

Unlocking What's Locked

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/1884891) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1884891>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence , Rape/Non-Con
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	X-Men: First Class (2011) - Fandom , X-Men (Movies)
Relationship:	Erik Lehnsherr/Charles Xavier
Characters:	Erik Lehnsherr , Charles Xavier , Sean Cassidy , Azazel (X-Men) , Alex Summers , Cain Marko , Darwin , Raven Mystique , Emma Frost , Hank McCoy , Victor Creed , Logan (X-Men) , Moirra MacTaggart
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Prison , prison break - Freeform , It came from my brain , Poor Charles , Charles Xavier has a Ph.D in Adorable , Erik is not a Happy Bunny , Erik is Crushing Harder than a 12-year Old Girl , Azazel is amused , Sean is Squirrely , WHAT IS THIS ONESHOT YOU SPEAK OF? , I cannot write oneshots and I should just accept that , Erik Has Feelings , Many of them , Attempted Rape/Non-Con , Spitroasting , fantasy threesome
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2014-07-02 Updated: 2014-08-23 Words: 28,256 Chapters: 14/?

Unlocking What's Locked

by [Ook](#)

Summary

Prison AU.

Why, why does Guard Xavier's shift have to be today? Why does he have to be so kindly?
Bitter mutant lifer Erik curses his timing. Sean worries. Azazel sighs.

So, a prison break fic, spiralling into an on-the-run fic and who knows where we're heading next?

The author regards her WIPS with shame.
The author apologises.

The author writes another 2000 words and gives up hope on this whole "One Shot" thing.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1

The mutant/mutate prison wing is quiet today.

Oh, some of the occupants are talking—shouting—to each other over the force fields' steady hum, but there's no real conflict in the atmosphere. Not today. Erik stares down at his plastic chess pieces laid out on the grid he's scratched into the concrete floor and refuses to acknowledge to himself why this might be.

He knows though. Today is a different day to many in their monotonous round. Erik turns his back on the eyes in the other cells, ignoring Sean's smirk and Azazel's attempts at talking to him. He looks at Alex's cell, still empty. Everyone in this little bay knows what's coming. They all know why they're being quiet; feeling calmer today. One of the few bright spots in prison life is at hand.

Guard Xavier's on duty.

Erik's heard the other guards call him "the social worker." Because of the amount of effort he puts in for the prisoners. It's only faintly jeering; they might not like what he does, but they sure as hell like to benefit from the improved mood and decreased conflicts he leaves behind.

When he roams through the corridor, stopping here and there for a quiet chat with one inmate or another, everyone's quiet. The young guard has that effect on prisoners. He reminds them that they are people. He's interested in them. He *listens*.

Even to Erik; who hadn't spoken to anyone in two months when Ch—Xavier's first shift occurred. Now it's barely six months later and somehow Xavier's got him running the chess club. Useful as that has been, Erik wishes Xavier wasn't on duty this day of all days, wishes he was far away from here. Wishes he'd never so much as heard of this prison. He's too good, too kind, too trusting.

Xavier's going to get hurt, here.

Or what Erik thinks might be worse, corrupted. Xavier's a human, he'll end up like all the rest. Jaded. Cynical. He shakes his head, dismissing the thought. Xavier's been a guard at one of the toughest penitentiaries in the country for almost a year. Corruption's likely inevitable.

On the other hand...

Xavier's been here six months and he's still the bright eyed, friendly, trusting fruitcake he was when he started. Maybe he *can't* adjust any more.

"Hey! Xavier!" Sean calls. "Got any weed?" It's a friendly call, without malice. Xavier grins and ambles over. Sean fiddles anxiously with the shock collar he has to wear, but the guard keeps his hands well away from the controller tucked into his belt next to the shock stick and walky-talky.

“Weeds? In my back yard? Plenty,” Xavier says, cheerfully. “How’s the quest for the GED going?” And he sneezes.

“Not weeds, weed, man!” Sean says loudly. And then, more softly. “Not bad. Kinda having trouble with some of the math, though.”

“Let me see.” Xavier walks closer. He gives Erik’s cell a friendly nod. Erik makes no response, but he smiles, inwardly.

Sean drops his papers in the slot and shoves the wooden drawer towards the guard. Xavier sneezes again, absently, as he looks at Sean’s math homework.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Erik says, shortly, to the chess pieces.

“Pawn to G4,” Xavier absently suggests. “Why shouldn’t I be here today, Erik?” His eyes are sharp.

Erik stares at the chessboard. He’s right, damn him. “Because you’re sick.” He frowns at the paler face and the bags under Xavier’s eyes. “Go home and get better, before you infect the rest of us.” *Go home*, he tells him silently, though he knows he won’t be heard. *Go away. Before it’s too late.*

Xavier looks up from Sean’s math and beams at Erik. “That’s very kind of you, my friend, but work is work. A little cold won’t kill me.”

Sean and Azazel exchange glances. Erik turns back to his chess and—moves the pawn as Ch—the guard suggested.

“I think I see your problem, Sean.”

“I’m in prison, and they’re never gonna let me out?”

“With the math,” Xavier says calmly. “And they will let you out; you’re not a lifer. Not here forever.”

Carefully, no one looks at Erik. Who is here forever; at least so the human courts have decreed.

“Feels like forever,” Sean grumbles. “Alright, prof, where ’m I screwing up?”

“Well, here...” Xavier wanders right up to the force field; those humming sheets of energy that will only let oxygen and sound waves cross them, right up to Sean, a mutant whose power lies in creating sound waves, and starts tutoring him in math.

Azazel stares at Erik, and raises an eyebrow. Erik shakes his head. Not yet. They still have a little time. Xavier will probably leave as soon as he’s helped Sean with his math, seeing as Erik hasn’t asked for a chess match today.

“Thanks, prof,” Sean is all smiles, ten minutes later. “I owe you one.” Xavier waves him off with a smile, hands the papers back through the drawer, and continues on, around the corner.

Erik heaves a mental sigh of relief. Good. He's out of it. That makes things simpler.

Xavier reappears five minutes later, walking backwards. He's stopped smiling, and he's gone paler. Two of the other guards are following him, and they don't look friendly. Azazel scowls, and Sean drops his papers. Erik moves another pawn.

He tells himself he doesn't care; someone was going to hurt Xavier, someday; be it guard or inmate. He tells himself he's only worried because of what it means for the timing.

The two guards slam their colleague up against the force field to Erik's cell. Xavier gasps; touching the fields *hurts*, burning the skin even through clothes.

"Just a friendly chat," the bigger guard, Marko tells him. "You've been making us look bad."

"Come on, man." The other guard swallows nervously. "Free Association starts soon. We gotta—"

"Camera's off. And they aren't gonna say anything." Marko says, shoving Xavier back harder.

From the vantage point of his cell, Erik sees the palms of Xavier's hands bruise and blister as the man claws at the force field behind him. His feet aren't even touching the floor, and his hat's starting to char.

Marko grins. "I bet we won't have to hang around long. Not if he's smart."

The second bell, indicating five minutes to Free Association, rings. Five minutes till the force fields at the front of every cell—as opposed to the ones surrounding them—drop, allowing time for inmates to talk and mingle. It's not a time to look vulnerable. Erik starts putting his chess pieces away.

"I don't know how I've been making you look bad." Xavier wheezes. "But I have to say, it doesn't seem to be a very difficult task."

He didn't. Erik glares at his bishop. The young fool *didn't*. There's a time to speak truth to power, and a time to shut the hell up and hope they don't break too many of your bones; and even Erik knows which is when. He doesn't need this, not now, not today. None of them do. Too much is at stake.

Marko steps back, draws his shock stick and strikes Xavier with it. Xavier spasms and contorts on his way down to the floor. Azazel draws his breath in with a hiss. For a guard to move against another guard like this; so openly—it must speak of real hatred. Usually guards make some pretense at unity, in front of the inmates.

"Marko—"

"Shut up," Marko advises his fellow guard, without looking at him. He stamps down on Xavier's shoulder. "You're gonna withdraw that complaint—"

“I—” Xavier coughs, eyes glassy and blank. “I don’t know what you’re talk—”

Marko kicks him again. Sean cries out, babbling in frenzied protest.

“You gonna stab him? Don’t stab him, I don’t like the blood, don’t make me see the blood, I don’t—don’t stab him—”

Azazel slams his tail into the table in his cell, creating a crashing noise. The two guards look up.

Without even looking at Sean, Marko thumbs his shock collar on. Sean howls silently, voice gone, pain digging in.

Xavier drags himself to his knees.

“Stop it.” He glares up at Marko. “He didn’t do anyth—” The shock stick strikes him on the temple. He crumples.

“Marko.” The second guard steps back, looks toward the distant gate. “We gotta go. The camera’s back on once Association starts, and I’m not gonna stay here til it does.”

“We are a frightening group,” Azazel says, gravely, to Erik. Erik hides his grin, nods solemnly. Marko glares at them. Sean whimpers.

“I bet I don’t have to tell any of you what happens if you open your traps about this?” Marko glares at the three mutants. They look away, and he straightens, satisfied they’re cowed. “Don’t worry about him.” Marko points at Xavier’s motionless form. “I’m sure some of you’ll take real good care of him.”

He laughs and leaves, the other guard hard on his heels.

Xavier groans.

“Sean,” Azazel says, as Xavier’s eyes flicker open, confused. “Hold on, we can get the controller as soon as the fields go down—”

Sean makes no sound, but his face is contorted with pain. The prone guard turns his head and looks at him in concern.

Wavering, Xavier climbs to his knees.

“The controller dropped from his belt by my cell.” Erik says, ignoring the human in their midst. “It’s here.” He glares at the little plastic thing, just the other side of the force field and completely out of reach for another long five minutes. “I’ll—as soon as the force fields go, Sean, all right?”

He ignores the shock-drunk guard; Xavier will hopefully get himself out of here before the majority of inmates can find him, and even more hopefully, won’t notice he’s lost his controller. Not that most of them would hurt Xavier usually, but there’s always a few who can’t restrain themselves when they see weakness.

Slowly, Xavier starts to crawl.

“Heading in the wrong direction,” Azazel advises him. Xavier ignores him. He drags himself to Erik’s cell, fumbles with the remote controller, and finally manages to enter the deactivation code.

“Sorry,” he says, raggedly. “Bit... slow.”

Sean gasps with relief as the pain goes and he has his voice back.

“Not your fault, prof.”

Xavier smiles vaguely. The controller drops from his hands and clatters to the ground. Xavier follows it.

The bell for Free Association goes. All the force fields snap off.

Erik begins the countdown in his head.

Sean scurries out of his cell and bends over the fallen human.

“Prof.” Sean pats Xavier’s face, gently. “He’s out cold,” he reports to the other two. “What we’re gonna do? We can’t just leave him.”

“He’s a guard,” Erik reminds Sean. “One of your jailers. A human, too.”

“I know,” Sean says, quietly. His hands fist in Xavier’s khaki uniform shirt. “But... he’s the Prof. He... he helps. And they’ll—” he swallows, face set. “You know what’ll happen to him, if we don’t do anything. He’ll get hurt. *More* hurt.”

Erik knows that, too. But their plan requires timing. There’s no space for alterations to the route, or additions. He scowls. They have so little time before the big event.

Azazel goes through Xavier’s pockets.

“Zip ties... breath mints...” he reports, securing Xavier’s limp hands in front of him as he searches.

Footsteps echo in the hallway, and they all look up. Other guards? More dangerous inmates? Erik glares, metal from Xavier’s pockets and gear held at the ready, relaxing only when Darwin approaches.

“We starting already?” Darwin asks lightly. “Normally they run away if more than one of us is loose.” His face falls when he gets close enough to recognize the guard. “Ah, hell. You had to start with Xavier?”

“We didn’t,” Erik denies, curt and hurried. “That was Marko.” He goes to one knee, peering at Xavier’s skull, turns Xavier’s head to point out the marks of the shock stick. Xavier groans. Erik pats his hair, gently, and the guard settles again. Erik fights down the shiver at the feeling of that hair, crisp and clean and warm, against his touch-starved fingertips.

“Erik,” Azazel says, quietly, pointing.

“What am I looking f-?” And then his eyes fall on the small silver spider’s web embedded in Xavier’s scalp, just behind one ear. “Oh.”

More elegant and sophisticated than the collar Sean wears, but still a restriction on his powers. Erik grinds his teeth. Always, the humans do this; keep them down, force them to silence part of themselves. Always.

“Prof is a *mutant*?” Sean’s eyes are wide. “Then why—”

“Some kind of psychic, likely,” Az murmurs. “or psionic”

Erik’s fingers trace the metal embedded in Xavier’s skull slowly. For two pins, he’d free Xavier right then and there, release him from society’s limitations and restrictions, but firstly, he doesn’t know if Xavier would know whose side he should be on right now, if he woke up. And secondly, those wires go quite a way into the brain. Erik doesn’t know what damage he could do if he tried that without some research first.

“Erik. Erik, please,” Sean says, eyes huge. “Don’t hurt him; don’t—he’s one of the good guys.” He pulls at Xavier’s shirt, trying to move him away from Erik.

“Yeah,” Darwin adds softly. “Gotta say, I’d be real unhappy if we just leave him here to get the shit kicked out of him.”

“Time moves on, my friend.” Azazel stands. “We do not want to get left behind.” He looks at the cameras meaningfully.

“Fine.” Erik bites back the impulse to swear.

He stands, and lets Az haul the semiconscious guard to his feet.

“Sean; you wanted this, you and Darwin are responsible for him, if you bring him,” Erik moves toward the gate as Az hands Xavier off to the pair. “You clean up any messes he makes with the others, and if he causes more trouble, it’s on your heads.”

“Do we get to feed him and take him for walks, too?” Darwin is smirking now, a cover to hide the relief rising inside him.

“Come on,” Erik says. “Alex is in the infirmary, and we have—”

A huge explosion tears through the building. Sirens start wailing as dust fills the air.

“Go, Alex!” Sean shuffles Xavier between himself and Darwin. “Chess club rules!”

“Took him long enough,” Az says.

Another explosion. Alex is on fine form today.

Erik snarls. “Shut up and start running!”

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Erik in the getaway van. Charles in captivity. (also pain)

Running commentary and entertainment provided by Darwin, Azazel, and Sean.

I cannot write oneshots and I should just accept that. More chapters to follow. How many, you say?

laughs hysterically

Erik is pretty sure Emma picked this van because it smells of pineapple. Emma hates pineapple too, so the driver's section, currently holding Alex and Emma, is probably smell-free. It would be like her, that calm, careful attention to petty irritations. That and making sure she doesn't get caught out by them.

Oh, doubtless the factors that go into her selection of discreet getaway vehicle include clean plates, working brakes—he winces as they corner hard, and the limp body of their captive slides from one side of the van to the other before Sean can steady it—and so on, but the pineapple scent probably clinched the deal.

Erik hates pineapple. He's being stoical about it.

“Erik.” Sean says, solemnly, from his place by Xavier's head. Erik sighs, and braces himself.

“What, Sean?”

“I was checking out his back—for force field burns—and.... Look! He's got *scars*.” Sean confides, looking over his shoulder to see if Az or Darwin heard. Despite himself, Erik looks, and sees old scars, silvery testimony to pain past. Abruptly, he feels ashamed, prying at the other man's private past like this.

“Pull his undershirt back down over them, and leave him alone.” Erik says, shortly, unable to stop watching Sean's twitching fingers petting Xavier's hair as if the man is Sean's long-lost puppy. His own fingers prickle, reminding him of how Ch-Xavier's hair feels against them.

“Stop poking him.”

“But—”

“Sean,” Erik says firmly, and who elected him Team Dad? Az flashes him a grin. “He’s asleep. Let him be.”

Sean subsides, pulling Xavier’s undershirt down over his pale, freckled (scarred) back again. He straightens the lie of the oil stained sweatpants that replaced the uniform trousers around the guard’s bare, bony ankles. Xavier’s toes look strangely naked and vulnerable against the battered metal floor of the van.

“Someone should tell Sean that our new friend, he is not puppy.” Az murmurs, low and hugely amused.

Erik nods absently, calculating. It’s been three hours since the balloon went up. Two since they found Emma and the disguises and getaway van. That means, at least two more hours until Az is fully recovered and can ‘port them to the safe house. And what will they do with Xavier then? Leave him there?

Emma’s already said she can’t alter his memory. She’d tried, while he was out, and theoretically helpless, and apparently her first gentle probes triggered a fanged and ferocious defence all the more frightening because it was—again, in theory—a purely unconscious one.

Conscious, of course, his suppressor probably holds his powers back far more completely. Emma, a telepath herself, recognises it as an adjustable T-regulator, but she can’t identify the make. So tampering with it to make sure Xavier’s harmless is also out, as Erik refuses to contemplate causing major brain injuries to fellow mutants unless they’re completely necessary. He frowns at Sean again.

Erik runs a mental finger over the metal bands newly adorning Xavier’s wrists and ankles, tugging on them slightly as they go round another corner. A security measures that appeals to him, certainly, but he can make them be useful in other ways.

This time, the unconscious man stays still, held by Erik’s will. Erik grunts to himself, pleased. Light sparks off the bands, making them appear almost decorative.

“Well, he’s not *Sean’s* puppy,” Darwin puts in, grinning. Erik turns to stare coldly at him. Darwin adds, “More like team mascot. We wouldn’t have gotten past the second checkpoint without him.”

It’s true.

Without a hostage, they’d have been shot down before Alex could shut down the last force field generator, the one that blocked their exit from the prison proper. It had been hard, holding sharp metal to the dazed mutant’s throat, for Erik. He hadn’t liked snarling his threats convincingly at their rushing attackers.

Xavier’s head lolling on his shoulder, gaze unfocused, white throat bare to the pricking point of Erik’s shiv, his arm holding Ch—Xavier up against him—

Erik blinked the memory away. He knew Xavier was mostly an innocent as well as a fellow mutant, and in the end, Erik had only managed to sound genuinely threatening because

Xavier had so plainly been unaware of anything happening around him at the time.

It had slowed the guards' approach long enough for Darwin and Az to take them out. That was the main thing.

"I wouldn't have hurt him," Erik says, slowly, staring at Xavier. "Not after... He's a mutant. We don't harm our own kind."

"Pretty sure some of the other guards were, too." Sean is petting Xavier's head again, Erik notes. He finds himself irritated for no easily identifiable reason.

"Accidents, Sean. Bad timing. Nothing we would intend." Erik flicks his fingers, dismissive. "The human authorities must bear their part in imprisoning so many of us in the first place." He feels in no way defensive.

Xavier's eyes flick open, narrow slits of dark blue. He paws clumsily at his own head, groaning.

"I told you to leave him be!" Erik hisses at Sean, who looks wounded.

"He took a shock stick to the *skull*!" Xavier groans again. "You know how dangerous that can be!" Gently, Sean lifts Xavier's bandaged hands away from his head. "Don't... don't do that, man."

"Uhhh?" Xavier's eyes open fully, but they are glassy, confused. His tongue flickers out over his astonishingly red lips.

"Come on, try sitting up for a bit." Sean babbles. "Sitting's all the rage; I hear it's more fun than lying down and stuff."

"What-?" Xavier blinks some more. Erik can sympathise, the aftermath of a shock stick encounter is somewhat painful even for someone who isn't trying to make sense out of Sean's babble.

"It's ok." Darwin hands Sean the water bottle. "Just shock-headache. It'll pass."

Upright, Xavier folds his legs, sits cross legged on the grubby floor of the van, and looks around him with calm and collected curiosity of the truly feline. Helpfully, Sean holds the water bottle to his mouth rather than handing it over. Xavier blinks at him and then at his bandaged hands in puzzlement before drinking.

"Your fellow guards held you against the force field," Erik says, conversationally. "Don't you remember?" He holds Xavier's gaze, ignoring the way his throat moves as he swallows.

"Marko." Xavier nods. His eyes flicker from face to face and something in his expression hardens. Sean offers him the water bottle again. Politely, Xavier shakes his head, and squares his shoulders. He looks at Erik, eyes sharp and clear.

"I hope you realise the prison authorities have a strict rule of non-negotiation with hostage takers." His voice is calm, factual.

Erik nods, slowly. Xavier doesn't look away. If it weren't for the way sweat has started to gleam on his temples, and the pulse has quickened in his throat, Erik could quite easily be fooled into thinking the other man was not afraid. But he is afraid.

Good. He should be afraid of Erik, at least. Hopefully that will stop him doing anything stupid.

"We won't—we took you along because we thought they—the other inmates would hurt you!" Sean says, wounded, and shifts away from Xavier.

"Ah." Xavier turns his head to look at the younger mutant and smiles warmly. "That's—thank you, Sean."

It had been *Erik's* decision, but he is not piqued by this smile aimed at someone else. Really.

"Thank you, all of you." Xavier smiles around the van.

"S'nothin', prof." Darwin smiles easily back. "I hear you turned off Sean's collar for him."

Xavier shrugs, looking down at his sweatpant-covered lap. He doesn't look up for a moment.

"He did," Az confirms. "Should have been taking care of himself, but—"

"Prolonged use of a shock collar is forbidden by law." Xavier says quietly. "That's—it wasn't —"

"It is still more than we have come to expect from our jailers," Erik says. "So we looked closer at the one who did. And saw you were one of us."

"One of—" A flash of real fear flares in Xavier's gaze.

Erik taps behind his own ear by way of explanation. "Your suppressor."

"A mutant." Xavier relaxes, minutely.

"One of us," Erik repeats, liking the sound of it.

Xavier brings his hand up as if to touch his own skull, but stops half-way, apparently fascinated by his new bangles. He taps one, and raises an eyebrow at Erik.

"My gift is metal." Erik tugs just hard enough on the bands around Xavier's wrists for emphasis. Xavier goes very still.

"Cause any trouble—" Erik goes on, harshly, because he doesn't like having to be the grim threat, but he must be. They cannot rely on Xavier's goodwill for their freedom, after all. "Try to get away; and—" the bands tighten. "You'll be a quadruple amputee for the rest of your life."

Xavier pales, shrinking into himself. Erik loosens the metal's clasp on him before it starts to bruise. The man's been hurt enough today.

“You said we weren’t going to hurt him!” Sean snaps, angry. He moves from the floor of the van, standing as if to challenge Erik. Erik braces himself, but Xavier gets there first.

“Sean! I’m alright. I’m fine.” Sean sits back down, on the bench seat. “Mr Lehnsherr was just... making sure. Of things.” He pats Sean’s knee, clumsily. “Right?” He looks at Erik. Erik looks away.

“As long as he behaves himself, he’ll be fine,” Erik says to Sean, ignoring Xavier’s appeal. He sits back, avoiding Az’s mocking glance.

He still doesn’t know what they’re going to do with Xavier, long term. The original plan—to drop him, still unconscious, at the nearest safe guard post, and lock the door—hadn’t worked, because there had been no safe post. It had been a bloody journey to the extraction point. The other inmates had seen the opportunity to get back at their jailers, and had taken it.

And then they’d needed him to get past the only manned post and into the open air, so leaving him there hadn’t been a good idea, either, and... by then they’d been at the van, and it had been simpler to drag him aboard than to abandon him with their discarded prison jumpsuits.

Emma hadn’t any clothes for him; of course, and they could hardly leave him in his uniform, so Xavier’s in his undershirt and a pair of sweatpants found under the seat in the van. He looks chilled now, rubbing his hands up and down his arms like that.

Sighing, Erik pulls off his jacket and strips off his nice new sweater. He throws it at Xavier, who makes no real attempt to catch it. Erik would be insulted, but a sudden flash of Xavier’s hands bruising and burning as he scrabbles at the force field assaults his memory, and he relents.

“Put it on.” Xavier blinks at him, not moving. “Sean, help him.” Erik sighs. “You’re cold,” he tells Xavier, as if he doesn’t know.

“We didn’t exactly come prepared for a ride-along.” Darwin notes this cheerfully, looking at Erik from the corner of his eye, as Sean helps Xavier into the grey-green sweater, still warm from Erik’s own body. Emma had a good eye for fabric.

Erik forces himself to look away from way the too-long sleeves drape over Xavier’s wrists, down to his knuckles. From the way the v-neck exposes a pale swath of smooth skin, the sharp-cut collarbones, the length of that working throat...

“There’ll be stuff for him at the house.” At the guttural comment, Xavier jerks his head round toward Erik, and opens his mouth as if to ask a question, before closing it, firmly.

Az just looks at Erik, and then he laughs. A lot.

“Prof.” Sean earnestly stares into Xavier’s eyes from about two inches away. “Do you have a first name?”

“Yes?” Xavier says, craning his neck to look up at Sean from his seat on the floor.

The silence stretches for a moment before Sean snorts a laugh and sags.

“Well, what is it?”

Erik doesn't say anything. Xavier glances over at him briefly, before he smiles and says, “My name is Charles.” He puts his hand out to Sean, who shakes it, looking thrilled. “Charles Xavier.”

“Charles?” Az, eyes alight with mischief, mutters to Erik, “*This* is your-?”

“Shut. Up.” Erik hisses at him, and prays Darwin and Sean haven't heard the conversation.

They haven't, but judging by his expression, Charles—Charles Francis Xavier, as Erik knows his full name is—has.

Damn.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Charles Xavier is reasonably certain he's going to die quite soon.

Charles' POV of the back of the van is a little different to everyone else's and not just because he's sitting on the floor.

Charles Xavier is reasonably certain he's going to die quite soon.

He hasn't received any health warnings, he's a young man in (he's been told) a fine state of fitness. However, he's also a young man currently employed as a prison guard. Who has just been casually kidnapped by some escaping inmates on their way out the door. He rather doubts they have much of an interest in his ongoing wellbeing, whatever Sean says on the matter.

Given the current level of stun-headache and the angry throbbing of the T-regulator at the back of his skull, not to mention the ache of the 'field burns down his back, Charles thinks that death might not be an entirely terrible thing. There's something still wrong with the suppression device; it's... tingling, for lack of a better word, in his mind.

"Prof—Charles." Sean says, leaning down. "You want more water?"

Charles smiles up at him, distant lessons in surviving capture mingling with childhood memories in his head.

Sean likes him; Sean is trying to be pleasant, so it's important not to appear unhappy or unwilling or uncooperative. It's why Charles has made no effort to seat himself at the same level as the others, staying on the floor, submissive, lower, unthreatening.

"Thank you." Charles juggles the water bottle in his bandaged hands and drinks, genuinely grateful. He tallies up the indicators of his status or role in the group.

Someone treated and bandaged his force field burns. *That's a good sign*, Charles tells himself. They took his clothes, but they've replaced them, they're allowing him water, he's not tied up—well, not really, Erik's metal is different somehow—and they have acknowledged him in conversations.

Charles closes his eyes as the van takes another corner and his entire body protests. He takes a deep breath, trying to remind his body that calmness is a survival method, and tries to calculate how badly his plans have been messed up by this unexpected detour.

He'd been *so close*.

The amount of evidence he'd been able to discover, record and dispatch to Moira's enquiry team about what was really going on at the prison—abuse, exploitation, even experimentation on humans and mutant inmates alike—had been frightening. He'd even begun building his own, separate dossiers on those who had been wrongfully convicted or sentenced, things had been so bad.

At least three of the people inside the van with him are in those dossiers. And isn't that ironic? Fantastic, now Charles's battered brain is looping on Alanis Morissette songs. He'd blame Raven except—well. She's missing. Looking for her was one of the things that had led up to his current situation.

He hopes, if she was in the prison, if she was shifted into a male form, that she's got out too. He hopes she is safe, is free. He won't be able to do much more for here now, after all.

As soon as the prison authorities realise he's the guard who was taken, they'll likely probe his background, check that Charles is not a plant or working with the escapees. Charles glances around the van cautiously. Sean is happily humming to himself. Darwin is having a quiet conversation with Azazel. Erik is glaring at the air over Charles's head.

Charles tucks his head into his chest. The sleeves of his over-long sweater—Erik's sweater—flop over his hands again. He feels the cold weight of the metal on his wrists and ankles, Erik's hold on him made manifest in iron, and wonders if they've tightened slightly. It's hard to tell; they're distracting things.

Quadruple amputee, he reminds himself, and does not shiver.

Charles's background records, like the life story he used to get work in the prison, apart from his name and his T-regulator, are fake, fake, fake. The whole investigation could come crashing down, and the true criminals slip off the hook and out of sight in seconds. And these people, the ones who kidnapped him in case he got hurt—will only suffer more because of it.

It's funny, Charles thinks, sipping the water and trying to pretend he doesn't know that Lehnsherr, the apparent leader of the group, is staring at him grimly, that the people who hurt him, left him vulnerable during Free Association, were his co-workers; and the people they were trying to control are the ones who didn't want him hurt.

Or so Sean says. Charles cautions himself against reading more into that than he should, as he hands the water bottle on to Lehnsherr. He curls up a little more into himself. Stockholm syndrome, identifying with his captors too much, is a real risk; but he doubts that its reverse, Lima syndrome, is likely.

Quadruple amputee, his mind whispers, slyly. Hunger and nausea briefly contend for the upper hand in Charles's stomach. He closes his eyes again. No. No, Lehnsherr won't kill him—for cutting off Charles's limbs, if he's not very very close to a good hospital, will kill him—not like that.

Darwin laughs, soft and happy. Az murmurs something Charles doesn't catch. The van's engine continues roaring along. Erik—Lehnsherr—has given up on staring at Charles and is

either staring at the van floor in boredom, asleep, or talking to the telepath Charles knows is driving the van. She disturbs Charles, a little.

Hopefully, if they do decide he's dead weight, if they do decide to kill him, it will be quick and clean, and they won't do it in front of Sean. Sean is a sweet soul, and he is a lot more fragile, under his constant cheery nature, than he might appear. He's currently a little fixated on Charles, for no good reason Charles can think of, and if that's still so when—if, think positive, Xavier—he's got rid of, he might make a fuss and get hurt.

it won't last long.

Charles tries to comfort himself with that chilly little thought. Sean is only interested because he was in a position of power over them, and now he's not. Because Charles is currently hurt, and Sean likes to take care of hurt things. He's seen Sean be fascinated by any number of things in the past, and the only one that's lasted has been getting his GED.

Most people see through Charles's looks and his attempts at charm to the rest of him soon enough. Most people walk away once he stops being or doing what they need from him. The others... Charles doesn't like to think of them.

Given whatever he is to Sean is in Sean's mind only, Charles has no control over when Sean loses interest in him. He can only hope fascination is replaced by indifference rather than anything worse.

The van slows, turns, and Charles goes back to looking at his knees. His tension mounts higher as the van comes to a halt, stopping after a few manoeuvres. They're still near the highway, he thinks, through the sudden panic. He can hear the traffic. They probably won't kill him here. A door bangs. Footsteps march away. Charles tries to keep his breathing regular.

"I need to take a leak," Sean says.

"Not yet," Lehnsherr says, curtly. "Too many people."

"Why've we stopped then?" Sean wriggles, annoyed.

"Why do you think, Sean?"

Sean's face creases in intense thought. "Gas? Food?"

Erik nods, patiently.

"Hey! Ask Emma if we can get some candy!"

Charles's stomach growls almost audibly. He hadn't eaten before he came on shift, and god knows how long ago that was. His throat, despite the water, is sore—his cold hasn't been scared off by the kidnapping, either. Worse luck.

"Charles."

Charles jerks his head back up. The speaker is Azazel; the only visibly mutant among the group.

“Yes?” He almost adds, *Can I help you?*, but bites his tongue in time.

“Your head.” Azazel gestures. The scarlet-skinned face cracks in a brilliant gleaming smile. “How long have you had that?”

“The, the T-Regulator?” Charles bites his lip. Azazel nods, eyes watchful. Charles tries to calculate what date will be more pleasing to his audience, can’t work it out and resolves on the truth with a mental shrug.

“I—my abilities manifested when I was young.” *Everyone* leans forwards to hear his story. “There’s a lot of things adults don’t want a child reading.” *Like the fact you’re a greedy, materialistic manipulator*, he thinks, but after so long, the thought is more resigned than bitter. “So, my parents....” He trails off, one burnt finger rubbing over the silvery implant. “I was ten.”

“Ten?” There’s something like pain in Lehnsherr’s face, his voice. Charles nods. He sometimes misses his telepathy, but he’d been too young to protest then. And now he’s too old to complain about the should-have-beens in his life. *Not likely to get much older*, he thinks, wryly. Gallows humour.

“Ten, wow.” Sean says. “My abilities didn’t even kick in ‘till I was fifteen. Broke all the windows in the house.”

“What happened?” Charles tilts his head, genuinely interested.

Sean leans forwards and with many swooping gestures, spills out a tale of siblings and breakages and family hilarity that’s rather pleasant. Given that Sean has had no contact from this apparently large and loving family all the time Charles has worked for the prison, he’s not entirely sure Sean is telling the plain facts of the story.

It’s still a good story, and they’re all laughing—even Erik is smiling—when the partition between the driver’s section and the back of the van slides open with a bang.

“Take this.” Alex says, handing several pizza boxes to Darwin. He gives Charles a hard look. “Ems says this is for *him*.” He adds a plastic bag and slams the partition shut again.

Darwin leans over and drops the bag in Charles’s lap.

“Might think about getting off the floor, man,” he says, smiling. Charles finds his gaze drawn back to Lehnsherr. The metal bender gives him a slight nod, so Charles unfolds stiff limbs and cautiously sits on the bench seat running along the walls of the van.

Darwin doles out pizza as Charles investigates the bag. Flipflops. A toothbrush. A cheap disposable razor. Boxer briefs. It’s a strange little collection, and he’s no idea what it means. He looks up to see that, once again, everyone’s staring at him.

“Um,” Charles ventures, warily.

“Eat your pizza, professor,” Az says quietly. “Or it will be gone, and you must be hungry, if we are to go by the symphony your stomach has been playing.”

“Ah, um, sorry.” Charles grips his knees, momentarily dizzy at the prospect of *food*. He’d hoped that he might be able to get something to eat when the others had finished, but he wasn’t—he hadn’t expected to be treated the same, fed the same and at the same time as everyone else.

Carefully, he lifts the lid of the box. A cheese and tomato pizza steams at him, invitingly. It takes a little fumbling, what with his bandages and all, but soon the first piece is in his hands, and then it’s in his mouth, and shortly after that, it’s in Charles’s stomach. And it is *good*. Charles waits a moment, to make sure it’ll stay there, and then he starts on the second piece.

“Can we have soda?” Sean pipes up, a little later.

“No one is ever giving you soda, Sean,” Erik proclaims, as Charles starts on another piece of pizza. “Especially not when you’re about to sit in a van for a few more hours.”

“Aw, man,” Sean grumps. “I’m thirsty.”

Charles cautiously extends the water bottle towards him. Az grins, punching Lehnsherr on the arm companionably. Lehnsherr glares at him.

Charles closes the lid of the box. He’s not hungry now, and they might need more pizza later. He drinks some water when the bottle comes back to him, and stifles first a sneeze and then a yawn. His eyes are heavy.

Charles jerks his head up, uncomfortably aware he’s nearly dozed off several times now, as the others talk and eat the rest of their pizza.

“Go to sleep.” Lehnsherr slides down the bench. Charles blinks at him, still bewildered. “It’s safe,” his kidnapper earnestly promises Charles.

Charles looks at him some more. Safety is a relative concept to all, he knows, but *really*.

“I promise you, you’ll be awake if ever we kill you.” Erik flashes Charles his thin wolf-smile, entirely un-reassuring and proud of the fact.

Mentally, Charles sighs. He leans back. Considers the weight of the cuffs on his wrists and ankles. And... closes his eyes.

Sleep comes surprisingly fast.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Erik plans with Emma, talks with Sean and neither broods over nor stares at Charles.

Xavier fades into sleep remarkably quickly when he's fed. Erik ponders that as he chews his last piece of pizza; wonders if Charles is really sick, or really tired, or just finds sleep a safer place to be than awake when he's trapped in a van with four mutant criminals. Even though Xavier is a mutant himself, at least technically.

Xavier is hunched up on the bench in what is going to be a pretty uncomfortable position, once he wakes up. He's curled in on himself like he's afraid to take up a normal amount of space. It won't do. Erik uses the metal he clasped on Charles's wrists and ankles to ease the young prison guard into a flatter, more comfortable posture on the bench seat.

He'll sleep longer, like that.

Ten. Erik thinks, bleakly. Charles's powers had been active enough for his—progenitors—he won't call them parents—to want to cripple them at *ten years old*. They don't deserve the name of parents if they would do that to their child. Relaxed in sleep, Charles scarcely looks older than ten now, and Erik cannot imagine being able to do that to him.

At least he, Erik had been twelve when he'd faced the choice between the bullet and the coin. At least Erik had known his parents loved his powers as part of him, their beloved only son.

Sean keeps extending his hand and drawing it back, as if he'd like to stroke Xavier's hair, but doesn't quite dare. Erik sets his teeth on the idea of someone—even Sean—touching Charles without his awareness, or permission. Or anyone. Or anyone touching *anyone* without permission, he amends his thoughts, sharply.

I've always said the boy needed a pet. Emma says, lazily amused, into Erik's mind as he watches Sean watch Charles sleeping. *But I think a goldfish might have been a better choice.*

Out loud, Erik says, "He's not a pet!" and then wishes he'd managed to keep it to telepathy as everyone else in the back of the van grins. He has to glare at them all to make it stop; which allows Emma further time to broadcast her own amusement at him.

Well, what else is he? she asks, reasonably enough. *He's not one of us.*

Charles mumbles, but doesn't open his eyes.

He could be. He's a mutant, too. Erik sends back, after he makes sure Charles hasn't woken. *Or have you already forgotten the part where you tried to alter his memory and couldn't?*

He's also wearing a suppressor. Simply because someone possesses an X-gene does not mean they possess any shared goals or sympathies with you, Erik. Her mental voice goes a little chillier. *Didn't Sebastian teach you that?*

Erik's response is a wordless growl. No one should connect Sebastian Shaw with any other mutants, let alone Charles.

Erik. Emma's mental voice is sharp and cold. *I can't alter his mind! I couldn't even scan it! He was a **prison guard**, Emma says. You won't allow him to be killed. Don't you think we could at least ask Azazel to take him somewhere... isolated and quiet?*

If you think "isolated and quiet" would be best for him, we'll have Azazel bring him along with us. Erik says promptly. The idea pleases him. Charles already has a bond with this group; after all, weren't they the ones who rescued him from the prison break?

What?

We're headed for Hank's safe house; I know who's going where, remember? A small experimental agricultural station in the middle of nowhere sounds like it'd be isolated and quiet enough for all of us. And Hank is the best among them to help Charles with removing his suppressor... If that's what Charles decides to do, of course. He might not.

Darwin starts talking to Sean, low and soft. Erik feels momentarily grateful as Sean turns from Charles—who is lying along the bench, cheeks flushed with sleep and breathing in tiny snorts that aren't quite snores—to focus on Darwin. Sean needs to be a little less focused on Charles, Erik feels, and to pay a little bit more attention to the group's precarious situation.

They're not out of the woods yet.

Crowded, though. Emma cuts through Erik's unfocused irritation.

There'll only be five of us, plus Hank. Erik is a little puzzled; he's never been to Hank's farm, but he knows it's not that small. He sometimes suspects that the major reason behind Hank running it as a safe house is because he gets a steady supply of free and hopefully willing labour. Mutant labour, too, which is always better than human.

Seven, Emma says, coolly. *Victor is... playing up again, and you know he and his brother are better together.*

Erik sighs. Victor Creed is a monumental pain in the ass to have to deal with, but he's an asset, too.

Logan is able to ride herd on his less-socially skilled brother (to think of someone less socially skilled than Logan, it's disturbing enough by itself), and the fact that they both share a healing factor and strength makes it easier, in terms of what can be done to control Victor, but still.

Erik can't stand Victor, and he's not he wants the other mutant around the more vulnerable members of his group like Charles. Or Sean. Azazel glances at him and raises an eyebrow.

Erik shakes his head, minutely. Azazel grins. What is it with Erik's minions—co-conspirators, he corrects himself, promptly—grinning at him, lately?

Perhaps you are being more pleasant and open. Approachable, even. Emma's mental tone indicates extreme scepticism.

Emma... Erik's store of patience is not limitless.

Alright, alright. Fine. Xavier goes with you, until he's safe to release—

Or joins the cause, Erik says, stubbornly.

Emma snorts. She doubts that that time will ever come. Erik feels indignant. His persuasive powers are second to none; he's sure he can show Charles the best way forwards lies in working together.

I meant, you being willing to release him, Emma adds, amused. Erik has no idea what she means by that.

Meanwhile, I'll continue with the diplomatic work elsewhere. She sounds satisfied.

I hate waiting, Erik says glumly.

Shouldn't have gotten yourself imprisoned, then. Emma hasn't a single scrap of sympathy. *I mean it, Erik, about him not being released until we can be sure he's safe.* Her tone is grim. *We cannot let the cause—*

I know, Erik says abruptly. He does not like where this is going. But they've worked so hard for so long; and he and his have wasted so much time in human prison, in human society. They cannot let the progress they've made be derailed by one man, not even a blue-eyed, freckled fellow mutant, who snores adorably and trustingly by Erik's elbow as he plans.

If I can't find a way to wipe his mind... If you can't make him safe, find a way into his heart... Emma's voice trails off. *He knows far too much Erik.*

He's only been with us for a few hours! Erik protests.

Yes, Emma says. *And if you think that's not enough time to learn things that could destroy us, you're a fool. Either we wipe him, recruit him... or we're going to have to dispose of him, Erik. I have no intention of going to jail.*

He'll be safe! Erik snarls at her. *I'll see to it.*

Good.

"So. You plan on keeping him, then?" Azazel asks, and Erik feels a mild spasm of horror as he realises Emma was keeping his second-in-command fully abreast of the entire conversation.

“He’s a mutant,” Erik says. “And we don’t hurt our own.” Azazel opens his mouth. “Nor, Sean, do we stroke our own’s feet without asking first!”

“I’m not stroking my own feet.” Sean points out. “I’m stroking Charles’s. He’s cold again—”

Firmly, Erik says, “Leave Charles alone while he’s sleeping.” He thinks for a moment. “Also when he’s awake.”

“SO we just all ignore the poor prof? Seems a bit mean.” Sean pouts, but stops fidgeting Charles about.

“I don’t mean, completely ignore him, I just mean…” Erik fumbles for a way out of the conversational quagmire.

“He means, do not pester the poor man just because he is our captive now,” Az puts in, still darkly amused.

Erik almost wants to kiss Azazel.

“Unless he is okay with that, and you have asked first.” Az adds, cheerful. Now Erik wishes he could get away with punching him. Sean nods, slowly. Az stands then, and nods as well.

“It is time. I have recovered.” He rolls his shoulders and his tail rises until the tip is almost at shoulder level. “Command me!” he says theatrically to Erik, and grins, scarlet face split by white, white teeth.

“Emma has the list of who’s going where,” Erik says. Az nods again. “Deal with everyone else, apart from Victor and Logan, and then take us to Hank’s.” He wonders if mentioning Hank by name was safe, but he checks, quickly—Charles is still asleep. “Logan and Victor can just wait til last, if Victor’s going to play up.”

Showoff to the last, Azazel bows dramatically, and presses his fingers to his temple before vanishing in a puff of teleport smoke and brimstone.

“How much longer will we be waiting here?” Darwin quietly asks.

Sean adds, “Yeah. I still need to pee.”

Sighing, Erik hands Sean an empty water bottle.

“Gross, man,” Sean says. “Was hoping we’d have left all the slopping put behind us back at ___”

“We need to stay hidden,” Erik says irritably, before turning to Darwin. “Not sure. We’ve more than a few people to distribute among the safe houses and—”

“Prof is coming with us, isn’t he?” Sean asks worriedly. “We’re not, you know, going to dump him somewhere nasty, or, or—”

“Yes, Sean.” Erik *can* speak patiently. “The prof—Charles is coming with us. We have to keep him out of circulation until things are more decided, or ’til we can get him on our—get him inside.”

He says the last part of this to Darwin, who is capable of understanding slightly more complex concepts than Sean is.

Not that that is difficult. The goldfish Emma suggested as a suitable pet has slightly more of a capacity for understanding complex concepts than Sean does.

Sean smiles widely at the news, and he shifts closer to Charles.

"Sean..." Erik warns.

“Not gonna hurt him. Or pester him.” Sean says, promptly. “Just... he might be worried, when he wakes up.”

“We’ll all be here,” Erik says.

“Yeah.” Sean looks at him with far too knowing an expression. “He’s scared of us, you know that?”

“We won’t hurt him. He’ll learn.” Darwin speaks softly, and touches Sean’s knee.

“No, no, no, not that.” Sean shakes his head, impatient with the misunderstanding. “He’s *scared*. It’s like... Like he doesn’t know about friends.”

“Sean, your gift is sound waves, not mind reading.” Erik curtly tells him. Of course Charles must have had—maybe still does—friends and partners and so on and so forth. He’s handsome, extremely charming, and good with people. Of course he must have had enough relationships to “know about friendship,” whatever Sean means by that.

“And friendship.” Darwin is easy-going as always. “Maybe you can teach him about friendship, if he doesn’t know already, Sean.”

Erik bristles. If anyone is teaching Charles anything, it’s going to be him. He’s the leader here, after all.

Sean grins. “Maybe we all can.”

Erik subsides. He doesn’t stare at Charles.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Settling in does not go as cheerfully as Erik would like it to.

Victor Creed has managed to get drunk. For a mutant with a healing factor, and one who's only been out of prison for less than a day—and as an escapee, at that—it's an impressive feat.

Probably been drinking fuel alcohol again. Erik thinks sourly. He stares at Creed until his brother punches him in the arm and he backs away from their captive. He turns his attention back to Hank.

“He can sleep in the old bunkhouse.” Hank nervously twists his elderly hat between his currently furred paws as he talks. Erik scowls at him, trying to avoid the various glances—bored, amused, troubled—of his crew as he tries to negotiate Charles's place. Hank's skittishness isn't exactly helping things, either.

Charles needs to be kept securely, and close, but he can't be part of the main group; not until he can be trusted. There will be plans to make and people to see; Charles needs to not know about it until he's one of them. Also there's no TV or radio, so he won't hear any of the human authorities' propaganda about who they are, what happened during the escape and so on.

And if he listens to local news, he'll be able to work out where he is, which isn't safe for Hank, long term. Or any of them. The loose network of safe places for mutants evading trouble—or the authorities—is a valuable resource to the cause; Erik won't let one person jeopardise it. Not even himself. Not even Charles.

Logan yawns. Stubs out his cigar—and where did he get that from? It's an even less likely thing than the rotgut his brother found. Logan starts wandering off to the house proper.

“Hope you got a beer for me like you promised, Beastie.” He tosses the phrase casually over his shoulder. Hank grins and nods. Irritatingly, Victor does not go with him. It's a pity, Erik thinks. Still, Azazel will be back soon. If Victor causes any more trouble he can find his way home from Easter Island, or somewhere more remote and less picturesque.

“It'll—you said you wanted to keep him secluded, and there's, there's no radio or electricity,” Hank says apologetically. “And—”

Erik tunes him out. Charles' face is wearing the blankest, blandest expression Erik has ever seen. He isn't looking at anyone—hasn't, in fact looked anyone in the eye since Azazel

'ported them all here and took off for further supplies. It's as if he doesn't care, or perhaps doesn't understand that they're discussing where he will sleep.

Victor says something to Darwin, who stares at him for a long moment and shakes his head.

"Show us, then," Erik says. "Let's get out of the sun, at least." Charles is starting to look a little flushed with the heat, and he's pale enough to burn pretty easily. Erik hopes Azazel remembers the sun block.

Alex strides off, muttering about grabbing a shower while the water's cold. Darwin and Sean wander along behind Erik and Hank. Charles walks after them, still expressionless and calm. Erik tries to catch his eye, but he's still studying his feet, the ground, the horizon, with a steady, if detached, interest. Victor prowls along after him.

The bunkhouse is indeed old. It's not dusty, but it's a very bare place. Two rooms, one small, dingy-tiled with a sink, and one that holds three bunk beds and nothing much else. The windows open, but the insect screens are missing.

"Windows!" Sean eagerly runs across to open them. A hot, dusty breeze washes in. Sean closes the windows sadly.

"I-I'm afraid the generator can't cope with air conditioning everywhere." Hank glances at Charles, who smiles faintly, and doesn't say anything in reply. "B-but the hot spell should break soon."

Erik does *not* feel thoroughly unnerved by this mute pallid version of his—of Charles, but he's not quite comfortable about this. Something isn't quite right, and he can't put his finger on it.

"Does the door lock?" Victor says suddenly, peering at it. He's sobering up then. Good.

"The outside door does, but not the bedroom door." Hank turns to Charles. "And, um, I'm afraid there's no toilet, so..." He points to the stack of buckets. "I'll bring some disinfectant and a lid."

Charles simply nods.

"Sheets and stuff are in the closet." Hank shifts uneasily on broad, furry feet, prehensile bare toes gripping at the flooring. "It's not the best, but it's clean and, and... I'm sorry."

Slowly, warily, Charles moves to sit on the bunk by the window. His flip-flop clad feet continue to fascinate him. The small plastic bag with his underwear and toothbrush dangles limply from his fingers.

Erik glares at one of the buckets until it becomes a long, light chain. He moves towards Charles, who is still not reacting, damn it, and bends down, meaning to fuse the chain to his ankle cuff. The other end he will fix round the leg of the bunk bed Charles is sat on, for now.

It's a long chain; he should be able to walk around and move quite easily. Erik resists the urge to decorate it. He looks at Charles out of the corner of his eye. Surely this will get a response? Charles hasn't said a word since he woke up. Well, he's spoken to Sean, a little, but nothing to Erik.

Erik is starting to—well, not quite worry, but he doesn't like seeing Charles so withdrawn and neutral. It's not right for him; his eyes should spark with enthusiasm, as when he's trying to re-teach math to Sean, or when he's trying to persuade Erik the chess club really needs him. Darwin's voice jerks him back to the present.

"What are you doing?"

"Making... everything secure," Erik says. Charles stays very still, watching Erik's hand approach his ankle. "I can unlock this with a thought," Erik assures him, looking up at Charles. He wonders if the cold the other man talked about before everything started has reasserted itself. He's looking very pale.

"Put a loop in and get a padlock. Or we're always gonna need you to let him out." It's Darwin who suggests this. Interesting; Erik had *thought* the quieter mutant disapproved of keeping Charles separate like this.

"Why'd you wanta let him off the leash?" Victor laughs. Charles's hands tighten on his knees. Darwin looks at Victor and Erik as if they're both stupid. Erik is nettled by this, but he doesn't say anything.

"Don't worry, man," Darwin says, straight to Charles. "Things will settle out once we're settled in."

"Thank you, Darwin." Charles smiles faintly again.

"Get some rest." Darwin says. "Alex and me are on for cooking first meal. Hope you like vegetables." He stands in the doorway and says to Victor. "Come on man. We gotta get up there before your brother drinks all the beer." He stands there, waiting until Victor starts to move.

Victor slouches off and then it's just Erik and Charles. Erik moves back to his feet and looks at Charles again. Still pale, under the slight sunburn. Still quiet. Erik doesn't like not knowing what's wrong, and he doesn't like not being able to fix things, either.

"Charles." Charles jumps, quietly. "You don't have to—look, you're a mutant. Too, I mean." He scratches the back of his neck. "We don't hurt our own."

Charles cocks his head.

"Is that how you see me?" he asks, softly. "As *yours*? As your own?" As if by chance, he starts swinging his left leg. The metal cuff peeps out from under the ragged hem of his sweatpants.

“As a fellow mutant, yes,” Erik says, slightly less firmly than before. “And before... you were decent. For a jailer. Despite who you worked for. If you don’t cause any trouble... things will be alright.”

Charles smiles faintly again.

“I see.” He doesn’t stop swinging his leg. The metal in motion tugs on Erik’s awareness gently, rhythmically. Erik leaves the chain on the floor and moves over to the closet to find sheets and bedding.

“And maybe later, we can see about freeing you.” Erik says to the pillows he hauls out of the dark space. The leg stops moving. Erik turns to see Charles looking at him with an actual expression in his face. He hands him the pillows.

“You’d release me?” Charles blinks. “Under what circumstances?”

“Oh—oh yes, that, too,” Erik says, faintly awkward. “But... I meant.” He breathes in. “Charles. Haven’t you ever wanted your powers back?”

“Well.” He sighs. “I-I—don’t know—” Charles sneezes.

“You are part of the next wave of evolution, Charles. You’re a *mutant*. Like me!—us,” Erik says, passionately as he rummages in the closet. “Haven’t you ever wanted to know what you can do, to be what you are meant to—”

“I—” Charles says, and bites his lip. He looks at Erik anxiously. “Erik, regardless of what I feel—or don’t feel, about my t—my powers, I’d need to know what I was being recruited for, and I don’t think you want to tell me just yet.” He smiles, nervously.

He has a point.

“You have a point.” Erik admits. “But developing your powers—”

“I do not know if they’re still there.” Charles rubs the back of his head now, right where the suppressor is implanted. “And the doctors told my father—told me—that getting it out of there might kill me.” He looks at the floor.

“They made you ashamed of yourself.” Erik says.

“Not really.” Charles demurs, rubbing his implant again. “It was—it was more convenient.”

“For you, or them, Charles?” Erik moves to the bed, and drops the bedding he’s found there.

Charles doesn’t answer.

“Lean forwards.” Charles does so. Erik lays his fingers on the horrible spiderweb and focuses on it carefully. He makes no attempt to move or alter it in any way, given where its tendrils rest, just feeling along it with his metal sense.

“Glrk,” Charles wheezes. “I—that itches!” He shudders, and his shoulders hunch.

Erik whips his hand and his metal sense away.

“I didn’t mean—did I hurt you?” Erik demands, urgently.

“No.” Charles gives Erik a strange look. “No, it—I’m fine.”

Erik runs his fingers over the little spiderweb again. Charles shivers.

The fragile moment cannot last. It is snapped in two when Victor leans in at the door again.

“Hey.” Irritated, Erik turns round. Victor waves the padlock and keys at him. He snatches them out of Victor’s hands fast enough to sting.

“Ain’t you gonna put them—”

“Go back to the house.” Erik says, and nothing more until Victor leaves.

It only takes a little coaxing for the cuffs to form a loop he can fix the chain to with the lock. Erik checks that both keys work, and then stands, putting them in his pocket.

“Get some rest,” he advises Charles, who stares up at him with shadowed eyes. “It’s been a long day.”

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Alex doesn't get Xavier.

He really doesn't

Charles repairs a few of Hank's pipes and maybe changes Alex's mind about a few things...

Alex doesn't get Xavier.

He really doesn't. First there was the guy he knew back in the prison, Sean's "Prof", who was kinda decent for a screw. Then there was the unconscious deadweight slowing them up during the escape. Then the *semi-conscious* deadweight who'd been the reason they'd all got past the guards.

And then Erik'd dumped him on the floor of the van Ems had ready, and turned his lolling head to show them all the suppressor Xavier'd had stuck in his *head*. And Alex had felt a sudden keen burst of total betrayal.

How could Xavier have done that?

Even after he's told them that'd been done when he was a little kid, Alex is still angry with Xavier. He was a mutant, too. He'd lived as a mutant, among humans. Probably in England, going by his accent, but presumably he'd known what it was like, being a mutant among humans who either hated or feared or wanted to experiment on you.

And he'd helped keep them all locked up. Well, now the boot was on the other foot, wasn't it? Erik had kept Xavier in chains—well, in the evenings. Not during the day. Chaining him all the time would have been cruel, and Erik wasn't into cruelty. One of the reasons Alex had bought into his damn chess club in the first place.

Still, just 'cause he wasn't cruel didn't make Erik stupid. Xavier couldn't be let go; he'd tell people... stuff. So they were keeping him, Erik said. And everyone staying at Hank's had to earn their keep. Even Xavier.

Alex feels a mean little surge of satisfaction as he watches Xavier move, almost on his knees for most of it, along the field, steadily checking the long lines of plastic tubing that keeps Beast's plants from shrivelling up and dying.

“Missed a spot,” Alex calls, cheerfully watching the ex-screw work. He’s not helping. Let Xavier get his hands dirty for once. His grin falters when Xavier looks up at him, gaze blank and steady, before turning back to his work.

“Thank you,” he says, and Alex feels bad, now. Just a bit. He hadn’t been a *bad* guard, after all. He’d kept Alex from getting roughed up a time or too; and stood up for Sean and Sean’s GED.

“Just a joke.” He flops down in the dirt not far from Xavier. Xavier watches him, and then for no reason Alex can see, nods to himself and goes back to checking pipes.

“I don’t get you,” Alex says, suddenly.

“Get me?” Charles asks, cautiously.

“Like, why you worked for the prison.” Alex says. “You’re a mutant—sorta—too.”

“Well, not every prison has a mutant wing.” Xavier keeps his hands steady as he presses along one too-wet tube.

“Yeah, but—that’s where you worked.”

Xavier sits back on his heels and looks at Alex. Alex glares at the little innocent sprout things they’re trying to help.

“Is it just the imprisonment of mutants you’re objecting to me assisting with, then?” the ex-guard asks, as if he’s really interested in what Alex has to say, in what Alex thinks.

Alex thinks hard for a moment, disentangling what Xavier means from what he’s just said.

“Yeah. Humans, they can look after themselves. They shouldn’t be messing with us, getting in our business at all. But mutants—we’re supposed to stick together.”

“And working as a prison guard isn’t sticking together?” Xavier looks down and the piping in his hands. “Isn’t helping mutants as well as humans outside of the prisons?”

“Of course not!” Alex half-shouts.

How can Xavier think that? That prison was—was hell on earth; it was a pit full of misery and anger and people looking for any kind of escape; from the inside of their cells, from the inside of their heads, from the outside world. Putting anyone there wasn’t *helping them*.

“Can you pass me the puncture kit?” Xavier asks gently, as Alex fights to get his breathing and face back under control. “This one’s going to leak if I let it get worse.”

Absently, Alex passes it over. Charles takes it, opens it and fishes out the tube of sealant.

“Alex. Not everyone—not even all the mutants—in that prison were innocent. Some of them were genuine criminals.”

“So?” Alex bristles. He’s not going to argue with that one, stupid, mixed up kid that he’d been before he got caught. He’d done some stuff he wasn’t exactly proud of, anymore.

“So, some of them might have hurt other mutants as well as non-mutants, if they hadn’t been in there.” Charles’s hands deftly squeeze out a blob of the sealant and coax the thick glue-like stuff to cling to the hole.

“Yeah—but—but—” Alex wavers. It’s true, some of them were guilty, some of them weren’t ok to be around, but still— “They’re still mutants!”

“So?” Xavier flings his question back to him. “Does that mean they get to hurt anyone they want, even other mutants?”

“No but—but we—you shouldn’t be locking them up.” Alex scrubs a hand through his hair. Xavier is really twisting his head around.

“Oh, only humans get to lock mutants up then?” The prof tilts his head. “Weren’t you just implying that humans had no right to imprison any of us?”

“No—but—that’s not what I meant!” Alex glares at the other mutant. Charles looks back at him steadily.

It would be easier, Alex thinks, if Ch—if Xavier was mean while he asked his questions, if he mocked Alex for asking, if he dismissed him. This gentle series of questions makes him all confused. Makes him *think*.

Xavier shuffles forwards on his knees to a new section of pipe. There’s definitely a puncture here that should be fixed—the pipe is spurting a wasteful amount of water. The little seedlings of whatever-it-is Hank is growing here look half drowned.

“Wish these were metal.” Alex watches the sun flash on Xavier’s cuffs as he moves. “Erik could sort ‘em all out in no time.”

“I think the amount of leaks would increase.” Charles accepts Alex’s gesture of peace. “It gets so warm here; between rusting and expanding and contracting—”

“Yeah.”

This time Alex hands Charles the repair kit before he asks. They work on the leak together.

“Man, these must be thirsty little plants,” Alex says, after another silence. “Wonder what he’s growing this time.”

“Some kind of beets, I think.” Charles screws the cap back on the tube.

“Beets?” Alex makes a face.

“Vegetables are good for you.” Charles says lightly, teasing.

“Maybe he’s working on inventing beets that taste good,” Alex cheerfully replies.

“They’ll be ready in a month or so.” Charles’s voice is lower now. “I’m sure Hank will be delighted if you try some for him and let him know.”

“You first.” Alex Does Not Do Beets. He does not. Beets are just wrong. Nothing, not even Hank’s science-y magic and gene-splicing, can make beets taste good.

“If I’m still here.” Charles smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

“You planning on escaping, then?” Alex sits up to look at him sternly. “We’d have to stop you.”

Charles shakes his head. “Given that’ve I’ve been threatened with the amputation of my hands and feet—and cauterisation of the bleeding stumps—if I try to escape, I can promise you, Alex, escape is not on my mind.” He says it with that same awful excuse for a smile.

“Erik said that, right?” Alex shakes his head, trying to displace the gruesome image. “I’ll let you in on a secret; he’s not as mean as he says he is.” It’s true. Erik’s bark is pretty damn bad, but it’s worse than his bite. For a dangerous mutant terrorist, he can be a bit of a soft touch. At least, y’know, sometimes. For other mutants. And kids.

“Thank goodness for that.” Charles says lightly. “Come on, I think—”

“So,. If you’re not going to escape, you’d better brush up on your beet recipes—we’re gonna be here a while, I think.” Alex bulls on through Charles’s speech. The ex-guard looks tired.

“You might be, yes.” And Charles weights the *you* with an odd amount of stress.

“And you!” A sudden thought strikes Alex. Charles has been having a lot of headaches since they’ve been here. He doesn’t complain, but he goes kinda white and quiet. Victor’s been laughing at him for it. Hank’s been making interested noises about tests and stuff. Maybe Alex had better make sure Charles goes to the scientist for them.

“That is—you’re not dying are you?” Alex asks, roughly. He doesn’t want Xavier to die or leave or anything. He’s an ok guy. And too many people die or run off on Alex. His parents. His brother. Charles isn’t allowed to be another one.

“I’m not sick.” Charles says quietly. “But—”

“No.” Alex says, suddenly grasping what Charles is trying to say. “No. You’re—we’re safe here. No one has to—has to do anything stupid to make sure of that.”

Charles doesn’t say anything.

“They don’t,” Alex insists. “Has Victor been spouting bullshit about that—that sort of thing? He’s an asshole, don’t listen to him.”

Charles sucks in a breath, blows it back out. Moves along the pipe to a new spot.

“Seriously. Don’t.” Alex squares his shoulders and tries to summon up some courage. “Do I gotta go thump him?”

“I—I don’t think that’s a good idea, Alex.” Charles bites his lip. “He’s a semi-immortal with a healing factor who’s been in a few armies. You might—” he stops and very visibly edits what he’s about to say. “You might regret it.”

“Yeah,” Alex acknowledges. “He might put up a bit of a fight.”

Charles sneezes. Sort of. It sounds a bit like a choked-off laugh, but Alex knows he hasn’t said anything funny.

“Is your cold still hanging on?” Alex says, glad of a change in subject. “Thought Hank’s weird stuff had sorted that.”

“Just dust, I think.” Charles waves the question away. “I’m fine, Alex.”

They work on. Alex gets bored.

“You don’t—you don’t have to laugh or anything, but. You could try lightening up a bit.” Alex suggests, after a quiet ten minutes of patching leaks and checking for blockages.

“How do you suggest I do that?” It’s funny, listening to that precise and proper voice out here in the dirt.

“I dunno.” Alex allows short silence for consideration. “You could tell a few jokes?”

Charles is quiet for a moment, and then he asks, “Any kind of jokes?”

“Well, nothing too complex. Just something funny.”

“George Bush,” Xavier says immediately, and Alex is pretty sure a grin flits across his face. “Fox News,” he adds.

Alex protests. “I said funny jokes, not just—stupid ones.”

“Hmm.” Xavier ponders for a moment. “What about puns?”

“Awww, man!” Alex groans. Charles chuckles. And proceeds to bury Alex in a hailstorm of puns.

So Alex still doesn’t get Xavier. Or what he thinks of as a sense of humour. But he’s starting to think the guy might be ok anyway.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Hank and Charles, sitting in a lab, R-E-S-E-A-R-C-H-I-N-G.

Hank looks at Charles over his glasses. The lab coat, the equipment scattered around the room and the pages of scribbled notes and data printouts would make him look like an adorably crazy elderly scientist trapped in his battered lab, but the man is some forty years too young for that.

And also, Hank is intermittently blue and furry. Which does not, Charles corrects himself, preclude the idea of Hank being a well-meaning mad scientist, but it does mean he has issues attempting to fit the visual cliché. So few scientists go barefoot in their labs, or hang from the ceiling by said feet while trying to adjust equipment.

“You don’t mind all these questions?” Hank asks anxiously. Charles feels that Hank is genuinely concerned. He *wants* Charles to be able to answer of his own free will. Charles’s not sure where that knowledge comes from, but each of his visits to Hank’s lab over the last couple of weeks supports its certainty.

Charles shakes his head in response to Hank’s question. He doesn’t mind. Not really, and if Hank can explain what’s going on in his head, and possibly fix it, it will be worth stirring up unpleasant childhood memories of answering questions in another lab.

“At what age did you manifest?” Hank prods a few keys on his laptop, trying to encourage the scan data to process faster.

“I... I’m really not sure,” Charles admits. “It seemed like—I think it there was always something I could do. My father’s notes on my—on me go back to birth, I think.”

“Your father’s notes?” Hank looks up sharply. Charles recognises the data-hunger in his eyes.

“He was very interested in mutations and their development in early childhood. Particularly psionic.” Charles can’t help the stiffness of his reply. “We didn’t—don’t really talk much now.” Hank’s eyebrows rise. Charles looks down at his feet.

Hank clears his throat.

“And then this T-regulator went in at—”

“I was ten.” Charles says, head still down. And even then, he’d known it wouldn’t do any good. His stepmother would find it more convenient; his father might have the opportunity to gather different data, but the implant wasn’t suddenly going to make Charles loveable, or turn

his parents into people capable of loving him anyway. He swallows, and brings himself back to the present.

Self-pity is not a useful survival trait, he reminds himself, and looks up to catch Hank still staring at him. Charles stares back.

“And, um, your shock stick injuries, you got them in the, ah, in the breakout?” Hank looks awkward. Charles smiles a little.

“Just before. Altercation with a couple of the other guards.” Charles gives a brief recount of the nasty little incident.

“So the shock-stick actually *hit you in the head*?” Hank adjusts his glasses, looking appalled. His blue fur suddenly bristles up with anger and concern for his patient.

“The second time, yes,” Charles murmurs, thoroughly discombobulated. Hank McCoy is unlike any doctor he has ever met before. Some of that, but by no means most, is to do with his fluctuating appearance as he works on isolating a serum that will hide his less-human features without damping down his less-human talents.

Hank mutters dire things under his breath as he looks at the scans he’s taken of Charles’s skull. Scans of his brain, his implant, his... everything. Charles is impressed with the kind of talent and dedication it takes to build your own scanner. That he built it in a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere (probably), USA only makes it more impressive.

Charles’s own father would probably be fascinated by Hank and by what he’s come up with. Charles swallows back a bolt of nausea at the idea of his father getting close to Hank, who may technically be sheltering numerous escaped criminals and aiding and abetting said criminals in keeping Charles captive, but is a genuine nice scientist.

Charles didn’t think there were any; in his experience, scientific ability and an ability to see other people as well, *people*, were mutually exclusive talents. He’s learned differently in his weeks here; even if he may not live long enough to put any of it to good use anywhere else.

Still, now he knows how to check and repair irrigation systems for many experimental crops, and what Erik looks like chopping wood (exactly the same as he does the rest of the time; the axe is metal, so Erik just stands there, jazz-handing the logs into obedient kindling.)

And that Sean dreams of being able to fly, a fairly terrifying prospect for all, and that Alex is almost certainly never going to forgive him for being a prison guard and a mutant.

Most of Alex’s ire seems to be about that, as if being a mutant and needing a job are two completely exclusive concepts (like *science* and *safe*, Charles thinks). It’s not as if he can actually explain to Alex that he was there undercover, or as if Alex, or any of the others, would believe him if he said that, anyway.

“Tell me more about the tingly sensation you say you’ve been getting, please.” Hank picks up a pen and Charles swallows. Hank won’t hurt him. Hank isn’t testing him; Hank is trying to help him.

“It’s not... it’s not in my brain.” Charles rubs his fingers over the implant again. “it’s in... his waves, vaguely. “in my *mind*.”

“Feeling *tingly*, are you, screw? I can help with that.” A mocking voice speaks from the doorway. Charles doesn’t turn round, doesn’t flinch. He can’t afford any signs of weakness with this one.

“Out of the lab, Victor,” Hank says, calm and firm. “Now, please.”

Victor leans against the doorway. Hank draws a deep breath.

“You know I keep a good few... interesting substances here.” Hank’s fur’s bristling back up again. “Unless you want me to test them on you, leave. Now.”

Victor slouches out.

“He knows better than to actually do anything,” Hank says, turning to reassure Charles. “He just likes frightening people.”

Charles nods tightly. He won’t disillusion Hank, but he’s read Creed’s prison file. Even if he makes allowances for the mutant-phobic slant to most things there, Victor Creed is dangerous. Charles just has to hope that Erik—who seems to find some kind of value in Charles as a hostage—can keep things under control.

“Now, the tingling?” Hank turns back to his papers.

“It’s kind of intermittent...”

“Hmmmm.” Hank emerges from his reverie some considerable time later. “You know, the model of T-regulator you’re using is very rare.”

“Yes.” Charles does know. His father chose it, and explained exactly why, to his ten year old son. He’d drawn diagrams. He’d given Charles homework on it.

“It seems to primarily dampen the ability to send.” Hank says, absently, “And to block the capacity to receive.”

“Isn’t that how all of them work?” Charles tilts his head.

“Not at all. Most are suppressors, pure and simple—exactly the same as any control collar. Many focus on the genetic level of psionic abilities and attempt to eradicate them entirely.” Hank pokes at something on this laptop again, which beeps. “This one is far more complex. And far less damaging.”

“I thought— They said—” Charles gulps. The air in the bright, sunny lab is somehow thin. It’s hard to breathe.

“It’s a moot point, though,” Hank muses.

“Because it’s implanted in my skull, yes, and can’t be removed, I know—” Charles stops himself with an effort, before he starts sounding shrill, or worse, angry. He breathes in. This is the wrong tone to take with someone who has power over him the way Hank does.

“No, Charles.” Hank smiles as he says it. “Because it appears to no longer be working properly.”

“*What?*”

At the sound of Lehnsherr’s voice, Charles turns his head so fast his neck creaks. It’s odd. Usually Charles knows when Erik is about because the metal cuffs shift on his wrists and ankles. It’s useful to know when the metallokinetic is near; he’s obviously the leader not only of this little group, but also of something more, this nebulous “Cause” he wants Charles to commit to.

Hank calmly looks over at Erik.

“This is a matter of medical confidentiality, Erik.” He uses the patient tones of one who has said many similar things before. Charles blinks a little; Erik doesn’t seem to be the sort of leader who is fond of insubordination. “You asked me to take Charles on as my patient, remember? That means—”

“I-I don’t mind.” Charles says swiftly. He doesn’t. Medical ethics are one thing; finding out what the hell Hank knows about his implant is another. *Besides*, he thinks, *It’s not like anyone outside of here will ever know, is it?* The longer he stays, the less likely it’ll be that he gets out of here alive and un-maimed.

“Charles,” Hank says. “You don’t have to—”

“*Tell me.*” Charles all but begs. “Please.”

“The T-regulator was designed to do just that: regulate,” Hank says. “Yours was set on a near-total suppression level, but, as I said, it’s no longer functioning like that.”

“How is it functioning?” Erik demands. Hank gives him a long look.

“It’s failing.”

Charles’s heart nearly stops. Erik looks at him with concern. Hank is still talking.

“Going by the readings of your brain activity, Charles, I’d say it might have been doing so, in tiny increments, for a while before the shock stick overloaded it. Basically? Your access to your abilities is coming back. Possibly permanently.”

“Coming back?” Charles’s fingers bite into the wooden lab stool he’s perched on. He feels dizzy.

“Telepathy, sending and receiving, telempathy, ditto, right?” Hank’s smiling now. “Not sure what a decade and a half of non-use will have done to your strength, Charles, or if it will be a sustainable development but—”

Charles doesn't know what expression he's making right now, but it causes Erik to move closer to him, lay a hand on his shoulder and say, reluctantly, "If you genuinely don't want this, Charles, we can—" He frowns, but presses on. "I know some telepaths. We can—arrange something—"

"No!" Charles shakes his head rapidly. "No, I-I don't want anyone else in my head, please. I just—what do you mean by "sustainable?"

"What I said." Hank says, gently. "Your brain may not be able to sustain your abilities; we don't know if the underlying structures to process telepathic abilities survived the... non-use."

"But they might?" Charles shivers. That does not sound good.

"It's possible." Hank's eyes soften. "Things haven't hit a critical mass yet, but I think that will happen. We have a number of options to try if or when it does."

"Alright." Erik tries to hide his personal glee and fails, badly. "Charles. Your suppressor is failing. You've said you don't want your head meddled with. Does that mean you may consider... embracing your powers?"

"Do I have a choice?" Charles smiles faintly. Erik seems so set on glorifying mutants: their abilities, their position in society. And he's so focused on making—encouraging—Charles to do the same.

"Yes." Hank looks at Erik until he stops touching Charles.

Charles sighs.

"You don't have to make a decision right now. I don't think your abilities will come fully online anytime soon."

"Slow is better, perhaps." Erik says, thoughtful at last. "You get time to get used to the idea. And well, with the security situation—"

"You don't want me suddenly becoming a flight risk," Charles says, dry. Hank and Erik both wince.

"No," Erik says. "That's not—" But Charles's expression has blanked itself already, and he's looking down at his hands again.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

In which Victor attempts to assault Charles and does not succeed; and the start of the consequences.

Chapter Notes

OK. This is the chapter that earns this story the attempted rape tag I put up earlier; please to be warned and read prepared.

Charles's head hurts. He makes his bed mechanically, not thinking. He makes the bed and tries to keep his breathing regular, and his panic levels low. It's not very easy. His head hurts and his T-regulator hurts and he is far from anything remotely resembling safety.

Also, he's chained to a bed. As usual.

Not in the fun way, either. Not that Charles has ever, really, been interested in *fun* chains, he hastily reminds himself. The intent, focused expression on Erik's face when he'd spun the chain up out of a couple of buckets floats before Charles's mind's eye, and he banishes it, also hastily.

Exhausted, he crawls onto the bed and lies there, not moving. The evening air in the bunkroom is hot and enervating; lassitude seems to breathe from the faded paint on the walls. Charles sighs, and rolls over. The chain drags at his leg and knocks heavily against the leg of the bed. He's almost used to it by now.

Hank says his telepathy is coming back as the T-Regulator fails.

That's probably why it's hurting, nothing to do with the amount of fieldwork he's done today, in the sun. Charles hopes that whoever brings his dinner does so before they eat up at the house, and not after. And that they remember to bring water with them. The stuff from the sink here tastes awful.

Alex usually remembers; Sean doesn't but is happy enough to go back to the house two or three times to get Charles whatever he's forgotten. Az bamfs in and out so fast Charles never gets to speak to him, but he never forgets the water. Erik is clearly not on the "feed the hostage" chore rota, given that Charles hasn't seen him in here since the day he made the chain.

Sometimes Logan and Victor bring the evening's food; Charles can never quite shake off the nagging suspicion that Victor has somehow spat on or otherwise contaminated the meal, to amuse himself. Victor is a disturbing man. Logan, his brother, might be surly and curt, but he's never made Charles so immediately aware of all the exits in a room when he walks into it.

The door scrapes as it's dragged open. Charles sits up from his tired sprawl.

"Hey, screw." Great. It's Victor. "Got your nice little dinner here."

Charles shifts so his feet are firmly on the floor. Victor lounges in, grinning. Charles looks over Victor's shoulder; he won't avoid his gaze, but by now Charles knows that meeting Victor's eyes directly is dangerous. Logan does not follow on his brother's heels, and Charles' heart sinks.

Victor drops the tray on the far bunk bed, and props himself against it. Charles doesn't move.

"Not hungry?" Victor smirks. "Ol' fuzzy made this himself."

Charles doesn't reply. The moment of silence stretches out unpleasantly. Victor scowls, and strides forwards. He seizes Charles by the shirt and drags him upright.

"Ok. Lemme explain how this is gonna be."

"Let go!" Charles struggles. He opens his mouth to yell. Unperturbed, Victor slaps a paw over his mouth, holding him in place against the uprights of the bunk bed, and keeps talking.

"The boss's bin having his fun with you; Sean's been smilin' at you; and don't think I don't know what all that testing was really about with beastie. My turn."

Charles glares at him, and then bites down on the hand over his mouth. He doesn't stop when he tastes blood. Victor curses and slams Charles's head against the bed. Charles reels.

This can't be happening, this can't be—

"Oh, it's happening," Victor assures him, fumbling with one hand at his own pants, the other wrapping around Charles's skull. "You're gonna be real sweet to me, screw. Or you're losing all those pretty teeth, for a start."

Charles tries to shake his head.

"Yeah, you are." Victor strokes the thick claw of his thumb alongside Charles's eye.

"Bossman must be pretty tired of you, I reckon. He's already pissy that your mind-reading ain't come back yet. And none of 'em are gonna be interested in a broken toy." His breath is hot and damp and disgusting in Charles's face.

"So, like I said. We're gonna do this 'fore m'brother gets home." Victor steps away from the bunk bed, dragging Charles with him. He catches Charles behind the knee with one foot and forces him to the floor, bruisingly rough. "You get to choose how you end up. Sweet. Or broken."

He shifts his grip, cradling Charles' head in his hands. "Open your mouth," he demands, already panting, voice lowering to a growl as his pants slide down. "I want that first."

"Anything you put in my mouth," Charles grits out, keeping his gaze and voice steady by force of will, "You will lose." His head is a storm of terror and rage and *no*. Charles cannot help but think of Stephen King. And yes, he knows, that line about biting didn't really work for the hero in the Shawshank Redemption, either, but he can't—he can't—

Victor laughs. "Broken, then. Your jaw ain't that strong. And if it was? It'll grow back." His hands move, preparing to force Charles's head down. It's just enough that Charles can jerk his head away. He rips himself out of Victor's grasp, punches Victor in the balls, and bolts.

Charles makes it to the door of the bunkhouse before the chain pulls him up short, and he falls.

Victor prowls forward, grinning. He stoops, grabs the chain, and starts pulling Charles back towards him. Charles digs his nails into the floor and tries to fight it. He doesn't scream out loud. Waste of oxygen. But he screams in his head, panic and fear and rage. He pushes all of it towards Victor, willing him to stop, go away, forget about Charles.

Victor drops the chain and backs away a step. Charles's hand fixes on his temple and he pushes again, hoping, hoping—Victor shakes his head and rushes forwards again. He yanks Charles up by his collar and punches him in the stomach, hard and brutal.

Charles's concentration breaks up into a struggle for air. He tries not to vomit. Victor flips him onto his stomach and begins tearing at his pants.

This time, Charles screams out loud. He pushes again, and Victor's hands slow, but they don't stop.

"Get away from him!"

Victor looks up in shock.

The new voice is roaring with rage, too distorted for Charles to identify it. Other people are shouting as well. The metal flows off Charles's wrists and ankles. It wraps itself viciously around Victor, hands and throat and body, and it hurls the man against the wall hard enough to break bones, and then it holds him there.

As soon as the revolting weight of Victor's rank body is off him, Charles bolts outside. He makes it almost to the fence, blind with panic and nausea, before he drops to his knees and vomits. He'd just—he'd nearly—

Someone howls. A wash of anger and pain floods the night, and the sounds of shouting, of bones breaking, crashes of wood and metal inside the bunk house. Charles vomits again, although there is nothing to come up. His head aches savagely, fit to split.

Footsteps.

Charles scrambles up from his knees, whirling round and ready to run again.

“Professor.” Azazel. Quiet. Watchful.

“Don’t touch me!” Charles blurts, trying to back away, only to be betrayed by his limbs’ irritating watery weakness. “Just—just don’t touch me.”

Azazel instantly stills. Raises his hands to be very visible.

“I will not hurt you.” He doesn’t move. “Your nose is bleeding.”

Charles swipes a hand across his top lip, and looks at the blood.

“So I am.” He leans wearily against the boundary fence. “You can tell E—Lehnsherr, he doesn’t have to worry. I’m not escaping.” He can’t. The metal cuffs and chain might have gone to hold Victor down, but he’s still barefoot and bleeding with no idea where he is.

“Charles,” Azazel says. “Let me take you up to the house. You are not well.”

“I-I—” Charles squeezes his eyes shut for a moment. He fights to hold on, just a little longer. When he opens them, the red-skinned mutant is still there, waiting and watching. Azazel’s cautious expression darkens when Charles starts shaking, the physical reaction cruelly exposing the way he’s falling apart inside.

“Erik has that creature pinned.” Az says, low and unbearably gentle. “And when I know you are recovering, it will be my privilege to take him somewhere suitable. And leave him there.” He grins, astonishingly, and quirks an eyebrow. “I am thinking, an iceberg might suit. Or a volcano, if we can find one currently erupting. Or—”

“Alright.” If Charles thinks about this, he’s not going to be able to do it. But if taking him back is Az’s price for removing Victor Creed, Charles can pay it, and willingly. He takes a step towards Azazel. Azazel doesn’t move, so he takes another

Azazel raises his tail, brings it up between them in offering.

“Teleportation is quickest, if you can bear it.” Compassion warms his dark eyes. “I do not have to hold on to you.” He angles the tip of his tail towards Charles, a quiet invitation. “So long as you are touching my bare skin, I can move us both.”

Charles stretches out scraped and shaking fingers, touches Azazel’s tail and closes his eyes.

There’s a burst of blackness and then a flood of light as Azazel brings them straight to Hank’s lab. It’s deserted. Charles walks on numb and swaying feet to lean himself back against the nearest wall.

“I will bring Hank,” Az says, then adds, “and Sean.” Charles wraps his arms around himself.

With a burst of fast-dissipating smoke, Az is gone, and Charles is alone. Slowly, he lets himself slide down the wall.

He’s barely hit the floor before Az bamfs back into the room, Hank and Sean in tow.

“Prof—” Sean heads straight for him. Charles flinches back. “I’m gonna kill him!” Sean snarls. “He is *dead*.”

“Sean.” Hank adjusts his glasses. “Let’s focus on what matters, shall we? Which isn’t your feelings about this, right now.” Mutinously, Sean scowls. Az vanishes again.

“Charles,” Hank says. “Can you talk, right now?”

“Yes.” Charles whispers hoarsely. “Yes.” He holds tightly onto his elbows.

“Sean. Water. Go,” Hank says briskly. Sean blunders out of the room. “Charles. Would you feel better sitting in a chair, or staying where you are?”

“I.” Charles thinks. Hank waits, patient and still, unthreatening. “Not sure I can move,” Charles admits, finally.

“Take your time.” Hank’s voice is very gentle.

“Cold,” Charles observes, as he fights to his feet, Hank safely across the room. “Why’s it so cold?”

“Shock,” Hank suggests. Charles staggers to the chair, and manages to sit before his legs give way again. He should have thought of that. Why didn’t he? Hank holds a blanket out to him. Charles leans forwards and clumsily grabs it, just. He can barely pull it back to himself.

“You may be right,” he admits, as Hank deftly drapes the blanket over Charles’s shoulders.

“May I take your pulse and blood pressure, Charles? I’m a little concerned about them right now.”

Wearily, Charles nods. He can’t exactly stop the other mutant. And Hank is all blue right now, blue and furry, and entirely unlike Victor Creed.

Sean hurries back in, arms stuffed with water bottles.

“Charles, I’d like you to try drinking some water, please.” Hank says, his touch skilled and impersonal on Charles’s wrist and arm.

Charles stretches out his hand, and Sean puts a water bottle, cap already removed, in it.

“Thank you, Sean,” he husks, and drinks. It washes out the foul post-vomit taste in his mouth, and eases his throat. His stomach is sore, but the water does it good.

“I’m sorry.” Sean says, suddenly. “I-I should have brought you your food. I know—I didn’t want him alone with you but—”

“It’s alright,” Charles says, hastily. “You weren’t to—”

Hank flashes a penlight in Charles’s eyes and he winces away from the stabbing light.

“You stopped Marko.” Sean bites his lip sadly. “I should have stopped Victor.”

“I—he didn’t get what he wanted.” Charles looks down, away. “And it’s not—we do what we can, for our-. Sean . It’s not tit-for-tat.”

Sean looks hopeful. And then, he grins.

“Heh. You said tit.”

Charles surprises himself by wanting to laugh.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Charles gets hugged; gets used in a demonstration of consent re hugging, Erik puts his foot in his mouth, and Charles makes an unfounded accusation.

Charles sips at his soup. Sean brought it to him, but Alex made it, so it tastes good. The blanket around him also feels good. The panicky fear and horror of Victor's attack has mostly faded, but he doesn't feel up to thinking or feeling much right now, so he drinks more soup and watches Hank busy himself in his lab notes and results.

"You feeling better?" Sean asks, hovering anxiously. Charles thinks he's secretly checking to see if they missed any scrapes or bruises back when he and Hank were busy covering Charles in arnica and antiseptic and plasters.

"Yes, thank you, Sean." Charles can smile at him now. He can allow himself to breathe a little.

"How's the headache?" Hank peers at some of his ever-present readouts. "Are you sure you don't want any painkillers?"

"Yes, thank you," Charles says, quickly.

He doesn't like drugs; and much as he trusts Hank, he's fairly sure Hank is thinking of more exotic things than plain old paracetamol. "It's..." Charles glances in the direction of the bunkhouse; he can't see it from the lab, but it's where his headache has been radiating from. "Mostly stopped," he says, with some relief. "Perhaps it was the shock."

"Mmm." Hank looks a question at Charles. "Or the telepathy."

"It was a bit more than just tingling, this time." Charles looks down at his soup. "I did—I did try to make him stop. Um, by pushing him, with my mind, I mean..." he admits. "It had—it had some effect, but not—I couldn't—" He breaks off, and forces himself to drink some soup, quietly.

"Victor's like me and Darwin, bub." Logan speaks from the doorway, also quietly. Charles startles so badly he nearly spills his soup. "We've all got a resistance to mind powers; same as everything else."

"Oh," Charles says, a little weakly, trying not to scream or cower or hide. Logan doesn't look or sound or smell much like his brother but still, being there—being in this room, with Logan in the door, blocking the exit—

“Prof?” Sean sounds worried. “You okay?”

“Just came by to tell you ‘m leaving.” Logan grunts. “So you don’t need to worry no more.”

“It’s—it wasn’t you,” Charles says. “I—I—” His voice dries. He wants to tell Logan it’s alright; Victor picked a night Azazel had taken Logan somewhere else; Charles knows Logan would have stopped Victor if he’d known. If he’d been there. If he could. But Charles can’t bring himself to speak.

Logan sniffs the air, and fixes him with a long look.

“Yeah, and when your scent and’ your pulse tell me I don’t freak you out, I might feel better ‘bout that.” He looks down at his hands. Looks up again to say: “He’s my brother. I knew he wasn’t a good man; didn’t think he—” Logan breathes in, looks up. “I turned a blind eye to things Victor did before. Not to rape, but still. Too often. Gotta go get m’head on straight.”

“And Victor?” There’s a surprising amount of growl in Hank’s tone. Logan glances over before returning his gaze to Charles.

“Az’s taking what’s left of him; won’t say where. Erik’s orders, though.” Logan shrugs, almost casual. “Me? I’m done with him.”

Charles drops his eyes and drinks more soup. He’s tired. Logan is hurting. There’s nothing much he can think of to say to him.

“See you around,” Logan says to Hank, to Sean, maybe to Charles as well. He can’t be sure.

“Logan.” Charles summons up enough of himself to speak to the man. “It—it wasn’t your fault. Any more than it was mine. He’s your brother. That doesn’t mean you’re guilty of what he does.”

Logan doesn’t say anything, just tips his head in Charles’s direction, and leaves.

Hank turns back to his papers, muttering to himself about telepathy and structures in the brain.

“You want more soup?” Sean asks hopefully. “I—I can bring some more.”

Charles shakes his head, smiling a little. He’s not hungry any more. It’s good to be here, in this room, with these people. Sean takes the empty cup away from him and sets it down. Then, looking at Charles steadily, he moves closer and—

Sean. Is. Hugging. Him.

Charles swallows down the first instinctive yelp of protest, and freezes for a long moment, his arms held away from his sides, away from Sean’s around him, his fingers half-curved into claws. He’s not panicky enough to try to hurt Sean, but it’s close. And then his hammering heart starts to slow as his telepathy picks up. Not in sending—but receiving, something of which Charles has far less experience.

It's amazing. He can feel *Sean* is the person hugging him; that he's feeling worried, anxious and protective of Charles. He's not Victor. He's nothing like Victor. Sean is warmer, kinder. He could *never* be Victor Creed.

A machine beeps. Hank looks up from it and snaps.

"*Sean!* Let go of him now!"

Sean straightens up and steps away from Charles's chair, a hurt look on his face.

"What?"

"You must ask first, for these things," Azazel says, lazily, from where he's standing with Alex by the doorway. Hank seconds him with a stern nod.

"But he didn't—he didn't tell me to stop!" Sean protests. "I wouldn't have—"

"Not the point!" both Hank and Az say as one.

Charles wonders if they've had to explain this one to Sean before.

"Uh, sorry, prof," he adds, skin flushing red. "I didn't— Are you ok?" *Have I made things worse?* he worries frantically.

"It's ok, Sean," Charles says, with a weak attempt at a smile. "I—it's alright."

"Yeah, gotta ask, man." Alex walks up to Charles. Charles stands, rather hastily. Hank makes a protesting noise that Alex ignores. "Like this. Prof. I'm gonna hug you now, ok?" Alex stares at him, challengingly. Hugs seem to be serious business for him.

"I—Ah— I suppose—" Charles isn't going to object. It would doubtless be bad for Alex's emotional development. And besides, it makes Victor—and what Victor tried to do—further away, somehow.

Alex is hugging him now.

Alex feels different, too. He is less worried about hurting Charles; because he figures the Prof is tough, but he remembers his mom telling him, hugs fix everything. Charles tries to remember how to breathe. Between the hugs and the emotions he's picking up, it's a little much. He manages to relax his arms a little inside Alex's light bear hug, from where they'd been stiffly held at his sides when Alex first approached him.

"No, no, no!" Az says instantly, teasingly, but his eyes are far from amused. "You must get better consent than that, Alex."

Alex lets go of Charles as if he were on fire. Charles tries not to feel cold and abandoned. He had a warm press of—nice feelings around him, and now they've gone. He squares his shoulders, and tries to focus on the moment.

“Like so.” Azazel shifts from the door frame. “Charles. I am concerned about your wellbeing. May I hug you? I will understand if you prefer not to—”

“Yes, certainly.” Charles says, half laughing. He wonders what he’ll read from Az. It’s rather... lovely, being able to feel another mind like that. Feeling someone else’s mind press against yours. He’s missed it *so much*, he realises, almost gasping.

Az’s embrace is fierce, but no more threatening than Sean’s. He wraps his arms around Charles’s shoulders and murmurs something in a language Charles doesn’t recognise. He likes Charles. Respects his strength and his spine and his smile.

Muscles along Charles’s back are smoothing themselves out of long held knots by the time Az lets go of him. He hasn’t sensed another’s mind, another’s feelings, let alone a succession of them, like this, since he was ten years old. He never thought he’d get it back. Charles has to blink a few times to get the dust out of his eyes.

Quickly, Az drops a kiss on Charles’s forehead. “You will be well,” he murmurs, just to Charles. “All wounds can heal.” A little louder: “You see? You ask and you wait for *enthusiasm*, always.” Az holds on to Charles by the elbows until his knees reassert themselves.

“Even just hugs?” Sean asks, plaintively. “I thought people liked hugs!”

“Especially just hugs.” Everyone says to Sean, as Az releases Charles from his arms.

“What is going on here?” Comes a sudden snap from the doorway. Erik moves past Alex and towards Hank, hastily, brushing past Charles on the way. Charles bites his lip. “How is he?” Erik says. To Hank. As if he can’t, for some reason, talk to Charles directly, anymore.

“Charles?” Hank cocks an eyebrow. “Are you—”

Erik frowns and reddens. Charles nods, hastily. Hank continues, imperturbably. “He’s going to be fine.” Tension drains from Erik’s posture. Charles is heartened by that diagnosis. He would like to be fine, at some point. And he’s come to trust Hank’s abilities. He steps sideways and knocks into Az, who smiles down at him.

“And?” Erik asks brusquely. Still focusing on Hank.

Hank looks at Charles for permission to give more details. Charles nods again.

“Victor didn’t manage to hurt—” *me*, Charles almost manages to say, but Erik talks over him.

“What about the telepathy? Did Victor hurt—” Erik presses on.

Victor’s taunting sidles though Charles’s head again. “*Bossman must be pretty tired of you, I reckon. He’s already pissy that your mind-reading ain’t come back yet.*” Charles’s telepathy had re surfaced in the face of extreme need, certainly. Erik *had* been quite certain, the last few times they had spoken, that that was all it would take for Charles to join him.

A small and horrible feeling crystallises in Charles' gut. He moves to stand in front of Erik, who looks at him, startled.

"Was this a *test* to you, Erik?" He hates the fact he can even think this; he has no idea what to do if the answer is yes. Charles wants to throw up.

Everyone looks blankly at Charles. He stares at Erik, who looks furiously confused. Charles continues, cold and over-controlled.

"Did you want to see if you could somehow force my telepathy into action? Were you worried I was concealing my abilities?"

Now *Erik* looks like he want to throw up. He lifts an arm as if to grasp Charles's shoulder. Charles angles himself away.

"What?" Erik's voice is disbelieving, almost a whisper. No one else says a word.

"I know," Charles says, and he has to swallow, "that functioning mutations are valuable to your "cause," whatever that is, so, I have, I have to ask—"

"No!" Erik shouts at him. Everyone jumps. "Charles. I know—you're not freely here, but I wouldn't—I would not do that."

Charles looks at Erik, steadily. Erik stares back, gunmetal eyes dark and hurt.

He wants to believe, he does, but— He's been a test case before, with his father and he—he just can't stand it if—

"Charles," Erik says, every word sounding torn from him. "When I was twelve years old, a man put a coin on the table, and a gun to my mother's head, and told me if I couldn't move the one, he'd use the other to shoot her with." He runs a hand through his short auburn hair.

"Oh," Charles says, almost voicelessly. "Oh." He hadn't known that. It hadn't been in Erik's file. *What a vile thing to do to a child*, he thinks, distractedly.

"I couldn't—I could never do anything remotely like that to anyone, Charles. Least of all, you." Erik steps back, steps away from Charles, so Charles has to move towards him.

"I'm sorry, Erik," Charles says softly, just between the two of them. "Of course you wouldn't, not with—I don't— He said—"

"Victor Creed," Erik informs him grimly, "is no longer in a position to say anything to anyone."

"Er—" Hank butts in. "Did you actually-?"

"He is not dead." Az says indifferently. "Just wishing he was."

"Ew," Sean says, feelingly.

“Couldn’t happen to a better guy,” Alex snarks back at him.

“Boys.” Hank sighs, and Az laughs, sharp and bright.

Charles thinks he should probably stop looking into Erik’s eyes now, but how can he, when Erik is looking back at him like that? He wishes his capricious telepathy worked when he wasn’t touching people.

He wishes Erik would hug him... purely so he could get a better read on Erik’s feelings, of course.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Charles drinks tea with Alex and talks family and farming with Darwin.

The press of sleeping minds around him wakes Charles early again.

He mutters a brief curse as he sits up. He has *got* to get back into the habit of shielding while he's asleep. He could do it when he was ten, it ought to be like riding a bicycle. Charles strokes the implant in his skull. He never thought he'd be thankful he got hit in the head with a shockstick.

Sean's dreams are not very restful to share; plus, if he doesn't, it's only going to be a matter of time before Charles inadvertently sleep-eavesdrops on Darwin and Alex's *waking* activities. That would be just plain embarrassing for everyone.

Thankfully his room—which he thinks, but isn't sure, might have been Logan's—is right next door to Erik's, and Erik doesn't dream much. At least, not that Charles has picked up on. It's a nice room, too, plain and simple, but clean with working air conditioning. Hank turns it on for a few hours in the afternoon, so it's always cool and fresh in his room when Charles goes to bed.

Minds distractingly detectable around him or not, Charles sleeps better here than he has done anywhere else in years. Even, he muses, as he shoves himself out of bed, and reaches for his clothes, with the looming fear—a lot fainter now, but still present—that later circumstances will force his captors to kill him.

Because this fragile bubble, this... *happinness*, living like any other group of friends who just happen to like hanging out and assisting with experimental farming projects, can't last. Whatever Erik's "Cause" is, he's still pursuing it buried in the middle of nowhere, USA. Charles can see that, now he's living in the main house. And he won't be able to pursue it here forever.

Charles pulls on his jeans—so much more comfortable than sweatpants, just like the sneakers are better than flip flops. He grabs the T-shirt, reads the slogan on it and briefly considers wearing it inside out before shrugging and pulling it on anyway.

If he's very lucky, Charles will be left behind when the group dissolves. If he's luckier, he might be left behind somewhere he can actually try to start putting his life—such as it was, and is—back together. Prove he's alive. Find Raven. Get the rest of the information he'd collected to Moira. Now with added telepathy.

Tea. He's always full of self-pity before his first caffeine rush. Charles shakes his head at himself and pads barefoot to the kitchen. He ignores the coffeemaker, as Alex has sworn to maim anyone not Alex who touches it.

Charles is staring at his tea (Az bought some on his last shopping trip. Twinings' English Breakfast, from a Tesco somewhere in Derbyshire. Charles didn't ask.) when Alex slouches in and punches on the TV and the coffee maker.

"Morning," Charles says politely.

Alex grunts in response and turns to examine the bread dough he left to rise over night.

"Don't see how you can start the day on just tea, prof." He stares at the coffee pot. The TV skips from adverts to a news bulletin about a small dog somewhere that's done something very charming.

"Tea has caffeine, too." Charles cheerfully informs him. "And I also put plenty of sugar, so."

"Huh. Breakfast?" Alex starts rattling pans.

"I-I've had some fruit," Charles says, hastily. He might be up, but his stomach won't be awake for a while yet. Alex grunts.

"I'm making pancakes. You're eating some of them. You're getting skinny."

"I'm getting more muscles, actually," Charles retorts, and Alex grins. He is developing muscles, actually; experimental farming should be the next body building craze.

"Skinny." Alex thumps Charles on the shoulder as he goes past. Charles smiles into his tea.

The TV starts talking about what's up next; and Charles freezes and bites back a curse as his stepmother's all-too-familiar voice echoes in the small kitchen. She's crying again and some news host or other is offering her tissues and looking sympathetic.

Alex snaps the TV off two seconds later, but it's too late. Charles's mood has soured.

"Sorry, man." Alex goes back to staring into the fridge. "But—"

"If you hadn't turned it off, I would." Charles forces levity into his voice. "She'd put anyone off their food. Maybe even sour the milk."

"At least your dad doesn't turn up on—"

"It's quite possible he doesn't even know I'm missing yet," Charles says, thoughtfully. Alex looks shocked. "Probably he's not come out of his study long enough to notice I haven't been writing my usual letters."

"I-I'm sure you could—Erik might let Az—" Alex falters, as he almost always does when he has to acknowledge Charles isn't here of his own free will. The anger and hatred he had for Charles seems to have faded since Victor attacked him.

Charles shakes his head. “What’s the point? I don’t have anything to say they’d hear.”]

Raven, now, Raven he’d like to contact, like to know how she is, where she is. But even if he was allowed and Azazel was willing to take her a letter; Charles still doesn’t know how or where to find her.

Charles gulps down the last of his tea. Enough of this brooding.

“Is the coffee done, yet? I’ll take a travel mug of it out to Darwin—I saw he went out early today.”

“I’ll save your pancakes ‘til you come back.” Alex nods in grateful relief, reaching for the coffee pot.

He waits until Charles is out of earshot before turning the TV back on.

Darwin’s a little worried about the Prof—about Charles. He thinks about it as he walks another of Hank’s fields, joints and tendons and muscles automatically evolving and shifting as he runs the cultivator, so the soil gets turned over properly and he doesn’t develop RSI.

Early morning’s his favourite time to get some thinking time in by himself, and the day is still cool. So he left Alex sleeping in their shared room and came out to the Long Thin Field (Hank’s not so good with naming his fields, and neither is Sean. Before the Long Thin Field got its name, it was Plot #4a.

Charles will likely be awake by now, too. He’s an early riser, Darwin knows after a week of observing him warily settling in to the main house. He’s a hard guy to get to know, for all of his ready smiles and helpfulness.

Charles is quiet; damn quiet, and it’s only since the other evening—the first the telepath has spent in the main house—that Darwin has started to think that maybe that’s not who Charles really is. And he’s worried for the man.

It’s... not a front, precisely, but its behaviour that isn’t natural to Charles. No one naturally that quiet, naturally that co-operative and agreeable, would stand toe-to-toe with his captor and yell—well, speak firmly—at him for letting him be nearly attacked by someone in his control. Or voice his suspicions as to *why* so firmly.

Darwin can forgive Charles’s suspicions about *tests*, he supposes, as the cultivator hits a stone and tilts, wheels angling the blades away from the soil. He curses, and squats to check the underside. If the damn thing has eaten and choked on another pebble... Why can’t machines fix themselves like people can, again?

Tests, yeah, Darwin’s endured a few too many, too.

And what with Erik the grand high lord of manipulating people declaring that Charles was to stay in the bunkhouse ‘til he was one of them, it’s not surprising that their former guard never

learnt enough about the rest of them to realise that if that was the kind of man Erik was, they'd all have smothered him in his sleep at the first chance.

The cultivator spits out the pebble, so Darwin tilts it back up and resumes his steady pace. Slow and steady gets things done. As he swings round back towards the house, he sees a small figure leaving it. It waves at him, and Darwin evolves his eyes 'til he can see it's Charles, so he waves back.

The small figure trudges slowly towards him.

"Coffee." Charles hands him a flask. "Alex," he adds, on seeing Darwin's dubious expression.

"Life saver." Darwin turns off the cultivator. The coffee is warm, smooth and black. Perfection. "You didn't need to walk all this way. Az could have—"

Charles shrugs one shoulder and sticks his hands into the pocket of his new jeans. The sweatpants died the night Victor attacked; Darwin feels a bit of shame none of them had thought to get Charles more clothes before then. He'd been getting by on three old T-Shirts and two pairs of sweatpants and those damn flipflops.

"My stepmother's back on the television," Charles says, his smile strained. "And I've really heard enough of her guilt trips by now."

"Again?" Darwin dives back into the coffee. He drinks all he can—his boy makes the coffee just the way Darwin likes it.

"She's been on a lot of shows bewailing my kidnapping and probably brutal death. I expect she'll co-write a book about it as soon as is considered tasteful." Charles says it so-matter-of-factly that Darwin blinks.

Of course, Charles hadn't had a TV, either, in the bunkhouse. The rest of them, in the main house had started out staring at all the news reports and breaking news headlines about their bold and lucky escape, before getting bored and switching to HBO.

They'd kind of forgotten Charles might have a stake in it, until his stepmom popped up, and she was such a weird figure, all dry handkerchiefs and over-bleached hair, it had been hard to connect them, as real folk who knew and maybe liked each other.

"Seems kinda... usual? In kidnapping cases, for people—family—to worry about it." Darwin offers, carefully. Charles is on edge, and Darwin's not really sure how reassuring he can be. Oh, none of them will sit still for Charles being hurt, but Darwin's no fool. They can't offer their captive security that he'll actually *believe*.

Charles smiles almost mirthlessly. "It's not a usual kidnapping case. You know that, Darwin." He says, gently. "And she's not worried about *me* so much as—" He breaks off.

“I’m sure Erik would let you ask Az to—”

Charles shakes his head, smiling a little.

“Although that probably would quieten her down,” he says, thoughtfully, and he grins fleetingly, without mirth.

“What would?” Darwin frowns at the cultivator.

“I just thought— Send her a ransom demand for me, you won’t see her for dust.” Charles blithely dismisses his earlier mood.

“Not the maternal type, was she?” Darwin knows some—and has guessed more of this. No one whose parents stick a suppressor into their skull when they’re ten is likely to have a lot of happy family stories, after all.

“Just... not interested. In anything she couldn’t benefit from.” Charles looks away, runs a hand through his hair. “Sorry. Too much of Alex’s fine coffee. Makes me babble on.”

Darwin hears what Charles is not saying, clear enough. Well. He doesn’t like talking about his past much, either.

“I need to get a better look underneath.” He gestures to the device of evil and agriculture they’re standing by. “Shift back a step.”

“Do you need a hand?” Charles takes the empty travel mug.

“Nah. Just gotta—” Smoothly, muscles shifting, Darwin tilts the cultivator all the way over, and begins investigating.

“Did— You know a lot about farming.”

“Machinery, maybe.” Darwin says, cheerfully. “I was a taxi driver before jail; it helps to be able to fix your own car.”

“This is hardly a car.”

“Nope.” Darwin grunts. “‘S’ a *bitch*.”

There’s a bamf-ing noise and then Az is standing in front of them, still in his pyjama bottoms, and a little wild-eyed.

“Come. You both come, now.” He holds out a hand. Darwin takes it instantly, abandoning both field and cultivator to their fate. Charles hangs back a little.

“What...?”

“Erik said. Bring you both. Come.”

Reluctantly, Charles takes his hand.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Erik learns something very important, and nobody is allowed to stick anything into Charles.

“Guys!” Alex bellows, far too early for Erik, who was up half the night plotting their next diplomatic move towards Genosha with Emma. He pulls the pillow over his head, irritably. Alex sounds excited rather than frightened. Perhaps his new pancake recipe has worked, or he’s found Az’s secret bacon stash ahead of schedule.

The door to his bedroom bangs open. Erik reacts instinctively to someone unwelcome entering his space while he’s sleeping.

“Sorry boss man.” Alex says, recoiling from the blade floating at eyelevel. “But you gotta come see this. It’s the TV. Charles is on the TV.”

“He’s escaped?”

Erik sits upright, automatically reaching out for the metal of Charles’s cuffs before he remembers he didn’t have the heart to make Charles wear more metal after Victor’s attack. *Damn*, he thinks, and starts to think about likely directions and distances. There’s enough of them that a team could easily locate Charles before he got too far, but if he’s already made a public appearance—

“No—He’s not—he went to talk to Darwin,” Alex babbles. “But—there’s this documentary coming up, and—seriously, Erik, *you have got to see this*.”

Grumbling, Erik follows him to the living room, where Hank is feverishly fiddling with the aerial and wiring of the bigger TV, while everyone else, apart from Darwin and Charles himself, of course, are goggling at the sight of two suited women looking serious as they’re interviewed by one of the more famous anchors.

A small picture of Charles beams benignly from the bottom corner of the screen. Erik tilts his head to read the headlines marching across the screen beneath it.

“Undercover whistleblower reveals abuse, exploitation occurring in prison.”

Interesting; but what has that got to do with Ch-?

The headlines change. One of the women says something onscreen.

“Ha!” Hank says, with some satisfaction, as the biggest TV screen flares to life.

Five minutes later, Erik is still staring, slack-jawed at the TV screen.

“See! See!” Sean says, gleefully. “I was right about Charles *all along!*” He gets up and dances a few steps in a circle, carried away by his triumph.

“You said he could be a secret agent, yeah.” Alex acknowledges. “But you also said he was maybe a lost prince stolen at birth, or a changeling—”

“It would explain his parents—” Sean starts. Alex carries on, ignoring him.

“A clone of some famous Scottish actor, a Jedi and one of the fae.” Alex grins. “You’re only right by coincidence. That’s not the same thing as knowing it all along. This is like when you were sure you knew who was gonna be the twelfth Doctor.”

Sean cries out indignantly. Erik ignores them. The information, the realisation the TV has provided is far too great for him to be able to deal with their squabbling as well.

Charles.

Erik shakes his head, blinks. No. Still not settling in.

According to the TV, Charles had been working *undercover* as a prison guard when they took him. Charles had been gathering information on abuse and wrongdoing by the prison management. Charles had been *reporting* this information to one of the two women on the TV screen.

Now a major investigation of corruption has just gone public. The human authorities are tracing crimes reaching from the courts which had sentenced them all, allegedly unjustly, to the people running the prison... and the people profiting from mutant pain and suffering.

It’s the sort of thing Erik used to dream about, lying on his prison cot, waiting for Lights Out to be called, back when Genosha was another impossible dream, as far away as freedom. Justice. Hypocrisy revealed, and the filthy heart of human bigotry towards mutants shown plain and clear for all to see.

And the person whose work made it all possible, says the dark haired woman on the TV, is one Charles Francis Xavier, missing and believed killed in the jailbreak. Erik tenses, but she goes on to imply—nothing as direct as accusation—the prison authorities did the evil deed, and are using the chaos of their escape to hide the body and place the blame on the missing prisoners.

Alex and Sean are still arguing.

“Quiet.” Erik hardly recognises his own voice. “Azazel: go get Charles. And Darwin.”

“But—” Az takes a look at Erik’s face, and shuts up, vanishing instantly. He reappears a scant two minutes later with a bewildered Darwin and a wary Charles in tow. Erik leaps up and moves towards Charles, who eyes Erik’s sleep pants with confusion.

“Charles.” Erik says. Charles nods, shoulders going tight with caution. “Charles, you—you’re amazing,” Erik tells him, in a moment of too great honesty. “How did you do it?”

“Um,” Charles says, worriedly. “What?”

“You’re standing in front of the TV! He can’t see!” Sean says, helpfully. Erik jumps sideways, letting Charles see his moment of fame. Sean keeps babbling: “Prof, you’re just awesome! How do you get to be a secret agent, anyway? Did MI5 train you?”

“James Bond is MI6.” Azazel is amused, having got over his initial startlement far faster than anyone else. Darwin crosses the room to sit by Alex and demand a full explanation, which comes accompanied by kisses.

“Our Charles is way cooler than any 007!” Sean says, while Erik watches Charles watching the TV.

“Oh,” Charles says at last. “Moira worked out where I left my last cache. Good.” His shoulders relax a little. “I was worried she wouldn’t find it; and it’s the most important one, really. The others—”

“Your last cache?” Charles turns his head to look at Darwin.

“That was the one—we already had enough to shut down the prison, several times over. That was the one that, um.” Charles grinds to a halt, blinking. He shakes his head. “The one that was on the unsafe convictions. And sentences.”

“Unsafe convictions?” Darwin says, suddenly.

“I’m sure I don’t need to tell you how many of the people there were innocent, or should never have had the sentences they did.” Charles blinks, as if he’s trying to re-focus his eyes.

“Why—if you had told me, when you got here,” Hank reproaches him, “we—I could have done something about getting the information out, or how you were treated or—”

“What could I have said, that you’d have believed?” Charles’s eyes are too bright. He shakes his head again. “I knew—I knew I’d gathered enough to make the case, whatever, whatever happened. To me.”

“Charles.” Erik leans in close. Charles sways towards him. “Are you well? You seem a bit—”

“Sorry.” Charles licks his lips. “It’s—there’s. There’s a lot of. Feelings. In here. About me.” He waves a hand vaguely.

Erik prepares to eviscerate whoever is making Charles feel bad.

“Not—not bad feelings,” Charles says, quickly. “Just. Intense.”

“Sit down.” Erik steers him to the couch, hastily. Charles drops onto it and sags sideways. Erik sits down next to him and does his best to prop up a Charles who is rapidly de-evolving into a warm and boneless mass.

On screen, the story is still spinning out. The risks. The threats. The nature of the young man everyone on screen seems to mourn as a lost hero.

“M not a hero,” Charles mumbles, leaning into Erik. “Just. Needed to find her.”

“Her who?” Az sits down on the other side of Charles and ignores Erik’s stern glance.

“Raven.” Charles points at one of the suited women. “M’ sister.” His eyes are sliding closed. It’s like he’s been drugged. Erik frets. Surely this can’t be good for him?

Charles sits upright and stares at Erik.

“I’m not on drugs,” he informs Erik, owlishly.

“Feelings.” Sean snickers and shuffles across the floor to sit nearer Charles. “Can you get high on feelings?”

“Not precisely high,” Hank says, and Charles smiles again. “But close enough that we might have to take blood samples to be absolutely certain.”

“Ugh. Needles.” Charles leans back again.

“No one is sticking anything into Charles!” Erik says. “Any needles into Charles,” he corrects himself when Az’s eyebrows start to rise. “Unless strictly necessary.”

“Charles. Charles.” Sean tugs at the hem of Charles’s jeans as if he is physically three as well as mentally. “How can I become a secret agent?”

“Working undercover isn’t the same thing as possessing a licence to kill, Sean,” Charles says, eyes still shut. “Moirā—well, Raven went first, and then we couldn’t find her. And Moirā pointed out, with my implant and—and things, it would be pretty easy to fake up some references and get me into the prison as a guard.”

“Charles,” Hank asks, slowly. “You said Raven was your sister. What was she doing in an all-male prison?”

“She’s a shape shifter,” Charles says, happily. “She’s much more beautiful in her natural state.”

“Oh?” Az flashes Erik a wicked grin as Charles snuggles down, unconsciously elegant in the pursuit of comfort as a cat.

“Blue.” Charles says. “You’ll see. If the interview goes on long enough.”

Erik lifts a hand, and begins combing through Charles’s hair. Charles hums in satisfaction. Azazel watches the screen for a minute longer, and then, still watching, reaches down with his tail to lift Charles’s feet into his lap, where he can take Charles’s shoes off.

“Blue, hmmm?” Az says, encouragingly, and Charles laughs.

“She’s my sister, Azazel; be nice to her or I’ll tell—I’ll tell her you kidnapped me. She’s much scarier than I am.”

“Only to keep you from harm,” Az reminds him, hopefully. Charles chuckles and shakes his head.

“Kittens are scarier than you, Prof,” Sean says.

“She won’t care.” Charles smiles. “She’s very protective of the things she loves, is Raven.”

“Tell me more.” Az leans forwards, long scarlet fingers massaging Charles’ feet. Charles laughs again, and says nothing.

Erik swallows dryly. They did kidnap Charles. And all along, he’d been on their side. Helping them. Guilt fills him.

“Stop that.” Charles says, frowning. “You didn’t hurt me.”

Yes, but.

“You didn’t.” Charles jabs an elbow into Erik’s side. “Didn’t have to keep me alive. Didn’t have to protect me from Victor—”

“Who would never have got anywhere near you if I hadn’t—”

“Stop it.” Charles twitches. “Guilt stings, and it’s really itchy.”

Stricken, Erik tries to think about other things. How this will change their approach to Genosha. What Emma will make of it all. How comfortable Charles looks curled on the sofa between Erik and Azazel, relaxed, soaking up all the affection the room must be broadcasting, and knowing himself safe at last.

There’s a small bright glow settling in to the back of his head. It feels like Charles, but happy.

“Charles? Is that you?”

Yes/ the bright glow says, and everyone twitches. Sorry, the glow says, shrinking. Still not really clear about out loud and in the mind yet.

“I can stop.” Charles says aloud. “I—sorry, I think I’m a little, um. Not so used to processing positive emotion like this.”

“Don’t go!” Sean screws up his face in concern.

“Yeah, man,” Darwin adds. “It’s getting to the good bits.”

? The warm little glow reappears.

“On screen.” Alex stands as the TV cuts to commercial again. “Anyone want popcorn? Or snacks? S’gonna be a long show. They cleared half the schedule.”

Pancakes, Charles says, very shyly, at the back of everyone's head again. "You were going to cook—"

"So I was." Alex pulls Darwin up with him. "We can watch in the kitchen while I cook," he promises his boyfriend. "But Charles was promised pancakes."

Sean cheers.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

There's a stir of air by Charles's head and then Erik says "No." A sharp smacking sound echoes past Charles's ear.

"We do not pet the telepath." Azazel sounds amused.

"Erik is," Sean points out resentfully

Charles had been worried, when Azazel appeared and yanked him back to the house. To face Erik, an Erik babbling incomprehensible things. That only made him anticipate the worst. And then he'd seen Raven with Moira on the TV—well, her false face, anyway; and he'd almost been too relieved to know she was safe to follow what she was saying.

And then more relief; the relief of knowing his research had been found; that he wasn't going to die with it still hidden. That he might not even be going to die at all. Because the others, the group knew he'd been working undercover. That his work could benefit them. That he could be useful, productive.

At first, Charles' own relief had masked what he'd been picking up from the room. And then it had all hit him. Charles's telepathy was picking up on other people's emotions without skin contact. For the first time since he was ten.

Suddenly, he was *safe*. Among *friends*. And he knew this absolutely; not because of anything anyone had said, or his own reasoning. Because he could feel the emotions and some of the thoughts of the people in his immediate vicinity. And the people in his immediate vicinity?

Currently, they *really like* him.

Muscles both mental and physical, that had been wound tight with caution, loosen. Charles has only been captive for a couple of months, but before then there'd been the tension of living and working undercover, and before then the worry over Raven and...

Charles relaxes so suddenly and completely that his knees nearly give way before Erik marches him to the couch. He's barely able to stay upright, so great is the relief. He drinks down the mood, the feelings of the room, as eagerly as if he's been dying of thirst.

Sean's happy awe and smug knowledge—that he'd been right about how great his Prof was all along—bubbles sweet and sharp, like the best lemonade. Azazel's amused respect steadies him like a cup of the finest coffee. Hank's steady regard is as bracing as a really good cup of tea.

Alex's liking of him warms like the best hot chocolate—faintly bitter-sweet with Alex's determination not to lose another person. Darwin's calm respect and appreciation of Charles refreshes him like water from a mountain spring.

And Erik... Erik's feelings for Charles run deep, complex in flavour and subtly intoxicating, like the best wine Charles has ever drunk.

The whole experience is deeply, deeply splendid.

Charles is warm and comfortable, now, but he's not sleepy. Not really. It's just, with so much information, so many sensations coming at him at once, he finds it better to just curl up on the couch with his eyes shut, letting the people around him think he's dozing while they gawp at the TV. Charles sighs and stretches out his mind again, drinking them all in.

The news seems to be on a loop, returning again and again to the lurid tales of infamy discovered at the prison, speculation on Charles's own whereabouts and well-being, and Raven and Moira's determination to see justice done. It's a nice background noise, but having watched it through once, Charles doesn't need to see it again.

Not when soaking up the moods of the rest of the audience is far more interesting. Really, though, he's wide awake, and just a little distracted. Erik's fingers slide absently through his hair, as if Erik's actually forgotten what his hand is doing. Azazel's hands have much more purpose to them as they move over his feet.

Charles wishes he could purr. Purring would be nice.

"I dunno. You sound pretty close to it, anyway, man." Sean says, and he's amused.

So is everyone else. It tickles, a little. Charles takes a moment to bask in it again. It's such a nice feeling. All of the emotions everyone's putting out at the moment feel nice. Partly because they are all so resoundingly positive about *him*, of course.

"Well, of course they are." Sean says, brightly. "You're good people, Prof."

"Sean." Erik rumbles from above, and really, Charles thinks, Erik has the nicest knees. So comfy. And warm. "Yes, well. Thank you Charles." Erik sounds, slightly strained. Charles turns his head, rubbing his cheek on Erik's fuzzy sleep pants. "Remember what Hank said. Make sure he's opened his mouth before you respond to what he's saying." Erik says.

Oh, but that's so slow. So *dull*. He's only just got his telepathy back. And it feels so nice.

"It might be dull, Charles, but you really don't want to—your boundaries are a little fuzzy right now," says Hank, before adding, "Oh, damn," as he realises he's just done precisely what he told Sean not to do. Why was that bad?

Wait, is Charles leaking, again? He doesn't want to do that. Not to his friends. He likes them. They like *him*. Leaking is bad. He presses his head back against Erik for reassurance. If he starts leaking himself all over his friends—Charles bites his lip.

“He is going to come out of this, isn’t he?” Erik’s voice is sharp with concern as he teases Charles’s lip out from between his teeth. Erik’s concern tastes like lemon juice. Charles wrinkles his face.

“Yes, of course.” Hank’s certainty of tone is almost entirely unsupported by his mind. “Once we all calm down a bit, he should be able to focus more. I’m surprised he’s reacted quite so strongly. Perhaps—perhaps it’s the time factor.”

“But I like him!” Sean said. “We all think he’s great! Why would Charles feeling that that be bad? Especially when—”

“He can definitely tell you like him,” Charles volunteers. Hah. He’d said that with his mouth. He feels vaguely proud.

“Because Charles is picking up on your emotions,” Hank continues, lecturing. “Our emotions.”

“Yeah, but he’s a telepath, even if he’s a bit more like a cat right now,” Sean says, before pausing to possibly think. He continues, in a tone of bright speculation. “Isn’t he supposed to be able to read us? Hey! Are all telepaths part cat?”

Hank sighs.

There’s a stir of air by Charles’s head and then Erik says “No.” A sharp smacking sound echoes past Charles’s ear.

“We do not pet the telepath.” Azazel sounds amused.

“Erik is,” Sean points out resentfully. “You were.” Erik’s fingers comb through Charles’s hair again, and he hums, happily.

Hank says firmly, “Unless we are Erik, or Azazel, we do not pet the telepath with fraying shields, Sean.”

“No fair.” Sean moves away, muttering.

“Sean,” Erik asks. “You don’t want to hurt him, do you?”

“Of course not!”

“Well then, *think*.” Erik sounds irritated. “Just a roomful of us excited about the prison documentary, and he’s almost completely out for the count!”

Charles is perfectly awake and perfectly aware, thank you very much. Also he would like to point out that Erik’s hand has stopped moving.

“Yes, that’s why you’re curled up on the couch and wishing you could purr.” Erik says fondly, as he gently rubs the back of Charles’s neck.

In the background Hank is explaining to Sean about *overload* and *feedback loops*, but Charles pulls back from that to focus on the pleasant physical reality of Erik's hands on his neck and Azazel's hands on his feet.

"Is it enough?" Azazel says, cryptically, to Erik.

"Physical sensations to keep him grounded in his own body, no sudden loss of empathic contact, calmness, and time." Erik recites as if from a list. "And Emma will be here as soon as she can." His hands continue to knead at Charles's shoulders, distracting him from the implications of Erik's words.

Time passes. Somewhere out there in the world beyond the couch, someone has swapped out the newscasts and documentary for a film. Charles thinks he might recognise the Harry Potter theme. Erik has propped a notebook on Charles's head and is reading.

Alright; perhaps Charles *is* a little sleepy. He did get up awfully early this morning. Charles lets himself drift, thinking about boats, bobbing along the river, drifting pleasantly with the tide of friendship, basking in the summer sun of Erik's regard.

"Pancakes!" Alex says, sudden and quite loud. "Uh. Charles, man, you want pancakes?"

There's the most delicious smell in the air. Charles opens his eyes.

"Oh, thank you." He is *starving*. At least, he thinks the hunger he's feeling is mostly his. It takes a real effort of will to strengthen his shields long enough to find out. Losing some of the warm bath of affection he's been soaking in feels like a blow.

Charles makes some ineffectual movements, trying to sit up, until he realises that the blanket someone stretched over him is going to thwart his every effort. Az snorts and slides his tail under the blanket, deftly freeing him.

"Thank you," Charles murmurs again, and swings his feet down, preparing to sit up. Erik pushes and suddenly he's upright, waiting out the headrush that comes with it.

Alex plops a tray on his lap with three plates on it. All three are heaped high with pancakes and eggs and fruit.

"I'm not—I think you may have overestimated my capacity, just a trifle, Alex," Charles murmurs, a little stunned.

"Trifle?" Sean perks up. "I love desserts!"

"No." Hank, Alex, Azazel and Erik say as one. Charles can only agree with them. He's seen what happens to Sean when he gets too much sugar in too short a time, and the results are a little disturbing.

Sean droops.

"It's for all three of you," Alex explains, patiently, to Charles.

Oh.

“Well.” Charles says, picking up his knife and fork. “It all looks wonderful.”

It does, and he carries on clearing his plate as fast as he can. Azazel doesn’t bother to pick up his plate and neither does Erik; they’re too busy discussing something, but not so busy they don’t stop to fork up Alex’s pancakes from the tray on Charles’s lap.

“Thank you,” Hank says and gratefully dives in.

Sean mutters about trifle, but the pancakes shut him up too.

Alex and Darwin trade kisses and bites off of each other’s forks and it’s all quite pleasant until Azazel claps a hand to his forehead, swallows the last bite of his last pancake, and vanishes, cursing.

“Um.” Charles turns to Erik. “What-?”

Hello, sweetie, says a crisp, coolly amused voice in Charles’s mind. *I’m Emma.*

Azazel reappears with a rush of wind and []a sleekly stylish blonde woman. Charles takes one look at her and knows two things instantly. Her name is Emma. She’s a telepath.

“Three things,” Emma says, light and firm as she strips off her white, white gloves. “Thank you, Azazel.”

Azazel bows.

“A slumber party, and nobody invited me?” Emma grins, and Charles realises that aside from him and Darwin, everyone is still in their sleepwear. “How cute.”

“Three things?” Charles ventures, tentatively.

I’m here to help, Emma says, for his ear alone.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Erik has dreams, sure, we all knew that. In this chapter he also has fantasies. Sexual ones. Involving Charles.

Chapter Notes

So, for first; the fantasy Erik has involves non, or at the best, dub con with Charles, back in the prison. Please be ye warned. It's fantasy though, so Charles enjoys it too.

For second, the writing in italics (the hot sexual fantasy part) grew out of an idea of Kernezelda's that went back and forth between us for a bit and ended with K having wrote the most amazingly hot sex scene, the very one your eager eyes now read inserted (yes we made that joke, believe you me) in this chapter. Basically if it's in italic's, it's K's. Isn't she *skilled*?

Erik thinks. He thinks about Charles, and power, and prison. Uniforms and bars and restraints. Charles. Erik slides a hand down his sleep pants—the same pair Charles had rubbed his cheek over—and palms himself absently. It's late. Everyone's asleep. For a few minutes, he can indulge himself.

Erik thinks a little more; images begin to move behind his eyelids. His hand slides. Lightly grips.

Within the locked cell, Az coils his tail around Xavier's throat, the knife-sharp tip pressing, dimpling the soft skin beneath his chin. It makes Erik's mouth water, especially as he's manipulated the young guard's own cuffs to form thin bands, one at each wrist and ankle, and trapped his hands behind him. Xavier's knelt between them, his shoulders framed by Az's strong thighs, his parted knees nearly touching the outer sides of Erik's shoes.

Xavier's heavy boots and socks, his belt with its myriad attachments all lie scattered beneath the lower bunk. Stripped of weapons, he'd fought still, but eventually been forced to his knees. Bare toes curl and uncurl nervously. Half-hidden by the hems of his trousers, the soles of his feet are pink and clean, unmarked. Erik can feel confined wrists turning and bending, shoulders working visibly beneath the pale blue uniform. It's not long before pretty red lips part in a pained grimace, hands falling still as the guard gives up the futile attempt.

A very pretty picture indeed.

Az's tail-tip dances along Xavier's throat; Xavier tips his head back to avoid the pricking point, eyes wide in apprehension and fear; his mouth drops open as Erik traces his lips with a curious finger. Erik smiles across at Az; who answers with his own grin, filthy with anticipation. They don't often get to share a morsel as delicate as this.

"Are you ready for this?" Erik's voice is a growl. Az tightens his grip on Xavier's throat. The guard's breathing quickens.

"Let's find out." Az's jeans unzip with a wave of Erik's hand, in tandem with Erik shucking off his own. Their white t-shirts follow, and now it's undeniable, what's going to happen.

Az uses hands and tail to draw Xavier to his feet, kicks roughly at his inner calves until resisting legs slide inexorably apart, dragged by Erik's will and the metal ankle cuffs. That lethal tail slides down across the guard's torso, a leisurely exploration of taut nipples under the uniform, of buttons to prod and slice—snick-snick—away, until Xavier's heaving chest is half-exposed. Then the muscular loops of tail slide beneath the waistband of the trousers, and slowly, methodically—rip the heavy material and the thin briefs apart until Xavier stands bare from hip to ankle. He trembles, licks his lips; a flush warms his cheeks even as he grows hard beneath their eyes, responding to the blatant lust in the hands on his body, the dancing tail stroking along his inner thighs, Erik's eyes hot upon him.

Stripping him of his ruined shirt goes far more quickly. The loss of his last piece of clothing draws a strangled cry of protest from their captive, who only then seems to remember to struggle again, jerking against his bonds.

Erik tugs on the cuffs. A reminder of who has the control here. "None of that," he says, stern and strict. "Cooperate and we won't harm you."

Xavier swallows, blinks. "Please." he says, and it's no longer clear what he's begging for, release or satisfaction. "Please."

Az chuckles as he hitches Xavier tight against himself, one heavy hand on his back pushing his upper body down until he's eye-level with Erik's cock. Az's cock - wet with hand lotion - presses against Xavier's entrance. He lets out a hoarse yelp. Az chuckles again, and then, mercifully, replaces his cock with a finger.

"We may be ready," he tells Erik, stroking the shivering skin between Xavier's shoulders. "He needs a little more time."

Xavier opens his mouth. Whether to agree or to plead, it doesn't matter; Erik's past the point of waiting. He shoves himself into Xavier's mouth. Xavier chokes and gulps, then starts sucking in earnest.

"If I feel teeth..." Erik pants, and all four of the cuffs pinch a little tighter in warning. Xavier whines. "God, Az!" Erik mutters wildly. "So hot... Ah!"

Az adds another finger to the one stretching Xavier out for his pleasure; Xavier yelps again.

This time it's not pain, or fear.

Erik groans at the sensation of that tight, hot mouth stretching around his girth, sliding up and down his length; he licks his lips at the sight of Xavier's wide blue eyes staring up at him, blinking rapidly when Erik thrusts. He groans again when Az finishes a perfunctory prep and pushes his own length into Xavier, the dark red shaft disappearing in slow increments into Xavier's pale, round arse, Az's hands gripping him firmly at the hips, pulling him backward until there's not even a breath of space between their bodies. He flips his tail back around and coils it once, twice around Xavier's neck; the added pressure on Erik's cock stuffed down that working throat nearly makes him come right then.

Xavier moans like he loves it, like he enjoys having two inmates strip him naked and ream him vigorously. His pink tongue lashes the underside of Erik's cock, curling inward and back out, even as Erik pulls at his hair, clutches the back of his head to force Xavier's face right into his groin, spit-roasted between Erik and Az with Erik's metal restraints and Az's tail, and two sets of hard, rough hands holding him firmly, inescapably in place.

Az drags a hand from the back of Xavier's neck down along his sweat-slick spine, long fingers spreading wide in a show of possession until he reaches cuffed wrists. He resumes his hold on Xavier's hips, fingers digging bruises into peach-ripe flesh. Erik grunts, frees one hand from Xavier's damp and curling hair to rake long fingers over his arse where it's not slamming into Az, drags blunt nails to see the reddening lines left behind on silky skin.

Xavier's breathing grows ragged: his mouth is entirely filled, his nose pressed hard into Erik, oxygen depleting as his body works and his airways are blocked. He bucks roughly, tries to jerk back from Erik's grip.

He wheezes, and then cries out around Erik's cock as Az draws back and back, until only the head of his cock remains engulfed in Xavier's twitching, puffy hole; Az catches Erik's eye and grins demonically, dipping his chin toward the pretty, pretty captive uniting them bodily. Erik grins back, and in turn, draws back until he can feel Xavier's panting breaths on the head of his cock, feel the edges of his teeth where he's too tired to keep them covered.

The two of them tighten their holds, hips and neck and head, and as one, eyes locked, slam forward, fucking into Xavier in a hard rush, until he screams—and pushes back against Az while tightening his throat to suck out every liquid drop Erik spills, tongue swiping all around to catch it all.

Az pulls out first, easing himself from Xavier's relaxing body, gentle now as he guides their toy's loose-limbed collapse. Only Erik's strong hands support his slumped body; he's still impaling that mouth, that tongue still licking slowly, tiredly at the base of Erik's softening cock. Reluctantly, Erik allows Xavier's head to fall back, withdrawing himself from those perfect lips, swollen and wet with spit and come. And then Xavier's on his knees at Erik's feet again, blinking up at him sleepy and sated, and the emotion in those sex-clouded eyes...

It's not hate, or anger, or fear.

Joy...

Erik's pleasant musings—half dream, half fantasy—about Charles, taking him in Erik's own prison cell, almost forcing him, sharing him—as if he ever would, even with Az—end

abruptly when someone pours several buckets of liquid ice over him.

Erik chokes and gasps, jack-knifing out of bed in startled reaction. He hits the floor with a thumb, and stays crouched on his hands and knees, shivering. Puzzled, he realises he is, in fact, completely dry, and there is no one in his room apart from himself.

I'll do it again, honey. Emma sounds cheerfully amused at his snorting, shivering misery. *If you don't learn to restrain yourself a little.*

“What?” Erik shifts to sit on the floor. The sensation of ice cold water flooding over his body fades. Emma can be merciful, it seems. He’s seen worse things happen to people who’ve annoyed her than a telepathic ice bath. She’s still talking, trying to be patient with Erik’s block-headedness. As usual.

I get that you like look of him. The amusement fades a bit. *But, honey, Charles isn't just a toy. This assing around you're doing is playing with fire. Once he's trained; he'll be more powerful than me.* There’s a trace of bitterness in Emma’s mental tone as she acknowledges that; bitterness and awe.

“But—” Erik says, startled, “—your rating—”

“And in any case,” Emma purrs out loud as she walks into Erik’s room; Erik stands hastily. “I do not need a ring-side seat for your sexual fantasies and *neither does he.*”

“WHAT?” A slow, sinking sensation pervades Erik’s stomach; he doesn’t think this one is Emma’s doing, somehow. Had Charles— He’d never want anything like that in real life, never want Charles hurt, and— Emma shakes her head, slowly.

“Fairly sure you were broadcasting that one loud enough he’d have heard it if he were awake,” Emma says. “You need to learn not to do that, at least right now.”

Erik nods, dropping back down. Phew. Charles is asleep. He didn’t hear.

He’s had the “How to Not Sexually Harass Psionics” lecture from Emma before; he knows that while inadvertent thoughts are one thing, consciously and deliberately indulging in a sexual fantasy involving someone who can read it is more or less the equivalent to a heavy breathing phone call, or catcalling someone across the street, and is Not Okay.

Emma is still talking.

“Have you any idea how vulnerable a part-trained telepath is; or how much damage they can do? You’re all damn lucky his self-esteem was down by his ankles when you snatched him; or the first thing he’d likely have done when he erupted would not be to fall over and curl up high on the fact that somebody actually liked him!”

“Is that what-?”

“Yes, and you know it.” Emma sighs.

Erik feels stricken. Charles had been *so happy*. He hates to think that Charles had only been happy because no one had loved him properly before now. Because he didn't know what being liked truly *felt* like. Erik wants to be able to make Charles that happy all the time. Wants Charles to know himself loved, always.

Emma's expression softens. "Shove over," she says, affectionately. "You idiot."

Erik moves, and they sit on the floor, shoulder to shoulder, leaning back on the bed.

"Since the documentary, I've had three calls and one face-to-face with Genosha," Emma says, after a pause. "Plus I've had my lawyers carefully examining the evidence your Charles turned up about the convictions."

"Won't that show your hand?"

"Carefully and discreetly," Emma says. "You heard about Toad, and—"

"Re-taken, yes. Hank told me."

"Ah, but, not sent back to prison." Emma grins, and Erik can briefly see the small girl who used to hit him with her dolls. "Protective custody."

"That's a change!"

"Like I said." Emma smiles. "Charles is more than a toy."

Erik and Az shift their grips, hands tightening on their toy's hips and fingers clenching at his hair, Az's muscular tail binding his throat even more closely. They lock eyes, slam forward, fuck their way into squeezing, tender flesh as if to meet in the middle—shove in until Xavier screams with pleasure, voice muffled around Erik's thick shaft. Erik groans and curls his fingers even harder into sweat-damp locks, thrusts his full length into the gloriously wet, almost painfully constricted heat of Xavier's throat. Throbbing muscles squeeze even tighter where Az's tail coils round, a triple-wrapped collar of mutant flesh. Xavier begins to wheeze. The ridges of his trachea rub over the head of Erik's cock, and Erik can't stop the long, inarticulate moan that escapes. And then he can't take his eyes off of Xavier, who thrusts his hips back against Az, who tightens his mouth, his lips even further to suck Erik's brain through his cock until he comes in a white-hot flash of pleasure. Xavier frantically licks his lips and the corners of his mouth and all of Erik's shaft he can reach, as if desperate not to miss a drop.

Az recovers first, pulls gently free of Xavier's trembling body, half-petting damp flanks and slumping shoulders while he lowers their pretty bauble to the concrete. Only Erik's still touching him now, savoring the gloss of sweat and the deep flush coloring freckled cheeks, the scent of his own come and Az's, and even Xavier's, streaking the floor beneath him while his arousal slowly subsides.

Triumph roars through Erik's mind; he made Xavier come (well, he and Az), brought their too-pretty-for-his-own-good guard down, made him come without Xavier's own cock ever

being touched. And even now, it's thrilling, arousing enough almost to start again: Erik's still impaling that mouth; that tongue's still worshipping Erik's only-slowly softening flesh. Reluctantly, Erik pulls away from perfect lips made to suck cock, puffy and wet with Erik's come, with spit where Xavier can't seem to stop licking, the pink of his tongue an irresistible tease.

Xavier's lovely on his knees, at Erik's feet, blinking up at him sleepy and sated, and the emotion in those sex-clouded eyes...

It's not hate, or anger, or fear.

Joy...

The dream is hot. Intense. It also, unusually, features both Azazel and a prison setting. Neither of which have been major turn-ons for Charles before tonight. He wakes with a start, breathless and trembling and so, so excited, he has to jerk off immediately, before anything remotely resembling thought can occur.

Charles' technique is rough and sloppy, matching the fierce mood of his dream and arousal. He reaches down and tugs at himself a few times; all too quickly he spills over his fingers in warm wet pulses. He hasn't had such a dream, such arousal since he went undercover.

It's a relief to know he's able to think about such things, still. Charles is vaguely surprised at his subconscious; he thought he was past the stage of fantasising about people he can't hope to attract. However, he can't hope to deny that, when it comes to Erik, at least, he's been looking.

Charles's mood and the bed cool quickly. Now he's sticky. Charles reaches for the tissues on the nightstand and hopes he'll get over this adolescent infatuation soon. At least Emma's already taught him to shield in his sleep, and fortunately, he was alone and in bed when the dream hit. It could have been extremely embarrassing otherwise.

It's not light out yet, so he drowzes, loose-limbed and sleepy after his orgasm, until a sudden thought yanks Charles from his peaceful state of mind and causes him to stare, wide-eyed into the dim grey pre-dawn light.

If that was my dream, he thinks, disbelieving. Why was it all from Erik's point of view?

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Charles and Emma have a conversation. Erik faces up to this.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Charles doesn't sleep the rest of the night. He practises his shielding: visualising the barriers that separate his mind from other minds, that keep *Charles* in and others *out*. Failure to do that leads to leaking or eavesdropping, and he's really very, very, lucky that he's only eavesdropped on a fantasy involving himself, this time.

So he shuts himself down, almost to the baseline he's so used to operating at, the deaf-dumb-blind-bland silence of no ears or voice at all, and then stretches his abilities out as far as is safe to go alone, over and over again, like breathing. In. Out. He puts up shields but keeps his voice, plays at silencing himself while opening his ears. It's mostly kind of fun.

It's mostly kind of an attempt at distraction.

It's also mostly kind of unsuccessful.

Charles's mind keeps wandering back to that dream; so explicit, so detailed, so vivid. He's not really thought about Azazel like that before. He's a little surprised that Erik seems to; or that he seems to like Charles in his old uniform. In Erik's old cell, too.

Charles thumps his pillow, and rolls over.

Perhaps it's just recognition of the fact that now, post-Victor, and post-telepathy-returning, Erik and Az would never have a chance at forcing Charles to do... that, unless he let them. Charles lets his thoughts slide away from the wider implications, gently.

Erik, now. Charles *has* thought about Erik before. Rather a lot, actually. Outside, an over-eager bird starts to twitter away, so Charles takes a moment to curse it. Yes, he's certainly thought about Erik before, but nothing so... so precisely detailed as that dream.

Clearly, Erik has been thinking about *him*.

Rather a lot, going by how closely his image of Charles matches with what Charles himself sees in the mirror. Although whether he'd actually be that co-operative, actually be the toy Erik took him for in the dream. Well. That rather depends on his partner, and as much as Erik's dream might indicate otherwise, Charles is not so sure that a toy is what Erik really

craves in his lovers.

Charles wriggles in his bed and tries not to smirk. He had known Erik was fond of him, that he'd held affections for Charles before now, had known ever since the stern leader had let Charles spend most of a day curled up on his lap, blissed out of his mind on the feedback from half-a-dozen minds.

And now, thanks to that *interesting* dream, Charles knows the precise thrust of those affections Erik has for him. As it were.

Erik wants him. Erik likes him. Erik has *fantasies* about him.

Well then, Charles thinks, watching the rising dawn. *Erik is a man who should get what he wants.*

Is he now, sugar? Emma's mental voice is light, cheerful. Amused.

Oh, God! Charles waits for the hot flush of embarrassment to fade.

No, no, it's quite sweet, Emma says, not-so-politely ignoring Charles's fervent wishes to be swallowed by the ground, or learn to teleport. *Sweeter than listening to Erik's little production. He's very theatrical.*

I know, Charles says, ruefully. *But I—* and he stops short. But he loves Erik anyway? It seems to be so. When did that happen?

Precisely. Emma says. *But do you know who he is, what he's done? What he intends to do?*

You know I don't, Charles shoots back. *I'd never invade—and before, I—I couldn't.*

Wading through someone else's hostility or hatred interests Charles perhaps as much as wading through chest-deep raw sewage. Until his cover had been blown, Charles hadn't been certain if any of them, except perhaps Sean, had any other feelings for him. And after the TV had revealed his activities to the group, swimming in too many positive emotions had seemed just as dangerous, if more pleasant.

Now that you can, you don't? Emma's mental voice drips with her disbelief. *You're the captive of some very dangerous people, and you don't use your natural birth right to protect yourself from them?*

My natural birthright, as you put it, Charles snipes back, clamping down on his reactions hard. He is not going to show her any more of his own uncertainties, his own fears than he must. They won't like him any *less* for being a telepath than they did before, but it's hard to keep that in mind. *That... has been silenced for over a decade. Forgive me if I'm still uncertain as to how to employ it successfully and without detection.*

Camouflage isn't always protective, Emma observes, acidly. *No matter what you thought you learned as a child.* Charles flinches. Emma's voice softens. *And they—we are not the people*

you grew up with, Charles.

I can tell that, Charles says, a little more mildly. *Even without my birthright.*

No one's tried to channel their frustrations through their fists, for example. Or gotten decorously drunk every single day. Or— He clamps down on his thoughts again.

So, Emma says, either deaf to or ignoring Charles's mental maunderings. *You are aware of your feelings towards Erik.*

And that he think's I'd likely be pretty on my knees, Charles tries to hide the warm flush the knowledge gives him. *But I still don't know what this cause is that he thinks is so important, or if I would be able to be of use—*

You would, Emma says, instantly. Images flicker in her mind for a second: quiet rooms, hushed talks, wheeling and dealing.

Morally able, I meant, Charles qualifies, quickly. *And also... I've seen Raven, on the TV, but I still—I need to—I have a job to finish.* Also, he thinks, but doesn't send, I'm still, technically a bloody hostage or prisoner locked up with my captors. Why has everyone forgotten that?

And we do not have obligations, things to finish? Emma's metal voice is dry; and she either hasn't picked up on Charles's sub voce thoughts, or is choosing to skim over them, for once.

Emma. Charles tries to be firm. *If, like Erik, you're simply assuming you can count on my co-operation because we're all mutants, you must know by now you are wrong. And if you're assuming that once your great cause is explained to me, I will be willing to accept its morality and necessity, you must know that I am already under obligation to earlier commitments.*

You said that they had all your data, Emma snipes at him.

*My sister still thinks that I'm **dead**,* Charles sends, and pulls his pillow over his head. He doesn't know what to think or how to stop his feelings for Erik—and Erik's feelings for him—from affecting his judgment. But he owes Raven too.

To think I thought I didn't have to worry about Lima Syndrome, he muses, a little bleakly. He wishes he could sleep some more; but there's so much still to do. All the happy cheer from knowing Erik dreamed of him has faded away, along with more of his certainty.

Charles, Emma sends, and Charles doesn't move from under the pillow. *I'm sorry. I was pushing too hard. We can talk about this more later.*

Charles sends nothing in response. He's tired, and there will be more beets to irrigate, all too soon. And what can he say? He won't commit to anything sight unseen, and while he doesn't want to remain a prisoner the rest of his life, he would rather like for there to *be* a rest of his life.

Later, Charles echoes. He sighs, and tries to draw enough willpower in to think about getting up and dressed.

Go back to sleep, Emma advises him. *You've been awake half the night, between Erik and I.*

Not sure I can, Charles admits. *Hank has quite a few projects, and then there's—*

I'll help.

But— Charles says, and that's as far as he gets before Emma nudges her mind against his.

Sleep embraces him as tightly as Erik might, and draws him down, down, down.

"Erik," Emma says, meaningfully, from the living room.

"Yes?" Erik is wary. He hovers in the kitchen doorway, hoping that this is not a major issue, despite Emma's tone of voice.

"You need to shield better," Emma says, after a suitably long pause.

"You said." Erik nods. "And I will, but—he was asleep. Wasn't he?"

"Yes, but he had the most interesting dream." Emma grins and Erik freezes. Oh god. He's—he's traumatised Charles. That would explain why Erik hasn't seen him this morning. He's been too embarrassed or frightened or angry to face Erik, Erik and his lustful thoughts.

Emma pats the empty seat of the couch next to her. "I had a long talk with him earlier. Come sit next to me, and we'll work a few more things out."

"Er." Erik hesitates, and Emma looks at him, coolly. He walks forwards to his doom.

Chapter End Notes

I know, an update, and after so long! There will be more hot threesome soon as well.
Hopefully. :)

End Notes

Yes, I had a dream

And that dream was a mutant prison break with kindly Charles being the only prison officer likely to (a) be unlucky enough to get caught up in it and (b) survive, if he did.

I am not in any way sorry.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!