.

It was slightly charming, Erik was forced to admit. “I freeze things,” the lad explained, superfluously.

“I noticed,” Erik said drily. But the kid seemed perfectly pleasant and well-meaning, and had been completely abandoned by a conscienceless Raven to Erik's tender care. There was as much solicitude to it as a cuckoo lobbing an egg into the nest of a chicken-hawk. But Erik sighed, remembering his hostly duties. If he didn't remember them, then Edie was sure to remember them for him. Possibly accompanied by a clip round the ear, as reproof.

Twenty minutes later, and he was regretting it. He cornered Raven again in the hallway, in search of respite, and ostensibly a couple more drinks. “Raven. Honestly. What do you imagine you're playing at, foisting that blue-eyed kiddie on me?” he expostulated. “I've had him weeping on my shoulder the last quarter-hour, out in the garden. You want to know why? About his crazy ex-girlfriend, that's what. Honestly, Raven. Do I look like an agony aunt? Are you going to get people writing in to me about whether that shy boy in Accounts really likes them, or just has a lazy eye? His girlfriend, Raven. A quarter-hour! And he wouldn't stop talking! I realised in the end that I just had to wait until he was ready to stop. While slightly abandoning the will to live myself, or fighting off the urge to stick a dessert fork in his eye.” Erik loosened his tie, flushed and stressed. Bloody hell. No-one would ever understand how he'd suffered.

Raven was impressively nonchalance. But wasn't that always the case?

“And?” she asked innocently. “Why would that be a problem, brother dear?”

Which left him stymied, with a million un-had unspoken conversations hanging in limbo. He wasn't ready to have any of those conversations yet. Not with Raven – and he hadn't held off every one of
them until this point, for nothing.

Raven gave a sly chuckle. She jabbed him in the arm with an unseemly lack of respect for her older brother, senior and venerable. “He's still crying, isn't he? Still all broken-up and vulnerable? See what you can do with that, Erik. I reckon it's worth a shot. You can turn him, I'll bet. I have complete confidence in you!”

And that left Erik open mouthed, and gobsmacked, and with his little sister swanning off with a mean laugh and a little shimmy. And Erik with his hands flexing, and no neck handy to wrap them around.

Still, that was a fair way preferable to grappling with the next well-meaning attempt to fix him up. By Az, about which no more needed to be said.

Except that Erik couldn't restrain himself. Not after coming home from a parish council meeting, at which he'd been expecting to deal with nothing much more onerous than the usual requests to explain half a dozen things to the lackadaisical and incompetent clerk of the parish. Oh, and of course a certain amount of unofficial bouncer activity with obstreperous and vocal members of the parish. And to bat away the occasional remark about mutant numbers and activity within parish boundaries, neutralised with adroit diplomacy and subtle reminders of his sterling contributions over the years, his standing in the community. An exemplary mutant, symbolic of the contributions of all mutants to the wider society, and who could in good faith dispute it?

He'd had damn-all expectation of getting cornered in the parish offices unawares, by Stryker. Stryker, the least bonhomous and most bigoted near-neighbour they had. The man was a close rival to Scrooge, when it came to mean-spirited hate-orgies, and attempts to tear down anyone he perceived as a threat.

Cornered, and with a slightly-shaking hand laid on his arm by the eccentric blighter, into the bargain. And Stryker opening with a bewildering whispered non-sequitur of, “Are you An Admirer? It's you, isn't it?” Which led to a quick backwards conversation, traveling via reverse-engineered steps to the point at which it ought to have begun.

That led Erik to an appalling discovery. Which was how he found himself chasing Az up the back stairs on a sedate Wednesday early evening. And yelling “A valentine! A bloody valentine! You sent him a valentine, and sodding billet-doux, on my behalf, Az? What the hell?”

Az's protests were delivered over his shoulder, and on the retreat, and on the move. “I never signed your name! The integrity of your personal agency was never compromised! No actual liberties with the facts of the matter were at any point undertaken, pal! A man has feelings, Erik: I think it's overstepping the mark to describe it as an unethical, sociopathic appropriation of identity and persona. You wound me!”

“Well,” Az panted – pausing a moment on the landing, winded and clutching his side like a stitch was rapidly setting in. “Possibly I may have hinted, a bit. Considering that the whingeing miserable old bugger turns out to be deeper in the closet than you, even, Erik. I happened to bump into him a couple of times at clubs he has no business frequenting at his age, never mind his tastes. He's going to wind up with a heart attack, keeping that kind of company. And a mutant, too! Who'd have
thought it? Although I don't think he counts himself truly one of the brotherhood, what with it only setting in after some experimental treatment for his gout and horny growths on his special parts. Just like a jellyfish, when he presents his mutation, Erik! You'd never credit it unless you--"

Erik might not have credited it, but he also never heard it. He was too busy making one final lunge, to lay hands on the sly conniving meddler and end the discussion with action, rather than pettifogging debate and logic-chopping.

Too late, of course. With Az, it was always going to be too late. But still worth the attempt. Even as he staggered on the loose carpet rod on the fourth stair, and Az shimmered away. To wherever the hell it was he did go, when he chose not to be wherever it was he was currently making too hot for himself. There was a sulphurous sizzle, like bacon popping in the pan, and he'd evaded Erik.

Who sat down on the stair, to consider this. Probably the bastard was even now ordering tea and four sugars, at the greasy-spoon caff next to the West Indian barber's, up by the covered market in Colliers Wood. He'd disclosed it as one of his favoured destinations for foiling pursuers, over a late-night cuppa and rare fellow-mutant confidences, once. But that was a long way to go in pursuit, now. He was out of Erik's jurisdiction, temporarily.

A swift and terrible justice was thus out of the question, for the time being. Perhaps he'd have to be a little more creative about disincentives for Az to try interfering in his love-life again, after this.

There was always Az's famous little black book, of course. (Well, in fact, a tatty little A6 exercise book, with a heart pierced by Cupid's bow drawn on the cover, and some more crude pornographic sketches betraying a complete absence of artistic talent.

Normally Erik wouldn't have dreamed of invading the swine's privacy and autonomy, disregarding the unspoken laws of basic civility and decency that make up the social compact between all people of a level higher than beasts, bullies and demagogues. He would have deemed it to be poor quality behaviour, conduct unbecoming an officer.

(A lance-corporal, to be exact. He was proud of achieving even that N.C.O rank, though he'd been aiming at staff sergeant, in the extra couple of years he'd volunteered in the British Army beyond his conscripted National Service. An extra mark of the love and duty he'd wanted to express, to their new adopted motherland. Because she'd proven kinder than the old bitch she-wolf, who'd turned on her misfit cubs and savaged them. The uncomfortable prickly khaki serge uniform, he'd worn it with such fierce pride, tipped his beret with a vehement gleam in his eye.

But in any case. The notebook appropriated, he took a quick butcher's through it. Until he found the page he was looking for.

It was Janos' entry. And he and Az were, Erik was in a position to know, well past the stage of casual dates and yet more casual encounters, symbolized in a page of that tatty little book. But his number was still immortalized in there, in Az's appalling hand, a blotted botched spider-crawl, barely legible.

Which was handy.

Erik ripped the leaf out of the book, and went to make a call. If Az was so damn intent upon officious match-making, insinuating himself into Erik's personal business, then he was liable to get more interesting and unpredictable results than he'd set off accounting for.

xxx
Not that he was looking to do actual damage, to seek to hurt. He was his mamma's boy, and he knew better. He'd only thought that a quasi-date, and a few hints in Az's direction, might jar the insufferable bugger into keeping his nose out. Where Erik's heart, and the things he didn't tell his mamma about, were concerned.

Seventy-two hours later, a quasi-date was apparently morphing into a real date. And then there were some unexpected amorous developments, not instigated by Erik. Even if not much more than a couple of kisses, and a murmured suggestion, a raised eyebrow... Leading him to feel that Az was perhaps not the only one liable to be on the receiving end of more than he'd bargained for, once events were set in motion.

He extricated himself rapidly – with a million apologies. And a little bit of regret, considering what a really fine handsome quiet specimen Janos was. Probably a damn sight easier to live with than C.X. would ever have been, if it came to that. Peaceful. But Erik retreated, back to his own territory, which regrettably did not include Janos. He thought to himself that Az was well-meaning enough. Even if a well-meaning idiot. And that it was nice to see a couple of fellows sharing an amicable friendly attachment. Even if not such a monogamous one – on both sides – as he'd been fondly imagining.

Erik would have denied, to the death, the idea that he cherished any friendly, brotherly feelings towards Az. But even so, they'd been living side-by-side a damned long time now, comparatively. And there were certain things that a decent chap didn't do, wouldn't dream of.

Az wasn't such a bad sort, no. But people really had to learn to stay the heck out of his love-life.

xxx

More days, more weeks, and if not peace – not ever, he should be so lucky – then at least he had a life that was full and strange and demanding and–. He was satisfied. His life was good. A grown man didn't chase after dreams forever.

Then Mamma tried to fix him up. Oh, goddammit.

He was unsuspecting at first, when she badgered him into coming along to an ecumenical gathering being held in Camden town hall, early spring. (Just nicely in time for May the first, and International Worker's Day. It was officially posited as a book sale and conference, of diverse religious and spiritual groups. But it looked to Erik, judging by the list of speakers and the three-day schedule, more like a revolutionary caucus, of radicalized and excitable fringe-interest loons.)

It wasn't as if it was anything new, for Edie to co-opt him into service as a Pickford's furniture remover, general labourer, maitre d' and chief cook and bottlewasher, or whatever role it was she required a fine upstanding son for. And he went along with it, quite unsuspectingly, when they arrived at the hall in a car packed with the bolshier element of Edie's social circle. (Adherents and proponents for disarmament, and feminism, and unionisation, and all the usual cant and piffle. Aggressive mutancy stances, legalisation of homosexuality and abortion, all of it theoretically reasonable. And none of it approached in a common sense, productive way, persuasive instead of militant. They might as well have been shaking pike and musket, talking of marching on the government and taking over the Houses of Parliament, daft old buggers.)

Plus an assortment of leftist tracts, political theses, leaflets and handouts, and a thermos that he confiscated as soon as it reached his radius. (Since knowing this bunch, it was unlikely to be virgin undoctored coffee, and he thought he caught a whiff of rum on the air. Either that, or red-nosed old Harold had had his usual forty percent proof liquid breakfast. They didn't need any lubrication before the rabble-rousing began.)
Sometimes he considered the idea that Edie's ease and comfort in all social milieus was not an unmix blessing.

“Darling,” Edie said then, climbing out of the front passenger seat and loading him up with books, shelves, tablecloth and paperwork. “If you'd just get our table in the hall set up, and I'll get everyone organised, and sort out our schedule for tending the stall and attending talks. My dear good boy.”

Organised, Erik thought grimly, leading this unruly pack of spiritual and political loose cannons towards the hall's staff exit, feeling like the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Chance'd be a fine thing.

But inside the hall, the whole of the group set to with a will. They had the trestle-table, provided by the hall admin office, set up, the cloth laid on it, and their wares and tools of indoctrination set out, inside of ten minutes.

And Erik stood with hands on hips, and surveyed it, when it was done. He was well-pleased with what was mostly his own handiwork, or at least the grunt-work of it.

At least, until the moment was broken by his mother calling out behind him. “Oh yes, Harold, we'll see you at three, then! Enjoy the Palestine debate, Janice. June, will you bring me back a copy of the minutes from the Catholic liberation theology discussion, darling?”

And when he turned to see, that was their little gang of revolutionary god-botherers dispersed and gone. It was just himself and his mother left to guard the cash-box, and indoctrinate the masses with insurrectionary creeds.

Or at least, it was, until his mother's gaze was diverted, snaking off amongst the maddening throng of political wackos. Her expression sharpened, and she stilled with recognition. “Steven! Darling,” she called out, smiling, pleased and alert. “Come and meet my dear boy, here. I told you about my son Erik, didn't I, my dear? Of course I did: I tell everyone about my children!”

Out of the stampeding masses of middle-aged ne'er-do-wells, a solitary figure emerged, at Edie's beckoning. Blond, broad and handsome, a Greek god of a chap, walking up to Edie at speed and clasping her hands. He smiled down at her with the warm eager pleasure that was only natural, in greeting Erik's mamma.

And then he turned to Erik, and smiled at him also, holding his hand out.

His face was curiously familiar.

“This is Steven, Erik darling,” his mamma said, in explanation. “Steven Rogers.”
anytime he goes away

Chapter Summary

the winter soldier comes to visit.

Chapter Notes

'sleek fiery-eyed no-good' - filmstar!Charles Xavier = Blue Steel
https://www.epicgames.com/paragon/forums/attachment.php?attachmentid=4437&stc=1

Sharp-suited, suited and booted, moddy Winter Soldier. HYDRA meets Pierre Cardin.

I note that Erik appears to have mislaid his spectacles and cardigans along the way, so I'm going back and restoring them here and there.

And the blasted affair ran on for an unconscionably long time, well past late afternoon and on into early evening. Not that Erik was precisely complaining about it, no. Certainly it gave him a chance to get to know Steve a bit better, and that was no hardship. Sitting back on the gloss-painted radiator against the wall, he got a better back-view of the fellow, without making it too obvious that that was what he was doing. And, say what you might, you simply couldn’t find fault with Erik's mamma’s taste. The fellow was something like a cross between Michelangelo’s David and a Johnny Weissmuller beefcake shot, perhaps with a little more delicacy of carving and modelling. And that was even dressed in flannel and shirtsleeves, leaning over the trestle-table. (To find the preferred guide to anarchy and lawlessness, being requested by a little old lady in a velvet suit, clutching a chow.)

Damn it, but that was a view. Even in the hacking jacket with corduroy elbow patches - discarded and slung over a chair while he offered up willing labour in the cause of pleasing Edie - damn, but Steve Rogers was fine. Caught in a shaft of sunlight, from the great wide windows of the dusty Clapham mayoral hall, he was a sight to stop the heart. (Erik had to speculate that this get-up was what his new transatlantic friend thought appropriate, for a young man temporarily on the loose from his studies up at the ‘varsity. Americans. But even if they weren’t Savile Row duds and he was nothing near a Mayfair johnnie, he still made them work. Or perhaps there was simply no outfit made that wouldn’t flatter him.)

“My love, can I steal a pound of silver and coppers out of the tin? Sylvia has simply run out of anything to make change with. There’s been a tremendous run on her biographical accounts of assisting the Quaker medical aid in the Spanish Civil war, and she hasn’t a ha’porth left.” And - dammit - that was his mamma sneaking up on him, and absolutely catching him in the act of appreciating her good taste and discrimination in the matter of human horseflesh.

And it was no surprise to see the twinkle in her eyes - but there was no power on earth that could make him respond to it with a collusive smirk. This subtext would never become text between Erik and his mamma, or not while he had life and strength. Instead he aimed a repressive glower her way, and shovelled a handful of coins into the jamjar she’d brought with her. As he might have expected,
it didn’t depress her spirits one bit. Certainly not enough to prevent her patting Steve on the elbow. (Thank God it was the elbow.) As she caught him in the act of charming the pants off yet another satisfied and bedazzled customer/revolutionary, probably one with an extensive police profile.

“Steven, darling, how is my boy treating you? Not over-working you, I hope?” she asked sweetly. “You look a little flushed, darling.”

He did indeed, as he swivelled around to face Erik’s mamma, smiling and welcoming. Probably from all the shameless flirting that had been going on, with the sexually rapacious hordes. “I’m just fine, Mrs L,” he assured her, with a quick grin Erik’s way. “Erik’s been great, trained me up and got me ready to sell the heck out of all your stock. We’ve made quite a haul for the cause!”

“And just what do you imagine the cause is?” Erik murmured, as his mamma dived, satisfied that she’d done her bit for her son’s sex-life, back into the heaving masses. To instigate a riot, perhaps. “Beyond keeping my mother happy, and trying to stop her actually getting herself arrested at any point. Again,” he added.

Which clearly gave Rogers pause, as he stopped to think about it. And he pushed his hand through his bright blond cropped hair, and laughed. Erik knew right then, who’d he’d been trying to think of. And why Steven Rogers was so utterly damned familiar. (From the first second, from Edie’s proprietorial, meaningful introduction, and she thought she was so very subtle too. Erik had been labouring with it for a couple of hours now - the question of where Rogers had borrowed that angel’s face from.)

“Captain America!” Erik exclaimed. Because damn it, how had it taken him so long to come up with it? Especially given that the famous hero of America’s WWII covert operations had been his first - his very first - introduction to hopelessly crushing on the male of the species. Oh, he’d predated Charles-damn-him-Xavier, by about two decades, long before Erik’s tastes had been corrupted and vitiated by pseudo-European sophistication and the indiscreet, flashy charm of the plutocracy. An eleven and twelve-year-old Erik had never missed a Saturday morning matinée at the local picturehouse, once well wedged into his new British existence. And the highlight of them for him, had been the regular Pathé newsreels that often tantalised him with a glimpse of the fascinating, heroic, dashing Captain, the hero of the hour, the most glamorous symbol of American assistance in the war.

The Captain, and the dark shadow perpetually at his shoulder. Lieutenant Barnes, as much the David to Rogers’ Jonathan as if they were linked by a bond that couldn’t be severed. Something about the two of them had dug at Erik painfully, plucked notes like a bow from his pre-adolescent heart. (As well as the hormonal response bubbling up around that time, the awareness that yes, he was certainly a little different to other boys.) One of his grammar school teachers had banged on a lot about Alexander and Hephaestion, boringly fixated on their military victories and allegedly chaste friendship, instead of their passionate attachment. But Erik had done his own research. And it had chimed immediately with the scraps of black and white newsreel of the two special taskforce G.I.s, so that he couldn’t think of one pair of heroes without the other immediately springing to mind.

Now, Steve Rogers looked stunned, for just a moment. Stunned, and more flushed than ever, and a little open-mouthed. (Still a fetching look on him.) “I -- “ He coughed, and he wasn’t meeting Erik’s eyes. But then he visibly, physically pulled himself together. His shoulders went down, where they’d hunched suddenly. And he smiled at Erik. “You got me!” he said cheerfully.

Which was an odd reply. Erik had only been commenting - not with great eloquence, it was true - on the astonishing likeness between Rogers and the Captain. And the coincidence of the name, also. How extraordinary, this beautiful young buck being the very living spit of the Captain, and with the
same name, yet twenty years younger at least than the dead idol. (Oh, and Erik had almost grieved when the Captain had gone down in the ice in ‘43, almost as if he’d really known him. It had blighted his grammar school second year and swotting for his school certificate.) He must have looked gormlessly puzzled, because Rogers leaped to add, “I don’t generally talk a lot about it - once people know, it’s all they want to talk about, I find. But yes. Captain America - Steven Rogers, I was named for him, it’s actually Steve Jr. - was my uncle.”

Well, of course. Of course.

Perhaps Mamma knew a thing or two, after all. At least, Erik was tempted to think so, when his frog-marched and pressganged shift as Mamma’s aide and personal labourer was done with, having taken the King’s shilling. At Steve’s suggestion, they finally bunked off for a bite to eat and an ale or two, to the pub on the corner. (After numerous fond farewells, and extractions of promises of a return visit for Steve from Mamma, of course.)

And then a tube trip home, leaving Harold to chauffeur the rest of Edie’s gang. (After a discreet breath-test from Erik, and a stern lecture on what happened even to grey-haired, venerable old gentlemen who hurt a single hair on her precious head.)

Erik only discovered once they’d disembarked at Notting Hill, that this wasn’t, in fact, Steve Rogers’ own stop. “So,” the young Greek god was saying then, blithe and beautiful and with his hands in his pockets, as he shouldered through invisible crowds in the slowly darkening twilight, “when Edie invited me to come and lend a hand at this bunfight, I figured it would be a good opportunity to go visit a couple of artist friends of mine in Camden Town, right? And when one of them offered to put me up, I guess it was a sign-”

“Wait, wait, hold on a minute,” Erik interrupted him there. “You mean you’ve just been - walking me home?” (The thought made him feel like a seventeen-year-old girl. In a not-unpleasant way.

Now they’d reached Erik’s own front-door, where he’d taken a step up onto the doorstep. He swiveled around to face his fair and comely companion.

(It was the only way he could meet the chap eye to eye on an equal footing, in terms of height. Which seemed important, for some obscure reason.)

It also allowed Rogers - with a back slightly swayed, and his head bent a little - to look up at Erik. There wasn’t any other way he could have managed it, but manage it he did. Up through fair-brown lashes, and his eyes almost as devastating as - well, never mind whose. Erik wondered if he relied on that ‘America’s bashful sweetheart’ thing rather a lot, for spicing up stag weekends up from the university. It was inarguable that he’d got the thing down to a fine art.

“You could say that,” Rogers agreed. “Seemed like the gentlemanly thing to do, you know. After your ma’s been so welcoming to me. I guess I’d better get moving now, make sure I don’t miss the next train.” He paused, though, and didn’t make a move, regarding actually making a move to go. Just paused, and smiled at Erik. It was a prompt so clear that you could stub your toe on it, but though the hook was baited with prime beef, Erik wasn’t going for it.

“Unless you felt like inviting me in,” Rogers pressed on, quite shameless. A nice Catholic boy, and pure as the Virgin herself by appearances. It had to be tremendously useful to him.

Erik couldn’t help himself. He found himself saying, this once more, “My God, but you look so much like your uncle… Are you sure…?” He wasn’t sure, quite, what it was that he was asking.

Rogers paused for a moment. Then his smile was a little less innocent, a little more seductive. “Are
you really going to pass me up?” he asked. “Remember, this is the closest you’ll ever get to bedding Captain America.”

Erik had done more, cruder and more X-rated, brassy and lusty and lewd, with others these past months. He’d done plenty, God knew. But kissing Steve Rogers on a quiet doorstep, in the shadowy late evening, felt a lot more incriminating. And he didn’t even mean in the sense of the illegality of homosexual acts under the law. No, it felt like infidelity. Erik wasn’t even going to argue out the ridiculous nature of that with himself. But in a way it made sense. Rogers was the first serious prospect, since Xavier. Certainly the first one he couldn’t help but take seriously, and not only because of Edie’s approval. So he pulled his spectacles, wire-rimmed, round-lensed, off his nose by one arm, and closed his eyes to the past. With his mouth on those perfect firm lips, and the way Steve’s hand behind his head pulled him in with sudden urgency, it wasn’t so difficult.

“Why don’t you come in,” Erik said. “I’ll make tea.”

xxx

And when Erik woke up in the middle of the night, more than six hours later, Steve Rogers was gently murmuring in his sleep beside him, some not unpleasant dream running in glorious Technicolor behind those beautiful eyelids. Erik was appalled at himself. But even more so, at Edie. And oh, Erik cursed himself, for an easily seduced, oversexed idiot. But more than that, he cursed his mamma.

Perhaps a little too audibly, because Steve stirred properly, not just restless from bad dreams and late hours and illegal acts. Then his eyes opened wide, to stare straight up at Erik, caught right out gazing down at him. He smiled up immediately, pleasant and warm and friendly. “Well, what’s the verdict?” he asked lightly. And he caught Erik’s hand up in his, kissed the fist very lightly with perfectly sculpted lips.

“On what?” Erik asked. “Marks out of ten for performance, or…?” It was very pleasant banter, amiable and promising, and the evening had been better than that. He could have wished his pulse a little unsteadier, his heartbeat pounding and erratic. But what was there that was wrong with a friendly encounter, with the promising, sensible, rational beginnings of an attachment? Nothing, that he could see. He’d been set a bad example, and got into bad ways, romantic and fevered and adolescent. He had to learn sense.

“Oh, whatever you like,” Steve assured him, still a little drowsy but with a sly gleam of blue eyes through his lashes. (Not the bluest Erik had ever seen. But the lashes longer, the modeling more subtle, the - it wasn’t as if it were a competition, in any case.) “Would I make Miss America?” Steve asked. Definitely sly. And he pouted, giving a little twist and sway from where he was dazzlingly naked beneath the covers, making like a bathing-suit beauty.

“Depends what you mean by ‘make’,,” Erik said. “But I think the answer’s ‘yes’, either way.” That got him a jab in the ribs and a lazy laugh. A laughing angel in his bed, what did he have to regret or to hanker over? “So what did you think when you first saw me?” Erik asked. Turnabout and fair play, of course. And no-one was completely immune to vanity, even if not pampered Hollywood levels.

“What are you after, fishing for flattery?” Steve asked, amused, an arm behind his head now. What a sweet smile he had, truly. It ought to have been stockpiled and carefully targeted as part of the munitions of war. “Let’s see... I thought that you were everything Edie promised me. Very handsome, her lovely, handsome, clever, virtuous, upstanding and generally super-powered and incomparable son. She did a bang-up job selling me on you, by the way. She and my ma together, they’d probably have had the laws on sodomy revoked and us up the aisle inside of three months, if
they’d ever got together.” His face was a little sad, and Erik cursed a little. Rogers had mentioned at one point already that his mother was dead.

*Oh, damn it, Mamma,* Erik thought, at the litany and the proof of his mother’s ruthless machinations. But it was no surprise. Not any more. He only hoped, now, that he could live up to Edie’s promises.

xxx

There was where Erik found himself, then, in pretty short order - dating a man approved and selected by his mamma. Just as if she’d hired a posse of shadchanim hailing from every London borough from Finchley to Golders Green, to come in and get her past-his-prime eldest off the shelf and off her hands. It was an arrangement not difficult to fall into, in spite of the geographical challenges with Steve up at Oxford most of the time. And Steve certainly didn’t qualify as one of the casual entertainments who barely merited a pint and a handshake goodbye, that he’d been taking the edge off with these past months. Rogers - and certainly the nephew of *Captain America,* for God’s sake - required much more respectful and serious consideration, as a part of his life. A *boyfriend.* (He winced when Raven used the word, and begged not to hear it again. But still, what else was this? What else could he call the chap?)

It was wonderful. Obviously. And only slightly a pity that he had to point the fact out to himself. He caught himself at odd moments, ginning himself up before a date - giving himself a pep talk, trying to be in love, trying to be excited over it. Who should have to try to be in love with Steve Rogers, Jr.?

Steve was *perfect.* (Possibly a little too perfect? Almost designed by committee? Erik was certainly becoming a fussy old bachelor, if he was picking holes in perfection. What did he want, anyway? A host of character flaws, in a disreputable, troubled charmer? Someone unreliable, reckless, entitled and assuming, a grown man who by his own admission was in need of a keeper? Someone who’d abandon his true scientific vocation in favour of a shallow, glamorous profession he at least half-despised? Who was - who - well, who was also *short.* And vain about it. Erik was sure there were other things he could add, given time. But at this point, surely, he shouldn't care enough to make the list.)

But they were doing all the right things, and Steve seemed content, so there was that. Going out to dinner, public lectures, seeing Daniel Barenboim conduct. They spent afternoons in a Dixieland jazz club, strolling by the river on fine days. Discreet, hands in pockets, chaste as nuns in public, of course. And spending a lot of time at home - a *lot* of time. Most of that being rather less chaste, of course. At least, when Az wasn’t around. Erik's housemate was being strainingly, painfully tactful - and the swine certainly owed Erik that - so that was a lot of the time.

One unfortunate incident took a bit of surviving, when Steve expressed an enthusiasm for a cinema outing. And still more enthusiasm for going to see a currently released critically well-received murder-mystery, in which it was difficult to tell up until the last minute if the male protagonist was a murdering wrong 'un or a misunderstood hero. It starred Xavier, of course - his latest Hollywood outing. And Erik fought valiantly against it as an option, whilst attempting simultaneously to affect a casual indifference and lack of pre-judgement on the matter. It was a tough pose to bring off, and in the end unsuccessful.

Not helped by the alternatives being a Rock Hudson light romance, or an amateurish British kids’ production, of course. But still Erik fought his corner, and persisted in finding virtues in these offerings where they simply didn’t exist. It wasn’t as if he was going to explain why he had an aversion to seeing the damned thing. What was he going to say to Steve, after all? That he’d been very carefully barely aware that Xavier had a new film out in the first place? But that, once it was reluctantly allowed admission into his consciousness, he’d sooner have played Oedipus,
metaphorically, than to have to sit through an hour and a half of half-looking at the screen, and half-wishing himself anywhere else at all.

That would get them on to reasons and root causes, of course, and that would be fatal. What, explain a brief fling with a starry stranger, an unwise infatuation and an abrupt dénouement? Most likely Steve wouldn’t believe a word of it, dealing with him with tactful sympathy and mental speculations about his stability, possible diagnoses running through his head. It would be almost worse if he did believe it, Erik’s sorry tale of seduction and abandonment. ‘Poor rejected Erik’ was not how Erik wanted Steve to view him.

So he shut his mouth, concentrated on his choc ice, and mentally ran through cricket Test scores and his group of pals’ most notable trainspotting triumphs, back in grammar school. An excessively detailed memory had its benefits, and took his mind at least a little off the sleek fiend-eyed no-good up on the screen. A villain, that was Erik’s vote. Xavier was definitely playing a villain, here. Type-casting, you might say.

But all in all, life was grand. He’d completely adjusted - finally - to his inverted nature, and he had a real relationship, based on the beginnings of solid friendship. Perhaps there was still an unreliable slippery customer, a glamorous dream, an insubstantial angel/devil muttering in Erik’s ears now and then – if not truly, not telepathically – and occupying his dreams and daydreams. Nothing he couldn’t brush off, block out, refuse to pay any heed to, though.

And there was family, and friends, and work, of course. Work, certainly. It wasn’t as if he was going to just shut up the shop and throw himself into a love affair, simply because Eros was smiling on him. Not as if he could, either. Familial obligations were still - well, Erik resented nothing. Lovers might come and go, but family were what a man lived and worked for.

Thus he found himself in the shop on a slightly dreary, drizzling Tuesday, short of custom and with a hefty delivery from Faber and Faber that he ought to be working on. But a faint ache of déjà vu had him lingering over his mug of tea and procrastinating, trying to work out what it was he was being reminded of. (Trying to push it away: he knew well enough which quiet, slow, drizzling day in the shop he was thinking of, really.)

If they’d continued on with a lamentable lack of foot-traffic, then perhaps he’d have indulged himself with a little maudlin nostalgia, self-destructive as it might be. In fact he’d stepped into the shop’s backroom and knelt down to undo the first box of books, steeling himself for a little workaday labour, when he finally heard a step in the shop, not so very far behind him.

That was odd. Because he was the only person on staff today, and the shop had definitely been empty. So who was in there now, without the bell on the door having rung to alert Erik? Who was keeping him stealthy and cat-footed company?

(Erik was eleven years old again in this moment: part of Erik would forever be eleven years old, after all. Sweating, afraid and angry, and ready to kill to defend what was his.)

He rose from kneeling over the books, and he turned, doing it. But not quite fast enough. His jaw and cheek lit up from the inside with light and pain, then the light was darkness. And that was all he knew about it, for a little while.

xxx

When he woke again the lights were bright and there was a lot of pain. Fortunately, though uncomfortable, the light told him that he hadn’t been moved or abducted: this was still his own shop backroom. There was the worn patch on the carpet tiles under the green easy chair, and the
misaligned handle on the cupboard under the sink, that needed some tinkering with.

Oh, a lot of pain. He groaned, and reminded himself out of instinct that it wasn’t important. He moved his hands, his legs, and that was what was important. He was neither abducted, nor bound, nor gagged: what kind of incompetent, ineffectual assailant or thief was his attacker, anyway?

He found out, wondering it. As he lay, gathered his strength, and got ready for an attempt to rise: someone leaned over him from behind his head, upside down in his view. A thin, angular dead-white face, with dark hair flopping over it, a little too long. And as he struggled to speak, his throat rough in sympathy with the pain the rest of his head was experiencing, this chap circled around him, still watching him closely.

The thin face leaned in closer. This chap was lithe and spare altogether, with a rather nice dark suit on, if a little funereal. Something via Carnaby Street, copied off something smooth and French, Erik thought. (Uncle Syl had taught him plenty about the rag trade, and his first after school job had been keeping the sewing machines in Syl’s garment factory and back-room tailor’s businesses humming along sweetly, obedient to his power’s instruction. Jakob himself had been something of a dandy, and well acquainted with every tailor both Jewish and Gentile on Threadneedle Street. Those had been happy days of labour and study, living in freedom with his family at hand.)

The clothes weren’t really important, though. (Although the single black leather glove was an unusual motif. Sinister.) But it was the face that struck Erik, after its owner had done the same.

It was a face he’d seen before, but years and years back. Standing next to Steve’s uncle on those Pathé film clips, a dark shadow looming protectively behind him, the eyes - well, the eyes. ‘Being your slave, what should I do but tend, Upon the hours and times of your desire?’ That summed up the expression in those eyes well enough, to Erik.

Now those eyes were trained upon Erik himself, fiercely. In the face of Lieutenant James Barnes, second in command to Captain America in the Howling Commandos, and lost in combat two decades back, now. Although he was looking remarkably well on it.

He leaned a little closer over Erik, close enough to menace. “Lehnsherr,” he spat out, in a voice that sounded gravelly and little-used. “What the hell do you think you’re doing with Steve Rogers?”
The thing is, with you I'm in real danger

Chapter Summary

Erik has a chat with the Winter Soldier. It's surprisingly amicable, apart from all the threats and unrequited yearning.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from the film 'Notting Hill'.

Certainly, it was an interesting question. But to Erik, there was a question still more interesting. And even as he struggled to rise - because the bastard was certainly handy - he put it to him.

“Your hand,” he said, wrinkling up his forehead and struggling to understand. “Your arm - how the hell? Your arm is metal, it's metal, and you still managed to get up behind and hit me and -- “

It obviously wasn’t a monologue that was pleasing to his unexpected guest. Lieutenant James Barnes glared at him, almost as if he were considering a renewal of his assault just to shut Erik up. Which didn’t put Erik off one bit, even as he staggered gasping to his feet, and launched an accusing look Barnes’ way. Because how was certainly the question. At some point after his official death, Barnes had acquired a metal arm, and who would know that better than Erik? He could feel every atom of it, electrons lightly revolving in numinously uncertain continuous states, ending in claw-pinnings affixed to the shoulder-blade.

Erik felt it, now. “How did I not feel you coming?” he asked, incredulously, more driven by curiosity than apprehension of this lunatic shade of the past. And also, it was something of an affront to his amour-propre, it had to be admitted. Metal was the essence of his life. Who was he, if his mastery of it could be challenged?

Barnes sniffed, a bit, and suddenly looked some mix of modest and faintly contemptuous. “Mutant powers? Very pretty. And easy. Perhaps you should try real training, some time.”

That was distinctly a jab to Erik's pride. But it was more important to ask - rubbing at his head where he’d gone down, feeling the explosive throb of his jaw - “How the hell do you know who I am?”

This was a hell of a place for a stand-off. His shop’s back-room, dusty and ill-lit, and with customers liable to wander in to the shop itself any moment. His assailant was very still, in response to the question. He had his head cocked, the better to assess Erik, and Erik recognised that stillness. He had possessed it himself, in moments crucial to survival, sussing out opponents and deciding who should live and who should die. Long ago, of course.

“I make it my business to know, Lehnsherr,” Barnes said, softly, his eyes a steely light through really very pretty lashes. Pretty, for a feral beast. “I know of everyone who has dealings with Steve Rogers. I keep tabs, but mostly I stay hands-off. In your case, I make an exception.”
Oh, of course he kept tabs. Of course he did. Erik thought back, to the look on Barnes’ face, looking at an oblivious Captain America decades back, in grainy black and white footage. It was too obvious, and needed no further explication. Still… “Why am I an exception?” he asked, slowly.

Barnes was stiller, more silent than ever, at least for a moment. Then he came up close to Erik. And said, 'If you hurt him.'

The following silence was extremely intense, eyeball to eyeball. Not that Erik was going to back down.

Then, 'If you get him in trouble.” A shorter pause, and then, “I know who you are. I know what you are. Did you think you'd covered your tracks adequately? They never delete the files. Amateur.”

And somehow Erik knew instantly that he'd been rumbled, what Barnes was talking about. He thought, a little confused, Goddammit, I was eleven at the time! I didn't do too badly with what I had!

But on the other hand, he remembered pauses and hard looks from a couple of interrogators, during the family’s interviews for naturalisation. He'd had a feeling at the time – carefully forgotten since – that he was getting the benefit of the doubt. That wild stories and astonishing details had escaped and made their way over the Channel, along with the Lehnsherrs.

But who would believe the entire facts of the strange wild tale, from few and unreliable eyewitnesses? Tales of an avenging assassin, that proved - allegedly - to be about a wide-eyed eleven year old Jewish kid? Clinging onto his Mamma, silent and thin, and almost excessively polite in thickly accented English. Holding his adorable blonde pink-cheeked baby sister, too, whispering in her ear. Whispering with anxiety and insistence. (Naturally. Raven had got the idea well enough, that white skin and blonde hair were much approved by her new family, at least when anyone else was around. But she was three years old, if that, and any lapse could have been disastrous. Mutation might have been technically tolerated in the UK - with more enthusiasm than Judaism, perhaps - but it would have been yet another black mark against them. One they could barely afford, begging as they were for scraps, and a patch of earth to call home, to call a haven.)

A man would have had to be stone, to press the issue. The Lehnsherrs had clearly had a rough time. And a couple of good men had had better things to do than make it worse.

The gratitude and grief of the unexpected memories were overpowering. Erik turned away a little, and thought that he wasn’t going to cry in front of this maniac, he wasn’t, he wasn’t -. But Barnes' anxiety was understandable. “I’m not going to hurt him,” he said shortly. “And I’m not involved in anything - like that, now. I’m a different person.”

He had his back to a hunter, now, but he didn’t feel afraid. Now he was forewarned, and with a metal arm, he was confident he could over-match Barnes. But out of the blue, Barnes could have ended him, and hadn’t. This was, in fact, an advisory warning - a civility, a courtesy offered to a rival. “Mind you don’t,” Barnes said behind him, almost inaudible. Then, still quieter, “Don’t tell him I was here. He’s better off.”

This time, at least, he felt it - the shimmer of metal on the move, fast and fluid and beautiful to his mutant sense. Erik turned around, to ask something, to thank the crazed sinister ghost of the past. But he wasn’t quick enough. Barnes was gone.

Out in the shop, ten minutes later, Erik realised that Barnes had taken a memento with him. A book of seventeenth century love poems, off the display stand, full of flowery, ornate, hopeless yearnings for unattainable belles dames sans merci. Appropriate, Erik thought.
Although the blighter could have left a few shillings to pay for it, damn him.
Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child

Chapter Summary

Erik’s juggling, Steve thinks he’s got everyone fooled, Edie is a mystery.

Hours later, locking up the shop after a late, soothing file reorganisation and heading home, Erik was still reeling from the aftershocks. And not unreasonably, he felt. Not that anyone would have known it, from the prim exterior he presented, neat as a pin and wrapped up in the Aran sweater Edie had knitted for him last birthday. (Some battles even Raven was never going to win.) He was never, he supposed, going to look like the sort of chap who had passionate flings with actors and war heroes, who had slaughtered half the staff of a slave camp without a blink of hesitation before his voice had broken, who… Who was visited by politely violent dead men, and given tremendously courteous warnings about his choice of lover.

Appearances were deceptive, after all.

He was still stirred, his blood frothing with the itch for action, when he turned the key in the lock of his own front door, and stepped into the dusty, dim shadows of the hallway.

It seemed like a divine pat on the head to hear the bring-bring of the phone, sharp and shrill, even as he set foot over the threshold. The phone was in the hallway, and he only had to take five steps to pick up the receiver.

It was no surprise to Erik to hear Steve’s voice on the other end of the line. He had known it deep down in his bones, that it could be no-one else. But there was still a warm comfortable glow, about hearing the amiable transatlantic murmur of, “In a hurry, Erik? I wouldn’t want to keep you, if you’ve got better things to do.”

Perhaps the tone of his ‘Yes?’ had been a little abrupt, maybe he had come off as impatient. It was undoubtedly the result of the adrenalin still coursing through his veins, only slowly lowering to pre-Barnes levels. And he consciously softened his tone in replying. “Steve,” he said - a little pleased with himself in the moment. “Don’t you know that I could never have anything better to do than you?”

Steve laughed, and Erik could hear he was pleased. “Lehnsherr, you’re shocking. And Edie promised me you were such a good boy, too.”

Oh, it was nice. Perhaps Erik wouldn’t have set the thermostat any higher than that, emotionally. But still, very nice. “Maybe I can offer you that something better to do anyway, and a little earlier than we were thinking, if you like,” Steve continued. “My Flemish art criticism tutorial seminar has been cancelled for Friday - i could get down to yours a day early,” he offered. “If you’re sure you don’t have anything else going on, that day?” But his voice was richly, warmly confident. Who, after all, would turn down Captain America?

Even if at this point, he still thought that he had Erik snowed, duped into thinking him his own nephew.

“Sounds good to me, Rogers,” Erik said lightly. “Though they don’t seem to be cracking the whip
half hard enough with you Fulbright types, I must say. Does Uncle Sam really feel he’s getting enough bang for his buck? What with you playing hooky from college, tooling around the United Kingdom giving the natives some tips on East Coast technique for their resumes?”

“Oh, I think he’s got it down as fraternising with the locals, promoting American interests with our loyal wartime allies and satellite post-war economic partners, you know,” Steve said lightly, playing along. Erik did not fail to notice that he let the Fulbright scholarship reference slide. He had noticed before now, that Steve’s references to the funding body for his post-grad studies seemed to fluidly migrate between Fulbright, Rhodes, and on at least one occasion the G.I. Bill. There was little doubt in Erik’s mind, that Captain America was no more than extremely technically retired. And, for that matter, purely nominally dead.

He was every bit as much an active covert agent as his old buddy Barnes, Erik had little doubt by this point. And not for any agency involved in the issue of academic scholarships for overseas study. He only wondered if Steve was really, in fact, enrolled to study up at Oxford at all. And for that matter, if he himself only constituted a form of cover, for oversight and screening by senior handlers more concerned with effective execution of duties than any concerns over sexual orientation.

It wasn’t a pleasant thought, and he quickly put it away from him, in the way he had learned with disagreeable things.

“One, Steve asked. And Erik realise that his thoughts had preoccupied him, and he’d failed to answer. “Are you okay? Are we on for Friday, then?” For the first time there was a trace of hesitation in his tone, a wobble to his perfect sang-froid and breezy amiable charm.

Erik hesitated, but then said quickly, “Yes, why not. Come down, we’ll do the rounds, go out on the town. And the rest.” What are you doing here? Captain, he wondered, though. What are you doing with me? And what the hell is Lieutenant James Barnes doing, creeping around keeping tabs on you?

It was on the tip of his tongue to actually say it, to let his exasperation and curiosity actually break through. But after all, he had made a promise, after a fashion, to Barnes. By omission of protest, at least. He doubted very much that Barnes meant the Captain any harm; only suffered himself, a helplessly bound satellite orbiting around the sun that had drawn him in too long ago. And Erik had nurtured enough secrets in his past, burnt and ripped-out pages in his personal journal, that he had to respect Steve’s right to finally confide in him as he saw fit, when he saw fit.

So that when Steve said jauntily, “Alright, I’ll come down to see Edie, then. Give my love to her, and tell her I’ll see if I can fit her son in while I’m down, too,” Erik only grunted a laugh, and bid Steve a temporary farewell. The cheeky swine.

He sighed when Steve rang off, looking at the bakelite receiver beeping in his hand in the dark hallway.

He was still in the dark, and still only halfway in love. It was a lukewarm state of being.

And he’d also meant to visit Edie herself on Friday, to take her a new set of spark-plugs for her dignified, well-worn Jag, and the Elizabeth David Mediterranean recipe book she’d taken a fancy to. He thought that he’d better go on the morrow, a Thursday, instead.

xxx

Visiting your ageing parent, you grow conscious of your slow journey through time, Erik thought, pushing open the gate to Edie’s Paddington home twenty-four hours later. Herself a little older each
time, and yourself too, your most reliable travelling companion with all your shared history behind you. And ahead of you as well. Only a second bereavement left to dread, after losing Jakob in his first year at Imperial College. And with full awareness that there’s nothing lonelier than a motherless child, however old. Nothing at all, he thought, and shivered.

She was supposed to be in the kitchen, according to their phone conversation the previous night, baking for a charitable sale of work for one of her pet causes. But she wasn’t - and she wasn’t in the sitting room, or the dining room or upstairs, either.

When he finally stepped out into the back garden, that was where she was. Out standing by the garden shed, near the rosebed with the tawny Queen Elizabeth roses he’d planted her three years back, and gazing up at the elms where they bordered on old man Stryker’s property. She wasn’t weeding, or tidying the lawn furniture, or any of the other hundred and one garden tasks that she’d normally be busy with. Just standing and staring at the steel-grey sky, quite motionless.

It was raining a little as he reached her, feeling a little disturbed. When he stood beside her, a few specks were flecked across her smooth, rounded, well cold-creamed face. Her light olive skin was unblemished, barely wrinkled at all for her age. She still didn’t look at him, look him in the eye, as he stood before her.

“Mamma,” Erik said, and stopped. The quality of the daylight was odd, neither light nor dark, but all the brilliance was robbed from the day by the stormclouds threatening. He paused a moment, and she said nothing. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

She looked at him then, and it was as if she’d been truly unaware of him until that moment. “Darling. Erik,” she said. And she accepted his light embrace, his kiss to her cheek, like the little queen she was.

“What is it, Mamma?” Erik asked. Because he was not fooled, and he was not about to let it drop, even as she began to pick up dead leaves and busy herself. As if nothing was the matter, nothing at all.
"Power comes from the people, yes. But where does it go?"

Chapter Summary

Edie makes a new friend, Erik isn't thrilled.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title by Bertolt Brecht. Good old Bert!

“First of all, they came to take the gypsies
and I was happy because they pilfered.
Then they came to take the Jews and I said nothing,
because they were unpleasant to me.
Then they came to take homosexuals,
and I was relieved, because they were annoying me.
Then they came to take the Communists,
and I said nothing because I was not a Communist.
One day they came to take me,
and there was nobody left to protest.

_Bertold Brecht, inspired by Emil Gustav Friedrich Martin Niemöller_”

Even the pause before she answered him was telling. Because Edie had been all but born talking, according to her own old bubeleh, and if she had a story to tell then normally not all the devils in hell could prevent her from holding an audience spellbound, and probably going off at a few tangents with extra instalments along the way.

She still wasn’t even looking at him - was actually turned away, to needlessly adjust the lucky horseshoe nailed to the shed door - when she finally replied. “Don’t get so excited, darling,” she said, her voice distant, more thready and insubstantial than he’d almost ever heard it. “I had a visitor just a little before you came, that’s all. A friend of yours, he said that he was. And a friend of dear Steven’s, too.”

Damn it all. Really and truly, Erik felt as if he didn’t even need to ask. Or if he did, then it was only for confirmation. “Is that so, Mamma?” he said quietly, breathing careful, steady. “Did this friend of mine leave a name?”

From the tilt of her chin, Erik could watch his mamma think about the question. Or think about other things entirely, developing her own plans and strategy, while she kept him distracted. Given their history, damn it, he thought that she could finally lay down the burden and cease protecting him, however. Reluctantly, she did respond. “Well, he seemed a little confused on the issue, darling,” she said. And she moved to pluck a rose from one of the bronzey-orange bushes, so that she needn’t meet his eye, could still maintain an air of airy insouciance. “But I think, possibly James. Or possibly
Yanna. His accent was quite variable also.” Turned towards him, with her face three-quarters visible, the light mist of rain on her face was more clearly mixed with a couple of half-dried tear-tracks.

She was in one piece and unmarked, unharmed, though, however distressed. It was foolish to feel as if his stomach had had the lining burnt out with acid, the shot of panic that only obstructed rational thought and careful strategy. He hadn’t even realised that he’d grabbed at her arm, hard, until she laughed at him and brushed him off, pushing at his chest with girlish small hands, nicely manicured. “Darling, I’m fine,” she reproved him. Although the great sighing deep breath she took wasn’t reassuring.

“Fine?” Erik expostulated. “Fine? You’re crying, and he’s - he’s - .” A maniac, he could have said. A violent assailant, a dead man, a hopeless lover with quite considerable reason to hold a grudge against Erik and what belonged to Erik. Why in God’s name had he not reported the incident in the shop? Barring the difficulties, regarding reporting a possibly immortal, ageless U.S. soldier who’d gone missing, presumed dead, decades back.

“Well, so would you. So would you have shed a tear or two, my love,” Edie said, and she was half-laughing, half-crying again now. But she wiped firmly at her damp eyes, and smiled up at him, as a weak ray of sunlight attempted to break through the clouds and light up her face. Her smile was as uncertain and faltering as the sun. “We had a nice, sensible, productive conversation,” she added. “And then, the last thing that he said to me, was that I reminded him of his own mother.” Her face creased up in a sudden spasm, as if she were firmly resisting more tears.

Erik rather doubted he would have succumbed to tears, himself. Damn all of these motherless men perpetually hanging around his mother, hinting and coaxing for honorary filial status. Perhaps they should have taken better care of their own, if they wanted to preserve the Oedipal bond beyond any decent age. A boy ought to be prepared to repel boarders, slaughter mad scientists, take out an army of onrushing Mongol hordes, when the security of his mother was at stake.

“Except,” Edie said, in a wavering tone that was truly nothing like her usual steely poise, “when I said, ‘How sweet, my love. I’m sure she was wonderful. What was she like?’ he said that he didn’t know, couldn’t remember. He seemed a little distressed, darling.” Well, damn it. Perhaps Erik could allow Barnes a modicum of sympathy, hearing that. Just a crumb of it.

“And then he had to go,” Edie finished. “But there was the message he gave me to pass on to you. He wouldn’t let me write it down: said it was very important to only pass it via word of mouth.”

So that is what I have been doing, waiting for you to arrive, Erik dear,” she said now, much calmer, her poise regained. “Repeating and memorising what he wanted me to tell you. He was so very insistent that I commit it to memory, and not put it down on paper or repeat it over the telephone, not at any price.”

And Edie did exactly that: clasped her hands to her chest, and carefully recited the information Lieutenant James Barnes had passed to her to transfer to Erik. “Thank you for taking care of him for me,” she said, a mouthpiece for a madman. “I trust you with him, after a little background research. And in return, I have done a little digging for you, too. Remember the files? I assumed: but since then I have taken the trouble to check. The files still exist, it’s true: files that could get you into a lot of trouble. Not with your own government, perhaps: but with people who are always on the lookout for useful tools, against whom they can acquire a little leverage. They could make of you a useful tool, quite easily, Lehnsherr. And perhaps your illicitly-acquired sister too: don’t doubt their ability to do it. But don’t worry too much. These files have dust on them inches thick.”

(Erik felt faint, and a little sick. He felt the past float around him, as if it were inches and minutes away, not decades and a nice cold sea, hundreds of kilometres of continental Europe. He wondered
if Barnes’ dust was literal, or metaphorical, or both. Both, he thought, probably.

And then,” Edie said, her eyes bright, intent upon him, “he said that as long as you continue with your nice sensible life, and keep your head down, and rock no boats, then probably no ill will ever come of it. No-one should ever think to look in those files, unless they are given reason. They have much more pressing matters and interesting individuals to be giving their time and attention to.”

And she looked at Erik, with her head cocked, and they had a little moment of silence as they stared at each other. Erik and his mamma, and the past bright and terrifying and inescapable between them. They might as well have spoken what they were thinking, but why bother when it was so clear even without taking the trouble? The past evaded, but never quite escaped. Erik felt his throat raw and hoarse, as if it had been set afire recently. He could not have spoken in order to yell 'Fire' in a burning theatre.

Edie patted his hand, and smiled at him. The line of her mouth was firm, and there was more of the soldier in the set of her shoulders than he had ever been. Or perhaps the assassin. “Well, darling,” she said, considering. “I am still an excellent shot, if it should ever come to that.”
"I may have told a few people down at the pub."

Chapter Summary

Saturday night, round at Erik's.

Chapter Notes

Title from the movie 'Notting Hill'.

I note that Erik appears to have mislaid his spectacles and cardigans along the way, so I'm going back and restoring them here and there.

STATEMENT OF ACCOUNT

DEBIT
1 x superhero boyfriend (recorded deceased)
1 x amnesiac assassin (also recorded deceased)

CREDIT
6 x cardigans (hand-knitted)
1 x spectacles (pair)
1 x no-good movie-star (should be deceased)

Two or three bare weeks later, and you might have thought that nothing had happened. That was a Saturday evening at Erik’s own house, with himself and Raven and their friends, packed around the dining room table, taking turns at playing gin rummy and laying bets on the side. (Oh, the high life.)

Well, to say friends might have been overstating it a little. There was Steve, of course - down despite the pressures of his studies heating up, and essay deadlines looming. (A pile of his papers and textbooks lay in the middle of the dining room table, the visible symbol of his vows to spend the weekend in quiet study and contemplation. They were already abandoned, and hadn’t yet been touched. And there he was, in the middle of their rowdy little gang, pointing at Janos as he whispered cheating suggestions in Az’s ear, laughing when Raven threw her cards in the air, a legendary bad loser.

Good intentions could rarely withstand Raven’s persuasions, of course.

And Janos, yes, quietly listening, leaning in and stealing a sip of Az’s drink, when the old devil was absorbed in his cards, producing an extra queen from nowhere via his tail. Az was there, because, hell, it was his house too. Erik couldn’t very well bar him, from an unscheduled evening of cards and drinking and mutant villainy. Especially as he’d provided the rather peculiar sherry they were all quaffing, from a weekend in Spain with Janos. (Janos, who was keeping his distance with Erik this evening, in a very amiable way. And every evening, and vice versa too.)

There were Raven, Darwin, Hank, Bobby, Angel, and a couple of others that Raven had dragged along without waiting for an invite. She’d dropped in trailing her entourage, on their way to a
planned evening at a folk club, but that was by the by now.

Nothing was planned - Janos was here for Az, and a family games evening had probably been low on his list of priorities. Steve was Erik’s - after a fashion - and Bobby had simply turned up on the doorstep, mysteriously. (Erik hoped it wasn’t for more damned relationship counselling.) Here they all were, though, settling in for the evening. Scrabble was probably on the cards, and he just hoped it wouldn’t come to charades. Or Pelmanism. Good God, Pelmanism.

Erik wasn’t quite sure how this had come to be his life, now - family and friends and work and lovers all mixed up into one big trifle, layers blending. All it needed was for Edie to turn up on the doorstep, to decide she was sitting in on the game and going to show them how it was really done, for nothing in his life to be decently partitioned off, discreetly separated and controllable.

No more controllable, at least, than Raven herself. Who chose that moment to throw down her hand of cards, and stand up from where she was sitting on Hank’s lap. (Poor boy, looking distinctly uncomfortable. Not enough so to protest, at his mistress’ bidding, but uncomfortable just the same.) “Well, I’m going to get myself a top-up,” she announced, holding up her glass drained dry. “Anyone else? Angel? Darwin?” She smiled around, and then leaned forward over the table, propped with her hands in the middle of it. In her low-cut sweater, her upper arms pressed together did everything that could be done, for a cleavage that needed precious little enhancement in the first place.

“Steve?” she cooed - because it was Steve who was seated directly opposite her, the one getting the benefit of the view. It was a different tone of voice to any she’d used on the rest of the roters infesting his house. “Can I get you… anything?” Anything at all, she might as well have said, because it was implied, right there. Angel whistled, sucked in a breath and grinned across at Erik. The rest of them rolled eyes, smirked, said, “Aye-aye!” in meaning tones.

And Steve - to give him full credit - was completely unfazed. (Not that he hadn’t probably seen and heard it all before. How could he not, with a face like that, and a body like that. And a smile that said yeah, he knew what he was, but he was still a sweetheart of a mamma’s boy at heart? Just like Erik. Perhaps they were made for each other, after all.)

Steve just leant back in his seat, or rickety dining room chair, rather. And gave Raven the full benefit of that smile, the complete wattage, and you could see, see it stop her in her tracks. “Raven, you are a sweetheart. And you can fetch me anything you like - just as long as you run it past Erik, here, first.” He tipped his head towards Erik - and gave the kind of wink that no-one would believe Steve Rogers capable of, who hadn’t seen it.

That got them a round of jeers and squeals, too. Darwin murmured, “Nice try, Ray!” in a commiserating voice.

But Raven flung her hands up, despairing, and only laughed along. “A girl’s got to try!” she offered, with Angel nodding vigorously. “How about you, Erik love?” she asked, transferring her attention to the brother she’d been attempting grand larceny from, moments before. “Do you want another drink? I can’t imagine you could want anything else. I think you’re pretty well served, in most respects.” And she winked and shimmied at him, hands on hips. Then she jerked her head Steve’s way, mouthing something Erik didn’t care to lip-read. It probably translated as get a load of that! or something cruder.

“I think you’re pretty well sauced,” he replied, dryly, as he stood up. “I’ll help you with the glasses. God knows anything could happen otherwise.” He followed her out the dining room doorway, heading towards the kitchen, where the sherry bottle was on the kitchen counter.

And he lunged to slap her bum, once they were out in the hallway and out of sight of the merry sods.
She squealed, and jumped, and Erik laughed. “What’s that for?” she asked, swiveling around to face him in the narrow hall, pale light from the front door-glass lighting up her cherub’s face.

“What do you think it’s for?” Erik asked dryly. At this point, he’d have thought she’d have been well past trying that innocent look on him. “It’s for being a shameless flirting little hussy, that’s what it’s for.”

Oh, and she was still trying it. If her eyes were any wider and her pout any more incredulous, then she’d look… more like a china doll than she already did. In this particular incarnation, at least, her usual mask.

“Flirting with…?” she asked, still feigning incomprehension, her hand straying to his chest. Pretty fingertips patted at him, trying earnestly to understand the mysterious ways of her staid, strict, sober older brother.

Erik laughed again. “Flirting with Steve, you saucy minx. As you know full well. Flirting with…”

“With…” she echoed. And she peered in at him, head swaying and not only from the booze. Looking for the right words, trying to draw them out of him…


“With your boyfriend!” Raven crowed, triumphant. And leapt in the air, balletic, a natural gymnast, swiveling as she did it and dancing in the direction of the kitchen.

And Erik laughed to himself, following on behind, even hearing the snickers from the dining room, the teasing echoes. It wasn’t as if it did any real harm, to please and indulge little sisters, in their whims and villainy.
An Inspector Calls

Chapter Summary

There's another visitor on Erik's doorstep. Is he never to get a minute's peace?

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is the title of a famous play/film, by... not sure... let's Wikipedia it up... J.B. Priestley, there we go. Bucky may not precisely qualify as a police inspector, but he certainly considers himself qualified to judge Erik's fitness as a boyfriend for Steve.

It was the work of a moment to grab the bottle, Erik steadying little sis as she wavered and wobbled a little, tipsy, steering her back out of the kitchen. She bounced back down the hallway, and Erik paused in the kitchen doorway, on the very edge of following her back to the card table.

But something stopped him, and it wasn’t only the quiet scrape of a painted, damp-swollen wooden window-frame being dragged open, cautious and slow for maximum stealth.
"Do you really think that just because you have an idea, it belongs to you?"

Chapter Summary

If you're an uninvited guest, at least dress up for the occasion. A principle the Winter Soldier understands very well.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Obadiah Stane, noted appropriating scummer of Avengers' parish.

The very air of the kitchen was shimmeringly still, expectant - there wasn't a rustle from the morning newspaper on the table, not a single coo from the pigeons out in the street. But Erik had senses not everyone had access to, and the silence was no cover.

"Hello there. Come out, then - come out and play," he said to the air - and his voice was dry.

Still there was a pause, but Erik knew damn well he wasn't alone, not talking to himself yet, dammit. And after a moment, the pantry door - perhaps the fifth of an inch ajar - creaked and opened out halfway, sliding over the shabby figured linoleum.

Oh, not by itself, nothing of the poltergeist manifestation about it. No, it was pushed by a boot-tip - a Cuban-heeled winklepicker boot, too, well-polished, the ultimate in mod gear, very smart. And that look was completed by a well-tailored, and only slightly sombre black suit, a Mexican bandit's bolo tie... and a gun gripped hard against the lapel.
Chapter Summary

A bleeding enemy combatant is not what Erik wants to discover in his pantry. He was only going for a beer, for Christ's sake.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from... well, I'm vaguely under the impression that Enemy At The Door was quite a famous telly series, a million years or so ago. It seems appropriate.

And the hand that gripped it – well, it gleamed, with a dull sheen of stainless steel, alternating at joints and knuckles with an inhuman chrome dazzle. It seemed that Erik had another guest, just as uninvited as the other freeloaders fouling up the house. Sergeant James Barnes, to be exact – Specialist, late of the United States army, and a key member of Captain America’s Howling Commandos. (Expired.)

Again.

(Of course it was the huge metallic mass hovering in the vicinity that had tipped Erik off, since this time it wasn’t in motion and moving just too fast for detection. Something Erik had never experienced before, and it was still unnerving. The efficient, supernaturally speedy bastard.)
Blooded In The Hunt

Chapter Summary

Dammit. Erik distinctly doesn't remember signing up for this. And his first-aid skills are a mite rusty.

There was one difference, now. Now, there was a crimson flower of wet blood, blossoming out on the right side of his abdomen, across a fine charcoal wool blend and spotless linen. Those beautiful boots were also spattered with blood. And there was a ketchup stain on that plain bootlace tie, from the grimmest vampire’s breakfast ever served. His face was dead-white, dead as any memento mori.

Erik was on his knees by the wounded man’s side, without having known he was moving, and found himself applying pressure and re-positioning the man, as dimly remembered from National Service training. At least, he was, before Barnes vigorously shoved at him, with that other relatively soft human hand.
Bullets don't compare to the Soldier's psychological wounds.

"You're a bloody idiot," Erik said, quite dispassionate, and sat back on his heels. "See to yourself, then, do I care? What in God's name have you been up to, anyhow, Barnes? Not to mention, why come to me? Am I the first person to spring to mind, to help you out?"

Now, there was a blob of blood on the sleeve, of Erik's French-blue toggle-fastened cardigan. All thanks to his perfectly thankless ministrations, of course. Oh, as well as a drop on the lens of his spectacles, too, damn it. Something that didn't bode anything good, regarding the velocity of Barnes' blood loss. Erik just wiped it off on the teatowel hanging on the radiator next to him, absently. While Barnes gasped for breath, and simultaneously gave him a tight-faced, quite mean-spirited grin, supported up against the pantry wall. Erik was oh, quite well aware that he couldn't have been the one to instantly spring to mind, a fox-hole prayer. No need to rub it in, not under these circumstances.

"You don't want to know," Barnes muttered, his voice part-gasp and part-sneer, struggling to speak at all. "...who's here, anyhow?"

Only one person he was asking after, of course.
"I Don't Like Bullies."

Chapter Summary

A conversation while bleeding out is possibly not the best idea. But what can you do, with these manly men?

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from... ooh, it's a quote from somewhere... give me a mo... it'll come to me!

Oh, the irony.

"Do you want me to... shall I fetch him?" Erik asked, quite honestly amazed. Might it prove to be so simple after all? After such a dance, and so many years too: just a matter of a dying man, a last wish?

(And Erik hoped that it wouldn't actually be a matter of a dying man. In spite of everything, thus far, Barnes seemed a fairly decent sort. Well, as far as that type of immortal homicidal maniac went. And it would be damned difficult to clean up with any kind of discretion, liable to be a magnet for inconvenient, disagreeable attention, of just the kind that Barnes had already warned them of.)

"God. No. Dumkopf!" Barnes gasped. Erik couldn't tell if what accompanied his scorn was a laugh, a cough or even a groan - it was rather too bloody, painful and bubbling to discern "Get shot of him," Barnes said. He dropped the Luger, perhaps on accident or not, and jabbed at Erik with a vicious gesture. "Then when you come back... we'll get things fixed up," he slurred, loosely waving a metal finger at the gathering pool of blood to his side. It was absolutely ruining that lovely Carnaby Street knockoff of a Savile Row edition.
A Thorn In The Paw

Chapter Summary

Erik doesn't respond well to orders, being pushed around. But he's a soft touch to a wounded puppy.

"Oh, go boil your head. You've lost your marbles," Erik said, a flat refusal. "I was an army paramedic, I'm not trained for this. What you need is a hospital, you need--"

"нет!" It was a violent bark. If that metal arm had swiped an inch to the left, then Erik would have been concussed, or left with a drooling lisp and a head-injury. "I'm stronger than you see. Just like he is," Barnes said, apparently quite calm and lucid now. "I'll guide you through it. It's inconvenient, that's all -- I can't reach it myself. The ones who did this to me -- what, do you think they'd blink at removing a few doctors, a nurse here and there, if necessary? Or you? Or your sister, your mother? Get rid of those guests. Then come back, stitch me the hell up, Lehnsherr. What the hell kind of a soldier are you supposed to be, anyway? Didn't you kill a few score, nothing but a child? Do you faint at blood now, milksop?"

It was reasonably sensible, even couched as menaces delivered a little slurred and askew. Even the valedictory taunt was quite a fair bit of manipulation for a man half bled out. However, that wasn't the reason Erik stood up, smoothed his slacks with a sense of duty, and foreboding. He couldn't withstand the pleading that lay behind the pain, and the desperation in Barnes' eyes. What a soft touch he had become, after all.
A Bit of Flirtation on the Edge of Death

Chapter Summary

If Erik had any sense, he'd let Barnes rot. So he hasn't a ha'porth of sense, then, evidently.

So that it was fairly well established, that he was a soft, susceptible fool, secretly. Indeed, a mute plea from a suffering fellow-creature had landed him with a sister, amongst other tangles, parcels and camp-followers, and he knew himself powerless against such. What other reason was there to cultivate a standoffish air of callous cynicism, if not to protect himself from his own softness?

At the kitchen door, he turned back, to give Barnes a hard quick look. "Now, don't go anywhere!" he admonished. Of course Barnes had nothing to throw at him, barring the Luger he'd best hang on to. The provocation would do him good, Erik thought: might keep him alive long enough to stitch up and throw out again, into the cold world.

It is necessary to remember, though, that the intent to rid one's residence of the pestilential rabble infesting the place, and then beyond that, to do the deed in fact -- these are two separate concepts. They must be considered as such.
Gunpowder, Treason and Plot

Chapter Summary

A bit of excitement, anyhow. Erik's secretly enjoying himself, I think.

Chapter Notes

I'm not sure British Gas were in existence in '64-'65. Probably local regional authorities instead. Will be checking it out.

Oh, it was very much easier said than done. It wasn't as if he had a minute to spare, for tact and persuasion. No, instead, creeping about and relying on the inspiration of the moment, he quietly opened the front door, banged on it from the outside, and stood on his own front doorstep for a second.

Then he marched back in, in time to see Az peering out of the dining room doorway, cheerfully dishevelled and a bit the worse for wear. "What's going on?" he asked, bright-eyed, tail holding up a swaying glass of dubious hooch. "Any excitement, old lad?"

"You all have to get out. Now," Erik said shortly. "That was a British Gas engineer - there's a gas leak on this row of houses, it's an emergency evacuation. Go on, grab everybody! Get out!" He was a mite irritable. He'd had to check himself for bloodstains coming up the hallway. It wore on a person's temper. This wasn't your usual Friday evening, not by a long chalk.
Chapter Summary

Bloody hell. It is indeed like herding cats. Poor Erik.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from The Merchant of Venice. Perhaps 'No Music In Him' would have been more apt.

'Lecky' or 'leccy', Britspeak for electricity.

They were all drifting towards the dining room doorway, now, a quivering pack of meerkats, and nosey as all hell. Damn them, his people, every last one of them.

"But what do you mean, Erik, a gas leak?" Raven asked -- pressed up behind Az now, and managing, even so, to nuzzle at a flustered Hank as she spoke. "You're on the lecky, here -- the whole row's on the leccy. It doesn't make any sense, a gas leak, it--"

"UNEXPLODED BOMB!" Erik roared, internally cursing the whole pack and boiling of them. Hell's bells, could a man not get a little peace, and the house to himself and his murderous bleeding assassin pal? His house, his own, in fact. Damn, what if it had been something actually urgent, like a quiet wank in the bathtub accompanied by the weekend papers?
Chapter Summary

Erik, a natural leader of men. Biting his lip, governing his temper, trying not to kill anyone.

Chapter Notes

Tipping Point is a teatime British quiz show. It's hilariously awful, oddly awesome, and quite apposite here.

He did manage to shovel them all out into the street, though, in under three minutes. And that was probably too long, given Barnes' condition, but it was all a man could do, given the circumstances.

It was just a blessing that they were all, by now, too tipsy to look any more than mildly puzzled by the everyday appearance of the early evening street. No fire engines, no ambulance, no engineers bearing clipboards and hard hats, none of it. Before any of them managed to gather together enough brain cells to protest, Erik leaped in to give them some stern guidance.
"Now, stick together!" he exhorted. "You're all -- hell, frankly, you're all hopeless. And addled. Now, I'll liaise with -- well, never mind. Leave it in my hands. Listen," he snapped -- because he could see Bobby's attention wandering, like a cat that was about to go off and climb a tree -- hopefully not literally -- "there's a Kardomah café two stops down the line -- Raven knows it, don't you?"

Sister dear was giving him an odd look -- because it took a lot of hooch to impair her ability to detect when her brother was trying to pull a fast one. However, she nodded, slowly. "Grand," Erik said, not giving the wrong un's a minute to interject. "Get yourselves there -- don't flipping make a move -- and I'll come and collect you all when we've got the all-clear." Erik paused, awaiting appropriately submissive compliance. Then he flapped his hands at them, an exasperated shepherd. "Go on! Go! Stay not upon the order of your going!"

And -- gradually, and possibly with dawning suspicion -- they did begin to move, and filter off towards the tube station.
Erik hasn't forgotten about Steve. And Steve's no fool.

Thank God, certainly. And Erik could almost breathe the vastest sigh of relief. Except that there was the hand on his shoulder he'd been expecting. And no, he hadn't forgotten that Steve was present, at the jollities disturbing the peace of his little mausoleum.

As if.

Oh, and to turn around to see Steve's open, affectionate, sceptical expression, it left a sore spot in Erik's chest. The very person he least wanted to lie to, and was most obliged to under these circumstances. It was hard to find the words.
"Okay, Erik," Steve said, quite gently. Gentle enough to make it clear, that he was neither drunk nor
dumb enough to be fed a line, by Erik or anyone else. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

Erik was mute, searching for the words. And aware of every second ticking by. Too late, soon it
would be too late. And that was only if it wasn't already.

He felt disaster looming, almost as bad as for a kid running through a labour camp, expecting a bullet
or capture any minute. Steve's eyes were kind, and sharp, and Erik couldn't look away, couldn't bear
how transparently dishonest his face must be.
A Tangled Web

Chapter Summary

It would be pretty hard to explain to Steve that Barnes is still alive. Well, at least, without breaking a promise here and there.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Sir Walter Scott.

And if he was going to be forced to answer, then he – well, he couldn’t tell the truth. It wasn’t for him to tell: and Barnes had bound him to secrecy with chains that were damn near inescapable. If he perhaps just said – and his brain did another round of the hamster cage, the wheel, tramping in circles around and around —

“No, forget it.” It was Steve, and – had Erik actually been released from the arduous bonds of truth? Steve looked to be thinking hard: and nodded to himself.

“You want us all out of the house,” he said flatly, now. Waiting for Erik’s nod, and Erik nodded, since it seemed to be required. “Well,” Steve said. “I suppose you must have good reason, of one kind or another.” And Erik nodded again, dumbly. The pause yawned: but Steve excused him from response, finally. “Okay. I'm going to trust you, Erik,” he said. “You haven’t given me any reason not to. Have you?”
Chapter Summary

Steve is a very tolerant lover. And Erik, Erik feels just awful. For various reasons.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title as per previous chapter.

Oh, good God, the relief. And Erik couldn’t help but feel that Steve’s trust, his concession of not requiring explanation or any reasonable justification of Erik’s request – well, no doubt a price would have to be paid later. But later was later, and right now there was very little time to brood about bills that would come due at a later point.

And Steve didn’t hang about: just gave Erik the briefest brush of those beautiful lips to his cheek, brief enough to be totally deniable as far as twitching curtains and nosy neighbours were concerned. And then he was gone: marching quickly down the street, in hot pursuit of the wobbling, ambling gang that Erik had sent off in search of lousy coffee and 1960s bohemian teen culture.

And that left Erik free: free to deal with a godawful problem, to wrestle with life and death. Again.
Chapter Summary

Erik is a tool, a weapon: or he has become accustomed to the notion that we are all that. When necessary.

So he got his arse into gear. Barnes was still alive: just about.

Assembling an assorted jumble of first-aid kit, sewing bag and four-fifths empty bottle of gin, Barnes was mumbling at him, from where Erik had dragged him into the kitchen, up onto the battered daybed at one end where Erik could get better access to his wounds. Erik wasn’t listening: he had other priorities, and most of it seemed to be directed at someone other than himself in any case. Steve, he guessed: half of it in Russian, all of it whispered and snapped either in love-tones or as the bitterest calumny, he would guess. None of it the promised precise and detailed surgical directions, even the English portion.

Erik didn’t particularly need it, and that wasn’t what was worrying him. He had a reasonable basic medical education: knew what went where, and what it was supposed to do, how to deal with it. He just wasn’t qualified or experienced in that level of treatment, that was all. But Barnes had given him no choice: and he had decided at eleven years old, that approval was an optional luxury, when it came to doing what was necessary, what was right.
Erik's no surgeon. But he's the best option Barnes has available, and he's always found it difficult to duck responsibility.

Erik covered the fundamental questions: ensured that any projectiles had gone clean through Barnes and weren’t lingering about to cause infection and further injury. Sloshed some quite decent 40 percent proof liquor everywhere, and got on with stitching up what could be repaired, and trying not to think too much about internal injuries and all the equipment and training he had no possible access to.

Damn it. It would be nice, once in his life, to be the respectable British suburban gent he liked to pretend to be.

He was a long way beyond threading up a decent-sized, quite coarse darning needle – beggars can’t be choosers – when the vague registering of incident on the periphery of his consciousness clicked into full awareness. He had already stabbed the needle into flesh, committed himself to action.
'he today that sheds his blood with me'

Chapter Summary

Erik may have wanted a little excitement, to leaven his daily round. But really, this is a little too much excitement.

Also, Erik is an angel, apparently.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Henry V.

More than that, he was stitching away merrily, as if he were putting together a few items for his mother’s next sale of work table at a charity fete. And Barnes was taking it as well as might be expected, cursing gently under his breath in a variety of languages, as far as Erik could tell. He breathed deep, and caught himself in the inhalation, clearly in pain: and looked sidewise up at Erik, smiling as an alternative to a scream. “See, that’s what these people are, Lehnsherr. This is what they do, when a tool begins to develop a mind of its own, begins to have the arrogance to think that perhaps this or that assigned target does not deserve to die, does not deserve their meted-out sentence. Well, what else is possible? Otherwise, a tool, a weapon, it might decide that they are the ones to be judged… No?” His smile was terrifying, in fact. Even Erik: and in the camp he had decisively discarded fear, an unproductive waste of energy. “Was my advice not good, Lehnsherr? Be cautious: look to your dear ones.”

“I’ll make a note of it,” Erik said grimly.

Barnes had his head almost leaning on his shoulder, now, his face white, dreaming, a million miles away. He looked half-dead, but also caught up in his own lecture, and better than focusing on the pain, Erik supposed. “Would you like to know how I got the drop on you, Lehnsherr?” he asked, now – in short sharp gasps, in between the needle going in, going out. “How I could come so close without you knowing, despite your wonderful powers?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” Erik invited, shortly. This next bit of darning would be difficult, and the smaller wound above it in a more dangerous spot. Too deep for this bit of home-mending, but if the idiot wouldn’t listen to reason…

“Aah,” Barnes said, and barely moved his head, side to side, too clenched to really shake it. “You see, I have been watching you for a fair time, now. Since you became entangled with my old friend. I have observed your power, especially. Did you know that it does not encircle you, three hundred and sixty degrees around?” he asked.

As a matter of fact, Erik hadn’t. It was news to him. He gave Barnes a sharp look, and the fellow nodded, satisfied. There was a dark streak of blood down one cheek: but it was purely cosmetic, and they had other issues that took precedence. “At your shoulderblades,” Barnes added. “Radiating out from each, there is a blank: a radian-like section of the field where your power does not operate.
You might think, from such a description—well, in fact, it very much resembles *wings*, Lehnsherr. Would you describe yourself as an angel?” He coughed, and laughed, and would have done very much better in terms of pain not to do so. “You didn’t know, really?” he asked. And Erik shook his head, grim.

“That is shocking,” Barnes said, his voice a thread casual whisper, fading away. “Of course, you have received no proper training, as a civilian. But even then, you know what the world is: you ought to, if anyone. Your power is beautiful, and more than that, it has saved your life before now. You should have trained yourself, studied yourself as a valuable asset: you should know what you can do better than anyone. But now, see, I have given you the tip: perhaps you will gain a grain of sense in the matter.”

That last was barely audible: it seemed to take much, too much of what he had left out of him.

His head dipped a couple of times, shock or loss of consciousness surely not far off: but along with a robot arm, he seemed to possess a robotic invulnerability to normal human frailty.

But *something* was still off. Something minor, and some distance away, but... But under Erik’s hands was a bleeding man, holding his ruined shirt up high from his astonishingly taut and toned midriff, for Erik to get at a bloodily nasty wound. And he had only so much attention to go around.

So that it took a very soft, barely audible click a few feet down the hallway, beyond the almost-shut kitchen door, for Erik to jump to attention.
'Stars, hide your fires.'

Chapter Summary

There's an intruder in Erik's house. Let's hope he's put away the metal cutlery.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Macbeth.

Of course, though. Of course. That dim alert to his senses -- it had been a key, very slowly circling in the lock of the front door. Erik had locked it behind him, taking no chances with an injured crazy killer on the premises. One never knew: certainly not when dealing with Barnes. And with the people who had maimed him, this time: folks Erik had no desire to invite in for a cuppa.

After all, very few people had a spare key to his house. Az, of course: who could not have mustered up the stealth to get so far without alerting Erik, not to save his life. And Raven, who wouldn't even have tried. Edie, who was currently at a political meeting in Brixton, rallying the troops to her current pet cause.

And Steve.
Erik has an uninvited guest. Bloody hell, another one.

The click, that was the mistake. This ghost presence - a nonentity to Erik's extra sense, not a scrap or atom of metal on it - had opened the dining room door, stealthy as possible, searching him out. And the snecket on it wasn't only steel, but also chunky, and loud.

Loud enough to alert Barnes, too. Who, even in his groggy state, with about enough blood left in him to power a dormouse, stiffened, eyes popped open wide. He might have struggled up to take action, even now - flattened his metal hand down on the kitchen table and tried to use it to propel himself to rise, the damn fool.

But Erik got in there before him.
Some blood loss, and a less than frank conversation

Chapter Summary

Erik has been pressed into service as a nurse and amateur surgeon: and now, a relationship counsellor, too? God damn it all to hell.

Chapter Notes

Á plus, les nazes!

The kitchen door snecket was steel too: and Erik lifted an arm up, and slammed it shut at a distance. He put a hand on Barnes, panting and sweating half-prone on the table, and with his half-stitched wound oozing blood: their eyes met, and Erik shook his head. It was hardly necessary to put a finger to his lips.

“Say, Erik,” Steve said, up close to the door, now. Oh, yes, of course, damn it. It was Steve. Did he really need to put that seductive tone into his voice? He could scarcely know it, of course: but it was hardly tactful, given the audience. Even with the man half-dead, Erik could feel how Barnes stiffened, his mouth pressed into a thin line.

“I came back because I forgot something,” Steve said, now. “Why don’t you let me in, and we can talk about it?”
"Forgot something," Erik repeated, meditatively. He'd cleaned his hands, a right good scrub followed by the remains of the gin. But he examined them now, with regret that they weren't better trained. At healing, or at killing. "Forgot something," he reiterated, "so you came back... But took every shilling and ha'penny out of your pockets, before you crossed my threshold again. Took the cross from around your neck, and the chain too. You even remembered the aluminium tips to your shoelaces. Shoeless! I commend your thoroughness, Steve. The key hardly moved in my front-door lock -- not fast enough to tip me off, anyway. Nice work, Captain."

And he resumed stitching at the damage under his hands, the tear into flesh that was both rigid with tension, and bloody. There was a job to do, here; and he misliked the glazed look on Barnes' face. Physical shock, psychological trauma or plain heartache: he didn't like it anyway. He didn't like being angry with Steve, either.
Truth Hurts

Chapter Summary

Oh, but what man is whom they pretend to be? Dissemblers and impersonators abounding.

Chapter Notes

I think the chapter title comes from Henry Rollins, may originate with him, may not.

I think I got who vs. whom right, too, but really who knows. Fucking English language.

The silence on the other side of the door loomed, thrummed, pounded like a chest heaving. Then Steve said, in his sweet, reasonable voice, "Look. Erik. I was worried. Clearly you're in some kind of trouble, and... and what kind of a friend would I be, if I let you send me off with the same dumb-ass airy-fairy line you fed the rest of your friends?" Erik's chosen mode of address, he ignored. If he didn't acknowledge it, it wasn't happening, right?
Barnes' head was bent, dropped into his hand. And Erik could almost feel the strength ebb out of him, as he relaxed down into a semi-foetal position on the hard-used table. Gently pushing him flatter, to get enough access to finish his work, Erik did wonder what he was going to do if Barnes didn't survive. And Steve wasn't helping.

"Go away, Steve," he said calmly -- pulling thread tight, and searching for the glint in Barnes' eye that said he hadn't quite given up the ghost, yet. The kitchen looked like Fanny Craddock's telly show, combined with a slaughterhouse, and he couldn't see how Barnes could survive, really. Except that with such wounds and such blood loss, he'd have expected him to be dead already.

"Like hell," was the response Erik got, though. Menace, delivered from Steve's pretty mouth. And if he'd ever shown Erik half that casual mastery of the situation, such force and confidence, then maybe -- well, then perhaps he'd be as much a poor fool for Steve, as this poor fool.

And Steve banged on the door. "Erik. You are an idiot, and you have no idea what you're up against. Whatever you've got yourself mixed up in, you'd better believe me, you need my help. Let me the hell in!"
Erik generally performs well under pressure. Even under these unpromising conditions.

Interesting developments, then. "And just what would you know about it... Captain?" Erik asked coolly. He was busy checking Barnes' vitals: which were not good, but on the other hand, still there. Unconscious, now, but still in the land of the living. And Erik contemplated whether old Dr Stein at his mother's GP surgery would co-operate, in acquiring for Erik some heavy-duty antibiotics. If that was the best he could do, for Barnes.

Steve, right now, seemed like a hornet buzzing around his head, while he was trying to navigate a dangerous road, on an elderly motorcycle, with no helmet. Bit of a come-down for such a golden love-god - but Erik had more pressing concerns, right now. "Why would you think I'm mixed up in anything, anyhow?" he shot out, in addition. "What kind of a boy do you think I am, Steve?" And Erik grinned, to himself, even as he thumbed open Barnes' eyelid, met with a restless roll, a wince, and a protesting groan.
A Spy In The House of Love

Chapter Summary

Erik and Steve: lovers, combatants, fighting for a common cause though they don't know it. Why is trust so hard?

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Anaïs Nin.

That laugh barely sounded like Steve Rogers at all -- not the Steve that Erik had briefly known up until now, at least. "Well, Erik," came the muffled reply through two inches of sturdy teak, "since it seems like the moment for frankness... I think you're the kind of boy who'd tear apart a Nazi death-camp, to find someone he loved. Which gives us something in common."

Hmm. "So you knew that," Erik called out. "Not quite the nice mild mother's boy you pretend to be, eh, Captain?"

"Look who's talking," Steve shot back, sharp as steel.

"Not twenty-one any more, either," Erik added. "Despite that girlish complexion. Nor forty-one either, for that matter. Aren't I a little young for you, in fact, Captain... America?"

"So you knew that, too," Steve called, and Erik could tell from the timbre, how close he was pressed up against the door. "I guess neither of us have been as frank as we might have been. We can discuss that the hell later. Let me in, Erik."

Barnes was writhing, now, murmuring to himself -- clearly distressed even in unconsciousness by Rogers' voice. But his movement was weaker, only just perceptible. Weaker, that's what it was. Nothing good, too much blood gone, too much damage in all ways, at all times.

Erik looked down at him -- and felt helpless, in that way he loathed, the way he'd thought he'd never feel again, after trouncing Shaw -- and said, "Why would I do that, Steve? Why would I think that you're anyone I can trust? You've been keeping secrets: you've lied to me. Are you the one I should go to, for help? Have you been feeding intel about me and mine to your paymasters? Marking me down as a potential useful asset, for appropriation?"
A Revisionist Version

Chapter Summary

Oh, the truth comes out now. These boys, what have they been up to?

Chapter Notes

'His mother had had him tested.' - call out to Big Bang Theory, the great, the lamented, the immortal.

If Erik had been a nervy sort, he might have jumped when Steve punched the other side of the door. "God damn it, Erik. Are you actually stupid? I can't believe that Edie Lehnsherr's son could possibly be that much of a dummy." Pause: and Erik could almost hear, feel the force of Steve's breath, the palpitation of his chest. "No, Erik. To answer you: that's the very opposite of what I've been doing."

"You've been doing something, though," Erik deduced, from this. "You've been... Who the hell are you, Steve? Who do you work for?"

There was a pause: and then, Steve's voice was less angry, more conciliatory. "The good guys, Erik. I work for the good guys: except there aren't any good guys, not really. I'm not quite so naïve that I don't know that much."

Oh, Erik's hands were still, now. All his fears: all, impossibly true. He had not reckoned upon this day coming so early. And, certainly, not on it coming upon him through a nice boy like Steve Rogers.

Steve wasn't finished, though. "You might want to bear in mind, Erik: your power's no more than a parlour trick. You'd have trouble juggling three aluminium wassail cups, hands free, to entertain the crowds. And Raven? Dumb blonde, thinks blonde, blonde all the way through. Never been blue a day in her life, no tricksy fraudulent impersonations, norm to the bone."

"What?" Erik said. (He had a very impressive I.Q. His mother had had him tested.)
"My reports have been economical with the truth," Steve said. (Slowly: and patiently. Laid on a bit too thick, the patience, even at a moment like this.) "I've minimized what you are: and what you're capable of. And as far as I could ascertain, none of the head honchos have idea one about Raven, so I wiped her data clean off the board. You don't need to thank me, Erik: but you might trust me. If I was anything like what you're suggesting, they'd already be on your doorstep."

There seemed only one question to ask, then. "Why would you do that, Steve?" Erik said.

If a shrug could be audible...
"I do my job, Erik," Steve said. "My duty, as I see it. But there's too much information on you and your family out there, going too far back. " The files, Erik thought. The damned files. "A new powered operative, with no previous form, that's one thing. But you pissed the wrong folks off, some way back, Erik. And the higher-ups, they're too interested. If you popped your head up over the parapet, now... It's called discretion, Erik. A good man doesn't sell his conscience to any cause or country. Or, you could just call it friendship. Right?"

Erik didn't reply. He was busy looking at the blood on his hands. Always, blood on his hands. No meds were going to be enough. Barnes needed blood, at minimum, if not some real decent professional treatment.

"Whatever it is, I can help, Erik," Steve said quietly. "Are you going to let me in?"
Erik considered, for a moment. But the facts were unarguable, and he had never had any trouble making difficult decisions at speed. He moved towards the door: decision made.

Or it would have been: except that the threat of a cosy get-together with an old buddy, was enough to bring a dying man back from the brink. Barnes' Luger had been laid on the kitchen chair, sat askew by the kitchen table. And now, this revenant lunged up into the air -- like a killer whale, rearing up out of the sea -- to grab at it, and waver between Erik and the door as targets. Bloodstained, wild-eyed, shuddering with weakness -- dragging himself up with the metal arm that was the only intact portion of him left.

"No," he said, clear, loud, distinct, his voice stronger than any dying man's might be believed to be. "нет."

And that was when Steve took the kitchen door off its hinges.
A Brief Treatise On Home Ownership

Chapter Summary

God damn. Erik has certain standards, when it comes to home maintenance.

Erik’s little home -- a family property, passed on to him at a peppercorn rent by Uncle Syl -- was, perhaps, nothing much to write home about. A narrow little three-storey building, old and shabby and anonymous, in a slightly seedy part of London town. With the gas-lighting that had needed re-working, after Uncle Hugo had got one of Edie's workman's college protegés in on it, and he'd made a predictably incompetent, cack-handed, cretinous bodge-job of it. Then getting someone actually competent and conscientious to do it over had cost twice as much again, not to mention all of the unnecessary aggro in the meantime.

Oh, his home. His, with all its nooks and crannies, its dodgy water heater and water-damaged upstairs window-frames -- the summer ant invasions, the out-of-control bramble bushes in the back yard. His, though.

It was still -- damn it -- his home.
Captain Meets Soldier

Chapter Summary

Well. Dead folk turn up all the time, right? Depending on the circles you run in.

And now, in a single evening, it had been overrun by a ravening horde of Visigoths -- who might call themselves visitors, and friends, and relatives, but Erik knew what was what. It had suffered a backdoors intrusion by a technologically enhanced, preternaturally youthful secret agent, who'd bled all over Erik's kitchen.

Bloody inconsiderate.

And now, the final injury. His recently-painted, sturdy teak kitchen door, part of the house's original fixtures and fittings, cracked down the middle, off the hinges and lying in a cloud of paint-flakes in the hallway. Where Steve Rogers had thrown it, behind him.

Fury was a good look, as it turned out, on Steve. Fury, was it? That was what it looked like to Erik, anyhow. Mixed with a good dash of disbelief, perhaps. And fear. Erik couldn't remember ever once seeing Steve afraid, before. (Had perhaps not considered him to have enough basic good sense for it.)

And there he stood, 'like a greek statue come to life', wasn't that what folk generally said? Erik couldn't remember where the quote came from, but it certainly summed up the gist of the thing. A painted statue -- his cheeks flushed hot, and his eyes a deeper, more burning blue than Erik had ever seen them, almost as blue as --.
Hallo, Old Friend

Chapter Summary

Wow. Maybe they'll shag, or maybe they'll kill each other. Hard to say!

Mouth open, whites of the eyes visible all around. He only needed a straw in his hair to be the perfect picture of the village idiot.

And perhaps a little shock was admissible. Because Barnes had decided who to train his aim on now, and Steve was the bullseye. Even though Barnes couldn't stand to do it, was hoisted up leaning on that metal hunk o' junk, coated in blood and with his breath a nasty, noisy rasp -- that flesh and blood arm was steady, a perfect bead on Steve.

"Now, are you really *sure* you want to be doing that," Erik began, warily. (A self-appointed peacemaker, if only out of self-interest. There was quite enough blood daubed around his property, at this point, he felt. It was going to take the best part of a day to get the marks out of the lino, and the plastering. And though he knew himself perfectly capable of flashy magician's tricks, a powered Annie Oakley sending bullets askew in the case of gunplay, that didn't mean he *enjoyed* it. The very thought was irksome. He'd be more inclined to let this exasperating pair take chunks out of each other, at this point.

But the quick sideways jerk of Barnes' elbow, persuaded Erik to shut his trap. Not *his* monkeys, clearly. Not anymore -- not looking at Steve's face. Steve, finding his voice. Working his pretty mouth, a moment, before managing to get words out. "Y-you," he said, eyes not wavering a moment from Barnes' white ghost's face, eyes black, huge, haunted. "You. Who the heck -- you -- who are -- *no* -.
Chapter Summary

Ok, it's lookin' more like rudies at this point.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title, Book of Proverbs.

"Try not to have an aneurysm, Steve," Erik advised, uneasy -- because Rogers did look sick enough for just that, hot-flushed, nauseated, dizzy. Dizzy enough to sway on his feet, and Erik did move towards him then, jump to support the damn fool.

To support the wrong old geezer. Because it was Barnes who staggered, Barnes who fell.

And Steve who leapt to his side, quite rudely shouldering Erik out of the way. Not that Erik cared. Any fool could see the way this was going, and he felt he'd had quite enough of playing nursemaid for the night.

Not that Barnes had given up on anything, even gasping for breath and on his knees, clinging to the table-leg. He was still pointing that damn gun at Steve, a vain attempt to hold him off. But it was shaking like a leaf, now.

And Steve, Steve just laughed at him. On his knees too, and only far enough away not to be physically bashed by the Luger Barnes was still brandishing at him.

"Do you think I'll believe you'd really use that on me? You brought some extra stupid?" he asked -- and even saying it, he reached out and caught the barrel of the gun, in his manly, over-sized fist.

Caught it, and turned it away, with soft words. His eyes were fixed on Barnes, as if hypnotized, like a snake and a mongoose.
Chapter Summary

Well, here's a to-do.

I dunno who said that first.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from the Bard.

And Barnes - of course -- was equally transfixed. Which the snake, and which the mongoose, it would have been hard to say. And there was fear and horror writ clear on Barnes' face -- nothing very flattering to any old great pal, a long-lost love! He looked, to Erik, something like a captured animal, contemplating chewing off a metal limb, if it was the price of escape and freedom.

"Nyet, nyet," Barnes muttered: but it seemed more like talking to himself than any answer. His head dropped, not meeting Steve's eyes any longer: and then he slumped down onto the floor, and closed his eyes.

"A touching reunion," Erik commented, acerbic. Steve had grabbed Barnes where he had slumped almost to the ground: and it said something for Barnes' condition, that he made no struggle against being held.

Steve turned his head a little, towards Erik. His face was -- well, something Erik could not describe, not being much of a poet. That was what love did for you, he supposed. Personally, he was going to treat any future dalliance with the phenomenon very gingerly indeed. Once was more than enough.
"they were only following orders"

Chapter Summary

Masks off, chests bared. Metaphorically.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title... Ya know where that quote comes from.

"Did you know?" Steve asked. His voice sounded like his throat was raw.

"Never mind that," Erik said, and gestured at Barnes. "He needs blood. More than that, he needs expert medical treatment, someone who really knows what they're doing. I'm going to --"

"Shut up, Erik," Steve said. He looked down at Barnes, in his arms - who looked back up at him warily, but unresisting now. "I'll take care of him -- I can give him everything he needs. Get out of here, Erik."

"But --" Erik said.
"Get out!" Steve snapped. (Erik had only been intending to interject that -- well -- in fact, this was his house, after all. But he subsided -- this once. It was something of a petty quibble -- possibly better to let it go this one time, under present circumstances.

But Steve shook himself, and added, "Erik. You don't want to get mixed up, in this. You're easy smart enough to understand why. And I will keep you out of it -- you and yours, Erik. Just listen to me, and for once observe the line of command -- lance-corporal -- and do as I say."

"Yes, Cap'n," Erik said, drily.

"Good. Get out of here. I'll deal with this. Come back in four -- no, five -- hours. You'll never know we were here."

Steve waited a moment, and Erik was still there. It wasn't in his nature to hesitate, or to regret: still less to obey, barring Edie's loving commands. But still he said, "I suppose this is the last time we'll see each other?" He could have said a lot more. But it wasn't the time, and there wasn't time.
"I'll tell myself sometimes, but I won't believe it.'"

Chapter Summary

An ending, and a momentary pause.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from the film Notting Hill.

"Not in our hands, Erik," Steve said." He smiled, though. "Give my love to Edie." But his eyes had drifted back down to Barnes -- whose hand had drifted up to touch his face, with shining silver fingers, like a man hallucinating. Like a white flag.

And Erik was already gone. Up the stairs to the bathroom, a quick wash and brush-up -- and a clean shirt, sans bloodstains. Firmly rejecting memories of unreliable movie stars splashing around in there, playing with Az's rubber ducky, singing cheesy country music standards. Now that was ancient history, prehistoric.

Then quickly down the stairs, no return to the quiet kitchen -- not a look backwards, even. Just down the dark hallway, over the shattered remnants of his kitchen door - and out into the street. The front door clicked shut behind him, and in his mind, he said a goodbye and good luck -- you'll need it -- to Captain Steve Rogers, late of the U.S. Army, and the Howling Commandos. And his shadow, his shade, his sinister camp-follower too.
"All that awaits me at home is a masturbating Welshman."

Chapter Summary

Erik is recalled to his childcare responsibilities. Well, might as well be, with this bunch.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Notting Hill.

Erik did stay out a good five hours before returning to the house. But not before chasing up and checking up on his guests of earlier in the evening -- or at least Raven, and that meant the rest of them, too.

Not that he was so very thrilled to go retrieve all of them from the local Kardomah. After an early evening of cards and liquor, they had -- of course -- moved on to getting hopped up on overpriced Italian espressos, surrounded by mod kids in parkas and faux-Italian suits, eyeing them with suspicion.

(And Erik thought that Barnes could have given the northern-soul-loving horde some tips on Italian style, and where to get a decent tailor to copy it to a more than mediocre standard. But they were at least trying, he supposed. He only hoped that none of them had supplied his own crew with a handful of black-bettys, something stronger than coffee beans, alcohol fumes and their own argumentative delirium.)

It took a good ten minutes to herd all of his personal band of miscreants out onto the street. And all the while, he had a vastly over-cafeinated Az burbling in his ear, about their adventures off the leash and on the loose. (Perhaps it had been unwise to give this bunch licence to roam free through south-west London. Still, what other option had Erik had, at the time?)
"Yo-o-heave Ho! Yo-o Heave Ho!"

Chapter Summary

Az has had three too many espressos.

"-- and then, this girlie in the café, she was already in when we came in, Erik -- bit of a munter, Erik old man, arse like the Queen Mary meets a couple of blue whales lashed together with twine and Scotch tape -- well, she got up to leave -- after six sticky buns and a bathtub of chips -- except, you see?" (Cue much incoherent gesturing.) "Couldn't get that humungous arse through the doorway!" Az announced triumphantly. "Took six stout fellas to heave and tug her through it in the end. Yoo-oh heave-ho! God only knows how she got inside in the first place -- it must have taken a winch and flatbed to get the transfer procedure done, risk assessment beforehand too! Anyway, when she - -"
Thoughts on Return

Chapter Summary

A return to the field of battle.

And Raven, teetering a bit on unsuitable stiletto heels, pressed her lovely face into Erik's shoulder. (As if her lipstick wasn't already blurred, her wing of eyeliner a bit smudged.) "Yuuu-u-uu-uge!" she snorted, muffled, and Erik patted her back. And directed a disapproving look Az's way, as the oblivious loon was gathered up by a mother-henny Janos -- the only remotely sober and responsible member of the assembled company -- and together they acted as a pair of sheepdogs, worrying and hurrying their charges off home into the summer darkness, storming into evening.

And once they were all tucked away -- delivered into loving arms, or rented digs, or student accommodation, or the very bowels of hell itself, it was a matter of the purest most sincere indifference to Erik, at this moment -- Erik returned home. (With Az claimed and removed from the scene, off to spend the night with Janos. After a few hints, and a vigorous poke in that direction from Erik. Who knew what awaited him, in the Notting Hill property, after all.

***

Quietness, as it turned out. Perfect silence, and perfect stillness, were what greeted him, when he pushed open his own front door, after his five-hour excursion. Pushed it open with a certain excusable caution, he felt.
God Save the Queen, she ain't no human bein'

Chapter Summary

Erik's had quite a day. He allows himself a little downtime.

Chapter Notes

Erik isn't just a patriot - he's also a royalist. Oh God, of course he is. Oh Erik, has Edie taught you nothing?

Chapter title from the Sex Pistols.

Of course, Steve had made him a promise: and of course, he had delivered. There was no trace, anywhere in Erik's little house, of a superannuated U.S. Army captain, nor a metal-armed Slavic assassin. Not even in the kitchen -- and more than that, the kitchen itself was, incredibly, spotless. Reeking of bleach, true -- but still, as a feat it was impressive. He allowed himself a moment to wonder how Steve had achieved it, what favours he had called in -- and then thought that, after all, he was probably better off not knowing.

There was a new raw pine kitchen door hung on the door frame, ready for a lick of paint - the fragments of the old one gone. And his spare key was lying in the middle of the kitchen table - Steve's key. There was no 'Dear John' letter to go with it, but it didn't really require one. It had been nice while it lasted -- the perfect boyfriend, living an unreal romantic daydream, playing at lovers. And now it didn't hurt a bit, the ending, which expressed everything very succinctly.

Erik didn't go to bed until late, late into the evening -- into early morning, really. He sat up with a tumbler of watered-down scotch, staring, without really attending, at the screen of his small black and white TV. Finally 'Hancock's Half-Hour' finished -- and almost automatically, as the British Broadcasting Corporation's scheduled programming for the night came to an end, Erik stood, and lifted his glass in a toast.

Toasting her Majesty, of course. Elizabeth Regina II, monarch of Great Britain, her peoples, and the few mouldering bits of empire remaining to 'this sceptred isle'. The very flower of civilisation, the greatest nation in the world, his home.
Interim Coda

Chapter Summary

Erik ruminates a little - 'thoughts and prayers' style, Anthony Jeselnik

ETA: Erik fancies Queenie. OMG. He's also a bit of a nationalist in an unattractive Brexit-type way. Oh, Erik.

So programming came to an end for the night -- the mighty Beeb played 'God Save the Queen' -- and Erik stood in respectful salute. After a day of upheavals such as this had been, a little reliable routine and ordered ceremony was a very comforting thing.

(No matter how much Steve had gently ribbed him about it, standing for the National Anthem at the end of broadcasting on the telly, every night they spent in. One thing he wouldn't especially miss, even regarding that god amongst men. Steve really hadn't understood that Elizabeth Windsor was a special case, immune to every rule of the human heart, *sui generis*. As far as Erik was concerned, in any case.

Of course, even his devotion to the Beeb was staunch and devoted -- almost as faithful and devoted as his singular admiration for her Highness, Princess Elizabeth. (She that had been. A young Queen, now, of course: with a growing brood.) Indeed Erik sometimes reflected that, given extraordinary circumstances -- a nationwide natural disaster, say, or -- God forbid -- a revolution, that... Well, it would tidy Prince Philip right out of the way, quite neatly. Phil the Greek, no great loss. Erik was sure the nation could withstand it.

Erik had often felt that, given such a symbol of Albion, a paragon of exemplary young womanhood, the very soul of England... Well. He was sure he could rise to the occasion.

And, anti-royalist or not, he knew damn well that Edie would secretly love it.)

And as he put himself to bed -- the blue and white striped pyjamas, freshly laundered, and pulling off his spectacles to place on the bedside cabinet, rubbing the spot where they dug into the bridge of his nose - it would have been nice to feel as if his heart was broken, perhaps. But he felt more as if he'd like to congratulate Steve, on the winning move in a well-played chess match. And perhaps to warn him. Because if Barnes survived the next hours, the next days, then Steve was going to have his hands full.

*If* Barnes survived -- Erik hoped so. A walking weapon, a fool in love, but he'd done Erik signal favours, after all. He wondered, too, if he'd ever see Steve again -- either of them, in fact.
Blue Eyes and Goodbyes

Chapter Summary

Draw a line under that, then.

Probably better not. Wasn't life all goodbyes anyhow, just to be put off as long as possible? Drifting into sleep, he thought of smiling blue eyes, watching him doze. And he murmured, "Good-night, Steve," with only a last-minute consciousness that no, those eyes, that blue, had nothing to do with Steve Rogers...
The Right Way to Make Porridge

Chapter Summary

Erik has a day off from working in the shop. And he bloody needs it, too. What could possibly go wrong?

In the morning, Az had taken all the damn milk. And while Erik could tolerate his porridge made with water if necessary, he didn't much care for it made that way. He was an Englishman, not a Scotsman -- not a barbarian, after all.

(Bloody cheek, Az nipping home for breakfast, too. Announcing, "Just a flying visit, Erik! Audition for a bit part in the next Ealing comedy this morning!" And then working his way through two bowls of Kellogg's finest. While Erik sipped at his mug of tea, and carefully kept his mind a blank, free of last night's memories, or any thoughts at all.)

It was Saturday morning: with Raven rota'd for the shop, and the whole day free, no rush, no hurry. He got around to making breakfast when he felt like it, long after Az had leant to kiss his cheek -- the jokey bastard -- and breezed out of the house, door slamming behind him.
Erik has a new lease on life. Just the cue for getting tripped up.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Edmund Burke.

And that was when he'd discovered, that the last of the milk had gone on Az's cornflakes. *Bastard.*

Going out to the corner shop to restore the deficiency, he'd felt a pleasant buzz in the air. It was odd -- because surely he should have felt discombobulation? Disturbed, upheaved, lonely? Maybe it was just the fire and fizz of spring in the air -- but in fact, he felt especially alive, and aware, and free.

Perhaps it was the knowledge that, by now, he could have been an indentured servant in some corrupt secret service's employ. And he *wasn’t.* He had been spared that, thanks to the good graces of Barnes and Rogers, of good men before them. And he felt all the debt of it, how civilisation rested on the actions of civilised men, each virtuous action building a wall to keep out barbarism.
'Who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid.'

Chapter Summary

Erik has free time on his hands, now, and no particular plans. But life has plans, it certainly does.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Northanger Abbey. Which is Erik's favourite Austen. Of course it is.

In any case, Erik felt well, and grateful, and good. A little pang, concerning Steve, and a little concern, regarding Barnes. But well. Normally he would have bought a Telegraph, scrutinized the Manchester Guardian's headlines, discussed recent political radio programmes with the newsagent. But not today. He headed for home, milk bottle in hand, contemplating leisurely Saturday morning ablutions, perhaps, and reading Northanger Abbey for the umpteenth time, in the bath.

That was the plan -- a good plan, and one he put into action immediately upon his return to the house. An hour later, he'd got outside two bowls of properly sugared milky porridge, had bathed, and Northanger Abbey had worked its magic, taking his mind off recent upheavals, making a comedy out of all the chaos and darkness of love.

And, also, he had half a faceful of shaving cream on him, and was preparing to do an extra-careful weekend job of his usual titivations and smartening-up. Since he had no special dates or engagements going on for the foreseeable future, and had a fair bit of extra time on his hands.

And that was when the front doorbell rang.

It was probably Jehovah's Witnesses, of course.
The universe pulls a few threads together

Chapter Summary

Must Erik really be disturbed on his day off? Someone must pay for this!

Chapter Notes

I have JWs amongst family and friends, and live and let live and all that. But I'm with Erik on this one. May Erik not be allowed to live without the aid of religious tracts, himself?

He pulled on his spectacles from the bathroom cabinet stand, and grabbed a towel to wipe at his face as he went. It was a pity he was bare-chested for his shave, and normally he wouldn't have dreamt of scandalizing the neighbours with anything so indecorous. But frankly, the JWs had knocked on the door twice in the past week alone, and Erik was getting more than a bit fed up with it. Blood-stained killers slithering through his pantry window was one thing: but this was really the outside of enough.

And there they went, hammering on the door again with some vigour, even as Erik was hurrying down the thinly-carpeted stairs, the hollow wood echoing his footsteps in addition to the general uproar. He slung the towel over his shoulder as he stepped off the last stair. Because frankly, at this point, a bare chest and a faceful of foam was the least of what these blighters were asking for.
Chapter Summary

Erik does have a visitor. More annoying than the JWs, possibly.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Twelfth Night.

And he was all prepared, with some gritted-teeth civility (only slightly sarcastic) when he unlatched the door and swung it open. *Alllll ready.*

But the air went out of his lungs, and the words just dissipated away into nothing, as he stood there. Chilled, nipples saying *hello* to the breeze, face flushing, intolerably looking *such a fool,* doubtless.

Oh, it was Xavier. Who else? What other moment would the infuriating little prick conceivably pick?

Erik had no words available to manage the situation. He just stood, and stared.

And Xavier fidgeted uncomfortably, stood out there on the street. With Erik up on the step of his doorway, his already diminutive stature was emphasized, and he stared up at Erik, biting that full lip. He did not look especially well, and was, by his own usual standards, somewhat dishevelled.

"Can I help you?" Erik asked. Without having known beforehand that he was going to say it. It was a perfect opener, though, nicely sarcastic. If he could have cared at that moment, he would have congratulated himself for it.

And Xavier huffed out a tiny non-laugh through his nostrils. He looked away a moment, his eyes the only bit of startling colour in his pallid face.
Erik doesn't know what Xavier wants, and he's not too sure about himself, either.

"Hello, Erik," he said. "Can I come in?"

Oh, it was a liberty. It was unconscionable, it was movie-star entitlement to the *nth* degree. Even standing in the cold on a dumped ex-lover's doorstep couldn't quite snuff out the bastard's *sang-froid*. But he did, distinctly, look a bit uncomfortable.

Well, good. Erik approved of that. "How are your knees?" he asked, looking Xavier up and down. It was the first thing that sprang to mind. And, given their history, it had certain... associations.

Associations that Xavier clearly had immediately spring to mind, also. He flushed up to the roots of his mussed-up hair, and his eyes glanced away again. "Not too bad. Thank you. It's nice of you to ask."

"I was considering kicking you in them," Erik said, and the way that Xavier sucked in a breath was sufficient, gave him adequate satisfaction, a jab landed.

It was enough to make him relent, a bit. Which probably proved him a damn fool, but what of it? He'd lost a lover, stitched up wounds, and had his breakfast milk pinched, in the past twenty-four hours. He felt entitled to give some degree of free rein to his whims, as he pleased.

"Well, then," he said, standing a little to one side. "Why don't you come in?"
Xavier was slightly awkward about it, shuffling past Erik with eyes averted. But he swept ahead down the hallway like someone who lived there, visibly more comfortable by the second. Oh, damn it. This was probably a mistake, Erik thought, but a little too late to make that decision, now.

So he just followed Xavier into the kitchen -- still giving off blaring lungfuls of bleach, but clean and blood-free, at least -- and said a sharp, "Sit down, then." Just in case the bastard had any ideas of starting to act as if he owned the place. Or Erik.

And Xavier sat down, with pleasing obedience, at the kitchen table. (In a room, amongst furniture, that was ever now going to hold a doubled set of associations and memories, for Erik. It was confusing, and disturbing enough for him to firmly shut that side of his brain down, lock it and stamp on the lid.

"Tea?" he asked in Xavier's general direction. And turned immediately to the kettle, the pot, to begin brewing up. Never mind what Xavier wanted or didn't want: certain social niceties had to be observed. And certain social lubricants were indispensable. They couldn't possibly get through the next twenty minutes of whatever this might prove to be, without tea. And preferably the biscuit tin, too, unless Az, damn and blast him, had also emptied that.
Chapter Summary

Charles is in trouble. Who's he gonna call?

And there they were, in short order. Sitting opposite each other at that kitchen table once again, history repeating itself. Damn, but that table had seen some action, Erik thought. If only it could talk.

He picked up his mug -- careful not to slop it over himself, having quickly donned a clean shirt from the clothes-horse on the other side of the room, and discarded the towel he'd wiped the soap off his face with. And he gave Xavier a level look.

"Well, now we're settled," he observed. "To what do I owe the honour?" It wasn't that he really intended to spend this time metaphorically sticking pins in Xavier. It was just that it pleased him to do so.

And Xavier returned his look, his face careful, thoughtful, but open. (A bit more comfortable now that Erik was fully dressed. It couldn't help but have added to the awkwardness, all things considered.)

"You're looking well, Erik," Xavier began. He had a slight flush on his cheeks -- better than the complete pallor of previously. But Erik just waved a hand at him impatiently, in response to that. Xavier cleared his throat -- a little pinker -- and tried again.

"You haven't seen the headlines, then, I take it," he said instead.

"I pick my paper up -- I don't have it delivered," Erik said, slowly, picking his way through implications.

So. Some kind of trouble, then, he supposed. Well, obviously. What else would Charles be doing here?
Chapter Summary

Oh, really. dear oh dear. charles had better get a hold of himself re: his telepathy. Esp. now he's been outed as a telepath in the redtops and gossip columns.

Charles was properly discomfited now - his breath hitching, face redder than in congress. And he muttered, "Perhaps I could tell you - mind to mind? It would make things easier," he added hastily. "It's difficult to -- it's difficult."

"Oh, I don't think so," Erik said, pleasant and cold.
Charles sits down, takes a swig of his cuppa, and tells us a story.

Charles was silent a moment -- still thinking that obduracy and sufficient persistence might get him his own way eventually, no doubt. It probably worked often enough -- but not on Erik.

So he sighed, and began to speak -- with lips, and words, the traditional imperfect method he had no trademark on, could control and manipulate no better than anyone else. There was no home advantage to it for him, and that was how Erik liked it.

There was a cheap red-top newspaper in his hands, that he'd been clutching since he was stood out there in the street, minutes ago. He'd not put it down, not on the table nor a chair, and not loosened his grip. The knuckles of his large capable hand were white around it.

And now he put it down between them, on the table. There were a couple of small stories to one side of the front page -- wars, and economic meltdowns, and such small-fry concerns. The main photograph was of Charles, caught unprepared getting out of the backseat of a car. His hand was up towards the photographer, trying to shield his face. There was so much flash that his face was almost whited-out -- only his blue eyes were darkened to almost black, the pupils indiscernible. The image had a profoundly eerie quality, a changeling unease.
"Propaganda works best when those who are being manipulated are confident they are acting on their own free will."

Chapter Summary

Pretty pictures, isn't that what counts?

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Joseph Goebbels. Although maybe I should have gone for, 'Propaganda must facilitate the displacement of aggression by specifying the targets for hatred', after all. It's definitely groovier.

Lols. Hello fandom!

The headline read, 'TELEPATH'S STOLEN SECRETS', and Erik almost felt he didn't need to read any more of it. Oh, this was genuinely pretty bad. Xavier hadn't been dramatizing the end of his latest affair, or a bad review, as it turned out.

Charles stared down at the picture, his hands twisting and picking at each other in his lap. "Awfully unflattering photo," he remarked dispassionately.
Then he looked away from the paper, and seemed to shake himself awake for a moment, like a dog by the fire. "But how is Edie?" he asked, looking directly into Erik's eyes in a way he'd avoided until this moment.

And Erik shrugged, because that was a question requiring an hour's disquisition, or no answer at all. "She's Edie," he said, which was probably sufficient.

"That's nice, that the world still has that to count on," Charles noted. "I've thought about her so very often, and wanted to get in touch."

Of course he had, damn him. If he'd missed anyone, it had been Edie. Not that Erik resented that, it was just --

Perhaps he was a transparent fool, perhaps his thoughts showed in his face without Xavier even troubling to read his mind. At least, he reached out a hand towards Erik -- seeming to have second thoughts, and letting it drop rapidly. But he did still add, "And you also, Erik. I've thought about you, every day."

It was a good thing it was getting on for two years, since their last encounter, that hotel-room débacle. Otherwise Erik might not have been able to laugh at this, at least not convincingly. "No, you haven't," he said drily.

"Almost every day," Charles amended -- and gave him a quick cautious look, pink in the cheeks now -- unsmiling, taut with stress.

The pause, then, did yawn a bit -- considerably too long, considering that Xavier presumably hadn't invited himself in to re-hash their personal history. Still, he did give Erik a bit of a sidewise look -- oh, clearly waiting for something -- and then added, "Did you miss me at all?"

Oh, the almighty gall. Erik might actually have laughed. And a strict, bare, honest 'yes' -- well, no. Xavier sure as dammit wasn't getting that satisfaction.

"Not a shilling's worth," he lied, dry and cold as he could make it.

Ten guineas' worth, perhaps, more accurately. But strictly speaking, it was the truth.
a bit like someone who was famous for a while

Chapter Summary

Erik hasn't exactly invited confidences. But it's a bit late at this point.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Notting Hill.

"No, of course not," Xavier said, looking down at his clasped-together hands. "Of course not." Erik was doubtless just imagining that there was something of the whipped schoolboy about it. And even if not, it was certainly ridiculous to feel a twinge of regret, of compunction.

The ass merited a horsewhipping, or at least a good egging in the stocks, in a public square. Or a few stern glares, and a frosty reception, at least. Not petting, and fondling, and tolerance extended, certainly. Not the offer of a listening ear, and a shoulder to cry on.

Bit late to decide that now, of course. But at least they could get right down to business. None of this dangerous emotional nonsense, reminiscence, nostalgia. "So your little secret's out, then," Erik said abruptly. "How on earth did that happen? You were always so careful, as I remember." To the point of being disingenuous, and deceptive, he thought privately. Still, a little late to get judgmental about it, now. Rather than exercising better judgement, a long time since.

It earned him a quick vacant look from Xavier, as if the fool had been woolgathering as an Olympic event, lost in his ponderings. Then -- and Erik could see the cogs turning, the tumblers drop -- it clicked.
Chapter Summary

Charles is telling his story. Erik is reminding himself that this is over, and he doesn't give a damn.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Ted Hughes, about Sylvia Plath. What a historic twunt he was.

The story about Niven was indeed current at one time, though I don't know how much credence it deserves.

"Oh. Yes," he said, and Erik firmly resisted the temptation to point out that -- good grief -- that was exactly what he'd turned up for, uninvited, on Erik's doorstep, no? With a goodly quantity of asperity, possibly.

"Well," Xavier said, shrugging largely, "evidently not careful enough." The shrug pointed up that his suit jacket looked much as if he'd slept in it, and his shirt as if he'd balled it up and used it for a spot of dusting, for good measure. Nothing near the dapper aristo his fans were used to seeing onscreen. For that matter, nothing resembling the sleek charmer Erik remembered with only the most reluctant, resisted fondness.

"Have you heard the story about David Niven's house in the Hollywood hills, and the two-way mirror?" Xavier said now. Talking with exactly as much glib assurance as if he were making perfect, coherent, relevant sense.

Erik stared at him a moment. And it occurred to him that they were in his kitchen, where he had lots of lovely big sharp metal implements. Intended for cooking with, but it would be easy enough to turn them to murderous purposes, and...

Perhaps he glanced in the direction of the knife drawer. From whence came a distant rattle. At any rate, Xavier cleared his throat, and went on hurriedly, putting a hand up to ward off any flying fishslices. "It's relevant, I promise!" he insisted. "Well, after a fashion. The tale was going about a couple of years back -- that Niven had a two-way mirror installed in the ladies' dressing room of his mansion. So that at dinner parties with the women dressing for dinner, various Hollywood players would assemble on one side, drinks in hand, cigars in the other, commenting on the view of the other side of the glass. Hollywood wives, starlets, sashaying about in brassieres and whatnot, titties a-go-go."

He coughed, and raised his eyebrows at Erik, briefly. "The dirty old pervs. Well, that was the theory. In fact, in practice, it was a well-known thing, the ladies were in on it and most evenings gave a grand old show, lots of fun had by all. At least," he amended, "I bloody well hope so. I was invited, a time or two."

love is hard to stop
There he was, looking pensive, again. Despite his rumpled look, the shadows beneath his eyes, it was a fine look on him, that distant blue gaze half-hypnotizing Erik. Which was no good at all. "And this is relevant how?" he asked. With plenty of asperity, this time: a wheelbarrow's worth.

"Hmm?" Xavier asked, one eyebrow cocked. He looked into Erik's eyes a moment too long, and looked away. There was still colour in his face, hectic enough to denote neurasthenic stress, not health: more, in this moment. What a bloody stupid idea, to come to Erik for aid and succour. For both of them, perhaps. "Well," Xavier said. "Yes. The thing is, the spot of light voyeurism wasn't the point. Not really. Just a side-benefit. Mostly it was useful, for reasons of espionage within the industry. Spies in the house of love, Erik. Spies in the house of love."
"Really," Erik said. "So the odd usefully-placed female was encouraged to let down her back hair, rather than her brassière?" he asked.

And Charles nodded, with a quick smile lighting up his face. "Exactly, Erik. Very sharp of you -- that's what I always liked about you. Well," he amended. "One of the things." His eyes were wandering -- over Erik's thin damp shirt, half-way transparent, his face, hands, his...

Oh, hell. Hell, no. Erik had come too far to let Charles damn-him Xavier make him flush up like a teenager. Again. He cleared his throat, loud, and disapproving. Gave the damned encroaching interloper a hard look, knocked him back a bit. "So," he continued. "Dirty doings amidst the cosmopolitan élite. Unsurprising, and not useful. And?" It was beginning to warm up in the kitchen. Erik felt warm himself, for other reasons. If he even once began to think that it was nice to have Xavier here, to feel the same faint warm buzz as if it were the first drink of the evening kicking in...

Xavier sighed, rubbed a hand over his face, and pulled his jacket off, hanging it off one side of the chair. And leaned forward, forearms on the table, sleeves pushed up on that shirt that had seen better hours. Make yourself at home, why don't you, Erik almost said. But he didn't trust his voice completely.
Erik is immune to Charles' charms, now, and certainly his glib talk. Isn't he?

"I was having some problems with my agent, a couple of months back," Xavier said. His head hung a little, and he looked up at Erik, blue flickeringly interrupted by his lashes. The odd mix of sun and shadow in the morning kitchen put gold lights on the hairs on his arms.

It probably wasn't flirtation, given the circumstances. Erik had had some practice, lately.

"Moira?" Erik asked. Fairly proud, of the steadiness of his voice, after all. Although it wasn't so good that he could have named and enumerated the whole of Charles' touring ménage, without so much as stopping to think about it. Even now. Even still.

"No, no," Charles said, absently. "She's my personal manager: I entered into agreement with Obadiah Stane, a year back, to act as my agent. And everything went smoothly, at first." He sighed. "He's certainly a shark in a business negotiation: upped my take on points on my last two films, got my name above the credits on the Swedish thriller, edged Roger Moore out of the picture when I was in the last round for the Saint re-make..."

He paused. Erik's eyes were glazing over a little bit, and sometimes it was really a drawback to be the perfect model of a little English gentleman. Or maybe at this point, he'd just been inoculated against the lure and glamour of the big screen, and Xavier's part as a player on it.

"I'm boring you," Charles said quickly. It invited contradiction -- it invited a little warmth, to up the temperature of the interchange, chase after an intimacy that was gone. It didn't get it, though. After the tiniest micro-pause, he added, "In any case, I was perfectly satisfied with his services. As were Moira, Logan, et cetera..." He put a hand to his head: not the two-fingered subtle signal of imminent telepathic activity, but more like someone with a headache brewing. The colour had gone, he was white as chalk again, and that glossy head of hair was flatly dark and limp.

Half of his attraction rested on that wonderful high colour and vitality of his: certainly, there was none of Steve's Grecian regularity to his broad features and that busted nose. Without it, half his physical charms were gone: and if it was a little vindictive of Erik to take satisfaction in it, there was also an element of self-preservation.

All the better for him. Much safer.
they don't like it up 'em, Mr Mainwaring

Chapter Summary

It's not a pleasant story.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Dad's Army, a quote the gist of which should be evident to the very meanest intelligence. Nevertheless, in essence it relates to aggression and hypocrisy.

"He thought I was being welshed on a deal. Or he thought that we were, that was how he put it. Part of how," Xavier said abruptly. It hung in silence, and Erik realised they'd both lost moments, sitting silently together. Christ. "Or," Xavier said carefully, correcting himself, "what he actually said, was that we were being gypped." He gave that a moment to sink in, and Erik felt the line of his mouth harden.

There was his college 'girlfriend' at Imperial College, Magda, that was what came to mind. Lovely Magda, happy to play along with a polite fiction to please Edie, the best buddy and fake girlfriend any anxiously homosexual college freshman could have had. Magda with her Romany roots, half her extended family disappeared into the roaring, pitiless furnace of the Holocaust, just like his.

"Until he started alternating that, with suggesting we do something about it. Or else we were going to get Jewed out of what was coming to us," Xavier added. He didn't precisely meet Erik's eyes, saying it: just the slightest flicker, testing the waters.

Erik didn't say a damn thing. It seemed completely unnecessary. It wasn't as if Xavier was oblivious to the offence, nor even pretending to be. And if it was absolution he was after, the man had rocks in his head.

"Of course, I should have fired him there and then," Xavier hurried on. "Except that it's so ubiquitous in the business, you can't imagine -- slurs sliding out of every fat mouth like heaving oily slugs. And if you refuse to do business with one, then another, then ten more, who are you going to wind up doing business with at all?"

"Yes, who," Erik said, no question mark appended to it. Perfectly expressionless, and leaving Xavier to argue it out with himself.
Love Heroin

Chapter Summary

Erik knows better than this. Doing better than this, is a different matter.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Notting Hill.

"So what did he want to do?" Erik asked. A little intrigued, despite himself. He would, after all, have had to shell out three and six, to watch Xavier playing cloak and dagger, mysteriously murmuring, at the flicks. Here, he got the performance for free, and the refreshments were a significant improvement.

"Can't you guess?" Xavier asked. His expression was resigned, and slightly hangdog.

Oh, the little monster. "A smash and grab raid on someone's cranium?" Erik asked, slightly incredulous. Because -- even now -- he'd thought better of Xavier than this.

"Well," Xavier said -- and the uneasy quiver of his pupils, side to side in search of exits, was an equivocation in itself -- "we got him blotto first. Business dinner -- on my dime -- with the Scotch delivered frequently, and with a lead hand."

Erik was interested, now. Appalled, but interested. "Is that supposed to be some kind of exculpation?" he asked. Honestly curious, rather than judgmental. Or, as well as judgmental, at least.

Xavier sighed. And suddenly gripped the seat of his chair, and dragged it a little closer to the side of the table -- closer to Erik. The legs scraped on the linoleum -- perhaps a few stray flakes of J. Barnes' unbleached blood flaked off -- and Erik flinched a bit.

He was fairly -- mostly -- sure, that he could have put Xavier down with one hand, even minus powers. Given any trouble, inappropriate approaches, aggravation. And he wouldn't have characterised himself as unnerved. But --

Charles looked at him now, full-face and straight and honest, maybe for the first time. And sighed, and sagged a bit. Perhaps Erik was visibly tense, ready to run at the thought of an approach, a resumption of old bad ways. He had reason.

Based on past history, he didn't quite trust himself. No matter how much he knew better than that, in theory.
Chapter Summary

Oh, Charles has been a bad boy. Who needs a spanking? Charles does.

And Xavier put his hands on his knees, gripping them, squeezing a bit. With a hesitation, as if he'd considered putting his hand on Erik's knee, instead. And then thought better of it. In which case, good call.

"When someone's drunk -- properly oiled," Xavier clarified, speaking slowly, choosing his words with care, "then their thoughts flow freely. They transmit them louder, more readily -- less discreetly. Might as well be a radio tower, really. It isn't -- as a result -- necessary to perform any... forceful psycho-surgical procedures. Any decent telepath can just pick the thoughts out of the air, and the subject won't feel a thing..."

Oh, really. Erik didn't have to say a damned thing. He just looked.

Xavier looked away. "It seemed like a much more crucial distinction at the time," he observed. Then, out of nowhere, "You would have been good for me, Erik. You keep me up to an ethical bar I'm not capable of reaching on my own. No-one around me can make me do a damn thing I don't want to. The only influences I'm open to are bad ones."

"As if," Erik said, faintly. His eyes were stinging. He said no more. Anything could happen, otherwise.

"Anyway," Xavier said, with a decently-feigned briskness, slapping his hands on his thighs. All business, now. Damn him. "It was Justin Hammer -- the mark, you might say. He produced a couple of my early leading-man pictures, with the studio he inherited from Daddy BigBucks. And lately, the residuals from those titles had taken a nose-dive."

"Stane wasn't happy?" Erik asked.

"And how," Xavier agreed. "Not happy, and not a trusting soul either. The problem was, audit stipulations were written into my existing contracts -- and looking back, they were rather restrictive, though as much as I had the clout to demand at the time."

"You couldn't just march in and demand to see all the paperwork?" Erik asked. It was better to follow the thread, to let Xavier unburden himself, if he was so set on it. Certainly Erik's services in all capacities and departments were much in demand at the mo. Nurse, surgeon, business advisor, shrink... Perhaps he ought to hang out a shingle, along the lines of 'inquire within upon everything'. Might be more profitable than book-selling.

He was still watching Xavier -- when Xavier wasn't watching him. And when he wasn't watching Xavier, Xavier was watching him.

God damn. Erik was a book-seller. He knew enough about subtext to be following both conversations, here. And what he ought to be saying, without words, was, "No. No. No."
More stratagems and spoils? Bloody hell.

Chapter Summary

Erik learns a little of what's been going on.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title a light re-working from Shakespeare.

Anyhow. "Absolutely not," Xavier confirmed. "Not unless we wanted to get into lawsuit territory."

"So instead," Erik said carefully, "you invited Hammer to a business dinner, got him plastered, and rifled around in his mind."

"Erik," Xavier said, his cheeks a hectic rose-petal pink now. "You make me feel like a small boy, whose great-aunt has found him with his hand in the cookie jar." And that, that was attempted flirtation. And attempted distraction, too.

Give him a chance to explain himself, Erik thought. Mostly he felt despair. How had he ever taken this idiot seriously? "Charles," he said -- and watched the informality register on Charles' face, his pupils expand a little. "Why on earth did you go along with it?"

"Ah. Good question," Charles said wryly. Was he leaning in a little closer? This should not be encouraged: must not be allowed to stand. "First of all, it was quite safe. I was assured -- by Stane -- that there would be absolutely no repercussions."

"Really," Erik said: none more dry.

"As you say," Charles allowed. "Still, it was a reasonable assumption at the time. Secondly, we were fresh out of other options, if we wanted to find out what the heck was going on. And then, on the ethical front..." he added. And paused to look into Erik's eyes, a little too close, a lot too trusting -- as if they knew each other still. Or ever, really. As if Erik was the person he was closest to in the world. "Really, I assumed that Stane had the rights of it. Despite being a bit of a wrong 'un himself. Hammer's reputation is distinctly dubious. He's generally alleged to be up to all sorts, and--. Well, in short, I managed to justify it to myself. A feat which I have since learned to regret."

The morning was further along, now, the light brighter. The kitchen window was open, and the sounds of the market setting up, and the world getting busy in the street filtered through. Erik rose abruptly -- they were too close, now, not only literally.

"I'll freshen your cup," he said, grabbing Xavier's mug of tea. "And you can tell me what actually happened."
"You rotten swine, you!"

Chapter Summary

Explanations, subtext, undercurrents, motivations. Xavier really has no credible reason to be here. Erik really has no credible reason not to kick him out on his arse. Nevertheless...

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from The Goon Show - Bluebottle, of course.

An extra spoonful of tea in the pot, kettle on, water in. And Xavier behind him, telling his tale. Leaning back on the legs of that chair, now, and even without metal tips to the legs, it wouldn't have taken much to tip him over. It was like a mystery story on the Home Service: with added mutants, since they were considered by Reith a 'racy' element, reserved for mature entertainments.

"It all went perfectly smoothly," Xavier said, reflectively. "Well, except for the fact that I came up blank. Not that Hammer is a choirboy, not by any stretch, even just judging by what I'd dredged through by the time he'd got outside his second cognac. Quite a colourful history of deception and dirty dealings -- just none of it applicable to his dealings with us."

"Squeaky-clean, really?" Erik asked. "So what about the residuals?" He leaned on the counter, back to Xavier, drumming the ceramic surface with his fingernails, waiting for the pot to boil. Ah, what a metaphor.

And Xavier shrugged -- one hand gripping the edge of the kitchen-table, as he tempted fate - metaphors aplenty, here -- teetering on the back legs of the chair. He still looked like a rumpled, Bowery-Street-bum version of his normal dapper self, shadows under his eyes and hair mussed. But more relaxed than the nervous lost cat that had turned up hungry on his doorstep, half an hour back.

And Erik should certainly have charged him for that.

"Apparently, there have been distribution problems in a couple of territories," Xavier said, his low lovely voice only slightly doubtful. "Coupled with an accounting period discrepancy -- new procedures and regulations -- and a rights reversion for dubbed and subtitled properties. In short," he said, shrugging again, "a confluence of various benign, harmless, perfectly explicable factors, coming together to produce a very suspicious-looking end result."
"Do you remember, Eccles?"

Chapter Summary

You'd think Charles would have a bit of shame, really. Or at least the caution and good sense to remember that Erik has half a head and two stone on him.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title: more Bluebottle.

"Ironic," Erik commented, turning around. He leant against the counter-top, while the kettle began to hum, getting ready to whistle.

And he found Charles still watching him. And still looking like a hungry cat, in a different way.

Oh, the blasted nuisance. If he was still such an over-sexed amorous little leg-humper -- even now found Erik an appetising prospect -- then why had he --

Oh, Erik stuffed that train of thought down, damn quick. Profitless, pointless, and that way madness lay.

Or perhaps it was just any port in a storm, and no compliment to Erik. Just the nearest available sexual possibility. (The nearest available hole, his mind muttered crudely. God, but he'd been keeping bad company lately. Edie would throw a fit: not that she couldn't be vulgar as a docker, when she chose. A different thing for a son of hers to be less than a gentleman and a scholar, though.)

It was also another fruitless speculation. Erik tried to rein his mind in, a racehorse that had no intention of meekly entering the starting gate. He did think that it would be nice to have the time back, all the time wasted wondering why he never wrote, never called, never made a second uninvited visit in Erik's skull, after that one sleepy disorientated greeting.

"Ironic, certainly," Xavier agreed. "Dishonesty and dirty-doings in every direction -- but Hammer, it appears, was pure as the driven snow in his dealings with me. Perhaps I should be honoured? I felt quite bad about it." He wasn't looking at Erik now -- a raised eyebrow had put paid to that. But he wasn't looking nearly as chastened as Erik would have preferred.

Erik brought the mugs of fresh tea over to the table. "No harm, no foul?" he suggested, bringing the other eyebrow into play.

"Thank you, Erik," Xavier said. He looked up, and chewed his lip, looking as if he had so much more to say. "You're very kind," he added. He touched Erik's arm -- hesitantly -- as he set down the mug. And it was fortunate he was firmly on four legs, now, given Erik's start, and sudden rigidity.

Two nervous cats, then.
Of course, Erik could just throw the assuming ass out on his ear.
"Can I stay awhile?"

Chapter Summary

Two conversations, one spoken, one firmly disapproved and repressed subtext.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from 'Notting Hill'.

But no, he still wanted to know what happened next. Or that was the excuse that he offered up to himself, at any rate. "No, I'm not," he said tightly, sitting down again. "So I wouldn't rely too much upon that, If I were you. As you were, Charles: I believe you reached the point where you'd made a morally unjustifiable raid upon someone else's domain, and discovered their supposed ill-intent and reprehensible dealings to be a fairy story, bodged up by the frothing, fomenting brain of a bigot, beast and bounder. A lovely bit of projection, in fact. And what next? You've reached a null point, surely: proved yourself morally bankrupt, achieved nothing, but evaded well-deserved discovery and ruin. If you're thinking of making a film out of it, I don't recommend it. It lacks some quality of dramatic tension and resolution. No ciggie after that damp squib."

Erik felt rather pleased with himself. He'd dragged his chair to face Xavier head-on across the table again, and they stared at each other a minute. Xavier smiled slightly: but like a man who'd just been offered pistols at dawn, not an olive branch. "You know, I boxed at Cambridge, Erik," he said conversationally.

"Yes, I do know," Erik said, all chatty too. "I know a lot about you, Charles. As you know full well, what with having had a good old unethical root around in my brain, too, once upon a while ago."

"Rather harsh," Xavier noted. "In any case, I mean, I feel rather as if we'd do well to be in a boxing ring, right about now." There was a sharp point of colour on each of those coarsely-boned cheeks, a glint to the eyes. He'd livened up considerably since arrival: combat suited him better than soggy despair.

"You wouldn't do well," Erik noted. He supposed that he probably had a glint of his own.

"Oho, you think so, do you?" Xavier said amiably. "You've never seen me in the ring, Erik." Another moment's silence, and it took that moment for Erik to become aware that, well, there they were. Staring at each other, pleased with each other. Almost grinning.

This wouldn't do at all, was what Erik thought. And Xavier clearly thought something entirely different, reaching out a hand to rest in the middle of the table, between them.

Not that Erik reached out in turn. (He almost did: as a matter of automatic reflex, because some damfool bit of him still responded to Xavier, maybe always would. But he didn't, and that was what counted.) Not that Xavier seemed fazed, either. Just carried on without a pause, saying, "Yes, if that
was the conclusion I agree it'd be a bit of a damp squib. However, we saw Hammer safely home, handed over to the care of his various assistants, toadies and flunkeys. And then, the next day, he gave me a call."

"Not good news," Erik commented, judging by Xavier's wry face, eyebrow askew.

"Well," Charles said meditatively. "No. He opened by asking if I'd like to be legally fucked up the ass, through the spleen, or in the ear canal. So that was the first sign that something had gone agley."

Erik's tea was clap-cold, and he didn't give a damn. Also a reliable sign of unusually hectic activity. He stretched back in his chair, now, hands linked over his head. Fully aware of Xavier's eyes on him, and not giving a damn about that, either, or perhaps inviting it.

He felt aglow with well-being, here, now. This was the best entertainment he'd had in a long time, in or out of the bedroom -- entertainment well-earned, after the past couple of days. And not even all of it about schadenfreude.

"He knew?" Erik asked.

Xavier exploded with laughter, at this. "Nothing gets past you, Erik," he commented. "Although I'd have been worried if you hadn't picked up on that one. No son of Edie Lehnsherr should need to be led by the hand to the obvious conclusion."

"How did he know?" Erik offered. Oh, this was much too much like dancing. And, damn it, he wasn't even leading.

"Exactly!" Xavier exclaimed explosively, slamming both hands palm-down on the kitchen table, now. "And more than that, why would it even occur to him as a possibility?"
women beware women

Chapter Summary

Explanations are nice.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from... well, definitely a play. Might be Webster? /checks. Naw, it's Middleton.

He shook his head, that slightly overgrown mop falling out of and into place in a delayed wave. A marveling disbelief on his face, smiling at Erik. It was sickening: Erik felt a little sick, at himself perhaps. He ought to have had a sign on the door, in preparation for this day: 'No Visitors, No Jehovah's Witnesses, and most particularly no Charles Xavier'. Well, it beat 'No Irish No Blacks No Dogs', with or without Jews being added to the list too. Except for how it would make him look a lunatic, in the neighbourhood.
'No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs'

Chapter Summary

Getting to the meat of what's got Charles in a fluster, enough to drive him back to Erik's arms. Well, he clearly wishes, anyhow.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title: that's what particularly nasty poisonous British landladies used to put as a sign in their boarding-house windows, a few decades back. The 'No Jews' bit is probably implied, too.

I expect the modern equivalent would be 'No Poles, No Muslims... No Dogs'. If they could get away with it, and post-Brexit it may be just a matter of time. Hayy-ulp. Britain is over, as a relatively civilised experiment in whether human beings can be decent and, well, civilised. /bangs on Germany's doors. Oi, got any vacancies?

"I suppose you're going to tell me eventually?" Erik asked. Not patiently: only in the way of giving the bleeder enough rope. Beyond a certain point of wilful provocation, there'd be no alternative but to turf him out on his arse.

"He invited me out to lunch," Xavier said simply, a thoughtful, speculative look on his face. "I knew as much as you do now: to wit, nothing. I did know damn well that he couldn't have detected my little visit off his own bat. I'm an old hand: my technique is much too good."

The self-satisfied note in his voice was flagrant: sufficiently so for him even to pick up on it himself, judging by the way that he twitched, and flushed up a bit. Nothing to be proud of, there, certainly, Erik reckoned. "Well, I say invited," Xavier added quickly. "More like commanded, really: with unspecified consequences to follow, if I failed to turn up."

"What did you say?" Erik asked idly. The sun through the window was burning the back of his neck, and a shadow was falling over Xavier's face as the sun ascended. Xavier's true face had always been in shadow, though. More so than the likes of Raven and her masks, much more so.

"Well, first I said, 'But this is so sudden, Justin! I had no idea you were quite so keen, wanting to see me two days in a row.'" And Xavier mimed a nervous flutter, a flirty hand to his hair.

Erik snorted, just faintly. And thought that a light smack would really do this spoilt playboy no harm at all. "Did that go down well?" he asked.

Xavier just looked at him a moment -- a slight eyeroll -- and continued. "Well, I showed up for the appointment -- not having been given much option. At his private residence, of course."

"Enemy territory," Erik commented. He knew something about that. "To his advantage."
"Yes, Erik," Xavier confirmed. "Much like right now, but we'll move on... And he made me wait twenty minutes -- gave me an insultingly perfunctory lunch -- and made the most menacing smalltalk you can possibly imagine, for more than an hour. Until he finally deigned to end the suspense, and got down to business. Can I hold your hand a moment, Erik?" he tagged on, casually.

It almost tripped Erik up. And it did make him laugh, properly this time. He leaned forward a little, with emphasis. "Keep all of your parts to yourself, Charles," he advised.

"Oh, all right," Xavier said, lightly. "Worth a try. It would help my nerves considerably right now, that's all. I have thought about you, Erik. Frequently, and fondly."

Which only merited silence, and got it. Xavier shrugged, and what Erik could make out of his face in shadow, was dark already. "Well, Hammer took me down to his underground lab, anyhow," he said, finally. "Or lair, perhaps: lair seems appropriate. And he showed me a most curious device."
Chapter Summary

Justin Hammer's been having some fun, but Erik's more interested in other revelations.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title: see previous chapter. This is probably the universe-appropriate modification, as far as 1960s Brit landladies go.

Monty Python reference, or Monty Python-adjacent, at least.

"What is this, a Jules Verne novel?" Erik asked drily. But he was intrigued, it couldn't be denied. A ridiculous farrago, this, overall -- and he mistrusted, on principle now, and based on hard-won experience, every word out of Xavier's still.pretty mouth. But he couldn't deny that this was shaping up to be a ripping yarn, and God knew he deserved a little light entertainment.

"You might think so. I wondered myself," Xavier allowed, smiling slightly. "Hammer's lab was a wondrous Gothic tomb of defunct equipment, failed prototypes and manically active worker drones, toiling away on busywork. It's a good thing that Hammer Sr. had millions to bestow: what Justin Hammer lacks in inspiration, he substitutes with brute force, numbers and funding. Which explains his moderate success, I suppose. You should hear Tony Stark on the subject. In any case," he continued -- before Erik could interject, "he spent a little while showing off, in a suitably imperious and lordly manner -- one bites one's lip, good God. But he did finally lead me to the little chamber at the heart of the matter."

"You know Tony Stark?" Erik asked, stalled on this revelation, unheeding of the rest. Because the engineering fanboy in him simply couldn't be restrained. And though he didn't grudge a minute, or a day, or a year that he'd devoted to the bookshop, to the interests and upkeep and safety of his family, still... His heart beat a little faster for the beauty of metal and machinery. He'd been born for it, after all -- specifically designed, by evolution. Damn the human heart, damn love -- Erik would have cast every sonnet ever written into deep space, for the sake of one decent Roman aqueduct, or the meanest achievement of Kingdom Brunel.

Xavier laughed -- then didn't laugh, as he looked a little closer at Erik's face. "Oh, really. I suppose it's a good thing you didn't meet Tony, first," he noted. "Remind me never to introduce you. I don't think I could take the competition. Really, Erik? You aren't the least bit interested in how Hammer came to find me out, and hound me through the pages of the gutter press? Not now there's the prospect of an engineering pin-up on offer, instead?"

"Do I get to meet Stark, if I take an interest in your troubles?" Erik asked. Not quite joking -- not quite.

"Oh, it's come to that," Charles said lightly. "Bribery, and transactions. You hung on my every word, two years back, Erik. Must I remind you? It was giddying to be so fascinating, and to
someone so--" He stopped, like a broken clock -- like a machine Erik might fix. If he still cared enough, to do it.

"Before I dispensed with illusions," Erik suggested. "Or you did that for me, in fact. Thanks," he added.
Chapter Summary

All this prodding and provocation, something's gotta give.

Chapter Notes

I believe the title's from a track by Charlie Parker, or at least a cover. Although he was probably talking about heroin, not Tate & Lyle's finest granulated, like Erik.

Charles twitched a little, again. "Magnetic, that's the word I was looking for," he continued, just as if Erik hadn't spoken at all. "Someone so magnetic."

"Did no-one ever tell you about puns, Charles?" Erik enquired. And he put a hand up, and commanded the stainless steel sugar shaker on the kitchen counter, so that it slammed through the air resistance with an audible whistle, to land in his gently closing fist -- an act simultaneously violent, and utterly mundane.

He shook a little extra in his tea. About as sweet as vinegar, his mood right now: but he did like his tea sweet.
'a happy marriage is a long conversation which always seems too short'

Chapter Summary

A very shocking dénouement! Well, as far as Charles is concerned, anyhow. Simply appalling!

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is a quote from Andre Maurois, author of 'Fattypuffs and Thinifers'.

But he relented -- only because he did want to know, a bit. "What did he pull out and show you, Charles?" he asked, in the tone of one indulging a child. "Anything suitable for a family-friendly audience?"

"Well, first he whipped off his wig," Charles said baldly. And Erik cursed, choked, and spluttered on his nice sweet tea.

"You did that deliberately," he accused. To which Xavier smirked, a little. They were, really, getting along a little too well. It needed watching.

"A little payback," Charles allowed. "Who could grudge me? However. So there he was," he continued. "Tonsured like a mediaeval monk, hairpiece in hand like a very dead ferret. And that's not even the worst of it! It was voluntary," he disclosed. With a vain little shudder, and a protective hand instinctively flying to touch his own admittedly lovely, ample locks. "Much too neat and precise for natural male-pattern baldness. He'd clearly shaved his own head -- or had it done for him, a perfect circle at the crown of his skull. Can you imagine?" he asked Erik. Rather earnestly.
one of those complicated mixed-up cats

Chapter Summary

Charles' adventures in Wonderland. Or Hammer's lab, at least.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is a quote from Frank Sinatra.
The cap beneath the hair owes something to John Christopher's 'Tripods' series, the mesh skullcap imagery to a scene from Mary Karr's truly amazing 'Lit' memoir.

"There are worse things in life, you know, Charles," Erik said. (Good Lord. Didn't he know it.)

"Really, Erik? Are you sure?" Xavier asked. "In any case, there's where the device comes in. Hammer hadn't committed such a travesty just for the heck of it. He was wearing a skullcap."

"Really? Justin Hammer is Jewish?" Erik asked, eyebrows raised. Certainly, it was the first he'd heard of it.

"Oh, no. No," Xavier said, absently. "I speak figuratively. That's certainly what it looked like, though. A little silver mesh cap on the crown of his skull, right up to the boundaries of his tonsure. It was sealed there somehow, skintight. I only hope he hadn't gone as far as to have it screwed into his skull. And he sat down in what looked like a highly elaborate dentist's chair -- the whole little lab office was kitted out like a dentist's surgery, trays of implements and whatnot, gave me the creeps, frankly. And he swiveled it around a bit, smirking."

"Annoyingly smug," Erik noted.

"Oh yes," Charles agreed, oblivious. "And then he put two fingers up to his temple -- God knows where he picked up on that particular tic, he was the one who was drunk as a lord on our little jaunt - - and said, 'Tell you what, Xavier, why don't you try having a good old root around in here. Again.'"

Erik laughed, and Xavier gave him a wry look. "So glad to amuse. I played dumb, of course. Who, me? And what are you talking about, Hammer? Très unconvincing, I don't doubt. He just laughed his arse off, in the most galling fashion. 'Come on, Xavier,' he said. 'I've got you by the low hanging fruit, and you know it. And what's more, I can prove it -- but you don't need to worry about that, it's just between you and me. Aren't you curious, about how I knew?' Go on. Have a go,' he said."

Erik looked at him, with the gravest misgivings. "Charles. You didn't."

And Xavier shrugged. "Oh, of course I did."

Well, it wasn't as if Erik hadn't already known full well, really.
Chapter Summary

I've got this posted up on Wattpad as gothicmork, and last time I had a look I had a notification to say it was eligible for the Wattys 2019. Nice! But on checking the T&Cs, previous publication online rules that out. So sad! However, by that time, I'd filled in the entry form including writing a 500 word summary of the whole plotline. So no point wasting that, and here it is. SPOILERS for ya.

Chapter Notes

No notes, bud.

British book-store owner Erik Lehnsherr meets film-star Charles Xavier, through his charming socialite mother, Edie - and their affair is furtive, discreet and brief. Until Charles reunites with his famous ex-girlfriend Emma Frost, and drops Erik. Erik is heartbroken, but recovers. It helps to be romanced by handsome Steve Rogers, nephew of the late Captain America. Or is he? When Erik is attacked in his own bookshop by a mysterious assassin, he realizes that Steve is ageless, super-powered – and actually Captain America, undercover. And the assassin is Steve's old friend, 'Bucky' Barnes...

These two have their own tangled history. And when Steve has to rescue an injured Bucky, he disappears out of Erik's life. Erik might be more dejected, but Charles Xavier turns up on his doorstep again...

Charles has been outed as a telepath, and is now a pariah in Hollywood. He comes to Erik for comfort, and inevitably their romance rekindles. But when Charles mistakenly thinks that Erik has betrayed him to the press, he rejects Erik for a second time.

Truly heartbroken, and reckless, Erik gets involved in uncovering a covert HYDRA operation, with Steve and the Winter Soldier. When they come to grief – and Erik's mother Edie is almost killed – Erik decides he's had enough of glamour, danger... and love. He retreats to his quiet life as a book-store owner, licks his wounds, and counts himself lucky to still have his family.

And then Charles Xavier is reported to be making a fresh start – and a new film, in London. He's back in town. And Erik knows better, but is still tempted to catch just a glimpse of him. It's fatal. Charles pursues him, penitent and wanting Erik back – and Erik just can't resist.

He's in love – still – and he can't deny it. He's deliriously happy – until HYDRA taps him for service, using intel from his foiled attack with Steve and Bucky Barnes. With this blackmail material – and their threats against his cherished mother Edie, and his darling sister Raven – he's helpless. Until Charles – a much more powerful telepath than Erik had suspected – unites with Captain America and the Winter Soldier, to help him bring down HYDRA, once and for all.

Their lives have been changed forever – and there's no going back. Once, Erik was a mild-mannered
bookseller, a very British bourgeois little gentleman – or at least, he pretended to be. Charles was a fabulous movie-star, superficial, charming and heartless. (Steve Rogers was his own nephew, an Oxford post-doc. The Winter Soldier was a brainwashed assassin, no more than a tool in HYDRA’s hands.)

But now, they know the truth, they own it. They can change the world, working against evil, dictatorship and despotism, anti-mutant prejudice, homophobic and anti-semitic bigotry.

The last we see of them, Steve and Bucky drive away on the next mission – because there's always another mission. Charles and Erik are hand in hand. Erik is truly himself, now – no masks, no safe, inoffensive pretence, no timidity. Homosexual, Jewish, mutant – powerful and unafraid. And in love.
until an hour before the Devil fell, God thought him beautiful in Heaven

Chapter Summary

Charles has done something reckless and damfoolish. How surprising!

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is a quote from Arthur Miller's 'The Crucible', a play about a witchhunt.

"To be fair, it was with an invite, this time," Charles defended himself. "However foolish."

"However specious," Erik murmured, not especially surprised that Xavier affected a temporary auditory glitch. "So?"

"I had a little skim around," Xavier allowed. "Cautiously -- very cautiously."

"And?"

"Absolutely nothing!" Xavier said, exasperated. "Zilch! And by that, I mean, absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. I didn't go deep, nothing invasive, nothing requiring energy and intent, directional focus... Everything was just as I'd have expected... A lot of surface, random thoughts, and a lot of rather mocking self-satisfaction." He paused, breathed hard, shook his head. And looked a bit aggravated, for someone reporting 'four o'clock, and all's well...' "So I swam up out of there," he said, with a shrug. "And was left standing, facing the smirking little bugger."

(Erik had heard reports before, of Justin Hammer. Nothing flattering, regarding his films, or his research engineering labs. Or his character. But now, he wouldn't have minded shaking the dodgy, disreputable power-monger by the hand.)
"You are trying to kidnap what I have rightfully stolen, and I think it quite ungentlemanly."

Chapter Summary

Etiquette lectures, from Charles, and Justin Hammer. The irony!

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is a quote from 'The Princess Bride'.

"Well, I was baffled," Xavier said frankly. "Got to keep up a good front, though, eh? 'I hope you don't think that that sink-drainer on your head kept me out, Justin,' I said to him. 'Because if you do, then you've been sold a pup. I've just had a poke around in there: the bit with the Playboy model and the bowl of fruit was a bit distasteful, frankly. Not the thing at all, old chap.'"

And Erik raised his eyebrows: at which Charles leaned back in his chair, blew the smoke off an imaginary pistol, and grinned at him. "Believe me, Erik, you don't want to know. Anyhow. 'Jealous?' is what he said to that - and as if, Hammer's idea of appropriate conduct when romancing a lady-friend is -- well, never mind," he added, with a hurried glance Erik's way.

(Appropriate conduct. Erik thought he might melt the teaspoon in his cuppa, from the effort of restraining himself from comment. Still, no point getting into it. It would only give the bleeder an avenue to investigate, if Erik conceded it as an acceptable topic for debate.)

"Anyway," Xavier went on quickly, "he topped that with, 'Thanks for the lecture on gentlemanly conduct, Xavier -- even if it's a little on the ironic side, coming from you.'"
"I know you weren't yourself when you did this"

Chapter Summary

So. What *was* Justin Hammer up to?

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is a quote from the movie 'Single White Female'. Check it out!

Strangeness and charm are, apparently, flavours of quarks in particle physics. I have almost no physics knowledge at my disposal, think I picked it up off some indie song. Seems appropriate for Charles, though.

"'No, it isn't intended to keep out intruders,' he went on -- fondling the repulsive thing as if he were fond of it, a special pet. You wouldn't like the fellow, Erik," Xavier assured him.

"Really," Erik said. "And yet you make him sound so attractive."

That pulled Xavier up, and made him grin, and -- Erik had to stop playing along with this. They weren't *pals*.

"*Now* I'm jealous," Charles said. "Anyhow. 'Don't think I *couldn't* keep you out, though. If I'd wanted to,' is what he said. 'Just a matter of adjusting the settings.'"

"So. He was only out to monitor any psionic activity? Erik said, thoughtful. "Some kind of EEG, monitoring brainwaves, maybe."

"Erik," Xavier said -- a little reproachful. "The thought *had* occurred to me. I know you're a bright boy: but I'm not quite a dim-wit myself. But he wasn't wired up, no correctly placed electrodes, no print-outs, monitor, nothing. And nor was I, for that matter. There's state of the art, and then there are things that simply aren't within the scope of current capabilities. Well, so I thought, anyhow." He paused, brooding. "I was damnably curious."

"Really, you were?" Erik asked. You were *passionately intrigued*, he thought. You were *alight* with it. You were intellectually seduced, off on another wild chase after strangeness and charm.

Oh, and now *Erik* was jealous.
"Something unknown is doing we don't know what."

Chapter Summary

Erik didn't sign up for a master's seminar, damn it.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is a quote from Arthur Stanley Eddington.

'Les oncles' is a callback to Iris Murdoch's 'Nuns and Soldiers' - 'les cousines et les tantes'.

"Hmm," Xavier nodded. elbows on the table, fingers pressed together like a man in prayer. "Well. Hammer said, 'I'll show you, if you like.' And he took me by the arm, and guided me into the lab next door. It had a mainframe computer humming away -- really, Hammer Industries is amazingly well-equipped. You know, considering their underwhelming output."

There was something unhealthy in just how electric the light in his eyes was. Did you offer him hand relief to take the edge off, Erik wanted to ask -- to say any number of cruel and hurtful things, to get a dig in. But. No.

"He picked up a print-out, spooled out into a tray to one side," Xavier said. "Stood next to me, and went through it. As you say, something distantly related to an EEG. Rather in the way an Aston Martin would be related, to a pushbike. It was like being a first-year undergrad, let loose in a professional lab for the first time, pressing forwards to see the practical demonstration. And Hammer, playing the wise old pedagogue. I would have let him sink or swim, Hammer, back in the day as a technical instructor, during my thesis -- what there ever was of it. Not worth the effort of bringing up to an acceptable standard." Well. How could a voice be so distant, so light, and so damningly harsh at the same time.

"What was it, then?" Erik asked. Case closed, by now, barring the extreme improbability.
"Hammer's brain activity?"

"His. And mine," Charles said, reflective. "Two readings, a pair of data points along the axes. The ink was still wet. No proof, of course, he could have been spoofing me quite easily. Except, of course..."

"Except he knew what you'd been up to, already. Quod erat demonstrandum. But how the hell? Brain electrical potentials surely aren't strong enough for any kind of recording at a distance, and what about you? You weren't conveniently wearing one of his hardware-store yarmulkes -- how does that even -- damn it --." Erik felt flushed with frustration, irritation. It wasn't often that he felt quite such a dolt. "Are you trying to sell me on action at a distance?" he demanded, with a sharp laugh. "How about perpetual motion?"

Erik had had more frustrating seminars, in his senior year mechanics module, say. But not many. He
should absolutely have listened to Jakob and *les oncles*, he thought. Not dropped biology at the first opportunity, before his Leaving Certificate even, abandoning the fleshy, fallible, unreliable human body for the glamour and seductions of machines and chemical reactions. Ruling out medicine as a career at the same time, too -- disappointing for Jakob, ever a philanthropical gent, a humanist with a heart for the sufferings of humanity. But Edie hadn't given a damn. Her fine upstanding boy was a tinkering, overalls-sporting, engineering grease-monkey, a fervent hungry catholic reader and scholar, as well as a severe and righteous angel of death (when required.) What Jewish mother could be prouder than she?

"Does it matter?" Charles asked.
"The truth is you're exactly like Edison.'

Chapter Summary

Charles and Justin Hammer got their Tesla/Edison thing going on. Or something.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is a quote from the Big Bang Theory.

"Hammer dropped some heavy hints that there's piggybacking involved, on a telepathic subject's inherent powers. In any case. He started poking at his little flying saucer -- I was frankly worried that he might be about to lever it off, and though I'm not a squeamish guy, still, if drills and raw flesh and -- baldness -- were involved, I'd have much preferred an aseptic operating room environment. But no. He just said, 'This one, this is MK. II, Xavier. Would you like to know where MK. I came from?"

"Little green men? Planet 9?" Erik suggested. The light was higher, brighter in the sky: Xavier looked more relaxed, half the story out of him, telling his tale. The shadows under his eyes had lightened. Mercifully wound down, from his keyed-up state on the doorstep, an hour or so back.

Az would be gone on his audition until at least two in the afternoon, maybe three. They had the house to themselves.

Well, moving swiftly on. Especially with Xavier, cocking his head slightly Erik's way, smiling at him. "Oh, you're teasing me, Erik. Do that some more."

Hell fire.

It was warmer suddenly. No doubt due to the ascended sun -- yes, that was it. Damn the actual temperature, though. "It's a bit chilly," Erik said -- similarly chilly himself. And he retrieved his good old favourite cardigan, drying out on the clothes-horse in the corner. Shrugged himself into it like armour: because no nice mamma's boy, wearing hand knitted Fair Isle patterns, was getting seduced in his family's grace and favour little townhouse, today. (Knitted by Raven! His crafty, handy little sis! Not Edie. Perish the thought.)

Re-seduced, anyhow.

He fiddled with his spectacles, cleaned them. Put them back on, and glared a bit.
they still remembered to use stones

Chapter Summary

Nazi science ahoy, but not the Tesseract here.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is a quote from Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery', a story about a public stoning.

Fortunately Xavier was too smart to push it -- while Erik's brain seized momentarily, a spanner in the works. Instead he went on -- oh, too smooth -- "Well, it's a reasonable suggestion. All things considered. But no. In fact, what Hammer said to me was, 'My old Pop, Charlie, you'd have liked him. I was a heck of a disappointment to him, but he'd have liked you. Anyhow, Daddy was a very social fella, he had all kinds of buddies in odd places. Including a few pals in the C.I.A."

"Bully for him," Erik commented. Because he knew a thing or two about --

"Hmm. I wouldn't be boasting, myself," Xavier agreed. "Anyway. Daddy Hammer's good buddies in Central Intelligence had, it seems, taken him on a tour around some highly restricted 'salvaged artefacts', at some point back in the day. Artefacts with a rather dubious history, as far as that goes."

"It's all right, Charles," Erik said, rather dryly. "You can say Nazi scientists, without me flipping my lid." Not that it didn't leave a bad taste in the mouth, just the same. Not when he reflected that all it would have taken, back in the camp, was a little less resolve, a slightly worse aim -- and Schmidt would have been one of the Nazi bastards 'rehabilitated' by the U.S. secret services: the ones too useful to hold accountable for their actions.

Not too high a price to pay, to write off the tab. To some.

"Well, Nazi science, at least," Charles qualified. "Or, according to Hammer, excavated relics inspected and analysed by Nazi scientists."
one doesn't need telepathy to read your intentions

Chapter Summary

So what were the Nazis up to, with a telepath-detecting helmet?

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is by Frank Herbert, from Dune.

Beatles song reference in there.

"So Hitler was looking to experiment on telepaths, then?" Erik asked. "Identifying psionic activity, capturing subjects?..." And he shivered. Xavier wasn't the first telepath he'd met, in fact. One mutant knows another, knows another: and however one might prefer to blend in to normal society, it was still the easiest, most unavoidable thing in the world to pick up a few non-baseline acquaintances, here there and everywhere. Like gravitating to like, and all that, metal attracting the magnetized.

None of the psionics he knew, or had known, were in Xavier's class, though. It was only too easy to imagine what could have come of it. In Hitler's Germany, in Schmidt's. And it was like a dirty fingernail, poking at a pain receptor laid open by a scalpel, to think of Charles as a helpless lab subject, just the way that Raven had been, once. The both of them kids at the time -- the three of them -- and any mischance of fate might have brought it to pass. Xavier's parents taking a diplomatic posting, travelling for business, a family visit, anything.

The very thought was so extraordinarily painful that Erik felt a little faint. And he was indignant. Xavier, damn him! How dare he make Erik feel something, feel that flaming urgency to shield, to protect. Even now!

Leaving quite aside, just how ridiculous such hypothetical anguish might be.

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